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## The Anonymous Web in Adichie's Americanah

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The Anonymous Web in Adichie's *Americanah*

A thesis submitted for the partial fulfillment  
of the requirement for the degree of  
Master of Arts in English

by

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## Abstract

Adichie's *Americanah* is a novel that elevates anonymous blogging into black cultural performance. The novel follows a young Nigerian, Ifemelu, who arrives in the United States on a student visa and depicts her stressful confrontation with racism in post-slavery America. Through beginning a blog, Ifemelu voices her experiences as a black woman and immigrant in ways that renew the concerns of James Baldwin, an author whom she studies closely. Like Baldwin, her style blends humor and techniques of persuasion that trace to traditional oral folklore. Ifemelu's success rests partly on Adichie's construction of her as a character of good ethos, an individual whom both readers of her blog, and readers of the novel, are encouraged to trust. Her use of a pseudonym, the *non-American black*, offers her sanctuary to decipher an identity for herself as a migrant, and creates space for kinship with others who value her writing as psychological and spiritual support. This updates the socially engaged practice that Toni Morrison has recommended as part of a framework for her own writing, a practice that engages with the conflict between the public and private lives of artists. Although philosopher Martha Nussbaum and others have argued that online anonymity should be eradicated, Ifemelu's story illustrates a contradictory case in which the cultural traditions of the formerly colonized benefit from the privacy of anonymity. Further, *Americanah* exemplifies how the web, which was built to be nonhierarchical, is a place where black art flourishes, and that the web is a natural tool for politically engaged creativity.

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## **Dedication**

For my friend Hashintha Jayasinghe, and also for Ceylon.

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## Introduction — “That Elusive But Identifiable Style”

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s novel *Americanah* explores uncomfortable realities about race and immigrant experience in our globalized, networked twenty-first century. The novel follows a young Nigerian woman, Ifemelu, who arrives in the United States on a student visa and traces how she comes to terms with racism in post-slavery America. After her arrival, her initial excitement fades into alienation, which then gives way to a deep depression that destabilizes and endangers her. She eventually restores herself through writing her experiences and observations, gathering insight about whether a whole and singular identity is possible for her, and examining America as an idea—a misconception. The novel raises questions about whether the toxic race relations in the US disqualify it as a suitable home for her, or for that matter, any person. As Adichie herself has said, “race is something I discovered in America because when I was in Nigeria, I didn’t think of myself as black. And then I went to the US and I became black and it was a learning process for me”<sup>1</sup> (“Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie – *Americanah*” 3:36). Ifemelu’s coping strategy is her writing, particularly, her creation of a blog where she examines the politics of her day-to-day life. Even while it is essential to the growth of her character and thereby drives the novel itself, Ifemelu’s blogging and in particular, the characteristics of her anonymous voice,

<sup>1</sup> Ifemelu’s fictional blogs have real-world twins, or doppelgangers. Blogs with the same titles as their novelistic counterparts exist on the web, pseudo/anonymously, just as their fictional versions did. This bleeding-of-edges between reality and fiction is an added invitation to explore how blogging as a discursive practice co-exists with the novel’s storytelling. The cited quote from Adichie is from a YouTube video that is featured within one of these doppelganger blogs, entitled, just as it was in the novel, *Raceteenth Or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*. It is included within a post written on May 11, 2015 by someone using the novel’s main character as a screen name (Ifemelu). Is the blogger Adichie? The quality of the writing, particularly that within the other blog (*The Small Redemptions Of Lagos*), would suggest so. Could this be fanfiction? The fact that the posts were created two years after the novel’s publication allows for that possibility. Answers to these questions are absent and that mystery is partly a consequence of the web’s design, which allows for anonymity.

are an underexplored aspect of the growing literature about *Americanah*. These blog posts function as keys for their fictional readers, for readers of the novel, and for Ifemelu herself.

Chimamanda Adichie is both a writer and public intellectual whose work addresses the remnants of British colonialism in her home country of Nigeria and throughout the world. Her novels acknowledge the tension inherent in her use of a form that has been cherished by the same Western countries that have damaged and destabilized Nigeria's own cultural practices. Her approach to writing the postcolonial novel involves a rejection of singular stories because they too easily devolve into caricature and are prone to misinterpretation and misuse by those in power ("The Danger of A Single Story"). Likewise, as she seeks to tell multiple stories, her project within *Americanah* involves embracing multimedia textuality and incorporating it with traditional storytelling. Serena Guarracino, borrowing some of Adichie's own commentary about the novel, has skillfully argued that the blending of blogging with literary fiction in *Americanah* is part of Adichie's larger project to unravel the novel as a center of knowledge and to center newer 21<sup>st</sup> century writing practices. Adichie's success as a public figure has mirrored this intersection of text and culture as her words are perhaps best known for being sampled in one of Beyoncé's songs.<sup>2</sup>

The first paragraph of *Americanah* introduces Ifemelu's appreciation of Princeton, New Jersey for its "lack of smell" (Adichie 3), which the speaker indicates is comparatively different than other American cities and their distinct aromas. For Ifemelu, this absence of scent is how Princeton offers an ease that takes survival for granted, where knowledge leads to understandings, to certainty, to thriving. This first paragraph ends with: "She liked, most of all, that in this place of affluent ease, she could pretend *to be someone else*, someone specially

<sup>2</sup> "Flawless" from the album Beyoncé.

admitted into a hallowed American club, someone adorned with certainty” (my emphasis). The novel that follows is about Ifemelu’s longing for certainty on her own terms, how the dynamics within America make a stable immigrant identity difficult, how this eventually compels her to return to Nigeria, how her struggles with splintering identity and divided selves lead her to fashion a transnational voice through blogging as an anonymous non-American black, and how this voice begins her transformation.

The arguments within this thesis rest on the foundational work of Rose Sackeyfio who has examined *Americanah* as a novel that depicts minority perspectives of racist encounters and how they fracture the identities of focal characters. In her chapter, “Revisiting Double Consciousness & Relocating the Self in *Americanah*” Sackeyfio traces how Ifemelu’s accent acts as a cipher for a dividing within her consciousness: “The act of speaking in a foreign voice marks the beginning of a conscious *doubling* of (Ifemelu’s) identity” (217). Sackeyfio relies on W.E.B. Dubois’ notion of the divided self (also described as double consciousness) from his foundational masterpiece *The Souls of Black Folk*:

After the Egyptian and Indian, Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self (10-11).

Dubois’ visionary understanding of his dilemma, which he describes as both “strife” and a “gift,” has served as a theoretical frame for critical work in literature, sociology, and, as Sackeyfio highlights, has evolved to encompass many non-white experiences beyond the borders of the

United States. She situates *Americanah* as a text that explores double consciousness translated into hybrid, transnational experience, what has hitherto been explored by scholars within diaspora studies. One of these scholars, Samir Dayal, has described new territory for the DuBoisian notion as *diasporic double consciousness*, which he describes as a “circulating economy of representation”:

The transnational migrant’s double consciousness can continually reinvigorate the regulative ideal of an endlessly open and unpredictable negotiation of civil society and its quickening principle, social justice. My stress on negotiation is intended to emphasize a circulating economy of representation in real but also, increasingly, virtual *public* spaces (given the potential of cyberspatial communications to radically reconfigure cultural literacy, modes of cultural production, and access to institutional and theoretical discourse) in which majoritarian discursive practices are hybridized by minority discursive practices and vice versa so that new objects and emergent *subjectivities* can come into play, but in which the subject is always “less than one and double,” in Homi Bhabha’s phrase...

Negotiation thus contains the potential for anarchy in the nation-space but it points to a more responsive critical and practical approach to cultural difference than does a conceptualization of negotiation as a series of compromises or “conflict resolutions” – whether inscribed in a gestural politics of appeasement or motivated by a desire to defuse racial politics (56-57).

Dayal’s understanding of diasporic double consciousness as a possibility for transcultural critique and his sense of negotiation as a “responsive critical and practical approach to cultural difference” are useful for understanding Ifemelu’s accomplishment as a blogger. Her writing involves a consistent rejection of the politics of appeasement. Her negotiation involves the introduction of a new measuring tape, an emergent subjectivity: the non-American black (abbreviated as NAB), which she introduces in the title of her blog: *Raceteenth Or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*. By speaking through an organizing category, the possibly plural *non-American black*, she undermines the colonial signifier (identified by Homi Bhabha) “less than one and double” and makes room for multiplication. Instead of choosing a concrete, singular pseudonym, her label

suggests and imagines a collective; her writing often ends with an encouragement for participation (via interaction and comments). Homi Bhaba might describe it this way: “Political empowerment, and the enlargement of the multiculturalist cause, come from posing questions of solidarity and community from the interstitial perspective” (3). Through adopting the voice of a non-American black, Ifemelu begins this empowerment and solidarity with herself and with others who respond, contend, and eventually, elevate her voice. Symbols of her success include being offered a Princeton fellowship (and what she ultimately decides is the dubious honor of being invited and paid to speak to majority audiences about diversity).

If, as a novelist, Chimamanda Adichie is engaged in an anticolonial project of destabilizing the predominantly Western form of the novel as a center of knowledge, it is worthwhile to examine her efforts in relation to Toni Morrison’s awareness of the form. In her 1984 essay “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation” Morrison offers three sweeping and interconnecting ideas relevant to the study of Adichie’s novels and *Americanah* in particular. These ideas are 1) that the novel can serve as a recrediting mechanism and force multiplier for discredited knowledge, 2) that black approaches to orality are an expression of connectedness where ancestors communicate as roots, and 3) novels serve as a bounding mechanism for the public and private lives of the artist who, by definition, needs a life in the community. These together are why Morrison feels that the novel as a form is useful for black people.

Black communities have historically valued oral storytelling. Morrison says that artists traverse a narrow bridge between the public and the private, and that this is complicated by the fact that orality in black art involves the community. Morrison’s experience has been that the public and the private are two modes of life that “exist to exclude and annihilate each other” (56) and this conflict is likely to continue because “the social machinery of the country at this time

doesn't permit harmony in a life that has both aspects." Citing Jefferson walking home from his presidential inauguration, Morrison thinks that there must have been a time when a person could be both part of a given tribe and also an individual, but that these are not those times. She makes this case specifically about artists: "There must have been a time when an artist could be genuinely representative of the tribe and in it; when an artist could have a tribal or racial sensibility and an individual expression of it." She says that there is a remnant of this former harmony between individual and community that "you can see sometimes in Black churches where people shout," where trust makes personal grief and personal statements possible. She says, "the shouter is performing some rite that is extremely subjective" and "the other people are performing as a community in protecting that person. So you have a public and a private expression going on at the same time" (57). She concludes that this phenomenon does not transfer into general life and that the obvious thing is for her (as an artist) is to keep her personal life completely private.

Morrison further explains that novels evolved in the West partly with a didactic purpose for the middle classes, that the novel was a form that the aristocracy and peasants didn't need because they had their own forms and means. She reasons that although black people have always been healed by music, the novel is needed by African-Americans "now in a way that it was not needed before" (58) as a way to get new information out. She says that a deliberate focus for her as a novelist is to incorporate what she sees as the major characteristic of black art— "the ability to be both print and oral literature" to combine words so that they may be read in silence or heard in a way that makes congregants join a Black preacher in a sermon, "to behave in a certain way, to stand up and to weep and to cry and to accede or to change and to modify— to expand on the sermon that is being delivered" (59). Although as a novelist, all she has are the

alphabet and punctuation, her goal is to provide places for a similar kind of reader participation. The affective and participatory relationship between artist and audience is “of primary importance.” That the story wanders and meanders as it would if it were spoken is her method for inviting the reader into co-constructing the narrative, to participate, and to own that participation. She explains that she has experimented with different methods of creating a chorus that signifies the reader or the community responding to the action because the incorporation of orality is a fundamental characteristic of black art. Even though these features have existed before and in other cultures, her purpose is specific. Her work is about the struggle “to find that elusive but identifiable style” where acceptance of the supernatural and deep rootedness in the real world blend to form a “cosmology, the way in which Black people” look at the world. Her aim is to center the “discredited knowledge” that upward social mobility might otherwise leave behind. After all, it was discredited “only because Black people were discredited therefore what they *knew* was ‘discredited’” (61). The ancestor, a character archetype in all of her novels, functions as a re-crediting mechanism:

ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom...Some of them, like James Baldwin, were confounded and disturbed by the presence or absence of an ancestor...It was the absence of the ancestor that was frightening, that was threatening, and it caused huge destruction and disarray in the work itself (61-2).

Baldwin is also a key force in Adichie’s novel and for Ifemelu’s own progress. She delves deeply into his work before she is able to piece herself together, and with close reading one can see that he serves as a kind of ancestor for her. Likewise, Morrison’s commitment to orality is echoed in Ifemelu’s approach to the participatory possibilities of blogging.

This thesis examines how the novel carefully constructs honesty, outspokenness, and truth telling as defining characteristics of Ifemelu's personality while also illustrating how conflicts develop when, within offline life, as an immigrant and black woman in the United States, she is thwarted when she tries to ask the kinds of questions she later finds the freedom to pose within her blog. It is inexact to solely credit virtual space for Ifemelu's room to experiment with her non-American black *nom de plume*. Virtual space is important, but anonymity makes Ifemelu's approach to her writing possible. The anonymity of her blogging persona allows her to tell the truth in ways that the novel demonstrates she otherwise can't, and creates a rhetorical space for her to grow and build confidence. The first chapter examines how Ifemelu's encounter with the writing of James Baldwin (who functions as the ancestor in Toni Morrison's sense) is a foundation or root for her to build "a firm voice" whose perspective is consistent with her non-American accent.

The second chapter examines this construction of Ifemelu's ethos (in a rhetorical sense) both offline and online, and traces how her experiences as a black woman and immigrant add to a literature that questions classical understandings of the availability of ethos to every subject; in particular, how black women are often excluded from having voices that people hear and trust.

The third chapter examines why an anonymous persona was needed and how anonymous online speech makes a place for the oral traditions of colonized and formerly colonized peoples.

The conclusion will argue that *Americanah*, as a novel illustrates an anticolonial role for the web, and how the web's original design, which allows for basic anonymity, serves artists like Ifemelu in building bridges between public and private life.

## Chapter 1 — The “Labyrinth of Attitudes”

*For this is your home, my friend, do not be driven from it; great men have done great things here, and will again, and we can make America what America must become.*

—James Baldwin, “My Dungeon Shook,” *The Fire Next Time*

In Ifemelu’s childhood, the “serious Americanah” (78) was the Nigerian classmate, Bisi, who was mocked after coming back from a short American trip with new affectations, pretending as though she had forgotten or perhaps had never spoken her native language, Yoruba. In obvious contradiction, when Ifemelu wore a nice dress or braided her hair, Obinze could give Ifemelu the “ultimate compliment” (80) by saying “you look like a black American.” This paradox, the longing to be like Americans while concurrently ridiculing those who had more access to and knowledge of America, the undefinable trouble of colonial influence on her Nigerian psyche, this is an established anxiety long before Ifemelu arrives in America. The question of whether pursuing an American education—even while the Nigerian university system does not offer a viable alternative—will change her in the wrong ways (even while there are not any established right ways), intensifies throughout the novel’s narrative and never fully resolves. Whether it will render her unrecognizable, whether others might think that she has “lost her way” (126), whether she will become a caricature, alienated, without a coherent identity, and (because others fear it for themselves) become the butt of the joke— these are the conflicts Ifemelu faces even before poverty forces her to illegally assume the identity of a stranger, and when that too fails, desperation forces her into a brief (but traumatic) stint as a sex worker. The depression that follows temporarily diminishes her; she shrinks and fractures. Until she finds the ingredients for regrowth, a voice for herself as a writer, which involves interpreting what she has

learned throughout her education, including extracurricular reading, classroom experience, and the unique microaggressions experienced by black international students.

In her first days as a student in America, Ifemelu begins reading in the school library. She is strongly influenced by both the writing of James Baldwin, and the unapologetic confidence of her first non-American (Kenyan) friend, Wambui. The writing of James Baldwin is situated in *Americanah* in a way that is akin to Toni Morrison's description of the role of the ancestor as the source of rootedness in Morrison's novels. Baldwin's two essays (originally published in *The Progressive* and *The New Yorker* and then re-published under the title *The Fire Next Time*) afford a "conscious historical connection" (Morrison 64). Baldwin serves as a foundational author in relation to the problems that will eventually motivate Ifemelu's blogging. Further, the narrative focuses on "the firm voice" of a classmate and eventual friend, who models a confident disposition setting an example for Ifemelu and putting her on the path to make peace with her accent— and her hair. As a consequence, she is able redirect her anxieties about immigrant life into an original cultural performance as a "non-American" blogger.

Many of the chapters in *Americanah* are formally tight. The novel is a sequence of short stories that weave back and forth in time and place (which is reminiscent of Morrison's necessity that the black novel tether to oral culture). Chapter 14 is the tightest in the novel. It unleashes dynamics that activate Ifemelu. It begins with an encounter with Cristina Tomas from the International Students Office, a white woman who equates Ifemelu's foreign accent with cultural and linguistic incompetence. Then, it moves to focus on Ifemelu's quest for cultural literacy, how Baldwin's essays offer her an understanding of America, which troubled as it may be, is consoling. Finally, the chapter closes with an introduction to "the firm voice"— Wambui's

confident contributions to classroom discussion, in a non-American accent no less, which serve to symbolically refute the infantilization and disrespect from the Cristina Tomas's of the world.

Ifemelu's first impression of Cristina Tomas is that she is ill, not because of her "pallid complexion" (163) or "whitish tights that made her legs look like death," but because of how she speaks slowly and haltingly to Ifemelu: "I. Need. You. To. Fill. Out. A. Couple. Of. Forms. Do. You. Understand. How. To. Fill. These. Out?" Quickly, Ifemelu realizes that she is being spoken to in this way because of her foreign accent and she feels as though she is "like a small child, lazy-limbed and drooling." When Ifemelu emphasizes that she *does* speak English, Cristina Tomas further insults her: "I bet you do, I just don't know how *well*." As readers, we remember that W.E.B Dubois said the symptoms of double consciousness come from "measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (10). The diminishment that Ifemelu feels as Cristina Tomas mis-measures her is rendered in Adichie's use of the verb "to shrink" four times in one paragraph:

Ifemelu shrank. In that strained, still second when her eyes met Cristina Tomas's before she took the forms, she shrank. She shrank like a dried leaf. She had spoken English all her life, led the debating society in secondary school, and always thought the American twang inchoate; she should not have cowered and shrunk, but she did. And in the following weeks, as autumn's coolness descended, she began to practice an American accent. (164)

Vignettes like these, where Ifemelu is forced to reckon with white women, lace throughout *Americanah*. White women repeatedly and continuously serve up unsolicited antagonisms that distress Ifemelu. Cristina Tomas is the first in a string who cause Ifemelu to freeze, to become brittle and fragile, like "a dried leaf." As this passage suggests, her first response is intimidation and to avoid any more interactions where her accent will factor in how she is treated. She decides to appease Cristina Tomas, and chooses to develop an accent that is not hers. She would prefer to perform a version of herself that she thinks is unsophisticated.

Next to the encounter with Cristina Tomas is a description of the consolation Ifemelu finds in immersing herself in the books that Obinze recommends. *The Fire Next Time* is the first of these, and her first taste of Baldwin leads her to take every other Baldwin book from the library's shelves. The influence on Ifemelu is therapeutic: "as she read, America's mythologies began to take on meaning, America's tribalisms—race, ideology, and region—became clear. And she was consoled by her new knowledge" (167). Those familiar with *The Fire Next Time* might recall the central problems that Baldwin addresses are paradoxical: 1) that "whatever white people do not know about Negroes reveals, precisely and inexorably, what they do not know about themselves" (43) and 2) "For the horrors of the American Negro's life there has been almost no language" (68). These two problems are in tension with one another—if anything is to be done, it involves giving voice to the unspeakable. Keeping both ideas in mind, Baldwin's stated purpose is to encourage discourse: "we can make America what America must become" (9).

Since Adichie is indicating the connection between Ifemelu's development and Baldwin's role in it, intertextual connections can be inferred between *The Fire Next Time* and Ifemelu's blog *Raceteenth Or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*. Not just because, perhaps as a salute to Baldwin, she invokes the antiquated word "Negro" where "American blacks" would be enough, but also through her thematic choices, which appear to be in conversation with Baldwin's. For example, the first blog post in the novel, in Chapter 17, after she realizes that her perfected American accent is an empty accomplishment and decides to "return her voice to herself," is titled "Understanding America for the Non-American Black: American Tribalism," (227-8). The example that complicates her basic model of American class, ideology, region, and race is the

presence of Jewish people and dynamics of anti-Semitism. She is appalled and confused: “So in under-grad, we had a visiting speaker and a classmate whispers to another, ‘Oh my God, he looks so Jewish,’ with a shudder, an actual shudder. Like Jewish was a bad thing. I didn’t get it. As far as I could see, the man was white”. Baldwin has a similar account in *The Fire Next Time* about the effects of going to a predominantly Jewish school. He describes how having a Jewish best friend was not only a spiritual conundrum for him, but that it forced him to think about race: “The fact that I was dealing with Jews brought the whole question of color, which I had been desperately avoiding, into the terrified center of my mind. I realized that the Bible had been written by white men” (35). Both Ifemelu and Baldwin encounter the same kinds of exclusion, Ifemelu with her classmates, and Baldwin in his minister father’s loaded question about his Jewish friend: “Is he a Christian?” (36). After describing how his father responds to the inevitable wrong answer to that question by slapping his son, and how this unravels the last vestiges of Baldwin’s Christian faith, Baldwin’s confoundedness and disappointment is a forerunner for Ifemelu’s:

The transfiguring power of the Holy Ghost ended when the service ended, and salvation stopped at the church door. When we were told to love everybody, I had thought that that meant *everybody*. But no. It applied only to those who believed as we did, and it did not apply to white people at all. (39)

Ifemelu learns from Baldwin’s willingness to explore the backward, unconscious logics that facilitate hate— how many who have endured oppression thoughtlessly replicate and redirect it onto others and themselves. Even though it leaves him without the safety of a tribe, Baldwin rejects what he refers to as the “labyrinth of attitudes” (43) that are a consequence of mistrusting the self and interposing “historical and public” postures as an interference between oneself and reality.

In her comic second blog post which builds on her first and is placed at the close of Chapter 19, “Understanding America for the Non-American Black: What Do WASPs Aspire To?” (253-4) Ifemelu assumes the role of guide through a latter-day labyrinth of attitudes. She recounts a discussion between a Jewish professor and a black professor “Professor Hunk” about the oppression Olympics:

Jewish guy did not know this, but “oppression olympics” is what smart liberal Americans say, to make you feel stupid and to make you shut up. But there IS an oppression olympics going on. American racial minorities—blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and Jews—all get shit from white folks, different kinds of shit, but shit still. Each secretly believes that it gets the worst shit.

She concludes that most minorities have a “conflicted longing” (254) for the privileges afforded to white WASPs. Like Baldwin, she then describes her own understanding that this is likely to be a universal human frailty by slyly wondering (while citing Philip Roth’s notion of “Hating Your Goy and Eating One Too”) about who the WASPs (in their position at the top of the oppression ladder), could possibly find to simultaneously admire and deplore: “what do WASPs aspire to? Does anyone know?” Ifemelu’s confident treatment of the interplay between the hate inflicted by whites onto minorities and its transfer into competition for the worst “shit” as a manifestation of self-hatred extrapolates her own breakfast table conversation (just as Baldwin’s dinner table discussion with Elijah Muhammed was fodder for his examination of the same issue) into a work of art.

Toni Morrison states that the historical continuity that an ancestor offers a story is inherently political, and that good artwork must achieve this continuity in order to avoid getting lost: “yes, the work must be political. It must have that as its thrust. That’s a pejorative term in critical circles now: if a work of art has any political influence in it, somehow it’s tainted. My feeling is just the opposite: if it has none, it is tainted” (64). Ifemelu’s discovery of James

Baldwin initiates her into a possibility for writing that causes “new words to fall out of her mouth. Columns of mist were dispersing” (167). She finds it thrilling to disagree with her professors, and eventually too, the professors at her breakfast table.

The reason these passages from her blog posts elevate into the kind of art that Morrison points toward, is because there are no safe perspectives, even the smart liberal Americans are shown to be more about shaming and silencing ideas instead of exploring them. For Ifemelu, the “oppression olympics” is *both* nonsense (in the way that it is used to silence discussion) and the truth (because it describes the way that some minorities oddly vie in contests of comparative suffering). In disclosing this contradiction, she resembles Baldwin, his wise ability to keep two ideas in mind at the same time, and reproducing his insistence on building consciousness in others.

At home in Nigeria, pointing out nonsense was always a feature of Ifemelu’s character. But away from home, as a new American immigrant, the destabilizing effect on Ifemelu’s identity causes her to be more self-contained and hemmed in. The person who disrupts this self-containment, who causes more “columns of mist” to disperse, who demonstrates that this identity, “non-American,” need not be shame inducing, who has unique perspectives and the ability to set “everyone and everything right in the world” (170) is her Kenyan classmate, Wambui. The class discussion about the film *Roots* that rounds out Chapter 14 is essential to the re-emergence of Ifemelu’s confidence, and eventually, the voice she deploys in the writing of her blog. The first description of Wambui includes the first use of “non-American” in close proximity to her description “the firm voice”:

“Let’s talk about historical representation in film,” Professor Moore said.

A firm, female voice from the back of the class, with a non-American accent asked, “Why was ‘nigger’ bleeped out?”

And a collective sigh, like a small wind, swept through the class...

"It makes no sense to me," the firm voice said. Ifemelu turned. The speaker's natural hair was cut as low as a boy's and her pretty face, wide-foreheaded and fleshless, reminded Ifemelu of the East Africans who always won long-distance races on television.

"I mean, 'nigger' is a word that exists. People use it. It is part of America. It has caused a lot of pain to people and I think it is insulting to bleep it out..."

It came from a gravelly voice in the middle of the class. "Well, it's because of the pain that word has caused that you *shouldn't* use it!" *Shouldn't* sailed astringently into the air, the speaker an African-American girl wearing hoop earrings...

Ifemelu raised her hand; Faulkner's *Light in August*, which she had just read, was on her mind. "I don't think it's always hurtful. I think it depends on the intent and also on who is using it."

A girl next to her, face flushing bright red, burst out, "No! The word is the same for whoever says it."

"That is nonsense." The firm voice again. A voice unafraid. "If my mother hits me with a stick and a stranger hits me with a stick, it's not the same thing."

Ifemelu looked at Professor Moore to see how the word "nonsense" had been received. She did not seem to have noticed; instead, a vague terror was freezing her features into a smirk-smile.

"I agree it's different when African Americans say it, but I don't think it should be used in films because that way people who shouldn't use it can use it and hurt other people's feelings," a light-skinned African-American girl said, the last of the four black people in the class, her sweater an unsettling shade of fuchsia.

But it's like being in denial. If it was used like that, then it should be represented like that. Hiding it doesn't make it go away." The firm voice.

Well, if you all hadn't sold us, we wouldn't be talking about any of this," the gravelly-voiced African-American girl said, in a lowered tone that was, nonetheless, audible. The classroom was wrapped in silence. Then rose that voice again. "Sorry, but even if no Africans had been sold by other Africans, the transatlantic slave trade would still have happened. It was a European enterprise. It was about Europeans looking for labor for their plantations..."

After class Ifemelu and the firm voice drifted towards each other. (168-70)

When a collective sigh sweeps through the class, the possibility registers that it could have the intended (silencing) effect. Behavioral policing of an outsider by insiders is sometimes unconscious, but the register of a chorus of sighs from the American students in the classroom who wish that Wambui would not venture this opinion could have the effect of silencing anyone without self-assurance. Wambui, who gleans her strength from being the president of the African Students Association and the “renewal” (171) that comes from being with others who share in the slights and frustrations of being African immigrants together is thereby not always an outsider, and levies this renewed strength even when she is outnumbered.

“Like a small wind”— the simile that Adichie chooses for the classrooms’ reluctance to discuss what Wambui thinks is essential, conveys how taboos feel elemental, that the tacit agreements that insiders adopt within communities, even if they are mostly unspoken, can assume a force like the environmental when their effects, as sighs do, become palpable in space. Wambui’s willingness to confront taboos, to poke at uncomfortable topics, while disregarding expectations that she straighten her hair and conform to gender norms, and instead deploying the confidence that comes from a national habit of winning foot races, Wambui, the outsider, has the confidence to point out what none of the Americans are interested in considering: the idea that hiding things doesn’t make them go away.

Much of Ifemelu’s later writing hinges on revelations of formerly unspoken taboos from an outsider’s perspective, and Ifemelu (who raises her hand before speaking up to agree with Wambui), is not just struck by Wambui’s lack of fear, but by the harsh thrust of Wambui’s speech. Ifemelu is unsure whether it is acceptable, whether calling these opinions of her classmates “nonsense” has crossed a line. She learns, in this case, it hasn’t.

Wambui's metaphor of the stick, which conveys the idea that nuance and context are important in speech, that *who* speaks and *why* is valuable to consider, is delivered with the compactness of a proverb. It stretches communication beyond what would seem possible for so few words and reflects a distinction between oral argument and prose: in speech, thought depends on the working memory of the listeners and thus, in oral speech, being brief contributes to one's success. Some of Wambui's tactics are evident in Ifemelu's blogging persona, which insists on plain-spokenness, conversational grammar, and brevity. Where Ifemelu might have formerly demonstrated her perfect grasp of formal (colonial) English for the doubters like Cristina Tomas, her voice as a blogger leaves out articles, puts an explaining "so" at the beginning of many sentences, and like the spoken word, uses sentence fragments when they will do just as well. It is reminiscent of the high-speed to-and-fro of unrehearsed conversation, imperfect and without an interest in perfection. It mirrors a rhythm of speech that reflects confidence instead of a desire to be accepted. As Toni Morrison puts it when she describes how oral quality is essential in black writing, "what is left out is as important as what is there" (59).

Chapter 14 closes when the restaurant manager calls to speak to Ngozi, (the false name and identity that Ifemelu has used to apply for a hostess position), to let her know that the restaurant has selected "a more qualified person" (175). As Ifemelu's economic insecurities mount, she thinks briefly about how her mother would be inclined to blame the devil for these kinds of disappointments. It is a fearful moment for Ifemelu as she faces the materiality of a stack of bills while lacking a helpful narrative to pull herself through. Ifemelu seems as confounded by her mother's religiosity as James Baldwin is when he laments his father's. To some extent, as readers, we are shielded from the weight of this anxiety, because we have already absorbed parts of the story that describe Ifemelu's eventual success. We have seen the

titles of Ifemelu's blog posts and already know that she makes her way to an eventual Princeton fellowship. As readers we are thereby less prepared for the difficulty she faces in the next chapter and the unique kind of gendered shame that James Baldwin doesn't offer a map for.

Sighs signal conscious (or unconscious) feeling. Sometimes they are exhalations that render politically charged moments uncomfortable, enough to silence provoking speech. They demonstrate how the breath is one of the ways that bodies connect to and influence physical space. In Chapter 14 of *Americanah*, Adichie's airy metaphors for the sighs of students in the classroom work to prove that the classroom dialogue is spatial. Wambui ably demonstrates that the classroom discussion involves persuasion, (meaning that the person with the keenest sensitivities as well as the ability to concretely express them) will assist in shaping the environments that make education, humanities discourse, in this case, discussions about historical representation in film, worthwhile.

Before the West and western capitalism (or in Wambui's words "European enterprise"), from classical philosophers we know the name for the field (and art) of persuasion as *rhetoric*. In this way, we can understand that the classroom space is rhetorical space. It is also easier to see how any place where persuasion is used to contest the "labyrinth of attitudes" (Baldwin 43) is rhetorical space. In *Americanah*, Ifemelu's character and her "natural proclivity towards provocation" (63) reflect how some spaces are more (and less) welcoming for discussions of race. If Ifemelu is influenced by Baldwin's necessity that we "make America what America must become," (9) finding space that allows her the opportunity to develop her voice. Understanding more about Ifemelu's character and some of the contours of rhetorical space for black women in general, online and off, is the next step for exploring Ifemelu's identity as a successful blogger.

## Chapter 2 — “This Is Like Poetry”

Black women do not have all the answers. We are not superheroes, and ours is not the definitive worldview. But we are trustworthy subjects, of our own experiences and of ways of knowing. One of the more resilient slogans from the social media era of black cultural production is “Trust black women.” Sisters on social media say it to make their legitimate claim to what they know about their own experiences.

—Tressie McMillan Cottom, “Girl 6,” *Thick*

In the first sentence of *Americanah* the reader encounters Ifemelu’s sense perceptions of Princeton, New Jersey: “Princeton in the summer, smelled of nothing...the quiet abiding air of earned grace, it was this, the lack of smell, that most appealed to her, perhaps because the other American cities she knew well had all smelled distinctly” (3). In a novel that dwells on abstract ideas like home and nationality, race and immigration, this beginning reinforces the fact that so much about our perspectives, our “truths,” hinge on our individual bodies.

It is arguable that from this first sentence we are encouraged to trust Ifemelu. Why? — the reasons aren’t singular, but one idea is that Adichie has constructed Ifemelu as a character of good ethos. Ethos is a means of persuasion where an audience is convinced of a speaker’s moral character through their projection of traits like honesty, benevolence, or intelligence (Sloane). As Coretta Pittman has argued, good ethos is something that others have the agency to develop, while black women have been consistently excluded from the opportunities and free choices that have made it possible for others: “The idea that an orator needed to convince audiences that he had good sense, good moral character, and good will in the Agora is also applicable to writers of texts in

American society, particularly black women writers” (44). Pittman demonstrates that complications stemming from racism, classism, and sexism have marked individuals who come from “undesirable groups” (45) and that the opportunities for black women to develop good ethos, in the way that more privileged people can, have been few.

Ifemelu is not a grasper, she’s not blogging in order to become wealthy or famous, she is doing serious writing for many different audiences on a necessary topic. Her intentions are not just credible, but creditable. Adichie peppers the text with cues for the reader that Ifemelu is honest, a person with good faith intentions, and even when she makes decisions the reader questions, circumstances are often forcing choices between only bad options. Problems for the most part, do not arise from a lack of deliberation or consideration, and when they do, when she cheats on her boyfriend Curt, for example, the reader is privy to her steps at rectification and the responsibility she takes.

For Adichie to develop a trustworthy character, an agent of truth, not only serves important representative purposes— presenting a nuanced portrait of a black woman of good ethos— it is also a mechanism for exploring how and to what degree truth is contextual (partly as a consequence of our individual perceptions). Finally, having a character of good ethos who is also a blogger, is useful for examining how the web, where text is separable from the body of its author, is a unique context and rhetorical space for black cultural production. It’s a place where, if you are trusted (and that’s a big “if”), you can get information out (in Toni Morrison’s sense) and make legitimate claims about your lived experience as Tressie McMillan Cottom describes above.

Early in the novel, tensions are evident around Ifemelu’s tendency to speak honestly, because it is symbolic of a moral perspective that rejects corruption. She trusts

her own estimation of right, more than her church's, and this leads to a conflict with Sister Ibinabo over making a garland for Chief Omenka whom Ifemelu thinks is a thief and says so. Her father admonishes: "You must refrain from your natural proclivity towards provocation, Ifemelu" (63) and Aunt Uju chides her: "I've told you that you don't have to say everything. You have to learn that. You don't have to *say* everything" (65). The reader learns that Ifemelu is bristling to the point of rebellion against the church's interpretations of reality because the church has the power to influence her mother. Ifemelu is skeptical because her mother seems willing to believe any religious interpretations that will bring her closer to wealth. Ifemelu's family discourages her outspokenness, and her mother describes her as a "troublemaker" (64). Without Obinze's mother, who becomes a mentor for Ifemelu's moral development, it is hard to know how Ifemelu would have coped with the negative feedback from her family.

Adichie signals that the availability of truth, the ability to tell the truth, is a kind of luxury or privilege, that may only be possible in certain times and places. In Obinze's reflection as a grown man, he muses that he was "raised by a mother during a time when truth telling was not yet a luxury" (347). Truth is contextual, perhaps even dependent on living in times when professors like Obinze's mother are involved in seeking and teaching it. Obinze's mother is never named. She is introduced as a woman who is a notorious "troublemaker" herself because of her willingness to openly accuse a male colleague of misusing funds. This colleague slaps her and the situation leads to community discussion (led by Obinze's mother) about how no man needs to defend her because she is a "full human being" (71). This leads to female students wearing t-shirts

that say “Full Human Being.” As before, autonomy is an ingredient in formulations of good ethos and in Nigeria, and elsewhere, a questioned attribute of women.

The novel stages larger questions about the precise conditions of when and where hypocrisy can be called out. “To be a child of the Third World is to be aware of the many different constituencies you have and how honesty and truth must always depend on the context” (396). Ifemelu says this when she is having a conversation about how she thinks Americans have unnecessary expectations for “unbending, unambiguous honesties” in relationships. Her boyfriend Blaine disagrees with her; he says that it is lazy to “use the Third World like that” and the reader’s attention turns to how Ifemelu feels a strange reluctance to disagree with both Blaine and Blaine’s sister, Shan, on this issue because she wants Shan to like her. Ifemelu doesn’t typically need people to like her, but this push and pull is a miniature of the colonial truth that she was trying to get at: telling the truth is negotiated through permission and permission is granted by the powerful. It is, in Ifemelu’s experience, sometimes bending and ambiguous. Ostensibly, both Nigeria and the United States are democracies, but Blaine and Shan have been conditioned by privileges of life in a country where norms like freedom of speech are thought to supersede social position (although that is not to say this freedom is fully felt by all in the U.S.). Ifemelu’s argument is an uneasy one. The evidence for her point of view is lost in incommensurabilities of experience.

Ifemelu traces this negotiation about honesty, and how it is reflected in oneself in her blogging. Sometimes the reader isn’t given access to the full-text of these posts but instead, narrative descriptions of the feelings that accompany their composition. Entries about Michelle Obama are described:

...she blogged, too about Michelle Obama. She gloried in the off-beat dryness of Michelle Obama's humor, the confidence in her long-limbed carriage, and then she mourned when Michelle Obama was clamped, flattened, made to sound tepidly wholesome in interviews. Still, there was, in Michelle Obama's overly arched eyebrows and in her belt worn higher on her waist than tradition would care for, a glint of her old self. It was this that drew Ifemelu, the absence of apology, the promise of honesty. (439-440)

This passage, besides its articulations about Michelle Obama is partly a projection. What she sees in Michelle Obama is made possible because Ifemelu and Michelle Obama are in similar circumstances. For different reasons, they both want to be liked. They both need to be accepted by broader constituencies. Unfortunately (and ironically) there is something unwholesome about being fully oneself and expressing it in front of majority (white) audiences. The notion of Michelle Obama's "old self" being cloaked behind other presentations is true of Ifemelu too.

The tight relationship between "absence of apology" and "the promise of honesty" is worth noting. "Absence of apology" is another way of saying unapologetic, which is often used to describe a baseline confidence in one's blackness and in one's individual body. Implicit is the idea that many black people feel called to apologize for their blackness and this recognition and refusal undermine the dynamics of double consciousness. It is the emergence of "full-fledged black subjectivity" (Qureshi 63). These are the revelations of Ifemelu's character arc. Put simply: on arriving in America she learns that she is black, and instead of rejecting it, she adjusts and learns to become unapologetically black.

When Ifemelu returns to Nigeria she lies to anyone who asks about her relationship with Blaine saying that they are still together and haven't broken up. It is a lie of convenience more than anything in order to keep from having too many irritating

conversations about marriage. Because of her ability to imagine the possibilities of a life in which she and Blaine haven't broken up and stay together, the narrative discloses one of the principal disadvantages of telling lies: "sometimes she believed her own lies" (493). Obinze, however is quick to affirm that Ifemelu's general tendency toward the truth is of lasting importance to him: "You haven't stopped being honest Ifem, thank God" (529). In his experience as a rich man he sees Nigerians as too obsequious and that this obsequiousness breeds insincerity. He says, "you don't know if anything is honest or true anymore" (532).

Even before she and Obinze reconcile, the comment on her new Nigerian blog (that she knows is his) "this is like poetry" (584), is an indication of a culminating alignment between the depths of her personality and her art and that it is evident to those who know her well. Even without Obinze "Still, she was at peace: to be home, to be writing her blog, to have discovered Lagos again. She had, finally, spun herself fully into being" (586). In this phrasing readers might hear the resonance with Obinze's mother's notion of being a "Full Human Being" (71). The metaphor of spinning, of twisting strands of fibers together into a yarn, suggests that healing her fractured identity is both a consequence of being home and of having found the confidence to accept herself as a troublemaker/truth teller there.

If we are willing to accept the idea that Ifemelu is persuasive and that part of that is because of her good ethos, then examining how the rhetorical context in which her writing succeeds is useful. It helps in understanding how Adichie is using the legitimized space of a novel to indicate that blogging is a valid form of cultural production and thereby expanding the boundaries of what qualifies as significant writing. André Brock, a

scholar of race and the internet, has argued that blogs represent “third places” (which is from a sociologist, Ray Oldenburg, who theorizes about places that aren’t quite public and are also not private). Brock says that blogs operate as neutral spaces “where conversation is the main activity; they are free of external social hierarchies; they are inclusive and accessible; they expand possibilities for association by like-minded souls; and they offer psychological comfort and spiritual support” (16-7). Besides these features, which might be true of most kinds of blogging communities, Brock contends that black blogs are also a place of signifying: “although signifying is usually understood as a game of insults (the ‘dozens’), it is better understood as a celebration of invention, timeliness, and delivery in a discourse style intended to speak truth to power.” With Brock’s understanding of black blogging, Ifemelu’s writing (and her success) becomes an expression of not just her developing confidence, but of cultural competence, of not just an understanding of America, but of the worthiness of her experience within it.

What culture precisely? Without the notion of “transcultural critique” (Dayal 56), the answers to that question might be too narrow. Ifemelu is not solely speaking to American black people, or in some cases American white people, but often to those like herself (black non-Americans). Samir Dayal, the theorist of diasporic double consciousness cites Shakespeare’s character Caliban from *The Tempest* in describing some of the characteristics of what transcultural critique can involve:

In splitting official narratives a *signifying irony* is also preserved, one aspect of which is the Caliban capacity, that is, acquiring the discursive strategies of the (neo)colonialist, in order to better curse through them. (56)

One of Ifemelu’s blog posts deploys signifying irony in the specifically postcolonial way that Dayal describes. In “To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: In America, You Are Black, Baby”

(273-5), Ifemelu adopts the voice of the colonist, the taskmaster who imposes “order” through official interpretations of the negative social reality that is a consequence of his domination.<sup>3</sup> With comic effect, Ifemelu is aping the colonist who supplants all perspectives with the (only acceptable) official narrative. With the paternalistic air of a drill sergeant, she gives specific instructions including the “fact” that part of being black involves the requirement of taking offense in all instances of possible racism:

Stop arguing. Stop saying I’m Jamaican or I’m Ghanaian...Don’t deny now. What if being black had all the privileges of being white? Would you still say ‘Don’t call me black, I’m from Trinidad’? I didn’t think so. So you’re black, baby. And here’s the deal with becoming black: You must show that you are offended when such words as “watermelon” or “tar baby” are used in jokes, even if you don’t know what the hell is being talked about—

Part of socialization involves figuring out the unstated rules of in-group behavior. One exception is in cases of colonial rule, where the colonist supersedes and defines correct behavior (to an absurd extent) and strictly polices it. Many African and Caribbean countries are well familiar with the tactics of the colonist and it is this shared knowledge that produces an audience for the humor of Ifemelu’s mimicry. Immigrants from these countries can appreciate both what she is making fun of and the disclosure of what she knows of America. To put it another way, the practical value of her shared understandings, that it may alleviate embarrassment or awkwardness in the likely scenarios where black Americans will expect (regardless of whether they are authentic) specific responses from black immigrants is elevated by the fact that in this instance, immigrants are in on the joke. The post continues with one specific caution that has been a longstanding unstated atmospheric truth:

In describing black women you admire, always use the word “STRONG” because that is what black women are supposed to be in America. If you are a woman, please do not

<sup>3</sup> Many theorists including Sartre, Foucault, and Georges Balandier have explored “colonial systems” and how language is deployed within them to reinforce colonial power.

speaking your mind as you are used to doing in your country. Because in America, strong-minded black women are SCARY.

Here, the order of instructions points to the unstated contradiction: in America, black women are expected to be strong, and it is expected that they be described as strong, but being strong-minded is not appropriate. It is scary. The humor is partly in Ifemelu using an exaggerated voice to deliver the news that she is intimidating (coupled with the unstated but obvious fact that her mind is what makes her strong).

The post closes with instructions for describing to a non-black person a case where something racist has happened to you: “make sure you are not bitter. Don’t complain. Be forgiving. If possible make it funny. Most of all, do not be angry. Black people are not supposed to be angry about racism.” Ifemelu is not making this up. There is a reason she has to couch her own experience with this delivery. She completes her thought through revisiting a theme, to articulate the narrow difference between (white) conservatives and liberals. She acknowledges that they will respond differently. Liberals won’t deny that racism happens but will subtly police your responses to it. Conservatives will wholly deny the perception itself: “the conservative will tell you that YOU are the real racist and your mouth will hang open in confusion.” That liberals and conservatives merely present differing reception of what is essentially unwelcome news shrinks what might otherwise seem like a gulf between them. To Ifemelu, there is little difference in policing her response and denying her experience outright. It is an exaggeration, the kind of exaggeration that builds humor and is characteristic of Ifemelu’s *Raceteenth* voice, but it is also a legitimate claim to what she knows of her own experience, which as she shows, is often contested territory. The double bind exposed, and what makes it the most memorable, is that black Americans will expect you (a black immigrant) to be offended by racism, while white Americans will expect you not to be angry about it. Humor is the only option. An important

clarification is that the kind of humor that Ifemelu deploys is not an appeasing sort, one that is aiming for laughs, it is instead a celebration of its own delivery, what Brock would term “a discourse style intended to speak truth to power” (17). It is a delivery that legitimizes her identity and the identities of others like her.

Blogs and message boards are fora for conversation, sometimes for building conditions of trust and are thus by definition, rhetorical spaces. Within *Americanah*, it is worth emphasizing how for Ifemelu, both writing (or signifying) and responding are depicted as valuable forms of participation. They invigorate her. Ifemelu’s first involvement is in the role of responder. On HappilyKinkyNappy.com the first words we see from her online take the form of a comment. In a far more tentative voice, one that registers more like her mother’s than her *Raceteenth* persona, Ifemelu, after remembering Jamilah’s online promise that she “will never (put) horse hair on my head again” (264) decides after coming to the beauty supply store for that very purpose, not to buy another weave for her own hair. While later in her writing career she might have described the decision with bold fierceness sourced solely from her own self-regard, instead she writes of it as though it is an epiphany: “Jamilah’s words made me remember that there is nothing more beautiful than what God gave me”. The beneficial effect this tiny interaction has on her is equated with the feelings of the true believer; it is compared to the kind of interaction that propels the black church (the kind that knits public and private together in the ways that Toni Morrison described). Ifemelu testifies: “She had never talked about God so much. Posting on the website was like giving testimony in church; the echoing roar of approval revived her.” Even though she has friends like Wambui who tell her that “relaxing your hair is like being in prison. You’re caged in. Your hair rules you” (257), rejecting this prison with strangers online is a unique kind of liberation for Ifemelu. She posts pictures of her hair and delights in the approval

that she knows will be offered. In her first online expressions, she is not a performer, but an individual seeking community. It is her first initiation and signals a momentous shift into what has been called “sympathetic cocreation” by Kesho Scott (xiv) and described as ‘the wealth of the network’ by Yochai Benkler. She is no longer a passive observer, but a speaker and participant.

Early in the novel, in the first description of Ifemelu’s blog, we learn that details about her occupation as a blogger often makes strangers uncomfortable:

People were flattered to be asked about themselves and if she said nothing after they spoke, it made them say more. They were conditioned to fill silences. If they asked what she did, she would say vaguely, “I write a lifestyle blog,” because saying “I write an anonymous blog called *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black* would make them uncomfortable. (4)

She then describes two instances where her expectations of how people (two white men) would respond were mistaken, one is unexpectedly negative given that he has dreadlocks, and one is unexpectedly positive given that he is a poorly dressed middle manager from Ohio. The Ohioan has an adopted black child and through this personal experience, agrees that racism is a big problem in the U.S. In many cases though, her blog prompts discomfort and she chooses not to describe it too clearly so that strangers will continue to talk to her. The discomfort is attributed to the subject matter—race. However, in some ways, it’s understandable that an anonymous race blogger is uniquely formidable. For complex reasons anonymity levies a certain kind of threat that is relevant and worth considering, especially if it changes the kinds of truths Ifemelu feels comfortable sharing.

### Chapter 3 — “Unzip yourself. This is a safe space.”

“Anonymous statements have, as we have seen, a universal air about them. Absolute truth, the collected wisdom of the universe, seems to be speaking, not the feeble voice of a man.”

–E.M. Forster, “Anonymity: An Enquiry,” *Two Cheers for Democracy*

*Americanah* does not specifically address why Ifemelu chooses to write her blog anonymously.<sup>4</sup> The voice of her blogging persona, the “non-American black,” is justified mostly by her success. In examining this question, because these reasons are likely to resonate with Ifemelu’s, it is useful to understand that some people, including black people, have gravitated toward anonymous places online, and that writers have chosen anonymity for centuries. The novel gives us suggestions, and through inference, through our access to the narrative of Ifemelu’s life in America, through adding up how her ideas about racism are received, especially by white women, these factors provide a picture as to why she might want to keep her truest ideas separate from her identity— so that they cannot be used against her. If we couple that idea with the realities of her economic and immigration circumstances (which are amplified to the reader through the trouble that Obinze experiences in the United Kingdom and how he is eventually deported back to Nigeria), we begin to understand her choice to write pseudonymously. It allows Ifemelu the permission and confidence to speak with certainty and without having to offer qualifications or silences that serve to please others. A final, more abstract rationale, is that her persona allows her the opportunity to write herself into existence as

<sup>4</sup> “anonymous” (4) is Adichie’s word and has been used for the purposes of discussion. “Pseudonymous” would be a more technically exact term for Ifemelu’s non-American black persona.

an unapologetic immigrant who reclaims the confidence of her Nigerian self, even before she is certain that that is possible.

In her 2015 book *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, Simone Brown provides a selected list of over thirty black radicals, artists, activists, and intellectuals who have been targeted for surveillance by the FBI (2-3). Early in her list is Ifemelu's favorite, James Baldwin. Through that connection, and through how Browne puts modern approaches to surveillance in conversation with the methods of domination practiced on black people within transatlantic slavery, history serves as a beginning to explore why anonymity, even though it is not the technical kind that would protect her from being traced by powerful forces like the FBI, is a wise choice for Ifemelu. If James Baldwin, who was an American citizen, was still not exempt from the expectation that his activism was dangerous, so much so that the FBI felt active surveillance of his activities was warranted, by extension the harms that might await Ifemelu are considerable. Knowing that Baldwin was officially considered a threat serves to reinforce the vignettes within the novel that imply how unwelcome Ifemelu's ideas, which often echo Baldwin's, are for many Americans. The U.S. government's extensive records on James Baldwin are a worthy reminder of how dangerous it could be for her to express herself without a screen name.

The social pressure that Ifemelu experiences and the idea that anonymity aids in alleviating expectations of conformity is evoked by a conflict she has with her babysitting employer Kimberley's sister, Laura, in Chapter 16. Ifemelu's willingness to use her knowledge of history, both African and American, is something that she would do with ease in the space of her blog. However, with Laura, she is forced to apologize and say that she has been rude.

Laura is a routine offender who seems to be threatened by Ifemelu and it compels her to share information about Africans and Nigerians in passive-aggressive gestures that imply a sense of American superiority that she seems to cling to. In the moment that leads to conflict, Laura has been telling Ifemelu about a Nigerian man she has just met, a doctor, “well-groomed” and “well-spoken” (as though he wouldn’t be as an American black man) who has just seen her child, Athena:

I think I’ll switch and have him be Athena’s doctor. He was wonderful, so well-groomed and well-spoken. I haven’t been very satisfied with Dr. Bingham since Dr. Hoffman left, anyway.” Laura picked up the menu again. “In graduate school I knew a woman from Africa who was just like this doctor, I think she was from Uganda. She was wonderful, and she didn’t get along with the African-American woman in our class at all. She didn’t have all those issues.”

“Maybe when the African American’s father was not allowed to vote because he was black, the Ugandan’s father was running for parliament or studying at Oxford,” Ifemelu said.

Laura stared at her, made a mocking confused face. “Wait, did I miss something?”

“I just think it’s a simplistic comparison to make. You need to understand a bit more history,” Ifemelu said.

Laura’s lips sagged. She staggered, collected herself.

“Well, I’ll get my daughter and then go find some history books from the library, if I can figure out what they look like!” Laura said, and marched out.

Ifemelu could almost hear Kimberly’s heart beating wildly.

“I’m sorry,” Ifemelu said.

Kimberley shook her head and murmured, “I know Laura can be challenging,” her eyes on the salad she was mixing.

Ifemelu hurried upstairs to Laura.

“I’m sorry, I was rude just now and I apologize.” But she was sorry only because of Kimberly, the way she had begun to mix the salad as though to reduce it to a pulp.

(207-8)

Through Ifemelu's relationship with Curt, we eventually learn much more about Laura's family and their wealth, but even in this moment, we're aware that Laura is an unhappy rich woman. It is partly that she has always been wealthy, and partly her whiteness, but especially because she is the sister of Ifemelu's employer, all of these give Laura the expectation that her words will be received without scrutiny. It is through these expectations that her thinly-veiled offensive is not a conversation with Ifemelu, but a unidirectional performance to establish herself as open-minded and egalitarian, with a college friend that she thinks may have been from Uganda no less, and to goad Ifemelu into a position where she is forced to agree that African-American women have "those issues." Ifemelu is unwilling to be forced into this position, but she is also not rude to her. She merely corrects Laura in the same way that she would one of the children. She challenges her to learn more. Her correction skillfully uncovers the problem with Laura's assumption which is that people from completely different places and with completely different histories can be compared because of their skin color. Laura has used blackness as a basis for comparison, and having this pointed out is embarrassing to her. Ifemelu's comment also points to how the legacies of parents and grandparents shape our lives, which implicates Laura's un-earned generational wealth.

Even before Ifemelu responds, Laura's narrative is rife with condescension. She says she is going to "have him," meaning the Nigerian doctor, "be" Athena's doctor instead of asking him, as though she is doing him a favor. After Ifemelu responds, Laura shuts down what was never really a conversation in the first place, as a spoiled child would. She equates Ifemelu's challenge with an accusation that Ifemelu is calling her illiterate. Her emotions and behavior align with what antiracist educator Robin DiAngelo has dubbed white fragility, in which white people when confronted with racism, adopt exaggerated defenses that serve to shut down

conversation, and in the long run, serve to reinstate the equilibrium that brings them the most comfort—the status quo. Even Kimberley’s response: silence, and murdering a salad, is emblematic of white fragility. The discussion going on in her own kitchen needed a referee and Kimberley’s response is fear and silence. Kimberley’s discomfort is what causes Ifemelu to apologize to Laura, even though what Ifemelu said could have just as easily (by a sound-minded adult) been accepted as a helpful revision.

It is easy to see how the negativity of this situation could cause Ifemelu to blame herself. Without a framework like DiAngelo’s notion of white fragility, it might seem to her that her words were the root of a conflict that didn’t have to occur. Even though Ifemelu apologizes, the scene exposes that she has a unique and useful perspective. Her ability to see what Laura and Kimberley can’t is powerful, perhaps too powerful for her situation as a suburban babysitter. The qualities of the language she uses are similar to Wambui’s metaphor from the classroom film discussion—the idea that it matters *who* hits you with a stick. Ifemelu’s quick comment is full of imagination and sympathy and is delivered with the short-and-sweetness of a clever tongue. It is reminiscent of a sentence from one of her blog posts (which the reader encounters for the first time in the chapter that follows this incident).

The similarity between Ifemelu’s spoken response and the words that she writes not only reminds us of Toni Morrison’s focus on orality in black art (that even when it is written it should sound like it could be said), and indicates that Ifemelu has learned from this conflict with Laura. She learned that hers is the kind of power that sharpens and directs discourse, and that for the purposes of self-preservation, she might choose to silence herself with the white people she works with. However, when she is confronted with the irrationalities of racism, she possesses not just insight, but style.

The more appropriate basis that Ifemelu sees for comparing the differences between the two women's fathers in Uganda and America is also significant. She doesn't choose to focus on employment or generational wealth. Instead, education and ability to participate in democracy, to vote and run for office, these are the indicators that she selects for emphasis. This detail points to larger themes about the importance of discourse, that it is the engine of democracy, where voters with improved consciousness make wiser choices. For Ifemelu, these are the stakes that make conversation about race so urgent.

One of Ifemelu's later blog posts "Understanding America for the Non-American Black: A Few Explanations of What Things Really Mean" (435-6) is worth examining in relationship with the scene with Laura and adds to the practical rationale for keeping her blog anonymous. Ifemelu lists the pretenses that she sees as veiled conversation closers, insulators of white fragility:

If you are having a conversation with an American, and you want to discuss something racial that you find interesting, and the American says, 'Oh, it's simplistic to say it's race, racism is so complex,' it means they just want you to shut up already. Because of course racism is complex.

That racism exists, and is complex, would be a good beginning for a conversation instead of the end of it. Even while this doesn't include a description or indication of who might have frustrated Ifemelu, if she were to sign her name to this, the possibilities that it could be received as anything other than part of her artistic/advocacy project might be compromised. Ifemelu is not out to settle scores, but since she uses her experiences as material for critique, it is natural that the possibilities for personal offence are plausible and possibly costly.

Whether writing should be signed is a problem that has existed within both democracy and literature for some time,<sup>5</sup> and Ifemelu's blog is an example in which anonymity makes sense given her circumstances. But it is also useful to examine the question of how anonymity plays into perceptions of Ifemelu as an artist. E.M. Forster's essay "Anonymity: An Enquiry," makes a unique case about books and newspapers, which were the most relevant formats in his era. He also contextualizes the question as a problem unique to times (he was writing in 1925) when speech is "comparatively free: it may not be free much longer" (76). He says the question of anonymity cannot be answered "without considering what words are, and disentangling the two functions they perform" (88). His argument is that words either convey information, or create atmosphere, and:

in so far as words convey information, they ought to be signed. Information is supposed to be true. That is its only reason for existing, and the man who gives it ought to sign his name, so that he may be called to account if he has told a lie...But as we approach the other function for words—the creation of atmosphere—the question of signature surely loses its importance... what is not information need not be signed... What is the element in words that is not information? I have called it "atmosphere," but it requires stricter definition than that. It resides not in any particular word, but in the order in which words are arranged—that is to say, in style. (81)

Creation comes from the depths—the mystic will say from God. The signature, the name belongs to the surface-personality, and pertains to the world of information, it is a ticket, not the spirit of life. While the author wrote he forgot his name; while we read him we forget both his name and our own. (87)

Although Ifemelu is not writing fiction, her writing is more about adding depth where flatness has been the prevalent expectation from those around her, or where her perspective has been left out entirely. In Forster's sense, hers is an atmospheric practice, rather than an informational one.

<sup>5</sup> One example, Brockden Brown's novel *Wieland: A Transformation*, is one of the first novels ever published in America. It critiques the potential for disembodied (anonymous) voices within an experimental democracy (Wolfe).

The novel shows that her writing persona adds a sense of mystery that shields her from expectations, even those of fellow Nigerians, and thereby helps fulfill the political purposes of her writing. In one significant scene, in Chapter 35, Ifemelu is confronted with news that a fellow Nigerian, a novelist, concludes after reading her blog, that she is not African. This novelist is convinced that she must be Caribbean because “Africans don’t care about race” (394). Given what we know about Ifemelu’s friends in the African Students Association, race, especially racism, was a common topic of concern. It is clear that the novelist has confused Africans not caring about race with Africans not writing about race. That Ifemelu has demonstrated this false impression to another artist, an artist from her home country no less, is a statement about her achievement. Ifemelu’s role as a “race blogger” (499) is enabled by her screen name. She acknowledges that there are others who don’t “talk about Life Experiences That Have to Do Exclusively with Being Black. Because they want to keep everyone comfortable” (380). In a post called “Open Thread: For All the Zipped-Up Negroes” she invites them, “tell your story here. Unzip yourself. This is a safe space.” The post is a simple invitation, five lines long. Ifemelu has the bravery to begin the conversation, but she knows that she is not the only one with stories to share.

In the middle of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which are the years that Ifemelu’s blog is depicted, screen names and anonymous writing were much more of a commonplace online. Adichie successfully characterizes the state of the web in that moment, and in this realistic portrait, she doesn’t shy away from the ugly sides of online anonymity. There are three instances that draw the most attention. The first is Aunty Uju’s boyfriend Bartholomew, who writes articles on a website called *Nigerian Village* using the moniker “Igbo Massachusetts Accountant” (143). His posts are filled with misogyny and mythologies of a Nigeria that he has

not visited in years. Ifemelu finds the quantity of his “airless arguments” surprising, but there is the sense that she doesn’t blame the medium for the abuse that he hurls at the women who question him. Likewise, after she gives a diversity talk and receives an abusive e-mail: “YOUR TALK WAS BALONEY. YOU ARE A RACIST. YOU SHOULD BE GRATEFUL WE LET YOU INTO THIS COUNTRY,” (377) her conclusions focus on why she had been invited to give the talk in the first place, and not about the technologies of exposure that have allowed this abusive feedback to land in front of her in her living room. The chat room activity about Obama during the election however, does give her a discomfort that she seems to intuitively connect with her laptop:

Sometimes in chat rooms, she wilted as she read the posts about Obama, and she would get up and move away from her computer, as though the laptop itself were the enemy, and stand by the window to hide her tears even from herself... The chat rooms made her blog seem inconsequential, a comedy of manners, a mild satire about a world that was anything but mild. (439)

The tight community surrounding her blog has produced a sense of progress and accomplishment that feels “mild” and deflated by the magnitude the problem, the task of contradicting the multiplying racist voices responding to a black man’s candidacy for president. She chooses to keep blogging, about policy and things that focus on his presidential candidacy. She does this because she doesn’t want to specifically respond to the “people who abhorred not the man that Barack Obama was, but the idea of him as president” (439). That online anonymity emboldens racists, to the point that it bothers Ifemelu, is important. Equally important though is the way that she continues the fight through writing, suggesting a refusal to cede this new battleground to the enemy.

In her first post, Ifemelu concludes by stating that the “problem of race will never be solved” (367). It’s an unexpected conclusion for someone who will become a famous race

blogger. She thinks that interracial couples, romantic love, is the necessity for its resolution, and that because love is rare, “and because American society is set up to make it even rarer between American Black and American White,” that progress is impossible. Even so, her purpose for beginning the blog is that she longs for listeners and wants to hear what stories others can share with her: “How many other people chose silence? How many other people had become black in America? How many had felt as though their world was wrapped in gauze?” (366). Her purpose is more about building a kind of kinship around unspoken discussions, and offering them a place to occur so that they don’t pile up and further suffocate her or anyone else.

In present-day discourse, anonymity does not tend to be associated with safe spaces. The philosopher Martha Nussbaum has written that anonymity should be done away with online because it functions as a mask that enables misogynistic abuse, reputational damage, and other bullying by protecting perpetrators from real world consequences. In this argument, Nussbaum devalues cases like Ifemelu’s where an author who might otherwise be endangered by her political speech, protects herself through masking her identity. Others have pointed out that anonymity and traceability are different and that consequences for criminal behavior can be addressed without sacrificing the value that anonymity offers to free expression (Moore; Véliz). Carissa Véliz, a political philosopher, has argued that masks protect speech, especially speech from the margins, and that perhaps masks should be the norm instead of the exception. Véliz’s notion of an online masquerade aligns with Ifemelu’s case. In adopting the moniker of the non-American black, we witness her transformation into a writer who builds a stable place for herself as a migrant, encouraging the kind of discourse that improves democracy, and creating space for kinship with others who value her writing as psychological and spiritual support.

## Epilogue — “How many had felt as though their world was wrapped in gauze?”

“Human communication scales up only if we can be tolerant of the differences while we work with partial understanding.”

–Tim Berners-Lee, *Weaving the Web*

A couple of years ago, in 2017, *Americanah* was selected by the black women’s student organization, My Sister’s Keeper, to be the community read for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) campus. At least in theory, the many scientists, technologists, engineers and mathematicians at MIT all opened their brains up to the intuitive, inductive logics of human storytelling practiced by the exceptional Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. The imaginative wisdom within a text like *Americanah* can serve many communities, and since Adichie has said how, among other things, the novel is about not knowing that she herself was black until she came to America, Americans, while surely not the only audience for the novel, are a good one.

The value of the novel for its dissections of race would make it a worthy text for many educational communities. The fact that it is a novel that doesn’t shy away from the possible didactic purposes of the form, make it an exceptional choice for a community read, especially in communities where fiction titles are rarely selected. After all, some of the purposes for community reading programs are didactic in nature. Also, the fact that it examines wealthy elite American university campuses like Princeton and Yale from an outsider’s perspective make the novel an even more perfect choice for a prestigious campus community like MIT’s, one that will only truly thrive by welcoming outsiders.

In the background, behind these reasons, though, there is an added dimension to this specific community selecting the novel. At the time, as part of his role as one of their professors

of computer science, Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the web, would have been included in the community reading about Ifemelu and her anonymous blog. It's hard not to think that among the many things one might take away from *Americanah*, Berners-Lee would be inclined to see how Ifemelu is a character who benefits from two key aspects of the web's design—it's lack of hierarchy, and the potential for anonymity.

The web was designed to be non-hierarchical as a consequence of prestige and extreme privilege. The community it was built to serve, the physics research campus CERN in Switzerland, operates with the basic assumption that everyone has something to offer. Berners-Lee, in his attempts to build a persistent documentation system using the internet, has written about the unique politics of building a non-hierarchical system that ironically, the physicists at CERN were not that interested in. Indeed, the whole project would have ended in failure (if it had been up to them):

I would have to create a system with common rules that would be acceptable to everyone. This meant as close as possible to no rules at all. (15)

The system had to have one other fundamental property: It had to be completely decentralized. That would be the only way a new person somewhere could start to use it without asking for access from anyone else. (16)

E-mail allowed messages to be sent from one person to another, but it did not form a space in which information could permanently exist and be referred to. Messages were transient. (When the World Wide Web arrived, riding on top of the Internet, it would give information a place to persist.) (18)

I was excited about escaping from the straitjacket of hierarchical documentation systems, but I didn't want the people responsible for any hierarchical system to throw rocks at me. (21)

My vision was a system in which sharing what you knew or thought should be as easy as learning what someone else knew. (33)

The fundamental principle behind the Web was that once someone somewhere made available a document, database, graphic, sound, video, or screen at some stage in

interactive dialogue, it should be accessible (subject to authorization, of course) by anyone, with any type of computer, in any country. (37)

anyone (authorized) should be able to publish and correct information, and anyone (authorized) should be able to read it (38)

the principle of minimal constraint. If the Web were to be universal, it should be as unconstraining as possible. (39)

The “straightjacket of hierarchical documentation systems” is remarkable when examined in relation to Ifemelu’s question: “How many had felt as though their world was wrapped in gauze?” (366). Adichie presents this framing as Ifemelu’s reason for beginning her blog, as a way of finding out for herself if others could relate to her experiences. A computer engineer reading this would correctly interpret the “gauze” as social negation, downward pressure, a negative consequence of a hierarchical system/society. Through Ifemelu, Adichie signals that the availability of truth, the ability to tell the truth, is a kind of luxury, or privilege, that is often only possible in certain times and places. In most instances, telling the truth is negotiated through permission and permission is granted by the powerful. The exception is where hierarchy has been left out as part of the design— permissionless space.

People should be able to surf the web anonymously, or as a well-defined entity, and should be able to control the difference between the two. (Berners-Lee 146)

Ifemelu’s character reveals how some spaces are more (and less) welcoming for discussions of race and how online anonymity offers her freedom to express ideas that are uncomfortable to many people. As readers, we remember that W.E.B Dubois said the symptoms of double consciousness come from “measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (10). By speaking through an organizing category, the possibly plural *non-American black*, Ifemelu undermines forces that seek to diminish her and makes room for

multiplication. Instead of choosing a concrete, singular pseudonym, her moniker suggests and encourages a collective, and her writing often ends with an encouragement for participation (via interaction and comments). Through adopting the voice of a non-American black, Ifemelu empowers herself and others who respond, contend, and eventually, elevate her voice.

*Americanah* is a novel that depicts how the web, because it was built for a community where hierarchy was not an important concern, is a natural fit for social justice uses. This interactive potential was not part of Berners-Lee's original vision, but it astonishes him:

My original vision for a universal Web was as an armchair aid to help people do things in the web of real life. It would be a mirror, reflecting reports or conversations or art and mapping social interactions. But more and more, the mirror model is wrong, because interaction is taking place primarily on the Web. People are using the Web to build things they have not built or written or drawn or communicated anywhere else. (165)

Accusations of American digital colonialism, that we have exported specific values through inventing the internet and turning capitalists loose within it, are abundant and compelling. While consequences will continue to unfold, novels like *Americanah*, point to a counter-narrative of positive and anticolonial possibilities of internet technologies like the web, which is as useful for cultural production as it is for business. Blogging is one of the original and revolutionary uses of the web. The “we” in “weblogging” has fallen off over time, but the permission to write with the assumption that you have something useful to say, “anonymously, or as a well-defined entity” (Berners-Lee, 146), and that communities producing urgent conversations can emerge, is worth protecting.

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