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RUPTURING THE GENRE: UN-WRITING SILENCE IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *AMERICANAH*

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Abstract:

This paper examines Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) and it's troubling of the silencing and policing of black female migrants. Focusing on the salon/hairdressers and Ifemelu's blog, I argue that the former represents an intimate and politicized narrative space whose production and habitation invites us to engage with migrant/feminine interactions and non-normative feminine aesthetics. In addition, I read the virtual site of Ifemelu's blog as a space that transcends the circumscribed nature of interracial relations and dialogues. By portraying these spaces' cultivation of heterogeneity and polyvocality, Adichie's text advances an alternative politics of inhabiting racially and patriarchally hierarchized foreign spaces.

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Silence, aesthetics, race and femininities

Americanah (2013) – Adichie's third novel after *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* – is a work that spans three continents and revolves around the love, migration, return and reunion of the two main characters, Ifemelu and Obinze., who both grow up in Nigeria. Some few years into college, Ifemelu obtains an American visa and migrates to continue with her education. The writer handles this separation by developing two plot lines that trace their different experiences: Ifemelu in America and Obinze in Nigeria, Britain and his eventual return to Nigeria. From this authorial gambit, we learn that Obinze, who is supposed to follow Ifemelu to the U.S. after he is done with college, is denied a visa. He later moves to Britain on a temporary visa. When the visa expires, he makes plans to marry a European so that he could become a European citizen. However, on the day of the marriage immigration officials arrest and deport him back to Nigeria. While Ifemelu is in America, their relationship becomes strained, and they eventually stop communicating. Ifemelu completes college and gets a job which she later quits to concentrate on a famous and controversial blog she calls *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*. Despite her relative success and her acquisition of American citizenship, she opts to relocate back to Nigeria, mainly because of subtle yearnings and unresolved romances with both the Nigerian home and Obinze, her first love. Back in Nigeria, she starts another blog titled *The Small Redemptions of Lagos*.

Adichie uses Ifemelu and Obinze's love and migration as a threshold to narrativize the vexed questions of home, hair politics and feminine aesthetics, and racial hierarchies. She employs a highly heterogeneous novel—a romance and migrant novel, and a novel of manners—to reclaim and rewrite the normative romance and immigrant narrative. The novel trenchantly represents migration as unequivocally gendered, explodes and disperses the mythical romance with the nation, disrupts and shifts epistemic and discursive centers by manipulating the subject/other and the observer/observed positionalities, and gives an incisive and self-reflexive portrayal

of the hydra-headedness of racial pathologies. In addition, Idowu-Faith (2014, p. 2) observes that the novel critically engages "international migration theories ... to chart a new migration story where return migration is the quintessential closure." The novel's radical reversal of conventional narrative order and representation is reiterated by Hallemeier (2015, p. 232) who argues that "*Americanah* presents an alternative, utopic vision of global power in which the United States stands as a foil to the promising future of late Nigerian capitalism."

This paper is concerned with the novel's particular generic hybridization—thematic and stylistic choices which are deployed to trouble silencing and policing, especially as they relate to the black migrant, and specifically as they are exercised over the woman as the racial, femininely gendered and sexual other. While the novel often reads like a "cataloguing of experiences" and "anecdotes that defy the fabric of coincidence" (Aribisala, 2013), which ultimately makes the plot feel "like an excuse for the venting of opinions" (Maslin, 2013), I contend that this polyvocality is strategically tooled to trouble the silences concealed in the pursuit of propriety and nuance. In this way, I read silence as regulating and structuring gendered and interracial relationships in ways that maintain social hierarchies. In thinking through silence/silencing that *Americanah* limns, I draw upon the ideas of Picard (1948) who posits that silence suffuses every aspect of human life; Dauenhauer (1980, p. 4) who argues that silence encapsulates something more than the mere "absence of audible sound"; and Clair's interjection that "expressive activities can be silencing" and "silence can be expressive" (1998, p. 23). In this regard, Adichie portrays language/speech as imbricated with silence and/or silencing. In addition, and in contrast to Malhotra and Rowe (2013) and Irigaray (2008) who recognize silence as an important component in any interaction and even as possessing some transformative and liberatory possibilities, *Americanah* portrays it as both disingenuous and reactionary when it relates to the black, female migrant.

Admittedly, Adichie's fascination with both elected and imposed silence and/or the "unspoken" runs through most of her

fictional oeuvre. Both *Purple Hibiscus* (2004) and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), to a certain extent, grapple with silences within the national and private/family spheres. On the one hand, the narrative structure of *Purple Hibiscus* is imbued with oppressive silences and abuse within the family unit. The narrator, Kambili, and Jaja, her brother, develop a "secret language" that they use to deal with the exacting violence of their father, Eugene Achike. As Hewett (2005) observes, the narrative brings us into confrontation with the family's "troubled lives," for instance, "their mother's multiple miscarriages" and "Jaja's deformed little finger" which "remain unspoken secrets" (p. 81). She maintains that "these 'unspeakable things unspoken' are shared between Kambili and her brother through stolen glances" (p. 81). *Half of Yellow Sun*, on the other hand, excavates the ghosts of the Biafran war from a national psyche that seeks to elide such histories. Adichie's representation of war, memory and national/communal/personal traumas enables her to deal with divisive, contested and unresolved histories within a nation's collective consciousness and the overarching troubled processes of nation formation. In *Americanah*, Adichie represents the ideas of silence and conformity as gendered, racialized and often played out against the migrant subject. While this is a theme that has been explored by various African writers—Buchi Emecheta, Doreen Baingana, Chris Abani, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Chika Unigwe—with varying degrees of focus and intensity, Adichie's success, public and online persona and her deft handling of "transnational intertextuality" add nuance and focus to migration, gender, race and silence (Hewett, 2005, p. 75).

Americanah presents a number of instances where Ifemelu's voice and experience are dismissed and trivialized in various regimes of power. This also extends to the control and surveillance of her gendered and racialized body. These various forms of control not only happen while she is in Nigeria—where she is constantly reminded of her gender—but also when she eventually migrates to America—where she is repeatedly made aware of her foreignness and race. For instance, when young Ifemelu questions why she should make decorations in church for Chief Omeka, a 419 man, her mother laments thus: "Why

must this girl be a trouble maker? ... it would be better if she was a boy, behaving like this"; "... she doesn't always know when to keep her mouth shut"; "You don't have to say everything" (pp. 52-53). These sentiments both expose Ifemelu's mother's complicity in female silencing and reveal the normalization, even celebration, of silence, nuance and ambiguity as a feminine virtue. This relegation of the racially conscious voice to the realm of the "abnormal" is often accompanied by its dismissal as immaterial and banal and this conversely reifies and normalizes the white and male voice and experience.

In the U.S, Ifemelu often encounters these silencing acts/practices. One such instance is when she encounters a dismissal from a "dreadlocked white man who sat next to her on the train," and whose entire outfit and mien fit the archetype of a "social warrior" (p. 4). After telling him that she has a blog called *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*, he evenly retorts that "race is totally overhyped these days, black people need to get over themselves, it's all about class now, the haves and the have-nots" (p. 4). The response—which reductively divorces race from class—trivialises and invalidates Ifemelu's lived experiences of racial exclusions, hierarchies and privileges in its claim of a post-racial society. This claim of a post-racial American society, especially after the election of Barack Obama, has been variously contested as ignoring the persistence of racism and how it continues to define socioeconomic inequality (Lentin, 2014, p. 1265), and as a myth that is grounded on a privileged perception of racial relations (Dawkins, 2010, p. 10). In the novel, the various forms of silencing the black female migrant is subjected to go hand in hand with the conflation of the female, migrant and black voice with aggression and "noise," the latter a threshold to chaos because of the threat it presents to mainstream epistemological certainties and securities.

Apart from the two incidents mentioned above, the novel also captures other nuanced ways in which interactions and conversations impose certain silences and elisions on Ifemelu's voice and experience. Ifemelu's relationship with Curt, her white

boyfriend, aptly demonstrates this subtle yet insidious way in which she feels circumscribed and constrained by interracial interactions. Though the novel represents romantic love as having the potential of creating interracial bridges and understandings, Ifemelu feels stifled by the shallow and facile conversations she has with Curt. Their relationship becomes strained partly because of his seeming "sunniness" and naivety that comes from his gender, class and racial privilege, and for this reason, she often feels the urge to burst the bubble he dwells in (p. 197; 287). She contends that racial conversations with Curt were "slippery … admitted nothing and engaged nothing and ended with the word 'crazy,' like a curious nugget to be examined and then put aside" (p. 291). While their interactions permit a certain level of openness and scrutiny in engaging racial aggressions and white supremacy/privilege, their conversations are ultimately highly coded and self-regulated.

From the foregoing, Adichie represents silence/silencing and/or the unspoken as pervasive in regulating and controlling racial, gendered, migrant and host interactions. The novel, however, troubles the circumscribed ways in which Ifemelu is allowed to relate through its placement of her voice within certain interactive social spaces whose nature and constitution rupture hegemonic discursive closures. In inhabiting these spaces, Ifemelu—and and a cast of other characters—contravenes the injunctions of docility, passivity, invisibility and vulnerability by dropping the pretensions of propriety, challenging patriarchal certitudes and white racial comfort, entitlement and expectations. The most significant space that repeatedly recurs in the text is the hairdresser's salon. Through the choice of the salon, Adichie mines the most ordinary feminine practices and experiences in order to transcend attempts to limit migrant/racial/feminine self-expression and visibility, explore the complexity of racial slights and aggressions, and migrant longings and desires. In this way, the salon provides an extremely politicized narrative space in which the characters engage and sometimes transcend given categories and also forge bonds of commonality as women and as black migrants.

The salon conversations, what Wabende (2014, p. 33) aptly refers to as the "register related to the salon," provide a unique frame of reference through which we can examine interactions within the context of foreignness, class differences and shared female experiences. The interactions we encounter in this space are extensively varied. Of particular significance are those instances when the hairdressers and their clients engage in what often passes as "gossip" when viewed through a certain prescriptive lens. In the text, however, they are adroitly tooled in a way that they enable the characters to negotiate their seeming marginality/powerlessness and inscribe themselves into discourse. Indeed, the pejorative association of gossip to "feminine culture" does not take cognizance of the fact that this labelling underwrites "a powerful … discourse deployed by males to perpetuate the subordination of women" (Greenfield & Williams, 1991, p. 2). In the novel, "gossip," mostly dismissed as a frivolous feminine speech act is transformed into a semantically loaded interactive moment, one that empowers and escapes the policing and boundaries placed upon female and migrant interactions.

Ifemelu takes note of these overtly political speech acts when Halima and Mariama, both hairdressers, start talking about a client who had just left the salon. The client, who "looked about seventeen," had disclosed that she had two children. After she left, Mariama notes that she is too young to have children and Halima quips that "Oh oh oh, these people ... when a girl is thirteen already she knows all the positions. Never in Afrique!" When they turn to Ifemelu for her agreement, she keeps quiet and mentally notes that they would also talk about her as "that Nigerian girl" who "feels very important because of Princeton" and who "does not eat real food anymore," and they would laugh, but with "mild derision, because she was still their African sister" (pp. 102-3).

Halima and Mariama's exchange infantilizes their client and carries connotations of white America's sexual permissiveness and promiscuity by inferring that children as young as thirteen are sexually active. Read against Halima's assertion that such behaviour can never be found in "Afrique," this totalizing and

speculative conversation carries racial inflections that read closely invert the racist and foundational discourses of the "colonial enterprise" that hyper-sexualized and eroticized black women (Bernard, 2016, p. 1; Holmes, 2016, p. 1). Their gossip is here deployed as a discourse that explodes this binary of black/white sexualities while at the same time constituting and securing relations amongst themselves by attempting to rope in Ifemelu into a supposed shared bond of familiarity that is their "Africanness." Significantly, through the deployment of "gossip" the author assembles the "gossiper" while disassembling the "gossiped." This seemingly trivial encounter thus demonstrates the ways in which the women claim and negotiate their agency through their creation of narratives that re-write their daily encounters in a seemingly marginal profession.

Halima and Mariama's assembling of the self is reinforced by various interactions with their clients that expose the complex interplay of class and power relations in the salon subculture. On a number of occasions, and in a manner that claims knowledge and expertise over the client, the hairdressers ignore their customers' instructions on how they want their hair handled. Even when they show obsequiousness to the clients' demands, the servility is not only feigned but also defined by the context; and both the performer and the audience recognize this. By amplifying the class and affluence of their clients, and the client's acceptance of the affected deference, the hairdressers create an environment that enables both to play out their different claims to class and power. For instance, Ifemelu notes the quiet deferential manner in which Mariama talks to an offending client all the while wearing "a smile full of things restrained" (p. 186). Halima on the other hand stretches "for a little too long, as though to register her reluctance," when she is about to begin braiding a new client (p. 187). All these actions underwrite subtle class and power negotiations that define salon interactions.

Significantly, Adichie uses the salon space to enunciate conversations about transgressive feminine sexualities and relationships. Portrayed as a site where social and class hierarchies are temporarily suspended as the characters are

united by their femininity and experience, the salon can be read as a liberating space where speech flows freely to articulate what is normally regulated in everyday life. In this regard, Aisha confides to Ifemelu that she has "two Igbo men" and, in a tone laden with sexual innuendo, adds that "Igbo men take care of women real good" (p. 15). In disregarding social conventions and strictures, and in having and talking about her dual sexual liaisons, Aisha removes her sexuality from the realm of the unspoken to the level of normalized—albeit temporarily—salon conversation. In doing this, Aisha appears to be aware of the reduced risk of slut-shaming by Halima, Mariama or Ifemelu because of having two sexual partners. Aisha enables the reader to envision the exploding of what Foucault (1990) terms as the "modern Puritanism ... edict of taboo, nonexistence and silence" as she troubles convention and propriety in talking about her sexual experiences (pp. 4-5).

Aisha's sentiments should be read in the context of the larger narrative's portrayal of the patriarchal control and surveillance of the female body and sexuality, often with female complicity. On numerous occasions, Adichie's protagonist makes us aware of this policing of female bodies and the repression of their sexualities. At one point, Ifemelu recounts her mother's reference to her genitalia when she told her to "scrub between your legs very well, very well" (p. 128). The casting of Ifemelu's genitalia as the "unsayable" by her mother forms an instructive point of departure on how the girl child is socialized into shame and silence with regard to her body. Her mother's approach to the female body and sexuality is contrasted to Obinze's mother who, when she caught them making out, called Ifemelu to her bedroom and talked to her about love, sex and abstinence (p. 72). The normalizing and removal of "shame" when discussing sex is presented as a counterpoint to her mother's conspicuous silences. In her mother's world, "between your legs" is "unmentionable" and therefore possessing overtones of the shameful. This socialization into shame is poignantly echoed in Odiemo-Munara's (2012) study of Mary Okurut's *Invisible Weevil* (1998) where he flags women's socialization to their body parts, processes and functions. While examining Nkwazi's—the protagonist's—coming to terms with her body

parts and processes, Odiemo-Munara notes how in *Invisible Weevil* female genitalia morphs from "the shameful whose real name they should never say" to "kooko" which "actually meant animal" (p. 102). Odiemo-Munara argues that this "socialisation into shame" marks Nkwazi's relationship with her genitalia such that when she is sexually abused she cannot report the abuse "because it carries that which is deemed 'shameful' and thus to open up about what is being done to the 'shameful' is in itself a shame" (p. 102).

Like Nkwazi who overcomes this negative induction into womanhood, Ifemelu rejects the shame and silence that would see her repress her sexuality. In Adichie's text, Ifemelu's unreserved embracing of her sexual desire not only legitimizes but also normalizes female sexual pleasure. In addition, Ifemelu shifts the supposed power dynamics in heterosexual relationships by originating and owning the sexual negotiations with both Rob and Obinze. As such, to bend Foucault, Ifemelu performs "nothing less than a transgression of laws, a lifting of prohibitions, an irruption of speech, a reinstating of pleasure within reality ..." (1990, p. 5). By spurning the regulation and control of her sexuality, she by extension refuses to be subordinated in order to ensure the survival of what Tamale refers to as patriarchal and capitalist structures (2005, p. 11).

The space of the salon is also used to challenge and examine the insidiousness of singular and homogenized definitions of beauty. Arguably, the text explores the pervasiveness of what Idowu-Faith (2014, p. 1) calls "hair politics" within and beyond the space of the salon. Indeed, the larger narrative unfolds within the space of the hairdresser's where Ifemelu has gone to braid her hair in preparation for her return to Nigeria. While Ifemelu sits in the salon, the narrative moves to Nigeria and back to the present through a series of flashbacks. In this movement, Adichie invites us to contemplate the braiding of hair alongside the weaving of narrative. As the braiding goes on, so does the telling, tangling and untangling of the life experiences of the female characters. In the process Adichie portrays a rich tapestry of personal narratives of immigration, womanhood, love, longings for home, race and aesthetics. This braiding of hair and

weaving of narrative reads into Aribisala's (2013) contention that the author "insinuates the organic connection between the braiding of black hair, the telling of stories and the transferring of ideas from the braider to one whose hair is being braided; her stories and ideas are being braided into our black hair." It is in this double act of braiding and "telling" that the novel represents black hair as a site of struggle, and how hair "shapes black women's ideas about race, gender, class, sexuality, images of beauty, and power" (Banks, 2000, p. 3).

While the narrator flags the connection between "race, gender and body size" in determining what/who is considered beautiful, it is the politics of the stylization of black women's hair that she dwells on at length (p. 6). This comes up early on in the text when Aisha, her braider, wonders why Ifemelu doesn't relax her hair, a statement that momentarily turns Ifemelu into a proselytizer of the merits of wearing natural hair (p. 12). While this conversation seems to be hastily handled and abandoned, it becomes eloquent when read alongside the larger narrative of Ifemelu's progression from relaxed hair to natural hair. Through flashbacks, Ifemelu narrates how Ruth, her career counselor had advised her to lose her braids and straighten her hair when going for an interview, for, as she says, "nobody says this kind of stuff but it matters" (p. 202). On the day Ifemelu relaxes her hair in preparation for her interview, the hairdresser in West Philadelphia remarks that she will have "just a little burn ... But look how pretty it is. Wow, girl, you've got the white-girl swing" (pp. 202-3). This conflation of "pretty" as having a "white-girl swing" reinforces a Eurocentric notion of beauty, for it subtly ties beauty to certain bodies, while presenting natural (black) hair as the antithesis of what is beautiful. Like Aisha, this hairdresser demonstrates the internalization of a hierarchized notion of hair aesthetics that places kinky/Afro hair at the polar opposite of straight hair. This desire to distance oneself from "natural 'kinky' hair" (Barnett, 2016, p. 70) and the embracing of a white straight-hair aesthetic is also expressed by Aunty Uju who at one point tells Ifemelu that "there is something scruffy and untidy about natural hair" (p. 216). This assumption of straight hair as the norm and as the marker of beauty thus goes hand in hand with the inferiorization and devaluation of

blackness, not only by the mainstream society, but also by black people themselves (Mercer, 1987, pp. 35-6). The reader acutely feels these black pathologies when Ifemelu finally cuts her straightened hair. After cutting it, she becomes highly self-conscious of how she looks, refuses to go to work for three days and buys:

> oils and pomades, applying one and then the other, on wet hair and then on dry hair, willing an unknown miracle to happen. Something, anything, that would make her like her hair. She thought of buying a wig, but wigs brought anxiety, the always-present possibility of flying off your head. She thought of a texturizer to loosen her hair's springy coils, stretch out the kinkiness a little, but a texturizer was really a relaxer, only milder, and she would still have to avoid the rain. (pp. 208-9)

Her attitude towards her natural hair seems to configure it as a repository of shame, for in her statement we read the implication that her straight hair makes her like herself while kinky hair does not. The gradations of value she attaches to her hair therefore assume a hierarchy that places straight hair on top of black/curly hair. But the anxieties and insecurities that she suffers ought to be seen within the context of the racist environment that cultivates them.

While Ruth and Aunty Uju's statements on hair straightening point towards a negation of black bodies and a valorization of whiteness in mainstream America, they also illuminate the persuasive and coercive strategies deployed towards black bodies as a precondition for their inclusion, access and employability. There is therefore an attempt to limn what Michael Barnett germanely refers to as black women relaxing/straightening of their hair in order to aid their "economic security and assimilation" (2016, p. 73). On the one hand, Ifemelu and Aunty Uju's straightening of hair is an attempt to assimilate to the mainstream in the belief that straightened hair conveys "a non-threatening image to white and mainstream society" and allows "one to more easily blend in with the rest of society" (Barnett, 2016, pp. 73-74). On the other hand, their

straightened hair becomes a means of making themselves "as marketable as possible on the job market" (ibid., p. 74). Borrowing from Donaldson (2012), Barnett makes the point that "the decision to conform to a dominant style of beauty or to go natural may just come down to a choice between economic security and destitution" (p. 74). Both Ruth and Aunty Uju seem to be aware of this, for they relate the ability to get a job with one's hair style. Instructively, Aunty Uju tells Ifemelu that, "You are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do if you want to succeed" (p. 119). Admittedly, although straightened hair affords both Ifemelu and Aunty Uju access and "involvement in particular flows of capital and desire," this agency is seriously undercut by the fact that their straightened hair articulates a certain form of a coerced "embrace of whiteness … and it marks some black women as more acceptably desirable" (The Unknown, 2016, para, 13). As such, this "social capital" that they have acquired to "join the American professional class is purchased at a considerable mental, emotional, and personal price" (The Unknown, 2016, para, 13).

The counterpoint to this uniformity that is enforced on non-normative bodies and values is represented by Ifemelu's earlier mentioned transition from straightened hair to natural hair. I read her decision to go natural as a form of deviance that enunciates difference which is often interpreted by the mainstream society as threatening to their structures of privilege and power. Though it takes some time for Ifemelu to get used to her natural hair, when she finally falls "in love with her hair," she evokes some anxieties and hostilities from the "mainstream" society because of the implied challenge her action poses to an assumed "infallible" standard (p. 213). This is exemplified by the tentative and hesitant questions and comments she receives from her co-workers and even strangers concerning her changed hair (p. 211). Of significance, however, is the way Ifemelu begins the journey of re-valorizing her natural hair. She does this within a group of fellow black women who recognize the political implications of straightened hair in the context of the ideologies of race and racism. When she tells Wambui, her Kenyan college classmate, that she hates her shaved hair, Wambui refers her to a

website called *HappilyKinkyNappy.com*, a virtual community of black women who share ideas and personal narratives of their experiences with natural hair (p. 209). The content of the website proves to be therapeutic for, in it, she finds:

> Message boards full of posts, thumbnail photos of black women blinking at the top. They had long trailing dreadlocks, small Afros, big Afros, twists, braids, massive raucous curls and coils. They called relaxers "creamy crack." They were done with pretending that their hair was what it was not, done with running from the rain and flinching from sweat ... They traded recipes. They sculpted for themselves a virtual world where their coily, kinky, nappy, woolly hair was normal. And Ifemelu fell into this world with a tumbling gratitude (p. 212)/

In this online forum, the ideas of weaving and telling continue to find expression as the women share their natural hair-styling ideas and experiences in ways that re-value and re-center black hair. By the same token, this virtual community uses natural hair—a signifier of black femininity—to re-assemble black female bodies as desirable and attractive through its untangling and challenging of racial histories that find expression in the valuation of hair. In this group, Ifemelu transforms her hair from what she had considered as a "stigmata of shame into emblematics of pride," to borrow Mercer's expression (1987, p. 39). The website provides a counter-space which offsets the constant and reductive bombardment by mainstream media, as it tries to force what Ifemelu refers to as "images of small-boned, small-breasted white women on the rest of the multi-boned, multi-ethnic world of women to emulate" (p. 178). As such, the website becomes a space where black hair represents alternative modes of being and aesthetics that contrasts with the mainstream norms. In their subversive pursuit of difference, they bring into existence multiplicities of being that challenge the securities and the privileges of a unisonant narrative and the mainstream's assumed uncontaminatedness (Leitner, 2012).

Ifemelu's blog, *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-*

American Black, provides another interactive space where she engages what she calls "American tribalisms." Adichie's use of the blog to address racial questions demonstrates the self-reflexive ways the novel genre has adapted and reacted to 21st-century platforms and publics. The blog necessitates a reconsideration of the different ways in which digital media can shape the form and content of fiction. In *Americanah*, the anonymity and the non-fictive nature of the blog allows Ifemelu to have a sharper say on issues in a way that pushes the limits of conventional narrative. When asked why she made her character a blogger, Adichie's response was that: "I wanted this novel to also be social commentary, but I wanted to say it in ways that are different from what one is supposed to say in literary fiction" (Guarracino, 2014, p. 2). Guarracino goes on to contend that "blog writing, or blogging, features prominently in the novel as such a space, both embedded in but also outside creative writing, and as a place where social realities of race can be discussed without the trappings of character and action" (p. 2).

Indeed, while face-to-face interactions among the characters, especially when it comes to race and privilege, appears stilted, the blog frees the interagents in a way that actual dialogue and narrative doesn't. The blog posts act as narrative breaks, punctuating the overall narration with pithy and incisive commentary on racism and its pathologies. But these breaks are used to build the text's concerns. Cognizant of this, Guarracino contends that the novel's "social commentary moves back and forth, from the blog to the novel and vice versa, contaminating fiction with the drive for elaboration expressed by blogging but also infusing blog entries with the emotional entanglements of creative writing" (p. 3). Reading the blog entries alongside the larger narrative therefore creates movements where the subtleties and conventions of narrative give way to pointed commentaries that engage race, privilege, interracial relationships and the coercive strategies of inclusion and exclusion from hegemonic forms. Shan, Blaine's sister, aptly articulates the explicit coercions deployed to downplay the exploration of racial experiences in narrative fiction in a space that seeks to silence racial schisms and grievances in its claim of a post-racial society. After writing her own memoir about

"growing up in an all-white neighborhood" and "being the only black kid in my prep school," her editor comments that "I understand that race is important here but we have to make sure the book transcends race, so that it's not just about race" (p. 334). After this experience, Shan remonstrates that:

> You can't write an honest novel about race in this country. If you write about how people are really affected by race, it'll be too *obvious* ... so if you are going to write about race, you have to make sure it's so lyrical and subtle that the reader who doesn't read between the lines won't know it's about race. You know, a Proustian meditation, all watery and fuzzy, that at the end just leaves you feeling watery and fuzzy (pp. 335-6).

In contrast to these limitations Shan observes, the blog presents a freeing space where Ifemelu's irreverence and ability to say the "inappropriate" and the "uncomfortable" collapse the circumscribed conversations that mask the frictions elicited by racism and patriarchy. In the anonymity and the immediacy that the blog affords her, she becomes a transgressor and initiator who vivifies and animates public discourse with her astuteness, honesty and courage while at the same time demanding collective probity and self-reflexivity.

Ifemelu's blog also captures the traumas and pervasiveness of racial slights and aggressions, musings ranging from "immigrant life in the diaspora to affirmative action and interracial relationships," and black pathologies induced by racial hierarchies (Sefa-Boakye, 2014, para. 1). In the blog titled "Why Dark-Skinned Black Women—Both American and Non-American—Love Barack Obama" Ifemelu blogs on how "many American blacks proudly say they have some 'Indian.' Which means Thank God We Are Not Full-Blooded Negroes. Which means they are not too dark." She goes on to blog about the value attached to light skin and summarily declares that American black men "like their women light" (pp. 213-4). In another blog— "To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: In America, You are Black, Baby"— she describes how non-American blacks insist that they are Jamaican or Ghanaian, etc., to escape the

"black" label. She quips: "And admit it—you say 'I'm not black' only because you know black is at the bottom of America's race ladder" (p. 220). Through these blogs, Adichie explores racially inflicted inferiority complexes that lead to, as Fanon (1967, p. 9) explains while examining black and white pathologies, the devaluation and negation of self through an identification with the other as the "norm." As such, the blogs reveal the complex ways in which power—as all hierarchical structures—and its performance sometimes necessitates and even demands the complicity of the powerless. This shift in representing immigrant/racial relations and desires presents an opportunity for nuancing the discourse on the workings of race. However, her unflinching representation of painful race relationships, her satirical tone and the semantically loaded laughter she invites the reader to participate in through her portrayal of certain archetypal characters—undercut the hierarchical positions that colorism discourses seems to buttress.

Adichie's choice of the space of the blog, an unpoliced and highly contradictory one, is as curious as it is instructive. Gunitsky (2015) pinpoints how the social media can be used both for political mobilization and dissent as well as for counter-mobilization, discourse framing, preference divulgence and elite coordination by "autocratic and hybrid regimes" (p. 42). Dean's (2010) theorization on blogging illuminates another inimical way in which the social media can hinder productive public discourse, self-knowledge and reflexivity. She advances that the deluge and constant bombardment of images, information, ideas on social media might "displace critical thought, replacing it with the sense that there isn't time for thinking, that there are only emergencies to which one must react, that one can't keep up and might as well not try" (p. 2). However, Dean also notes that the seeming chaos and frenzy in such interactions might have a solution in audience feedback. By borrowing Johnson's notion of the integral nature of feedback in virtual sites, Dean contends that with more feedback from an audience "online conversations would approach equilibrium" (p. 14-15). Guarracino (2014) reiterates the capacity of blogs to elicit conversations by noting that they are a "shared platform" which

"need both individual and collective engagement to be effective" (p. 5).

Reading Ifemelu's blog from this perspective of interactivity, feedback and equilibrium enables us to examine this space as dramatizing the dilemmas that characterize interracial relations that are often defined by nuanced silences. The blog provides an alternative space for collective conversations/deliberations in the face of the failure of the insulated nature of the "diversity workshops" and "multicultural talks" she is invited to as a guest speaker (p. 305). Indeed, in the opening pages of *Americanah*, where Ifemelu makes her last post in preparation for her return to Nigeria, frequent poster SapphicDerrida makes an instructive observation: "I'm a bit surprised by how personally I am taking this. Good luck as you pursue the unnamed 'life change' but please come back to the blogosphere soon. You've used your irreverent, hectoring, funny and *thought-provoking voice to create a space for real conversations about an important subject*" (p. 5 italics added).

Although SapphicDerrida arguably represents an ideal online interagent, her views point towards the capacity of the blog to make "people become invested in, energized by the exchange" (Dean, 2010, p. 5). The blunt, personal, sometimes bitter, ironic and sarcastic blog posts offer moments of reflection on a range of topics, bringing the reader to an awareness of the pervasive and insidious nature of racism, class and privilege, and the necessity to engage them. The responses Ifemelu receives vary from hostility to reductive dismissal as "an angry black woman," and a desire for genuine engagement. While, on the one hand, her dismissal distorts and reduces her humanity to a sexist and racial stereotype (Vanzant, 2016, para. 2-3), there is, on the other hand a deployment of the blog to counter the ignorance, superficiality, extremism and toxicity of public discourse on race in all its manifestations by presenting penetrating and honest arguments and conversations on its workings. These impassioned and emotive blogs and interactions offer valuable insights into how knowledge, racial privilege and power are produced, negotiated and deconstructed through affective relations and encounters. By the same token, the blog expands

the spaces and platforms of public interaction from face-to-face engagements which exhibit certain degrees of regulation to a space which allows for both disassembling and enabling openness. The different responses expressed by her respondents guards against the cultivation of an echo chamber that merely reflects certain views but rather gives room for self-examination, reflexivity and knowledge.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to examine *Americanah's* exploration of silence/silencing as it is exercised over the black, female migrant. Ifemelu's engagement with the hostland troubles and transcends the socio-political and epistemological boundaries placed upon her person as a result of her skin color, immigrant status and gender. Through the examination of the spaces of the salon and the blog, the paper posits that Ifemelu undermines and questions the practice and perpetuation of racist and patriarchal ideologies and structures. In her portrayal of both the hairdressers' interactions and the deployment of the salon to enunciate conversations on hair politics, Adichie represents the salon as a space where hegemonic desire to confer invisibility, enforce homogeneity and invalidate black migrant and feminine experiences, voices and bodies is challenged. The salon is therefore produced and inhabited as a site for migrant/female agency, a space of transgression, difference and sociality. In addition, by bringing these different female voices together, Adichie represents the salon as a marginal space where alternative politics of inhabiting racially and patriarchally hierarchized foreign spaces are articulated. Adichie's violation of the novel genre by intertwining the language of fiction and its conventions with the exigencies of the virtual site of the blog enables her to extend the platform of engagement into a less regulated space where her protagonist has a sharper say on racial experience, privilege and discrimination. By using the notions of interactivity and audience feedback, I argue that the blog presents the possibility of productive engagement, a freeing space where the narrator refuses to be censored and to be complicit. This movement away from silence, to voicing, to polyvocality is transformational and liberatory in its refusal of containment, its articulation of the incoherence of nationalist,

patriarchal and racial imperatives and its disruption of neat and easy understandings of womanhood, Americanness, and transnational subjectivity.

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