

Formation Within the Nation:

Migration and Marginalization in Chimamanda Ngozi

Adichie's *Americanah*.

By: Emma Flodqvist

Supervisor: Ebere Nweze

Södertörn University | Institution for Culture and Education

C-essay 15 ECTS

Department of English | Fall 2018



Abstract

Migration and its consequences are often discussed in contemporary postcolonial discussions. This topic of migration is central in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*. Adichie's portrayal of the migrating subject has placed her in the center of the Afropolitan discussion about transnational Africans and their right to represent. This essay aims to bring this discussion to light. Furthermore, with the use of Benedict Anderson's ideas of nations as imagined communities, Edward Said's definition of Orientalism, and Homi K. Bhabha's concept of mimicry, this essay intends to illuminate the colonial discourse of *Americanah's* America. I argue that the novel's protagonist Ifemelu's migration to the land of the free is bordered by remnants of colonial discourse, placing her within a western array of marginalization. As Ifemelu struggles with issues connected to her migration into a culture that marginalizes and discriminates under the proud flag of "the American Dream," she is forced to resort to mimicry of western traits, to get access to western privilege. I contend that the mimicry of western traits consequently reduces her presence in America to partial.

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1. Introduction

The dynamic and multicultural earth as we know it in the 21st century is characterized by an ever-increasing mobility. People move back and forth across borders more today than at any other time in history. Consequently, topics of migration and transculturation are of increasing importance in literary debate. Fernando Ortiz coined the term transculturation in 1947, describing the combined processes of deculturation and acculturation (102), and it has later been included and expanded in many academic fields. Augustine Uka Nwanyanwu states that migration is “a transcultural move between a periphery and a dominant metropolitan center in which the migrant must struggle through new marginalization” (391) and argues that the migrating subject needs to redefine their identity to fit within this new space. Thus, the subject forms a new transcultural identity. The formation of transcultural identities in relation to migration is arguably one of the many important themes of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*.

Adichie’s much acclaimed novel, *Americanah*, published in 2013, centers around the Nigerian born main character Ifemelu’s journey to America in pursuit of higher education. Set within the frames of a love story, featuring the star-crossed lovers Ifemelu and Obinze, *Americanah* ostensibly deals with deeper issues of identity, race, migration, discrimination, and gender. Ifemelu’s migration to the land of the free is arguably bordered by remnants of colonial discourse, placing her within a western array of marginalization. As Ifemelu, and other migrating characters, struggle with issues connected to their migration into a culture that marginalizes and discriminates under the proud flag of “the American Dream,” they are conceivably forced to mimic western traits to get access to western privilege. Furthermore, with its straight forward discussion on racism in contemporary America, taking shape in Ifemelu’s blog, the novel arguably turns the reader towards problems centering in the West (Hallemeier 232). By gazing on America and the West through the eyes of the postcolonial subject, *Americanah* can be claimed to turn the table and move Africa from the periphery to the center.

Scholars argue that Adichie is part of a new tradition of African writers, referred to as Afropolitan writers. These writers aim to bring to the foreground a representation of Africa that

differs from the narrow and unnuanced view of a dehumanized Africa¹ as traditionally portrayed by many western writers. These new representations resist the western discourse that places Africa as a backdrop to western experience (Hallemeier 232). However, it has been argued that these Afropolitan writers marginalize lower-class Africans by portraying only successful middle- and upper-class Africans in their work (233). Consequently, Adichie has been critiqued for obscuring the struggles of lower-class Nigerians (Pucherova 411). Furthermore, it has been argued that she fails to problematize *Americanah*'s characters' migration, who are claimed to be easily adaptable and effortlessly moving in and out of different cultures (410).

By examining the novel's protagonist, Ifemelu, as a postcolonial subject, forced to take on strategies of mimicry as it is defined by Homi K. Bhabha, I will challenge the view that Adichie simplifies and diminishes the transcultural struggle of migrating Nigerians. With the help of Benedict Anderson's theory of the nation as an imagined community, I will investigate the creation of communities within the context of *Americanah*, to show how the novel's American characters create their sense of nation-ness by contrasting America to a perceived otherness. To further describe the colonial discourse that manages and construes Africa and Africans from the western perspective, I will adopt Edward Said's idea of Orientalism. This colonial discourse consequently affects the migrating characters' possibility to create transcultural identities. I contend that *Americanah*'s central migrating subject, Ifemelu, is grappling with the formation of identity within new sets of marginalization, ultimately hindered in her quest by remnants of colonial discourse. Furthermore, I argue that Ifemelu is forced to resort to mimicry of western traits, which consequently reduces her presence in America to partial.

¹ The dehumanized view of Africa is elaborately described in Chinua Achebe's influential work "An Image of Africa" from 1977.

2. Background: Afropolitanism

In 2005, novelist Taiye Selasi wrote an essay, “Bye-Bye Babar,” published online in *The Lip Magazine*, reflecting on the emergence of a new Afropolitan movement. According to her, Africans, like herself, with transnational experiences of belonging to multiple places and cultures, were in the forefront of a new representation of Africa. The concept was picked up and developed by Achille Mbembe, who popularized it within academic discourse (Santana 120). In an interview, Mbembe described Afropolitanism as “a way – the many ways – in which Africans, or people of African origin, understand themselves as being part of the world rather than being apart” (cited in Pucherova 407). The new Afropolitan movement’s writers refuse to portray Africa as a backdrop to the West, instead their characters have autonomy and ownership of their own lives. Furthermore, the experiences accounted for are African rather than western. Selasi writes:

They [read: we] are Afropolitans – the newest generation of African emigrants, coming soon or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you. You’ll know us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes. Some of us are ethnic mixes, e.g. Ghanaian and Canadian, Nigerian and Swiss; others merely cultural mutts: American accent, European affect, African ethos. Most of us are multilingual: in addition to English and a Romantic or two, we understand some indigenous tongue and speak a few urban vernaculars . . . We are Afropolitans: not citizens, but Africans of the world (Selasi, thelip.robertsharp.co.uk).

The “we” that Selasi refers to is a transnational body of Africans, who in some ways feel at home both in Africa and in the West.

What Selasi voices is the idea of an emerging contemporary and transcultural individual. Ortiz coined the term transculturation to account for the process of “complex transmutation of culture” (98). Transculturation includes two processes, that of deculturation and that of acculturation. For Ortiz, the earlier and more acclaimed term, acculturation, did not take into consideration that transitioning into a new culture not only means to acquire a new culture, but also to some extent to lose parts of one’s original culture (102). In the end, Ortiz argues, individuals that have transitioned to a new culture are not equal parts of both cultures, but much like children they carry parts of both of their parents, without carrying one set of characteristics in total (103).

As Ortiz, Selasi argues that these emerging transcultural individuals are neither African or American, for example, but both.

Afropolitanism has since received much attention and criticism. Both scholars and writers such as Okwunodu Ogbechi, Bosch Santana, and Emma Dabiri have aimed critique at the movement. In her essay, “Why I’m not an Afropolitan,” Dabiri claims that Afropolitanism sidelines important issues of identity and race, to instead bring to the table a strong tradition of consumerism (Dabiri, Africasacountry.com). She maintains that Afropolitans attach African value to its ability to bring African versions of Western products into the global market. She further states that by playing into Western capitalism, Africa is left to “[play] catch-up in a game the rules of which we did not write” (Dabiri). However, the main critique towards Afropolitanism is aimed at its claim to represent all of Africa, while only including the voices of those who are privileged enough to take part in the transnational lifestyle. Dabiri argues that not only do Afropolitans make the struggles of lower-class Africans close to invisible, it goes as far as masking the extremely real problems of Africa in its effort to market Africa as on the rise” (Dabiri).

Writers connected to the Afropolitan movement have been both praised and critiqued for those connections. For example, the literature of these writers has been argued to complicate and enrich the earlier representations of “Africa as setting and backdrop” (Achebe 9), by assuming agency and participation for Africans in the global economy (Hallemeier 232). However, these writers have also been critiqued for only representing members of African middle- and upper class, and for excluding “non-affluent members of African diasporas” (233). Furthermore, the group of novelists have been called assimilationists and classists and said to neglect the many injustices that still endure on the African continent (233). Critics claim that these writers, in their effort to erase the pessimistic African storyline, risk making “the African success story” the dominant narrative (233)

In spite of Adichie distancing herself from the Afropolitan movement², scholars have connected her work to it. The next section will account for some of the substantial research that has previously been conducted on the topic of *Americanah*. Furthermore, it will illuminate how *Americanah* has been connected to Afropolitanism.

3. Previous Research

Americanah's length and complexity renders it interesting from multiple perspectives. Hence, the scholarly work on the novel is rather diverse. For this essay, I will account for the work on some of the general themes of migration and identity in *Americanah*, as well as for some specific aspects of beauty standards, racism, and economic and political representation. Furthermore, I will bring to attention the discussion on Afropolitanism in reference to Adichie's novel, a discussion that I intend to carry on in the analysis section of this essay.

In his text "Transculturalism, Otherness, Exile, and Identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*," Nwanyanwu discusses the novel's theme of migration and exile, as well as the consequences of migration to the migrants' lives and identities. Moreover, he presents *Americanah*'s discourse of otherness, and how otherness and migration can be understood through the lens of transculturalism (Nwanyanwu 387). Nwanyanwu argues that migration involves "a transcultural move between a periphery and a dominant metropolitan center in which the migrant must struggle through new marginalization" (391). In other words, moving from a third world country to a first world country means to leave one set of marginalization and move into another. The migrant needs to redefine their identity in accordance with the new social landscape as well as the geographical one (390). This argument will be developed in my analysis of *Americanah*.

Nwanyanwu argues that the novel captures the essence of being an exile, or an economic migrant looking for choice and security. Migration can generate what Nwanyanwu calls "the traumatic experience of otherness" (389), an experience that *Americanah* explores. He claims

² Adichie expressed her frustration with being connected to the movement in an interview in 2015 (Santana 122)

that Adichie's novel illustrates the need for migrants to "redefine identity in spaces of otherness" (389), and that otherness in *Americanah* is closely linked to the idea of the 'other' as inferior to a "dominant hegemonic power" (390). Hence, he argues that the essence of being a migrant is to inhabit the social sphere of otherness, which, according to Nwanyanwu is synonymous with being black within American culture (388).

I support Nwanyanwu's claim that *Americanah* explores the experience of otherness and racial boundaries, and will devote much of the analysis section to this experience. However, Nwanyanwu also argues that these boundaries are transcended by Ifemelu in her romantic relationship with Curt, a white American (393). I disagree with this interpretation, and rather, I argue that the relationship with Curt is what illuminates Ifemelu's otherness, and that it proves to her that it is impossible to transcend racial boundaries within the American nation. I will return to this point in the analysis section.

Furthermore, Nwanyanwu argues that the transcultural aspect of *Americanah* is linked to postcolonial issues (389). I agree that postcolonial issues in relation to the characters' experiences are important to investigate, however, while Nwanyanwu focuses on postcolonial issues in Nigeria, economic mismanagement and power imbalances, I contend that the most important aspect of postcolonial issues in *Americanah* is the remnants of colonial discourse within America. This colonial discourse will be further explored later on in the essay.

Dina Yerima explores the redefinition of identity in the postcolonial woman in her article "Regimentation or Hybridity? Western Beauty Practices by Black Women in Adichie's *Americanah*." Yerima discusses this question of identity-formation in *Americanah* with the help of Gayatri Spivak's idea of the postcolonial woman as oppressed in double remark, both as a postcolonial subject based on race, and as a woman based on gender (Yerima 641). Yerima examines how this double struggle bears out in *Americanah*'s female characters.

According to Yerima, the postcolonial woman struggles with the process of building identity through self-expression. Self-expression is defined as demonstrating individual emotions, ideas, and personality. For the post-colonial woman, self-expression relates to the constructs placed on her by modern society (641). She draws on Andrea Dworkin's idea of beauty standards as descriptive of the relationship an individual has to their body, and states that this idea shows how a woman's development and achievements are closely linked to her beauty

practices (641). I will return to the point of self-expression, as important for the formation of identity, in relation to my analysis of Ifemelu's struggle to form an transcultural identity within the context of American society.

Yerima contends that the beauty practices central to the plot of *Americanah* are those related to hair, skin and weight. For example, the importance of hair in the novel is clear when considering that a large part of the story is narrated from within a hair braiding salon in America (646). She argues that the non-western woman in *Americanah* is left to feel "self-conscious and defensive" (647) until she resorts to mimicking western beauty traits. If she refuses, as Ifemelu later chooses to go natural in terms of hair, Yerima states that the woman is forced to defend her choices (647). Furthermore, Yerima illustrates how these western standards of beauty and femininity are forced on postcolonial women in *Americanah*. The female characters are supposed to conform to a media-produced model of femininity, a femininity that is always white. Therefore, the idea of what being a woman entails has taken on a completely new meaning for the postcolonial woman. She argues that *Americanah's* female characters illustrate this point through their conformity to western standards. Ginika's loss of weight and Ifemelu's relaxation of her hair are both examples of the black woman trying to gain more power and acceptance for herself, and from others, by mimicking the white race which holds power in America (643). I intend to develop this argument further in the analysis section.

Mindi McMann also focuses on the black female body in her article "'You're black': Transnational perceptions of race in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Andrea Levy's *Small Island*." She compares the two novels, each including a storyline where a black woman in a formerly colonized country moves to the west, to examine how "racial identity . . . circulates in a globalized or transnational context" (McMann 200). She argues that the two women's bodies are not "fixed text", but rather that they are read through the racialized registers of America and Britain (201). By comparing two novels with different settings, both in relation to time and space, she examines how the reading of the black body is dependent on a context that is established through a history of "colonialism, exploitation, and oppression" (201).

McMann works from the understanding of race and racial difference as non-fixed and unstable concepts. According to her, definitions, ideas, and perceptions of racial and ethnic divisions shift and intertwine. However, scholars do agree that racial taxonomies generate

difference based on bodies (201). Furthermore, they agree that these differences are imposed from without the subject, and that the differences are constructed rather than inherent (201). McMann argues that the two novels examined illustrate this discourse of racial difference and questions the oppression and racism that comes with it (202).

The twenty-first century America that Ifemelu arrives in is a country where overt racism in large has been replaced with what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva refers to as maintenance of white privilege (McMann 202). This maintenance works without naming who is subjected and who is awarded. McMann defines this type of racism as an, “omnipresent invisible racism” (202), that is held up by well-established structures that privilege white people and actively discriminates people of color. In *Americanah*, racial difference becomes insidious through the refusal to talk about it. The pretend colorblindness that is being adopted in America helps to make discrimination towards people of color invisible, rather than deleting it. McMann cites Caroline Levine who notes that this blindness is being dealt with in *Americanah* with a realistic narrative style, where Ifemelu’s reflections via blog posts on race and racism are blunt instead of vague (207). McMann calls the posts “a kind of narrative voice that . . . wants to make the reader uncomfortable with the evidence that while lynching and formal segregation are mostly relics of America’s past, racism is not (209). In contrast to Britain in *Small Island*, the word black is rarely used in *Americanah*’s America. Ifemelu realizes that even though race is carefully avoided in conversation, it is omnipresent. This is made apparent by the novel’s constant discussion on various degrees of blackness and Americanness (210).

In "To Be from the Country of People Who Gave": National Allegory and the United States of Adichie's *Americanah*," Katherine Hallemeier explores the economic and political representations of Africa and America in *Americanah*. She argues that the empathy and sympathy that is typically aimed from the West at Africa is turned on its head, and instead directed towards the American citizens (Hallemeier 232). Hallemeier claims that the setting of privileged Nigerians and limited Americans helps Adichie to present a utopic vision of Nigerian capitalism’s future as in the forefront of global power, while America takes the role of the backdrop (232).

Hallemeier distances *Americanah* from the critique aimed at Afropolitanism, that it endeavors to transfer American models to Africa, and instead contend that the novel offers a

story about two different capitalisms, in the shape of Ifemelu's encounters with romantic love (237). Her two American relationships represent the "public first-world culture and society, in which capitalism's entwinement with white supremacy delimits citizen's capacity to apprehend how their seemingly personal beliefs are structured by specific and contingent political conditions" (237). In contrast, Ifemelu's relationship with Obinze represents an alternative Nigerian dream that separates capitalism from white supremacy (237).

Hallemeier argues further that *Americanah* brings forward the collective problems of the first world, instead of the problems belonging to the third world. By so doing, the novel opposes the United States' view of Africa as unbearable and their attempts to fix this perceived unbearableness. Instead the novel turns the same attitude around towards the US and highlights the tragic aspects of capitalism in a white-supremacist state (242). Moreover, Hallemeier argues that it is by looking at Africa as intolerable that Americans in *Americanah* can stand the misery of their own existence (242). Even though I agree with Hallemeier's view that Americans in the novel pictures Africa as inferior in order to overcome their own misery, I would add that these American attitudes still help to create American, or western, superiority. The American characters might be miserable indeed, however, as I will argue in the analysis section of this study, their actions still assist in maintaining the system of colonial discourse that shapes Ifemelu's, and other migrating characters, life chances in America.

In contrast to Hallemeier's celebration of the Afropolitan themes in *Americanah*, Dobrota Pucherova is critical to both movement and novel. In "Afropolitan Narratives and Empathy: Migrant Identities in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Sefi Atta's *A Bit of Difference*", Pucherova supports the Nigerian writer Yewande Omotoso, who argues that Afropolitan literature and narrative is written for easy consumption by the West. She marks that even though novels, like *Americanah*, are marketed as serious literature, they would be more accurately categorized with consumer-friendly popular literature (Pucherova 409). According to her, these novels, which are mostly un-known in Africa, are given the status as representative of African literature in the West. The novels are recognized by their English language, their expatriate African authors, their middle-class perspective, and their theme of negotiating African identity in the Western context (409). Pucherova refers to Omotoso in suggesting that "these novels appeal to Western audiences or to Africans living in the West precisely because they are

easy to understand – no effort is required to decode their symbolic systems” (409). This implies that the novels mentioned requires minimal effort in its western audience, rendering it possible for the audiences to falsely believe that they have acquired insight. I agree with Pucherova, that *Americanah* is written for easy consumption, however, I think she fails to take into account that novel’s like *Americanah* have to adhere to a capitalistic system that requires conformity in exchange for success. I will return to this point in my analysis of the novel’s narrative.

Pucherova argues that what differentiates these new consumer-friendly novels from the more classic postcolonial African *bildungsroman* is the relationship between Africa and the West. While the more classic novels depict these two parts of the world “in stark binary opposition”, Pucherova argues that the newer novels perceive Africa and the West as part of one and the same social reality, “operating with the same or similar references and worldviews and values” (410). Furthermore, she states that the newer novels’ protagonists are usually transcultural, high-achieving and young, and that they move “fluidly between the West and Africa and fits almost seamlessly into both” (410). Pucherova calls this the “celebratory optimism of Afropolitanism” and argues that it masks the reason for an increase in African migration to the West since independence. According to her, Adichie’s *Americanah* adds to a blurry picture by portraying migration to the West as natural to all those Nigerians who seek happiness, a happiness that consequently is claimed impossible to achieve in Nigeria (410). I will challenge Pucherova’s claim, that Adichie portrays migration and the forming of transcultural identities as simple and effortless, by showing in my analysis a directly opposing interpretation. I argue that *Americanah*’s characters, primarily focusing on Ifemelu, struggle greatly with migration to America and the formation of transcultural identities.

Pucherova’s biggest point of critique towards *Americanah* is the lack of representation of the poorer classes in Nigeria. She claims that the term Afropolitanism is problematic since “it refers only to the educated middle-class Africans, being silent about the masses of poor, illiterate and paperless migrants” (410). According to Pucherova, the same critique can be aimed at *Americanah*, which “focuses exclusively on the careers and love problems of its middle-class protagonists” (411). She further states that by failing to represent the lower classes, the novel never presents its reader with a reason for Nigeria being unable to offer its citizens the choices that are available in the West. Furthermore, the reader is not informed of the massive social

inequality of Nigeria, or the reasons for it (412). She concludes that this shows the novels lack of empathy for the fellow African, which she also argues to be symptomatic of the Afropolitan movement (412).

As previously mentioned, Pucherova's critique towards *Americanah's* middle class perspective is coupled with the main issue that critics connect to Afropolitanism, that it masks the struggles of lower-class Africans (Dabiri, Africasacountry.com). While I sympathize with the critique aimed at Afropolitanism for its failure to include perspectives from all classes on Africa's economic spectra, I argue that the responsibility to represent all classes should not be forced upon individual novelist, and particularly not on one individual novelist's single work. Attaching that responsibility to individual African authors is to take away their right to write from their own perspective, a right that western authors own by default. Furthermore, the desire to read *Americanah* as Afropolitan risks reducing the complexity of such a novel, to fit within a political storyline. Hence, I argue that the critique that Pucherova aims at Adichie for obscuring the problems connected to the lower-classes in Africa, and for portraying migration as simplistic and unrealistic, is misguided. By inserting *Americanah* into the political debate about Afropolitanism, Pucherova fails to look past the novel's surface. With the use of Anderson's concept of the nation as an imagined community, Said's definition of Orientalism, and Bhabha's idea on mimicry, I will illuminate the complexity underneath that surface. I will argue that Adichie's middle-class perspective is a strategic choice that highlights the colonial discourse in *Americanah's* America. Furthermore, I will illustrate how *Americanah* problematizes rather than simplifies the concept of transcultural identities.

4. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical approach for this essay merges postcolonial ideas of mimicry and colonial discourse with the political concept of nations as an imagined community, in order to illuminate the issues of identity, race, migration, and discrimination in *Americanah*. This section will introduce some of Anderson's ideas on the nation as an imagined community. Furthermore, to bring forward the concept of colonial discourse, Said's work on the topic of Orientalism will be briefly described. Lastly, I will account for some of Bhabha's work on mimicry as a mode of colonial discourse.

In his acclaimed book *Imagined Communities*, from 1983, Anderson attempts to define what has been notoriously undefinable: the nation, nationality, and nationalism. According to him, in spite of nation-ness being “the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time” (Anderson 3), the theoretical work on this nationalistic phenomenon, up till the point of departure of his book, had been insufficient. Anderson proposes a definition of the nation as “an imagined political community” (6) and adds that the nation is imagined as “inherently limited” (6). The nation is imagined because even though most members within a nation will never meet or talk to one another, they all hold an inner image of their connectedness. According to Anderson, all communities are imagined, what distinguishes them is the style of their imagining (6). Moreover, the nation is imagined as limited, because of its finite boundaries, across which other nations are found. Hence, the concept of the nation is never all inclusive (7). Furthermore, the nation is imagined as a community, because of its “deep, horizontal comradeship,” that is socially constructed and survives despite actual inequalities, conflicts and exploitations that reside within it (7).

In addition, Anderson argues that nationality and nationalism are cultural artefacts, which once created “became ‘modular,’ capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political ideological constellations” (4). In other words, the concept of nationalism is not created again and again independently, but recreated or copied from preexisting models and incorporated into various ideological systems. Furthermore, this imagined concept is transportable, the image of the nation can be carried into other imagined nations and readjusted within them.

The concept of official nationalism illustrates further how the nation is an imagined construct. The diversity of people, languages and culture, as well as the continued expansion of empires, meant that one nation could include many imagined nationalities. Official nationalism made it possible to “[stretch] the short, tight, skin of the nation over the gigantic body of the empire” (86), so that different nationalities could reside within one single nationalism. In the face of the threat of “marginalization or exclusion from an emerging nationally-imagined community” (101), traditionally dominant groups employed official nationalism as an “anticipatory strategy” that coupled “naturalizations with retention of dynastic power” (86) to

preserve the old dynastic rule while still installing the idea of a nationality with its inherent rights and equality. In other words, official nationalism is successful in its abstractness. The illusion of comradeship allows minorities to maintain power despite its own resolution to couple nationality with equality.

The core of the nation is superiority over all other nations. Anderson argues that colonial racism generalized this idea of superiority, by extending the ‘natural’ order within the nation to include the colonies within the empire. For the English, the hierarchy established was that of the English lord as superior to other Englishmen, but all Englishmen as superior to the colonial subject (150). Hence, the colonial empires helped to reaffirm antique concepts of power and privilege, to be a natural part of the modern world-order (150). Consequently, the nation as an imagined community is based on racial domination, as this domination of the ‘other’³ was key in the creation of a national consciousness. This hegemonic relationship between the West and other parts of the world is examined more closely by Edward Said in his famous book *Orientalism* from 1978.

For Said, the term Orientalism describes the relationship between the West and the Orient. According to him, the Orient has been important in the definition of Europe and the West, serving as a continuous contrast (Said 1). While serving as contrast, the Orient is always passive in the eyes of the West. This view is illuminated by Said’s observation that “[a] powerful difference posited by the Orientalist as against the Oriental is that the former writes about, whereas the latter is written about” (340). Consequently, the Orient becomes a passive backdrop as the inferior ‘other’, that serves to create the superiority of the West. Naturally, one cannot be superior if there is no contrastive inferior presence. This, of course, has its roots in Michel Foucault's concept of discourse, that Said adopts to understand the “enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage - and even produce - the Orient” (Said 3). Orientalism is not merely a conversation that intends to describe, it has the power to control, and even to create, Oriental culture. Orientalism manages the Orient by “making statements

³ Otherness refers to “the West’s definition of a sense of self through differentiation from supposed ‘otherness,’ or alterity” (Thieme 203)

about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, ruling it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient (3). In other words, Orientalism is defined by its conversations about the Orient, from the perspective of the West. Thus, Said defines Orientalism as a western discourse, at work to create and maintain power structures within the relationship of West and East. This concept has been further expanded by Bhabha in his work on mimicry and colonial discourse.

Bhabha has with his work within the postcolonial field endeavored to describe the colonial discourse that permeated colonial times. In the essay “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” he describes the term mimicry as a mode of colonial discourse, and states that mimicry is “one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge” (Bhabha 122). Mimicry is effective because it installs in the colonial subject a mode of self-consciousness that ensures the self-government of the subject. Its elusiveness stems from its construction of ambivalence (122).

Bhabha argues that the ambivalence of colonial mimicry is discernable in its desire for an intelligible ‘other’, or a “subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (126). The complexity lies in its double role. For the colonial subject, mimicry serves as a strategy to gain access to privilege. From the perspective of the rulers, mimicry is a strategy to appropriate the ‘other’ by means of self-regulation and discipline, it is put in place to keep power safe within their ranks. Thus, the ‘other’ is used as a weapon in the colonization of the ‘other’ (122).

The goal of an appropriated ‘other’ was articulated by writers such as Charles Grant and Thomas Babington Macaulay, who in their works advocated for the installment of an educated Indian class: “Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” (Macaulay cited in Bhabha 124). Grant suggested reform in which partial elements of Christianity and moral improvements would collude with alienating caste procedures, to avoid potential political alliances within the colonized nation that could prove to be dangerous to the colonizer’s rule.

According to Bhabha, the key word in Grant’s reforms is “partial”. Bhabha states that mimicry “fixes the colonial subject as a ‘partial’ presence” (123). By limiting the appropriation to partial, the colonial subject is set up for strategic failure. Hence, mimicry as a partial presence makes sure that the colonial subject never climbs above its assigned step on the imperial ladder.

Grant's suggested partial reform will produce subjects that imitate English manners, without ever being able to advance the imitation game to acquire these manners in total. It is in its nature of imitation, of repetition, that mimicry remains diminishing. Mimicry never re-presents, but only repeats, and therefore it cannot hold real privilege (Bhabha 125).

With the help of Anderson's concept of the nation as an imagined community, I will illuminate the importance of nationality in *Americanah*. As the characters move across borders, or meet and engage with different cultures, they arguably carry their inherent imagined view of nationality with them, which consequently shapes their relationships, as well as the relationships between the nation-states. I claim that the characters' interactions sheds light on the fixed categories of superior and inferior that consequently determines the migrating subjects' life chances and constitutes their marginalization. To cope with this marginalization, I contend that the migrating subjects are forced to apply the strategy of mimicry, as it is described by Bhabha, to gain access to privileges otherwise unattainable. I argue that the need to use mimicry points to the remnants of a colonial discourse in *Americanah's* contemporary America. Therefore, in my analysis of the novel, I will adopt Said's idea of Orientalism, to describe the colonial discourse that manages and describes Africa and Africans from the western perspective. This colonial discourse borders Ifemelu's migration into America, and consequently reduces her presence to partial.

5. Analysis

In this section, I present the social sphere that Ifemelu moves into when migrating from Nigeria to America. Focus will particularly be on American attitudes towards Africa, and the marking of Ifemelu as 'other'. Furthermore, I will examine how Africa is created as an imagined community from within, as a strategy to deal with the migrating Africans' marginalization in America. In addition, I will investigate how the use of mimicry helps Ifemelu to get access to American privileges, as well as how mimicry reduces her presence to partial in America.

5.1 New Set of Marginalization

“I came from a country where race was not an issue; I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America” (Adichie 290). Frustrated with the continuous strike action in Nigeria’s universities, Ifemelu moved to America to get access to higher education. To Ifemelu, and many of her generation, America was the land of increased opportunities and freedom. However, as previously mentioned, Nwanyanwu argues that migration involves “a transcultural move between a periphery and a dominant metropolitan center in which the migrant must struggle through new marginalization” (391). For Ifemelu, this implies marginalization based on the colour of her skin. Thus, more than a decade after her arrival in America, she explains to another guest at a dinner party, who has just stated that race was never a problem in her interracial relationship, that race in America is not invisible, but that rather, it is crucial.

Reflecting on Ifemelu’s meeting with the white American characters Kimberly and Laura will illuminate the new social space that Ifemelu finds herself in after migrating to America. Ifemelu first meets these characters during a job interview at Kimberly’s house, where she is applying for work as a babysitter for Kimberly’s children, and comes to develop her relationship with the women during her time working in the house. Kimberly’s view of Africa is clear from introductions. When given Ifemelu’s name, Kimberly speaks vividly of its beauty: “I love multicultural names because they have such wonderful meanings, from wonderful rich cultures” (Adichie 146). Kimberly’s assumption of Ifemelu’s name as a bearer of meaning is an example of the exotification⁴ of Africa, and other parts of the world, that is common in Western conversation. By exotifying Ifemelu’s assumed culture she marks it as something ‘other’ than her own, something distant and far away. Hence, Kimberly starts their relationship by distancing herself from Ifemelu, and in the process she introduces Ifemelu to the social space of otherness, an otherness that comes to determine Ifemelu’s life chances in America. Kimberly continues the track of exotification in a new topic about food: “I’m sure back home you ate a lot of beautiful fruits and vegetables, but you’re going to see its different here” (147). She has adopted an image

⁴ Exoticism: the view of alterity, or otherness, as exotic (Thieme 88)

of Africa as exotic and organic, which she contrasts to the American lifestyle. This contrast further marks Ifemelu's otherness.

By contrasting Nigeria's food as clean against the idea of America's food as dirty, Kimberly paints the picture of a Nigerian superiority. However, that idea is quickly overthrown by her sister Laura. She dismisses Kimberly's statement: "Kim, if she was eating all of this wonderful organic food in Nigeria, why would she come to the US?" (147). To Laura, Nigeria is not a magical place full of rich culture and organic food. Nigeria is a place that people run from. The thought that migration can have multiple reasons beyond poverty and scarcity is incomprehensible to her. Therefore, she draws the conclusion that Ifemelu would not have left Nigeria if the country had good food, even though she, upon meeting Ifemelu, stated that she had been told about Ifemelu leaving Nigeria because of strikes. A reason to which she replies: "[h]orrible, what's going on in African countries" (147). Laura's choice to use the phrase "African countries", rather than Nigeria, points to an idea of Africa as inherently connected. Anderson defines the nation as "an imagined political community" (6), and states that it is imagined because even though most members within a nation will never meet or talk to one another, they all hold an inner image of their connectedness. In this case, it is Laura that holds an inner image of an African connectedness. With her assumption, she diminishes the diversity of the African continent, and rather, she imagines it as one homogenous nation. Furthermore, as both of her statements illuminate, for Laura, Africa is a paltry place, full of horror, at the backdrop of the world.

By painting the picture of scarcity in Nigeria in contrast to overflow in America, Laura establishes America's superiority. The meeting of three women becomes the meeting of two nations, and the hegemony is already established. America stands on top as superior to a diffuse and inferior Africa. Said argues that the Orient stood as a contrastive inferior presence in the creation of the superiority of the West (1). In this case, it is Africa who carries the role of the inferior 'other'. In *Americanah's* America, this idea of superiority is a discourse, at work to create and maintain power structures within the relationship of the West and Africa.

America's assumed superiority is further marked by the introduction of white saviorism in *Americanah*. Laura seems fixated on withholding the established hierarchy between her and Ifemelu based on their different nationality, and she does so by constantly bringing Ifemelu

articles and news about Nigeria: “[i]t was an aggressive, unaffectionate interest; strange indeed, to pay so much attention to something you did not like” (Adichie 163). Ifemelu’s reflection that Laura does not like Nigeria, or Africa, points to an alternative reason for Laura’s interest. By talking about Nigeria with Ifemelu, Laura reminds Ifemelu that they belong to different communities, and consequently, she reestablishes the American superiority. When Laura brings Ifemelu a picture of a white woman holding a black baby: “a thin white woman, smiling at the camera, holding a dark-skinned African baby in her arms, and all around her, little dark-skinned African children were spread out like a rug” (162), this superiority is established further. The concept of white saviorism was first reflected upon within academic discourse in connection to film. Herman Vera and Andrew Gordon defines the white savior in film as “the redeemer of the weak, the great leader who saves blacks from slavery or oppression, rescues people of color from poverty and disease, or leads Indians in battle for their dignity and survival” (33). The picture brought by Laura illustrates how white saviorism operates within a charity context, where a white Westerner goes to Africa to save Africans from themselves. Ifemelu’s reflection of the black African children as a rug under the white woman’s feet illuminates the connotation of such a setting. The woman’s superiority is established on basis of the children's inferiority.

The ideas of otherness, superiority and inferiority are once again demonstrated when Ifemelu attends a party given by Kimberly and her husband Don. All Ifemelu’s interactions with the guests are based on her otherness. First, upon introduction, a male guest calls her beautiful: “[y]ou’re so beautiful . . . African women are gorgeous, especially Ethiopians” (Adichie 169). With this statement the man manages to objectify and exotify, as well as to group Ifemelu with other African women⁵. The objectifying manner of his statement points to a view of the African woman as a piece of art, rather than human. This is supported by his matter-of-fact way of commenting on Ifemelu’s looks. To him, Ifemelu is the subject of the conversation rather than a

⁵ Intersectionality theory examines how people are discriminated against at the intersection of different variables, such as race, sexuality, class and gender. This paper focuses on discrimination based on race and nationality, however, Ifemelu’s experiences as a black woman differs from the experiences of a black man. I touch on some of her experiences of sexism briefly, but a closer examination of how she is discriminated against at the intersection of race and gender lies outside the scope of this essay.

participant in it. Second, the topic of charities in Africa becomes dominant in Ifemelu's interactions with the other guests. She reflects on how this economic relationship of America as the giver and Africa as the receiver is based on the certainty of superiority: "[t]o take 'charity' for granted, to revel in this charity towards people whom one did not know – perhaps it came from having had yesterday and having today and expecting to have tomorrow" (169). According to Anderson, colonial racism generalized the idea of superiority, by extending the 'natural' order within the nation to include the colonial subject (150). Thus, the hierarchy within America is extended to include the 'other', epitomized by people of colour and particularly blacks, who consequently always ends up on the lowest step of the ladder. When the guest chooses to approach Ifemelu with the topic of charity, they create this hierarchy within their conversation. Ifemelu is forced into a position of gratitude that enforces her inferiority. Lastly, when a woman states that Ifemelu should work for her charity in Ghana, since "we don't want to be the NGO that won't use local labor" (Adichie 169), Ifemelu is again faced with the diminishing notion of Africa as one nation. The woman seems to think of all Africans as locals on the approximately 11,724,000 square miles⁶ big continent.

Ifemelu's meeting with the two sisters and their friends illuminates the importance of nations and nationality in *Americanah*. As previously mentioned, Anderson defines the nation as "an imagined political community" (6). These meetings illustrate just how powerful such an imagining can be, since their difference in form of nationality dominates the conversations, and shapes the characters' relationships to one another. More specifically, the conversations are dominated by Anderson's proposal that the nation is imagined as limited by finite borders (7). That the borders are imagined becomes clear when considering the clarity with which the white American characters, without thought or reflection, imagine themselves as separated from Ifemelu, even though they are all located within the same borders and conversation. For Ifemelu, this means that her move to America meant to move into the social sphere of otherness, where every meeting and every conversation is marked by her "Africaness". Nwanyanwu argues that migration involves the migrants' redefinition of identity within new sets of marginalization

⁶ Statistics collected from Encyclopædia Britannica

(390). For Ifemelu, who's move to America was characterized by her hopes for better opportunities, this redefining is limited by the imagined borders of America, as well as the remnants of colonial discourse, where American superiority is based on African inferiority. I will argue that she uses two strategies to deal with this colonial discourse.

5.2 Strategy One: Forming a New Community

“Halima smiled at Ifemelu, a smile that, in its warm knowingness, said welcome to a fellow African; she would not smile at an American the same way” (Adichie 11). Becoming black in America also meant becoming African. When Ifemelu walks into a hair salon around 15 years after her arrival, she is greeted with a smile from an African braider. Ifemelu states that Halima's warm welcome is due to their shared African descent. Hence, she assumes a shared comradeship based on their connections to the continent of Africa. As previously mentioned, Anderson defines a nation as an imagined community, imagined because most members of the community never meet or talk, yet there exists a connectedness based on shared membership. It is a community because within it exists a “deep horizontal comradeship” (Anderson 6) that survives despite inner conflicts and inequalities. Furthermore, he argues that when dominant groups are faced with the threat of marginalization from a nationally-imagined community, they can create an official nationalism that allows them to expand the tight borders of the nation to be able to include vast empires (101). Therefore, I argue that migrating Africans in *Americanah* expand the borders of their home nations to include the continent of Africa, based on their shared exclusion from the American society. These expanded borders create a safe space of inclusiveness within a nation that renders their otherness.

Another example of how Africa is constructed as an imagined community, with the help of official nationalism, is the African Student's Association (ASA). After a discussion in class between Ifemelu, one other African and two African-Americans, Ifemelu is approached by Wambui, the other African in her class. The discussion had aired a difference between the Africa-born women and the African-Americans, which spurs Wambui to invite Ifemelu along to ASA. At ASA, African students meet and share experiences of assimilation and segregation along with stories about home: “[a]nd they themselves mocked Africa, trading stories about absurdity and stupidity, and they felt safe to mock, because it was mockery born of longing, and

of the heartbroken desire to see a place made whole again” (Adichie 139). The ASA is part of the imagined community of Africa because their comradeship lies with other imagined Africans. Its limitedness lies on the exclusion of those outside of their borders, in this case, students who are not born in Africa. They join each other in a shared African identity by expanding their idea of the nation to stretch over all of Africa, even though their experiences are connected to different nations within the African continent, and they do so when faced with the threat of marginalization in America. Therefore, as an association, the ASA fits well in to the description of official nationalism.

The imagining of Africa as one nation is consequently created both from without, as illustrated in Ifemelu’s interactions with white Americans, and from within. When Africa is created from within it is a strategy that helps Ifemelu and other migrating Africans to experience the inclusiveness of nationality, while at the same time being excluded from the hosting nation. According to Anderson, once created, the nation “became ‘modular,’ capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political ideological constellations” (4). Ifemelu illuminates the transportability of the nation when she carries her nationality with her into other nations. Furthermore, with the help of official nationalism, she, and other migrating Africans, stretches the skin of their transportable nation to include all of the African continent. However, while the imagining of Africa as one community renders comfort to the excluded migrating subjects, it does not give them access to American privileges.

5.3 Strategy Two: Forming a New Self

“Ifemelu had watched Mariama in the mirror, thinking of her own new American selves. It was with Curt that she had first looked in the mirror and with a flush of accomplishment, seen someone else” (Adichie 191). While at a hair salon, getting her hair braided, Ifemelu reflects on the American selves that Africans take on to acclimate to the American social climate. She observes one of the braiders, Mariama, dealing with a difficult customer: “[s]he was agreeable, and smooth-tongued, but Ifemelu could tell that she thought her customer was a trouble maker . . . but this was part of her new American self, this fervor of customer service, this shiny falseness of surfaces” (188). This American self is defined by its falsity. Ifemelu imagines how Mariama

will shake the smile off as her customer walks out the door, only to bring it back when another shows up. The American self is the role that Mariama plays to get accepted, to ultimately get her pay check. Ifemelu states that her first experience of achieving to create this new self was in her relationship with Curt, a white American.

Through Kimberly and Laura, Ifemelu meets Curt, with whom Ifemelu moves into a romantic relationship. As previously noted, Nwanyanwu argues that it is in this romantic relationship that Ifemelu “transcends social and racial boundaries to redefine her sense of self” (393). On the contrary to Nwanyanwu’s interpretation of transcending race, I argue that Ifemelu and Curt’s relationship illuminates racial difference. After their first time in bed together, Curt reveals to Ifemelu that she is the first black woman that he has slept with: “[c]urt had never been with a black woman; he told her this after their first time” (Adichie 195). The colour of her skin is enough to limit her into a category of women. By calling her his first, he is fostering the idea of difference based on skin colour, and thereby the idea of otherness. This difference is further demonstrated to Ifemelu by the surrounding’s reaction to their relationship. While at a party together, she notes how the other guests are looking at her in surprise over the fact that Curt has chosen to be with her. She states that these looks, which are not new to her, “had begun to pierce her skin,” and adds that “[s]he was tired even of Curt’s protection, tired of needing protection” (293). Ifemelu’s frustration with the continuous reactions from the people around them points to how racial boundaries are illuminated, rather than transcended, in her relationship with Curt.

Furthermore, while Nwanyanwu interprets the emergence of Ifemelu’s new American self as Ifemelu transcending social boundaries, I argue that her new self is not about transcending, it is about performing. While she does describe how she transforms in their relationship: “[w]ith Curt, she became, in her mind, a woman free of knots and cares, a woman running in the rain with the taste of sun-warmed strawberries in her mouth” (196), this transformation is not real. As she states herself, it is in her mind that she is free. She expresses the falsity of this transformation further when talking about her life with Curt as playing a role: “[s]he was lighter and leaner, she was Curt’s Girlfriend, a role she slipped in to as into a favorite, flattering dress” (196). Being in a relationship with Curt feels like theater to her, and consequently, the new American self, that she creates in their relationship, is a performance.

In addition, I contend that Nwanyanwu's idea, that Ifemelu transcends boundaries, paints the picture of autonomy. To transcend implies that she rises above the social context, to autonomously shape her sense of self. On the contrary, I will argue that Ifemelu is not free to redefine her identity in America, and that instead, the new identity she takes on is built on mimicry of western traits. Bhabha argues that mimicry is a strategy that for the colonial subject serves to gain access to privileges, while from the perspective of the colonial rulers, it serves as a strategy to appropriate the 'other' by means of self-regulation and discipline (122). Consequently, as I will illustrate in the subsequent sections, when Ifemelu shapes herself according to western standards to access American privileges, she is not involved in the act of autonomously reshaping herself, she is self-regulating to create a "subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha 126). However, it is important to note that autonomy is a contentious concept within multiple academic fields. While I contend that there is no such thing as an autonomous self, as the self is always dictated by its context, I do find it useful to speak of autonomy in terms of gradation. What I intend to highlight, in the subsequent sections, is how Ifemelu's autonomy is reduced in America, due to the remnants of colonial discourse forcing her to mimic western traits.

One clear example of mimicry in *Americanah* is Ifemelu's mimicry of an American accent. Because of indirect British colonial rule in Nigeria, the nation's official language is English. For Ifemelu, this means that migrating to America does not entail acquiring a new language: "[s]he had spoken English all her life, led the debating society in secondary school, and always thought the American twang inchoate" (Adichie 133). However, when Christina Thomas welcomes her to University life in America, Ifemelu is quickly alerted to her language's new lower status as Christina says: "I. Need. You. To. Fill. Out. A. Couple. Of. Forms. Do. You. Understand. How. To. Fill. These. Out?" (133) Ifemelu's surprise at this humiliating experience is due to her so far being unaware of the colonial discourse still present in American society, due to the indirectness of colonial rule in Nigeria. For her, to migrate to America is to come face to face with a colonizer formerly unknown to her. When she tries to tell Christina that she speaks English, Christina explains that she can hear that, but that she can't possibly know how well Ifemelu speaks. To Christina, Ifemelu's Nigerian accent is deficit. It's a bad replica of the American or British English, not a language in its own, but a sign of otherness. Hence, she draws

the conclusion that Ifemelu's English is new and unadvanced. This alerts Ifemelu to the American attitude of non-western forms of English as lower in standard.

And so, Ifemelu starts practicing an American accent. She mimics the speech of the privileged to get access to the privilege of being unmarked. Passing as African American means to not be an outsider, however while still being subjected to discrimination based on skin colour. Later, when a phone operator compliments her on her American accent and she thanks him, she realizes how she has subscribed to the idea of American English as superior to Nigerian English: “[w]hy was it a compliment, an accomplishment, to sound American?” (175). And so, she decides to stop pretending, but instead go back to her Nigerian English and thereby become truer to herself and her nation.

As Ifemelu takes on an American accent, the novel itself is arguably taking on a western narrative style. As I have stated, Pucherova critiques *Americanah* for its consumer-friendliness and its similarities to western literature. I agree that the narrative of *Americanah*, with its romantic theme and straight-forward language, demonstrates the accessibility that is often connected to western popular literature. However, I contend that the discussion on African narratives must go deeper to not neglect the capitalistic order that not only African writers, but all writers must adapt to. As previously mentioned, critics of the Afropolitan movement states that Afropolitans aim to create African versions of Western products. They claim that by working to get accepted into the Western market, Africans are left trying to catch up in a game in which they did not write the rules (Dabiri, Africasacountry.com). However, I think it is important to consider the possible effects of not playing by the rules. To ask of writers, like Adichie, to not adapt their writing for the western market, might be to ask them to stay in the margins of the literary scene, and consequently, to be deprived of the opportunity to be heard. Therefore, I argue that the critique aimed at Afropolitanism as a movement should not be aimed at individual novelists, who are trying to make it in a capitalistic system. As Ifemelu's mimicking of western traits is her ticket to privilege, in the case of *Americanah*, conformity might very well be the ticket to its writer's literary success.

Furthermore, as Ifemelu resists the superiority of the American accent, there are moments of resistance in *Americanah's* narrative by the insertion of Ifemelu's returning blog-posts. As a reaction to being marginalized based on race, Ifemelu develops a blog dealing with issues of race

and racism. According to McMann, the blog, *Raceteenth or Curious Observations by a Non-American Black on the Subject of Blackness in America*, inherits a “realistic narrative style” to deal with the “omnipresent invisible racism” in America (207). The language in these posts are blunt, as, for example, in her post “Understanding America for the Non-American Black: A Few Explanations of What Things Really Mean”: “[i]f 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” (Adichie 350). In the blog she reflects ferociously on the racial climate in America, and the consequences thereof for people of colour. She states out loud what she contends that Americans refuses to talk about. These outbreaks from the conventional narrative resists the capitalistic system that the novel is forced to deal with, by showing the reader what the novel could be if it did not have to conform to said order. When the post is over, the narrative steps back into the safeness of easy-going, consumer-friendly literature, thereby illuminating the capitalistic system’s demand for conformity.

In addition to mimicking the American accent, Ifemelu mimics western beauty standards to pass as professional at a job interview. On recommendation, Ifemelu relaxes her hair with strong chemicals that burn her scalp and causes painful irritations in preparation for a job interview. When Curt asks why she has to do it, she explains that: “[m]y full and cool hair would work if I were interviewing to be a backup singer in a jazz band, but I need to look professional for this interview, and professional means straight is best but if it's going to be curly then it has to be the white kind of curly, loose curls or, at worst, spiral curls but never kinky” (204). As previously mentioned, Yerima argues that Ifemelu’s relaxation of her hair is an example of the black woman trying to gain more power and acceptance for herself and from others, by mimicking white beauty standards (643). As in the case of her accent, Ifemelu adapts to white norms to get access to the privilege of having a job in America, a job which in turn is crucial for her continued stay. Hence, her migration into America hinges on her adapting to American norms.

The last example of mimicry in *Americanah* is Ifemelu’s mimicry of opinions. After having developed her blog into a forum for discussion about race across the nation, Ifemelu gets invited to do workshops on the topic of diversity. After her very first one, that she feels she

delivered quite smoothly, she does not get the reaction she had expected: “the faces around her were frozen” (Adichie 305). The same evening, she receives an email: “YOUR TALK WAS BALONEY. YOU ARE A RACIST. YOU SHOULD BE GRATEFUL WE LET YOU INTO THIS COUNTRY” (305). The email was a revelation to Ifemelu:

The point of diversity workshops, or multicultural talks, was not to inspire any real change but to leave people feeling good about themselves. They did not want the content of her ideas; they merely wanted the gesture of her presence . . . And so, in the following weeks, as she gave more talks at companies and schools, she began to say what they wanted to hear, none of which she would ever write on her blog, because she knew that the people who read her blog were not the same people who attended her diversity workshops (305).

It turns out, Ifemelu’s success is dependent on her ascribing to the national story line of “post-racial America” that Eduardo Bonilla-Silva describes in his book *Racism without Racists, Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, from 2013. Bonilla-Silva argues that the overt racism of the Jim Crow era, where laws and open discrimination ensured the domination of the white race above all other races, has been replaced with a covert racism that uses practices hidden from plain sight to ensure racial inequality (3). Part of this new covert racism is to talk about racism as a past problem, to instead put focus on the progress that has been made in terms of racial discrimination. And so, Ifemelu starts to mimic the new discourse with statements like: “America has made great progress for which we should be very proud” (Adichie 305). Because of her conformity, the invitations keep on coming.

As I have mentioned, Pucherova states that Ifemelu moves “fluidly between the West and Africa and fits almost seamlessly into both” (410), to argue that Adichie’s depiction of migration is optimistic and celebratory. I argue, on the contrary, that Ifemelu’s mimicry of language, looks, and opinions are important examples of how she needs to bury parts of who she is and adopt “a way of being that was not hers” (Adichie 175), to get access to a small part of the privileges of those who do not have to conform at all. As Yerima argues, self-expression is closely linked to the process of identity-formation. She defines self-expression as demonstrating individual emotions, ideas and personality. Therefore, as Ifemelu is forced to change her accent, conform to Western beauty standards, and alter her opinions, she is hindered in expressing her own

personality. By having to carry an otherness, she is denied individuality in America and is instead continuously treated as part of the undefinable group of others. To deal with the discrimination connected to that otherness, she is forced to resort to mimicking western traits, rather than expressing her own self. Thus, it is not Ifemelu who is fitting seamlessly into both worlds, it is a false version of her, built on mimicry, that is accepted into the American society.

In addition, Pucherova critiques Adichie, along with other writers associated with Afropolitanism, for her middle-class perspective. Ifemelu is born into Nigerian middle-class and migrates to America in pursuit of higher education, rather than in escape from poverty. Pucherova states that *Americanah* “never represents the Nigerian poor and focuses exclusively on the careers and love problems of its middle-class protagonists” (411). I have two points of disagreement with her critique. First, I am critical of Pucherova’s lack of reflection over the choice of class-perspective in the novel. Bonilla-Silva argues that the Jim Crow racism, based on the idea of black peoples biological and racial inferiority, was abandoned and replaced with an ideology that explains the contemporary social standing of black people as hinging on nonracial factors. This racial ideology includes explanations for racial inequality that frees white people from any responsibility for said inequalities. Instead, “whites rationalize minorities' contemporary status as the product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and blacks' imputed cultural limitations” (Bonilla-Silva 20). For example, to dodge the question of race in color-blind America, people point to other factors, such as lower education, for inequalities between the races. Therefore, I contend that the middle-class perspective of *Americanah* is no nonchalant mistake, but rather a conscious choice that helps the novel to illuminate the pervading racism in America. By sidelining the issue of class from Ifemelu’s experiences, *Americanah* highlights her experiences as hinging on racial discrimination and perceived otherness.

Secondly, I find the critique aimed at Adichie problematic in its demand for representation and responsibility. When Obinze, who endeavors to migrate to Britain, is invited to a dinner party by his childhood friend, this question of African responsibility surfaces. One of the guests mentions that she started working with a charity that is “trying to stop the UK from hiring so many African health workers” (Adichie 273). The guest concludes that “[i]ts an absolute tragedy, African doctors should stay in Africa” (273). Her view is that African doctors

have a responsibility to work within their own continent. Another guest answers the woman: “I see, I don’t suppose any of us should have that responsibility for the blighted towns in the north of England?” (273). His contention is that the same responsibility, to fend for those with lesser privilege, is not attached to white British doctors. Similarly, I argue that the responsibility to represent all classes of one’s nation is not connected to all western writers out there. Since Adichie has not set out to represent all of Nigeria, she must be allowed to bring forward her own perspective. Adichie seems to argue herself for that western right to be privileged, without having to save the world.

As already mentioned, *Americanah*’s middle-class perspective helps the novel to illuminate how the discrimination that Ifemelu suffers is based on racial discrimination and perceived otherness, rather than questions of class. I contend that Ifemelu is hindered in her formation of a transcultural identity by these remnants of colonial discourse, and that ultimately, she is forced to resort to mimicry of western traits. This mimicry consequently reduces her presence in America to partial.

5.4 Partiality of Life in America

“She liked, most of all, that in this place of affluent ease, she could pretend to be someone else, someone specially admitted into a hallowed American club, someone adorned with certainty” (Adichie 3). The forced mimicry of accent, hair and opinions renders Ifemelu’s admission to America partial. Bhabha argues that mimicry “fixes the colonial subject as a ‘partial’ presence” (123). The possible appropriation is limited to partial, since Ifemelu cannot change either the colour of her skin or the nature of her hair, and therefore never fully acquire Western traits. According to Bhabha, the colonial subject is set up for strategic failure by impossible standards and limited access (123). As shown in the quote, after 15 years of living, working, and participating in American society, Ifemelu needs to pretend to be someone else to feel at home in America. This need to pretend illuminates the tight borders around the imagined nation of America. Not even a green card can make her feel at home in a country that does everything in its power to keep her at a partial presence.

For Ifemelu, the experience of partial presence leads to a longing for home: “[a]nd yet there was cement in her soul. It had been there for a while, an early morning disease of fatigue, a bleakness and borderlessness. It brought with it amorphous longings, shapeless desires, brief imaginary glints of other lives she could be living, that over the months melded into a piercing homesickness” (6). Pucherova states that Ifemelu’s return to Nigeria at the end of the novel is “a compromise” (412). However, even though Ifemelu’s decision to move back home is based on the realization, that she is unable to achieve anything but a partial presence in America, it is also coupled with the realization that Nigeria can offer her what she craves. Consequently, her choice is not a compromise, it is a celebration. As previously mentioned, Hallemeier argues that the novel opposes the United States' view of Africa as unbearable and their attempts to fix this perceived unbearableness (242). Instead, it is the partiality of life in America, for the ‘other’, that is unbearable to Ifemelu. From this sense of partiality springs a longing for something more. “Nigeria became where she was supposed to be, the only place where she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil” (Adichie 6).

6. Conclusion

The aim of this essay was to illuminate how Adichie’s novel, *Americanah*, has been inserted into the ongoing debate about African representation. When Selasi raised the voice of the Afropolitan movement in 2005, she aimed to bring a new representation of Africa to the table, to compete with the image of African scarcity within the literary field. Instead, the emergence of Afropolitanism extended the discussion, to further complicate the idea of African representation. Afropolitan literature endeavors to move Africa from the periphery to the center, by bringing forth the narrative of the transnational African (Hallemeier 232). However, this endeavor has been critiqued for failing to complicate the notion of transculturalism. Furthermore, it has been argued that Afropolitan writers focuses exclusively on the middle-class transcultural perspective, thereby masking the reality for the many Africans unable to travel or take part in the transnational lifestyle (Dabiri, Africasacountry.com). Hence, Afropolitans are critiqued for claiming to represent all of Africa, while only including a small number of African voices. In spite of Adichie distancing herself from the movement, she has been caught in the midst of this discussion.

I contend that the complexity of *Americanah*'s theme of transculturation is lost in the desire to read it within the context of the Afropolitan debate. While Adichie is critiqued for failing to represent the poorer classes on Africa's economic spectra (Pucherova 411), I propose instead, that her middle-class perspective is an intentional strategy that further illuminates Ifemelu's otherness in America, by sidelining the issue of class. Hence, *Americanah*'s middle-class perspective is not simply a celebration of the transnational lifestyle, instead, it problematizes said lifestyle by illuminating the difference between African and American middle-class in America. Furthermore, I have highlighted the problematic aspect of tying the responsibility to represent all economic classes to one single novelist, by arguing that the responsibility of representation would not be tied to Adichie if she was a white western author.

My main disagreement with the critique aimed at *Americanah* is the claim that the novel simplifies the idea of transculturation (Pucherova 410). As I have illustrated in my analysis, *Americanah* complicates the notion of a transcultural identity, rather than simplifies it. When Ifemelu migrates to America, she does so in search for increased opportunities. Ironically, what awaits her in the land of the free is a new set of limitations. In America, she learns what it is to be black, what it is to be African, what it is to be exotic, and what it is to be 'other'. In *Americanah*'s America, these things are synonymous with inferiority. Said states that the Orient served as a contrast to the creation of western superiority (1). In the world of *Americanah*, it is Africa that serves as a passive and inferior backdrop to the creation of America's superiority. Consequently, Ifemelu migrates into a new array of marginalization. Within this new marginalization, Ifemelu has to redefine her identity, by the use of mimicry, in accordance with western norms. Thus, I argue that Ifemelu's experiences in America illuminates the jolty idea of a transcultural identity for an African migrating to America.

A transcultural identity is a means to be a part of several societies. However, even though Ifemelu gets access to the privileges in America that she craves upon moving, she does so without ever feeling like an integrated part of her new nation. Instead she is forced to reduce her own identity with the use of mimicry, as it is defined by Bhabha, to one that does not feel true to her. Hence, her integration is dependant on the creation of a version of herself that does not feel true to her. Consequently, I argue that Ifemelu's presence in the United States is reduced to partial, as she is forced to resort to mimicry of western traits, to deal with the remnants of

colonial discourse in contemporary America. Therefore, Ifemelu moves back to Nigeria, in escape of the partiality of life in America.

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