Shifting intersections: Fluidity of gender and race in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah

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Shifting intersections: Fluidity of gender and race in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*

by

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Literature)

Program of Study Committee
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DEDICATION

“No subject posits itself spontaneously and at once as the inessential from the outset; it is not the Other who, defining itself as Other, defines the One; the Other is posited as Other by the One positing itself as One” – Simone de Beauvoir
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ABSTRACT

With her latest novel *Americanah* (2013), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie portrays the effect that the experience of migration—namely from a Western African country such as Nigeria—has on one’s identity. While *Americanah* centers on Ifemelu and her relationships with family, friends, and lovers, it also follows the story of her childhood sweetheart, Obinze as they immigrate, respectively, to America and England. *Americanah* illuminates the unique experience of two Nigerians emigrating and their encounters with confining social categories. Nevertheless, as it is relatively new, the novel has not garnered much scholarly criticism though it relevantly contributes to conversations on immigrant identity formation. In order to remedy this, my thesis focuses on *Americanah*, and, in it, I contend that *Americanah* must be examined through the lens of intersectionality because the issues Ifemelu and Obinze encounter during their migration and relocation extend much deeper than one simple analysis based solely on nationality or gender or race or geographic location could unearth. Rather, because of the complex interrelations between these identity factors, *Americanah* lends itself textually to an intersectional identity analysis. My analysis of *Americanah* examines how intersectionality operates within the novel as well as the identity fractures and formations brought about by a Nigerian emigrant’s experiences – the personal cost of immigration.

As Adichie portrays in the novel, migration allows an individual to experience many new things, and, chiefly, how different societies allocate power by defining hierarchical social categories. Within my analysis, I consider the intersections of gender, race, and class as Ifemelu and Obinze move across geographic boundaries, and I analyze how this affects Ifemelu and Obinze’s identities as they migrate to and from Nigeria. Specifically, within my first chapter
“Intersectionality of Gender and Geographic Location in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*, I examine the intersections of gender with geographic location for both Ifemelu and Obinze. Within Nigeria, Ifemelu embraces her femininity, but, after traveling to America, she is at a loss in its strict patriarchal society; not only does she have to reckon with her realization of race as a social category but also her gender. During his time in England, Obinze similarly discovers the difference in being a Black man living in Nigeria with relative power to being a Black man living in England. Both Ifemelu and Obinze find themselves in societies that embrace rigid gender roles, and they struggle until they return to Nigeria in trying to align the gender role prescribed for them with their race and other social categories.

Within my second chapter “Geographic Location and Racialization in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah,*” I analyze the way geographic location alters one’s concepts of race and class by studying Ifemelu and Obinze prior to their immigration from Nigeria, during their stays in different countries, and after returning home from abroad. As both characters become acquainted with the concept of race in the Western world, they are forced to realize that prejudices occur as well as how to best combat racism in their daily life. Though they both return to Nigeria, they do so as individuals with nuanced understandings of how they construct their identity in their homeland and how their identity is constructed for them abroad. Finally, I conclude that in *Americanah* Adichie provides readers with characters who demand to be examined in multiple ways, such as through their gender and race, and refuse examination through only one lens of Othering.
INTRODUCTION

In 2003, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie released her debut novel *Purple Hibiscus*, which immediately established her as a prize-winning and best-selling author. Set in Nigeria, her first book focused on a young girl’s coming-of-age and identity crises while living with her abusive father, silent mother, and protective older brother. As Adichie unrelentingly explored facets of Nigeria through her prose, academic scholars began critical analyses of both *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) and *The Thing around Your Neck* (2009), her two subsequent publications.\(^1\) In these fictions, Adichie continued to provide her audience with the voices of Nigerian characters who reside in a white-centric world—a goal that she has had since her early years as a burgeoning writer (“The Danger…”). In the novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie returns to the pivotal 1960s and, namely, the Biafran War (1967-1970)—the civil war that ended the decade while altering Nigeria’s future.\(^2\) Choosing to chart the individual stories of two sisters, Adichie brings to life the civil war and the far-ranging political and personal effects that it has had. Still, it is in her collection of short stories *The Thing around Your Neck* where Adichie widens her focus beyond contemporary Nigerian characters who reside in Nigeria to those who have chosen to immigrate to Western countries.

In interviews and lectures, Adichie has confirmed that her writing is grounded in her own childhood and life experiences (Gross; Klarl). As a child, Adichie wrote stories with characters and plots that drew on British phenomenon and culture—snow, apples, and ginger beer—which she had never personally experienced, though they densely populated the texts she was given to read.

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1 See, among other studies, Andrade 92-103; and Strehle 650-72.
2 The Biafran War was fought to prevent Biafra, an oil-rich area, from seceding from Nigeria. Biafran residents, the Igbos, had many casualties, and the war increased long-standing cultural, ethnic, and religious tensions.
read (“The Danger…”). The discovery of Chinua Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart*, however, illuminated her national literary heritage of novels *written in English* as she read for the first time about “[c]haracters who had Igbo names and ate yams and inhabited a world similar to [hers]” (“The Danger…”). As a consequence, Adichie has repeatedly declared, “[Achebe’s] work gave [her] permission to write [her] own stories” (“The Danger…”). Since this revelation, Adichie’s writing has progressively flourished through her creation of stories, foremost addressed to her Nigerian audience. She, indeed, provides the latter public with stories with which Nigerians can choose to identify, yet she simultaneously engages her broader Western audience to consider—and gain some knowledge of—the joys and tribulations a native of Nigeria or African immigrant can encounter.

With her latest novel *Americanah* (2013), Adichie gives her readers a narrative that, once more, reflects some of her own life and experiences while also conversing with recent scholarly discussions of identity. Specifically, she focuses on the effect that the experience of migration—namely from a Western African country such as Nigeria—has on one’s identity. *Americanah*’s narrative centers on Ifemelu and her relationships with family, friends, and lovers, but it also follows the story of her childhood sweetheart, Obinze, who eventually becomes her adult lover. Both Ifemelu and Obinze immigrate, respectively, to America and England during their young adult lives. Both their identities are profoundly altered by the racialization they undergo in these Western countries. Adichie immediately establishes the inconveniences and issues that Ifemelu encounters merely by being a Black woman in a predominantly white culture. Simultaneously, the author highlights that Ifemelu’s once-cohesive identity is not simply altered by her time in

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3 Chinua Achebe has been lauded as the first widely-recognized Nigerian author. His novels closely examine Igbo culture as well as the religious and cultural clashes between Western Christian colonizers and Nigerians.
Americanah does not proceed in a chronological fashion. As readers, we are exposed to flashbacks and also hurtled through years while learning Ifemelu and Obinze’s entire and wholly complicated story, but Adichie’s nimble movements occur seamlessly: never losing or confusing her readers. Switching perspectives throughout the novel, Adichie turns frequently to Obinze’s story which mirrors Ifemelu’s difficulties as he realizes the radical difference in how he is perceived as a Black man living in England. He goes from being revered in Nigeria’s patriarchal society to being discriminated against and stereotyped because of his race. In England, Adichie stresses Obinze’s realization of the implications of being what Simone de Beauvoir’s calls an “Other” (7)—an experience that Ifemelu had as a female in Nigeria’s patriarchal society, and which she is also now experiencing on an additional level as a Black woman in America. Consequently, by the end of the novel, both Ifemelu and Obinze return to Nigeria to escape the racialization they experience in white-centric countries.

Because Americanah was published in 2013, it has only just begun to receive critical attention from literary scholars. Thus far, few peer-reviewed scholarly publications have even examined the novel. Furthermore, most scholarly research conducted on Adichie has focused on her first two novels, and even that research has not been voluminous. One of the earliest articles on Adichie’s writing is “Coming of Age: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and the Voice of the Third

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4 See, among other studies, Hallemeier 231-45; Levine 587-605; and Goyal v-xxv.
Generation” by Heather Hewett who discusses *Purple Hibiscus*, and Adichie’s ability to write in multiple literary traditions. Hewett claims that Adichie writes “African literature, African women’s literature, black women’s literature, American literature … [Nigerian] third generation” literature (89). According to Hewett, this flexibility and Adichie’s differences from other African third generation writers stems from Adichie’s non-typical graduate education in the U.S. Similarly, Onyemaechi Udumukwu analyzes Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* as a textual representation of the changes that Nigeria as a nation is undergoing. Though written prior to *Americanah*, Udumukwu’s argument could also be extended to the new novel as it provides an updated symbol of the recent Nigeria movements and awareness concerning gender equality and large-scale diaspora. Finally, Susan Strehle’s “Producing Exile: Diasporic Vision in Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*” investigated the benefits as well as the costs that stem from diasporic practices in postcolonial nations. Strehle uses Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* to measure the price emigration has evoked in the country, and, in *Americanah*, Adichie nuances the diaspora’s costs by examining the personal toll on immigrants. Thus, these studies on Adichie’s early fictions could be extended to her latest novel, but, due to their publication year, they have mostly left that examination for other scholars to continue.

Nevertheless, newly published articles are slowly beginning to fill the gaps, for example “The Power of a Single Story: Narrating Africa and Its Diasporas,” by Daria Tunca and Bénédicte Ledent. Tunca and Ledent illuminate why Adichie has focused so specifically on two immigrants and their diaspora experiences. Diaspora texts like *Americanah* they write, “[R]efus[e] to homogenize the image of Africa and to iron out the differences between various African diasporic experiences. Africa is by definition a fluctuating entity, which under the pen (or the keyboard) of its diasporic writers refuses to be generalized, an amalgamation that would
only lead to a ‘single story’ of Africa, to echo Adichie again” (7). As portrayed in Americanah, Tunca and Ledent argue that the layers and complexity of Ifemelu and Obinze’s migration experiences attempt to provide readers with a richly nuanced image of Nigeria’s realities. No one story describes a whole country’s residents and their actions, and their reading finds it foundation in Adichie’s own TEDtalk.

Despite the growing scholarship, few scholars have published articles on Americanah. My thesis, then, represents one of the few academic contributions to the discussion of Adichie’s most recent novel. I contend that Americanah significantly participates in current studies, occurring across diverse intellectual fields, of migration and its effects on transnational identities. Providing Americanah as an example text that “issues a challenge to scholars of race and postcolonialism to more fully analyze the workings of race in global contexts,” Yogita Goyal declares, “[T]he novel inaugurates an important and long overdue conversation about the specificity of a Nigerian experience of racialization in the US and the UK, tying it firmly to both class and gender” (xi) Thus, I argue Adichie’s investigation through the fictional Nigerian emigrants, Ifemelu and Obinze, of the fluidity and fluctuations of identity must be examined through the lens of intersectionality because the issues Ifemelu and Obinze encounter extend much deeper than one simple analysis based solely on nationality or gender or race or geographic location could unearth. Rather, because of the complex interrelations between these identity factors, Americanah lends itself textually to an intersectional identity analysis. This is primarily due to the protagonists’ movement between distinct geographic boundaries which, in turn, produce clear identity alterations since Ifemelu and Obinze attempt to enter new countries and cultures where they are perceived as different. My analysis of Americanah will, therefore add the necessary and missing perspective that examines how intersectionality operates within the novel
as well as the identity fractures and formations brought about by a Nigerian emigrant’s experiences—the personal cost of immigration.

In this regard, Caroline Levine declares, “Adichie uses a time-honored defamiliarizing strategy: the perspective of the outsider. She offers us the changing perspectives of her two migrant protagonists who move between countries and climb and fall in personal wealth” (601). According to Levine, it is their status as outsiders or immigrants that allow Ifemelu and Obinze to critique the normalized, yet restrictive, gender and race categories (273, 588). Indeed, through *Americanah*, Adichie correspondingly presents readers with a succinct rebuke of both England and America’s racial ladders while revealing the unique barriers—such as gender, race and nationality—which a Nigerian faces and must overcome before even beginning to establish a transnational identity. With Ifemelu and Obinze, readers learn that identities form around one’s experiences in social position and geographic location which alter repeatedly as one migrates. Migration allows an individual to experience many new things, and, chiefly, how different societies allocate power by defining hierarchical social categories. As Adichie deftly demonstrates, identity develops as conflicting sets of ideas interact because of the variations in the ways individuals treat one another depending on their gender, location, or race, among other intersections. Identity is ever-changing as individuals adapt their personal selves to the feedback and responses they receive during the socialization process. Thus, complications quickly arise when dissecting an identity. Furthermore, as both Obinze and Ifemelu discover, one has to maintain one’s individuality when (re)forming a post-migration identity that encompasses alterations brought about by migration and the accompanying changes in social customs, position, and perceptions in order to preserve a unified self.
Within my analysis, I will consider the intersection of gender, race, and class as Ifemelu and Obinze move across geographic boundaries, and I will analyze how this affects Ifemelu and Obinze’s identities as they migrate away from and back to Nigeria. Within my first chapter “Intersectionality of Gender and Geographic Location in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*”, I will examine the intersections of gender with geographic location for both Ifemelu and Obinze. Within Nigeria, Ifemelu embraces her femininity, but, after traveling to America, she is at a loss in its strict patriarchal society; not only does she have to reckon with her realization about race as a social category but also her gender. From the minute events like having to take a train from Princeton to the outlying suburbs merely to find a hairdresser to the severe events when her boyfriend rebukes her for expressing opinions that contradict his, Ifemelu struggles adapting to the gender binaries that exist in America. Ifemelu did not face the same struggles living in Nigeria as a female, but America forces her to reorder her character to fit the American feminine role. During his time in England, Obinze similarly discovers the difference in being a Black man living in Nigeria with relative power to being a Black man living in England. Within my second chapter “Geographic Location and Racialization in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*,” I analyze the way geographic location alters one’s concepts of race and class by studying Ifemelu and Obinze prior to their immigration from Nigeria, during their stays in different countries, and after returning home from abroad. As both characters become acquainted with the concept of race in the Western world, they are forced to realize that prejudices exist as well as how to best combat racism in their daily life. In *Americanah*, Adichie provides readers with characters who demand that the oppressions (and privileges) they face be examined as interconnected, instead of considering instances of discrimination as isolated.
CHAPTER 1
THE INTERSECTIONALITY OF GENDER AND GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE’S AMERICANAH

In her foundational publication “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” to underline the interconnectedness of race and gender in social experiences, forever changing the way analyses of identity would be conducted. Two years after her initial publication Crenshaw, commenting on the theory’s origins in “Mapping the Margins,” wrote:

My objective there was to illustrate that many of the experiences Black women face are not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently understood, and that the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women’s lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately. (1244)

While not labeled as such, intersectionality theory existed before Crenshaw created the term. Nevertheless, since 1989, the concept has been employed to describe the plethora of facets that make up an individual’s experience and identity, and also the specific obstacles or privileges these intersections may generate. Since becoming a core concept within feminist theory,

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5 For studies discussing the interconnections between social categories that predated Crenshaw’s article, please see the Combahee River Collective’s “A Black Feminist Statement,” bell hooks’s Ain’t I a Woman, and Angela Y. Davis’s Women, Race, and Class.
intersectionality has witnessed the expansion of its original definition. In her discussion of effective feminist theory, Kathy Davis explains how the term now “refers to the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power” (68). Though some debate arises on the extent to which intersectionality should be expanded, many feminist scholars have successfully applied it to their research.\footnote{For examples of contemporary scholars engaged with and broadly applying intersectionality, see, among other possibilities, Carbado “Colorblind Intersectionality” (812-7) and hooks Yearning.} Inscribing itself within these discussions, this chapter uses the concept of intersectionality to examine Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Americanah and the author’s multi-layered representation of the intersections of race, gender, and migration. As high or middle-class Nigerians, the protagonists’ loss of social power upon immigration due to their gender and race cannot be traced to only one facet of identity, but to the Western version of social categories and power distribution.

Adichie’s latest novel provides the tale of two Nigerian emigrants, Ifemelu and Obinze, and the way changing their geographic locations alters their concepts of the social categorizations that intersectionality theory illuminates. In this chapter, I will be examining each character individually and delineating the alterations in the concept of gender that they both experience during their time abroad. In order to facilitate this discussion, I will first establish the concept of gender that each character possesses when in Nigeria in order to contrast it with their reformulated conception of gender upon migration. My analysis builds upon, Davis’s contention that “intersectionality initiates a process of discovery, alerting us to the fact that the world around us is always more complicated and contradictory than we ever could have anticipated” (79). Although, I will use intersectionality in my discussion of Ifemelu’s character and experience,
Adichie’s portrayal of the complexity, and sometimes chaotic nature, of human lives and interactions does not yield, as we shall see, monolithic answers or interpretations.

**Alterations in Her Conceptualization of Gender as Ifemelu Migrates from Nigeria to the U.S. and Back**

In her work on gender, feminist Judith Lorber describes this concept as being “so much the routine ground of everyday activities that questioning its taken-for-granted assumptions and presuppositions is like thinking about whether the sun will come up” (64). Gender is a socially constructed category that exists because society constantly perpetuates it, and, as such, Lorber claims that the majority of individuals do not question its premises. Furthermore, she explains that “gender [is] a social institution” and “one of the major ways that human beings organize their lives” (65). Consequently, humans undergo a gender socialization that, from childhood on, trains them into enacting specific gender roles within any given society (66). In 2015, with her release of a short essay entitled *We Should All Be Feminists*, Adichie strikingly reaffirms Lorber’s study: she openly explores the current concepts of gender, decries the inequality that still exists, and urges readers to end the way children are socialized to accept and preserve harmful, stifling gender roles. Adichie recognizes the part that gender plays in society and, echoing Lorber, declares, “If we do something over and over again, it becomes normal. If we see the same thing over and over again, it becomes normal” (*We should...* 13). Adichie and Lorber agree that gender construction has been normalized, perpetuated through gender role socialization and its agents of socialization such as the family, just as they are both concerned with Othering and gender-specific hierarchical ordering. In kind, Lorber states, “as part of a
stratification system, gender ranks men above women of the same race and class” (66, italics in original). Due to a patriarchal societal socialization, men are granted gender privilege over women. More specifically, in a patriarchal Nigeria, Obinze has entitlements that stem exclusively from his being male, privileges that are wholly inaccessible to Ifemelu.

Restrictive ideas of gender run rampant throughout Americanah and surface in both Nigeria and America. When reminiscing on her childhood years in Nigeria, Ifemelu reveals how her own parents reinforced societal concepts of gender. As a young teenager, Ifemelu’s family was forced into poverty because her father “was fired for refusing to call his new boss Mummy” and came home “complaining about the absurdity of a grown man calling a grown woman Mummy because she had decided it was the best way to show her respect” (Americanah 56). In Nigeria’s highly stratified workplace, Ifemelu’s father demonstrates that a male does not willingly work under a female, or if he does, he does not provide her with the respect a male boss would be afforded. In her research on Black identities and their formation, Janet T. Awokoya explores the importance of parents in shaping Nigerian children’s identities. In her study, she writes, “Participants reported that their parents played a fundamental role in influencing the construction of their Nigerian identity. In doing so, these parents instilled and emphasized the practice of traditional norms, values, and expectations that were in line with Nigerian culture” (101). Hence, parents are imperative in a Nigerian child cultivating traditional norms including those of gender identity and gender expectations (101). Thus, readers begin to see the world that Ifemelu’s parents shape for her being one that gives male bodies the preference and even control over female bodies. While in appearance contradicting this patriarchal pattern since a woman has power over Ifemelu’s father, Adichie still demonstrates the deeply ingrained nature of male
dominance in the Nigeria’s gender hierarchy as Ifemelu’s father refuses to accept a woman in an authoritative position.⁷

Furthermore, Adichie addresses the limitations on personal freedom and self-censorship expected of women that Nigerian men are not forced to follow. As she writes, “These Nigerians have been raised to think of women as inherently guilty. And they have been raised to expect so little of men that the idea of men as savage beings with no self-control is somehow acceptable” (We should... 33). For Ifemelu, her mother and her mother’s religion intersect with and reinforce the gender stereotypes identified by Adichie; as a young girl, she is inundated with women who support this patriarchal message. When her mother converts to a new Christian religion, Ifemelu finds herself compelled to attend Sunday school, and her interactions and questioning of the nuns leaves her mother less than pleased at her daughter’s unfeminine behavior. It is during a religious lesson that proper standards of feminine attire are forced on Ifemelu. The nun lectures the group of young females, “Any girl that wears tight trousers wants to commit the sin of temptation” (Americanah 61). The nun places the responsibility of protecting men from improper sexual thoughts on these young women; there is never a mention of men’s responsibility. Thus, one can easily assume who would be to blame in the case of a woman’s “tempting tight clothes” leading to a sexual assault by a man. Nevertheless, when Ifemelu is asked to work on a project that celebrates a known wealthy criminal in her neighborhood, she protests the hypocrisy of the church’s doctrine. Her mother chastises her for taking a stand and questioning those in authority. Mother tells her, “You must refrain from your natural proclivity towards provocation” (63). Both the church and her mother teach Ifemelu, a young teenager, that a female must subsume her

⁷ If the intersection with gender can be straightforwardly identified in Americanah, Adichie demonstrates that power and privilege come from a variety of social hierarchies too. In this particular instance in the novel, Ifemelu’s father’s gender privilege is trumped by his boss’s class privilege.
voice and personal will in order to be the ideal female—quiet and domestic. To venture outside of the socially-ordained feminine characteristics is dismissed as an impossibility; the actions and responsibility of females are already preordained.

Though parents are the first agents of socialization, other members in her Nigerian community can offer children like Ifemelu evidence that some women and males break dictated gender expectations. For Ifemelu, Obinze’s mother leads the attack on what is expected as traditional feminine behavior. By modeling how to be a strong female, Obinze’s mother also welcomes Ifemelu into a broader, more inclusive women’s world. An educated professor, Obinze’s mother fights for women’s equality at Nigeria’s collegiate level. After an incident in which another professor slapped Obinze’s mother after he was publicly accused by her of misappropriating school funds, college students protest the unjustness of the act. The students cite her widowed state as the reason for her not deserving to be treated in such a manner (71). However, Obinze’s mother declares that “She should not have been slapped because she is a full human being, not because she doesn’t have a husband to speak for her” (71). Obinze’s mother believes in gender equality, and she relates her views to Ifemelu who is able to incorporate these beliefs into her identity as a Nigerian woman. As a role model, Obinze’s mother demonstrates a femininity that refuses to conform to Nigerian expectations, and she subtly encourages Ifemelu to express her own personality without altering it to be socially acceptable for a woman.

Thus, Ifemelu’s strong and independent version of Nigerian femininity ends up being vastly different than that which her mother and father envision and reinforce. Ifemelu refuses to follow her docile and religious mother who preached subjection of a female’s will to the male ruling her life. Ifemelu shuns this patriarchal mindset in all her intimate relationships whether in Nigeria or America. Instead, Ifemelu embodies strength and independence; as Obinze reminisces
Ifemelu was “the kind of woman who would make a man easily uproot his life” (39). Despite the personal restrictions society expects her to perpetuate, Ifemelu demands mutual respect from Obinze; a demand the church has labelled sinful. Yet, Ifemelu believes that if she as a woman is expected to uproot her life for a man, the man—Obinze in this case—must also be willing to reciprocate. Even after years of no contact, Obinze’s awe of Ifemelu’s self-assurance validates her unusually independent ways. Originally, Obinze’s friends warned him against dating Ifemelu. They said, “Ifemelu is a fine babe but she is too much trouble. She can argue. She can talk. She never agrees” and she never changes (73). Ifemelu refuses to be a docile woman, and, throughout her narrative, she willingly speaks her mind. From her questioning religious practices to voicing her opinions on race in America through her blog, Ifemelu forsakes her childhood instructions in normative feminine behavior and conduct.

Even in her sexual encounters, Ifemelu refuses to adhere to Nigeria’s societal expectations for women. Though pre-marital sex is not openly condemned, it is also not widely supported for women. In her article “Oppression,” Marilyn Frye discusses this social quandary, and she has defined this situation as a “double-bind”: “situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure or deprivation” (2). In a “double-bind,” individuals technically have choices to make, but the choices are restrictive and oppressive. In *Americanah*’s Nigeria, a “double-bind” exists as females are taught to remain pure and untouched—as Ifemelu is instructed in her mother’s church—but are also mocked for their prudery; similarly, if they disregard societal guidelines and actively pursue sex and sexual satisfaction, they are ridiculed (61, 116). The bind Ifemelu finds herself in is standard in other patriarchal societies like the U.S. according to Frye: “It is common in the United States that women, especially younger women, are in a bind where neither sexual activity nor sexual
inactivity is all right” (3). Thus, in her teenage years, Ifemelu is told simultaneously to have sex and not to have sex by different members of society for varying reasons. Through her character, Adichie demonstrates that the sexual double bind is a nearly-universal phenomenon. Women are expected to remain sexually pure, but Ifemelu’s enactment of gender shuns this social command as she chooses to engage in sex despite society’s taboo.

In addition, receiving little advice on sexual matters from her mother, Ifemelu accepts the advice that Obinze’s mother provides to the couple. Once again, Obinze’s mother illuminates how to avoid blindly conforming to gender expectations while she attempts to ensure Ifemelu’s emotional and physical safety. Obinze’s mother cautions both of them about the emotional complications that sex can introduce into a relationship, and she suggests remaining monogamous in order to ensure the health and safety of both partners. Even if seemingly reinforcing another patriarchal construct for sexually-active individuals (heterosexual monogamy), Obinze’s mother’s overall message nevertheless liberates Ifemelu’s sexuality, which society seems intent on repressing. In addition, when she discusses sex individually with Ifemelu, Obinze’s mother instructs her to “[w]ait until you own yourself a little more” (87). Initially failing to comprehend, Ifemelu eventually realizes that Obinze’s mother wishes for Ifemelu to understand her own body and mind before allowing a male to have the privilege of knowing her. Thus, after their first intimate moment, Obinze remarks, “Other girls would have pretended that they had never let another boy touch them, but not her, never her. There was a vivid honesty about her” (24). Though other women might claim to be chaste as society commands them to be, Ifemelu is unapologetically open about her sexual history and satisfaction. For Ifemelu, embracing her sexual self is an essential part of her womanhood.
When Ifemelu makes the decision to attend college in America, she has developed an identity as a woman that allows her to be outspoken, independent, and sexually active despite what Nigerian society outlines for women. Moving across continents does allow Ifemelu some chances unavailable to her if she remained in Nigeria, specifically in regards to education. Nonetheless, her ability to even participate in a migration denotes an intersection that grants her a specific privilege. After researching Nigerian immigrants in the U.S., Ezekiel Umo Ette declares: “Women who are exposed to Western education [while in Nigeria] are likely to do well and to seek higher education. Those who grew up in urban centers and whose parents are educated and non-traditional are more likely to do well and to seek higher education than those who grew up in rural and traditional societies” (89). Because her parents allowed her to receive an education and were fortunate enough to live in an urban area, Ifemelu’s immigration is enabled because she has a class and geographical location privilege that young rural Nigerian women may not, typically, be granted, and, thus, Ifemelu is afforded opportunities. In this instance, Ifemelu’s eventual experience with American gender constructs is made possible by other intersections of her identity: class privilege allowed her the financial means to make the move and her geographic location in urban Nigeria impacts the likelihood that this opportunity was ever even extended to her. Upon her immigration to America, Ifemelu experiences gender socialization in a new country which begins to morph her gender identity in conjunction with her experiences of other American social categories.

In reality, Adichie does not explore the intersection of gender, race, and how they are impacted by the migration experience solely through Ifemelu. The author also features two auxiliary characters, Ifemelu’s friend, Ginika, and her cousin, Aunty Uju—both prior Nigerian emigrants to the U.S.—to whom she turns to as social instructors on how gender is performed in
America. In her article “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” Butler comments on the significant role that society has on how gender performance occurs (530). Butler writes, “Surely, there are nuanced and individual ways of doing one’s gender, but that one does it, and that one does it in accord with certain sanctions and proscriptions, is clearly not a fully individual matter” (525, italics in original). Not every female who identifies as a woman will perform gender in the same, identical manner, but there are certain expectations for a gender that, when not met, can lead to social shunning. In addition, patriarchal societies beget binary gender expectations.

Turning first to Ginika, Ifemelu realizes that her friend has adopted American social standards with more ease as she immigrated at an impressionable age, and she is the only minor character who can be effectively analyzed solely through her fluctuations in gender identity. Prior to leaving Nigeria, Ifemelu remembers her as “her close friend, Ginika, pretty, pleasant, popular Ginika with whom she has never quarreled” while another friend classifies Ginika as “just a sweet girl” (Americanah 77, 73). As a Nigerian, Ginika’s personality aligns with the traditional ideals of femininity; her physical appearance and docile manner are those of a young woman, and her friends acknowledge and admire her for her adherence to a gender standard. During her years in America, Ginika changes drastically, but, ultimately, she changes to conform to America’s gender standard. From the moment Ifemelu steps off the bus in New Jersey, Ginika’s physical transformation strikes her: “Ginika was much thinner, half her old size” (149). As Ifemelu is new to America, she has not been integrated into the culture that praises thin women (Wolf 1, 179-217), but Ginika has been. In order to fulfill America’s standardized depiction of a woman, Ginika closely watches what she eats, and she reveals that, in America, comments about weight loss are not rude as in Nigeria, but instead are compliments. To some degree, Ginika’s rigid observation of beauty standards could stem from attempts to be accepted
by her new society. Through Ginika’s gender socialization, the intersection of national origin and gender standards is demonstrated though the ideal characteristics diverge greatly from one another, and, in both countries, society pressures women to adhere to a physical beauty standard. In America, Ginika attempts to replicate the gender expectations, and she is very successful in Ifemelu’s eyes. As Ifemelu observes at a gathering of women, “There were codes Ginika knew, ways of being that she had mastered. Unlike Aunty Uju, Ginika had come to America with the flexibility and fluidness of youth, the cultural cues had seeped into her skin” (*Americanah* 152-53). Performing as a woman in this group, Ginika knows when to put forth her own opinion on a subject and when she should remain silent; she also knows what types of comments are expected of her as a socially-conscious woman.

Due to her early immigration, Ginika avoids the confusion and hardships that Aunty Uju faces as an adult, single mother immigrant. The difference between Aunty Uju and Ginika are distinctively disparate, yet both individuals identify as the same gender. Neither one of them is doing their gender “wrong” according to Nigerian or American standards; they are simply performing their gender differently. As a young teenager, Aunty Uju, Ifemelu’s older cousin, was brought to her uncle’s house in hopes of offering her a better life by obtaining an education that was unavailable to her in rural Nigeria. Nevertheless, as Aunty Uju struggles through the hardships of life in Nigeria, she loses her will to be independent, precisely as she meets The General. A high-ranking officer in Nigeria’s corrupt government, The General propositions Aunty Uju, and they enter into a relationship in which The General holds the power as he is the one with financial means. The General envisions Aunty Uju as a pliant domestic mistress, and she swiftly undertakes this role. Not in an ideal situation, Aunty Uju recognizes the system in which she and other Nigerian women live, and she chooses to take advantage of a non-
advantageous situation (56). After The General tells a story, “Aunty Uju would laugh, suddenly girlish and compliant. Ifemelu would smile dutifully. She thought it undignified” (96). As the younger cousin, Ifemelu cannot understand the radical shift in gender performance that Aunty Uju goes through in order to be The General’s mistress, but she does realize one thing when it ends: “that relationship destroyed [Aunty Uju]” (521). In the novel, Ifemelu’s character struggles with the issues of gender norms as she does not conform, and she keenly observes when other individuals face similar struggles. In trying to imitate a more accurate (and restrictive) representation of her gender, Aunty Uju loses her own individuality. In Aunty Uju’s attempt to replicate the norm, she fractures her own self by futilely attempting to press herself into a mold with impermeable boundaries.

Poised on the brink of being completely subsumed in her new role, Aunty Uju is freed, by The General’s sudden death, from Nigeria as his family forces her to leave the country. Arriving in America with their young son, Aunty Uju works three part-time jobs and enrolls in medical school. While one might think her new surroundings would encourage her to quickly take up her former bold self, readers are instead told that “Aunty Uju had deliberately left behind something of herself, something essential, in a distant and forgotten place” (146-7). America subdues Aunty Uju, and this cannot be simply explained because of the similarly restrictive gender roles in America. Gender is not the only facet that contributes to one’s identity while allowing for oppression. Upon arriving in America, Aunty Uju begins to slowly readopt pieces of her previous strong-willed personality that had disappeared during her time with The General, yet Aunty Uju’s confidence only appears during conversations with her peers and son. In fact, when Aunty Uju is in public, she adopts an accent “And with the accent emerged a new persona, apologetic and self-abasing” (133). Aunty Uju’s new personality trait coincides with American
societal ideals for women: someone who is demure and quick to admit fault. Yet, Aunty Uju’s behavior cannot be attributed to adopting a new gender role alone because she has two different personalities that she shifts between. The divide in her public and private behavior stems from Aunty Uju’s understanding of race as a new immigrant and its intersection with her gender. When in public, her skin’s pigment leads to her being treated in such a way that Aunty Uju purposely adopts the accent of an immigrant to signal to others that she is not African American, but she still cannot avoid people’s initial reactions to her physical appearance (133). Aunty Uju finds herself categorized because of her race and gender in these moments, and an analysis of her character must acknowledge both aspects of her experience.

For Aunty Uju, race and gender intersect, and this is especially clear through her relationship with Bartholomew. Butler describes gender as “what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure” (“Performative Acts…” 531). For Aunty Uju, her performance of gender is marked as more docile and domestic when Bartholomew, an online dating acquaintance, comes to dinner. From the moment he arrived, “She had slipped into the rituals, smiling a smile that promised to be demure to him but not to the world, lunging to pick up his fork when it slipped from his hand, serving him more beer” (Americanah 142). Bartholomew and Aunty Uju both understand the behavior expected in a woman who wishes to be married, and she employs gendered behavior that suppresses her more expressive self. By the end of Aunty Uju’s story, she has married Bartholomew, but, moving to Massachusetts with him causes her to realize the mistake that she has made (272). By correctly performing a combination of American and Nigerian gender ideals of compliance and passivity, Aunty Uju enticed Bartholomew to marry her, but his narrow-mindedness requires her to perpetuate the role she assumed during their courtship. Aunty Uju showcases one route for
migrant Nigerian women in the U.S., and Ifemelu also changes her expectations for herself as a female based on Ginika and Aunty Uju’s examples.

Desperate for money during her beginning years as an undergraduate student, Ifemelu, as an international student, is left without legal options for finding an employment. During this time, Ifemelu realizes the way in which Aunty Uju had thrived in Nigeria is also an option for herself in America as she is harassed and encouraged to exploit her sexuality. While applying for a gas station attendant job, Ifemelu is crudely told by the current employee, “You can work for me in another way” (178). Because of her gender, Ifemelu is subjected to open harassment in America leading her to realize that Obinze’s idealized America is not representative of reality. Furthermore, this hyper-sexualization of Ifemelu’s body originates from both her gender and race as they intersect: the view of African women’s bodies has roots stemming back to and beyond the colonial days and can be seen clearly in the treatment of The Venus Hottentot.8 Thus, Ifemelu’s experience is not an uncommon one among Nigerian migrants; after having America’s praises lauded in their homeland, they arrive and realize that the world they have thrust themselves into is as hierarchical as their homeland, except that in America they will also be subjected to judgment and prejudice based on their race.

Entering the U.S. on a student visa, Ifemelu cannot legally apply for a job due to her migration status. So, Ifemelu, desperate to earn money to pay for rent, answers a want ad for a

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8 In the early 19th century, Saartjie Baartman, infamously known as the Venus Hottentot, was brought to England immediately after slavery was abolished, and she was placed in a cage on display to be poked and prodded by spectators who saw her as an exotic and primitive hyper-sexualized body (Crais and Scully). Baartman was viewed as a sexual oddity because of her naturally curvaceous body, and the recently-ended slavery regime allowed for her continued exploitation as a woman of color in colonial-minded England and France. Regarding Baartman’s recent reburial in her home town Cape Town (2002), Sadiah Qureshi remarks, “Baartman has become a symbol of Western exploitation and a focal point for contemporary identity politics in South Africa: a status perfectly captured by the choice to bury her on International Indigenous People’s Day and South Africa’s Women’s Day” (62). Baartman remains influential in conversations today as an historical example of Western history’s racist and sexual tyranny over women of color.
man who is looking to pay someone for sex acts. After allowing the man to fondle her vagina, Ifemelu using her hands allows the man to ejaculate; traveling to America was supposed to open up the opportunities that Ifemelu could experience as a woman, but instead she finds herself realizing that America has forced her into a strictly dependent role as an immigrated woman (192). Following the experience, Ifemelu acknowledges that “[t]he world was a big, big place and she was so tiny, so insignificant, rattling around emptily” (190). Though she matured into a strong-willed and independent female in Nigeria, Ifemelu loses her ideal version of femininity as she experiences men exploiting her simply because of her gender, but as she establishes herself and pulls herself from crippling poverty, her experiences do change.

During Ifemelu’s time in America, it is important to note that it is not simply the men she randomly met through newspaper ads or when applying for jobs who undermine the power she draws from her femininity; the men with whom she entertained serious romantic relationships also forced her to compromise the identity she had developed in Nigeria. With her wealthy white boyfriend Curt, Ifemelu mirrors his privileged ways, falling rapidly into the life of ease that his family inheritance provides, but she is quick to comment at the end of their relationship that “[s]he had not entirely believed herself while with him” (355). With him and his family, she was more likely to curtail her opinions, especially on race, because as a woman, and even more so as a woman of color, she was restricted by his WASP family’s expectations (245). With Curt, Ifemelu realized that she had begun to force herself into the box that she had previously shunned in Nigeria; Curt wanted her to be a traditional female, so Ifemelu found herself embracing a domestic and demure lifestyle.

Hence, when she finally meets Blaine, her African-American boyfriend, she appreciates that she is not expected to pretend that racism is no longer running rampant in America—Blaine
experiences most of the same systemic racism that she does. Yet, Blaine’s condescending attitude towards Ifemelu comes to light when discussing her reading choices, but he is positive that “she, with a little more time and a little more wisdom, would come to accept that the novels he liked were superior, novels written by young and youngish men” (14). Blaine promotes young men as the epitome of current intellect; women do not enter his list of brilliant people. Blaine’s thoughts and actions can be explained by bell hooks’ work on Black masculinity when she recounts American history and writes, “[b]lack male sexism existed long before American slavery. The sexist politics of white-ruled and colonized America merely reinforced in the minds of enslaved Black people existing beliefs that men were the superiors of women” (*Ain’t I a Woman* 88). As he has matured in a patriarchal society, Blaine follows patriarchal thought patterns—as a male he is naturally more intelligent than a female, which allows him the right to correct Ifemelu’s personal thoughts on an issue. With Blaine, Ifemelu slowly comes to realize that she was not respected merely because she happens to be female. As Lorber writes, “From society’s point of view, however, one gender [A] is usually the touchstone, the normal, the dominant, and the other is different, deviant, and subordinate. In Western society, ‘man’ is A, ‘woman’ is Not A” (66). Social constructions allow Blaine to seamlessly view his reactions and actions as normal simply because he is male, but Ifemelu does not agree with his uncritical accepting of Western ideology.

In one of the most recent articles on *Americanah*, Katherine Hallemeier claims, “Ifemelu’s relationships with Curt and Blaine may be read as allegories for understanding ‘the question’ of race in the United States” (240). With Curt, Ifemelu finds herself alternatively defending and ignoring her Blackness. As a wealthy privileged white male, race has never had to be factored into Curt’s vision of the world, so he is hesitant to address racially-charged issues or
situations (239). In opposition, Blaine, as an educated African-American, is intent on examining every event for the possibility of Racism (240). As Ifemelu progresses through her relationships with each of these men, she becomes more aware of how sharply divided America is on the issue of race, and how it can begin to override the other facets of her identity, such as gender, that she wishes to preserve.

Toward the end of her time in the U.S., Ifemelu realizes, “There was something wrong with her. She did not know what it was but there was something wrong with her. A hunger, a restlessness. An incomplete knowledge of herself. The sense of something farther away, beyond her reach” (Americanah 358). This incomplete understanding of herself results from the struggles Ifemelu encounters while attempting to establish a reformulated post-migration identity that fully incorporates her new American-self. Ifemelu’s identity is not simply altered by this attempted incorporation but fragmented. Regardless of the setting, her relationships, especially with her significant others, always require her to suppress some part of her identity. Curt allowed her to be a woman, but not an unapologetically Black woman, whereas Blaine accepted her race and discredited her gender. As Ifemelu comes to terms with the various roles America allows people of her gender and color, she realizes that she has lost touch with the woman she was while living in Nigeria, and she resolves to return home.

When she finally returns, her homecoming is both a source of pain and relief as she reenters Nigerian society while also realizing the flaws and prejudices that exist that she never truly acknowledged as a young adult. Her new coworkers reorient her to patriarchal Nigeria with their day-to-day conversations, and readers might cringe with Ifemelu as Priye and Ranyinudo label a friend as foolish because “[t]hat girl never understood the first rule of life in this Lagos. You do not marry the man you love. You marry the man who can best maintain you”
Americanah 492). While her peers’ attitudes towards women’s rights has changed very little during Ifemelu’s time abroad, Ifemelu herself has. Facing sexism and binary gender roles, Ifemelu circumvents her circumstances by once-again defying societal norms, yet in Nigeria she does not have to contemplate her race as part of her identity. Upon her reentrance into Nigerian society, Ifemelu does not balk at taking the role of a strong independent female. In America, she was taken advantage of by men because of her gender, color, and migration status, but in Nigeria she wields her femininity as a surprise tactic; her landlord and his workers do not expect to be challenged by a female when they perform a shoddy home update for Ifemelu’s new apartment. Upon seeing the poorly executed bathroom tile, Ifemelu threatens the tile man loudly declaring “And if you want trouble, trust me, you will get it” (487). Though she does not have true connections with which to get the men in trouble, Ifemelu’s bravery and courage clearly returns to her as she reenters her homeland.

Understanding what the general population expects of a woman, Ifemelu chooses to ignore it and continues to live life as the woman she wishes to be: someone brave and authoritative. With a personality cultivated as a teenager in Nigeria and forged through her experiences in the U.S., Ifemelu’s decision to ignore preconceived ideas of gender for herself leads to Ifemelu’s wish to create a magazine that celebrates women who make their own way in Nigeria and who refuse to be silenced about women’s claims to equality. Likewise addressing the lack of women’s rights, Oluwafeyisayo Semiu Kuteyi writes in “An Overview of the Rights of Nigerian Women under the Laws” that “there is a need for a cohesion of various female empowerment movements and organization;” furthermore, “women should learn to work together as a body” (27). Thus, after her various experiences with the way that race, gender, and class intersect in America and lead to the oppression of people of color, and, to a greater extent
women of color, Ifemelu determines to invoke female empowerment from Nigerian society. Ifemelu decides that every Nigerian woman deserves respect and equitable treatment for which she decides to spend her career advocating (483-4).

**Alterations in His Conceptualization of Gender as Obinze Migrates from Nigeria to England and Back**

Though Ifemelu’s story is central in the novel, Adichie provides the opening for a conversation that assesses the intersections of gender and geographic location through a Nigerian male’s migration experience by including Obinze as an auxiliary protagonist. While Women’s and Gender studies have historically focused on the construction of femininity, since the 1990s a greater emphasis has been put on the necessity to study the construction of masculinity as well. Scholars of African American identities and communities have similarly advocated for a greater focus on Black masculinities, as have, through their independent research, bell hooks and Kopano Ratele. In particular, they have both concerned themselves with the problematic nature of patriarchy’s construction of masculinity. Concentrating on African American men in America, hooks vehemently maintains, “Masculinity as it is conceived within patriarchy is life-threatening to black men” (*Yearning* 77). A patriarchal society creates a gender binary; in other words, a human is either male or female, and one must fulfill that role exactly. In a white-centric patriarchal society, masculinity can be life threatening to Black men because they are shown the prerogatives that they should have because of their maleness, but then those privileges are stripped away because of their race (hooks 77). With this intersection of gender and race, Black men are unable to fulfill the role that patriarchy’s construct of masculinity requests of them,
which in turn leads to a sense of powerlessness and subsequent life threatening reactions. Ratele, recognizing a similar problem in Africa, pleads for Africans to concern themselves with “politicizing masculinities” in order to provide “society a way to see that, at any point in time, there is no single idea of how to be a man” (32). As Obinze progresses through his migration, he realizes that race intertwines with gender hierarchies outside of Nigeria, which produces personal turmoil.

Agreeing with Lorber’s understanding of gender construction, researcher of gender categories in Africa, Adu Funmilayo Modupe writes, “masculinity in Africa is culturally grounded. Different genders in the African society grow to learn a follow-up pattern of behavior” (102). As his father died when he was only seven, Obinze’s mother, a strong, independent, and intellectual woman is the main familial influence on Obinze’s gender construction. Not being privy to conversations that Obinze would have had with his mother, it is hard to know how she counseled her son to understand gender, yet readers do see Obinze interact with other young men of his age. When Obinze first arrives in Lagos, “He was quickly admitted into the clan of swaggering, carelessly cool males, the Big Guys” (Americanah 66). Obinze aligns himself with other young males, showing his adherence to traditional gender roles and hegemonic masculinity that R.W. Connell conceives “as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (77). Nevertheless, it is hard to know Obinze’s exact concepts of his gender as a teenager and college student, but the moments of Nigerian pop culture that populate the story provide some interesting insights.
A poignant showcase of perceived Nigerian gender roles occurs during Ifemelu’s storyline when she visits the hairdresser who is watching a Nollywood film. The movie contains several acts of violence being committed by male Nigerian movie stars; the first scene shows “a man beating his wife, the wife cowering and shouting,” and, later in the film, “a father was beating two children, wooden punches that hit the air above their heads” (Americanah 11, 12). This film’s representation of masculinity asserting power through physical abuse cannot truly represent Obinze’s home life as his mother was a widower, but the societal message broadcasted through such a dominant media would have exerted influence on the masculine attributes presented to Obinze by society. As seen through his school-year interactions with Ifemelu, Obinze does seem to internalize some of these macho-masculine gender norms. While he is never physically violent, the narrator reports, “He admired her for being outspoken and different, but he did not seem able to see beneath that” (80). After spending time with Obinze’s brazen and bold mother as discussed earlier, Ifemelu began to adopt some traditionally masculine speech characteristics and is unafraid to boldly declare her opinions, but Obinze does not understand how to interpret her actions (80). He appreciates her differences but ignores and glosses over the complexity that she introduces to the definitions of Nigerian masculinity and femininity. Society has told him through friends and pop culture that he is supposed to be the dominant and intelligent individual, and Obinze initially accepts and follows this regime despite the subsequent discrediting of Ifemelu’s intelligence and power.

When Obinze decides to immigrate, he has been brought up in a culture that emphasizes the male gender and its attributes, and, even if not instructed by his mother, he still would have

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9 Nollywood is the name given to Nigeria’s modern and thriving film industry.
received the privilege that goes hand-in-hand with being a member of the dominant group—a privilege that he quickly loses because of the intersectionality with race that emerges once he migrates from Nigeria. Traveling to the Western world, Obinze quickly realizes that society perceives him in an incredibly different manner than he has been accustomed to.

Arriving there, Obinze almost immediately falls from his privileged position based on his gender as England’s ideologies force him to strip down and reformulate his definition of what being a man means in light of his race. Treated as a lower class person simply because of his color and forced into trivial jobs, Obinze begins to realize that though Nigeria’s culture praised him for his gender, other places in the world dismiss him and attribute other, less favorable, characteristics to him because he is a man of color. In his seminal work *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon discusses his similar experience writing, “[T]he white world, the only honorable one, barred me from all participation. A man was expected to behave like a man. I was expected to behave like a Black man . . . I was told to stay within bounds” (114-5). Obinze has been demoted to the Western definition of a “Black Man,” and as such he has lost all gender privilege. Further delineating the concept of race that Obinze experiences, Fanon declares, “not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man” (110). In England, Obinze has, therefore, undergone this process of Othering based on skin color Fanon denounces: he has become an Other against whom all discriminations are justified precisely because of this assigned Otherness (Fanon 114, 116). As a consequence, Obinze’s male privileges are useless in a society that defines masculinity in terms of whiteness. In like manner, as joked about by Nigerians, Obinze’s first job finds him doing low-skill janitorial work. Reflecting on his work, Obinze remarks that “he was indeed abroad cleaning toilets, wearing rubber gloves and carrying a pail” (*Americanah* 292). In Nigeria’s gendered hierarchy, housework and cleaning is left to the
women, and it is with this job that Obinze begins to realize the oppression inflicted by Othering (292, 303).

Though he is only in England for three years, Obinze’s thoughts on gender change radically based on the Othering he personally experiences as he changes geographic location. Whereas before he could respect but not understand a female’s breaking from the assigned gender role, Obinze begins to question the restrictive categories that Nigerian females are shoved into by their male counterparts. During a dinner in England, observing his cousin, Nicholas, and his once-outspoken wife, Ojiugo, Obinze wonders: “was it a quality inherent in women, or did they just learn to shield their personal regrets, to suspend their lives, subsume themselves in child care” (301). Obinze quickly understands and questions the culture that would require a vibrant woman to give up her essential being in order to appropriately fulfill the role of a mother and wife. Because of his personal experiences, Obinze cannot accept patriarchy without examining the effect that it has on women; he refuses to impede the progress of equality, and questions why his friends perpetuate the system. Watching Ojiugo bring Nicholas his dinner, “Obinze sometimes wondered if she bowed while putting it down or whether the bowing was merely in her demeanor, in the slump of her shoulders and curve of her neck. Nicholas spoke to her in the same tone as he spoke to his children” (Americanah 296). Having known the couple prior to their marriage, Obinze does not understand the subordination Ojiugo submits herself to simply because society dictates certain roles, nor does he understand Nicholas’ willing acceptance of Ojiugo’s behavior; Obinze sympathizes with the women in his culture who are also subjected to treatment as inferior beings.

These thoughts remain with him even after Obinze, on his sham wedding day, is picked up by the immigration authorities (343). Degraded by the entire experience, when his lawyer
comes to council him, he chooses to be deported. As the narrator reports, the lawyer asked if he wanted to be ‘‘Removed.’ That word made Obinze feel inanimate. A thing to be removed. A thing without breath and mind. A thing’’ (345). With his arrest and subsequent treatment, Obinze feels dehumanized. Obinze’s position as a Black man in England strips him of the social power that he had in Nigeria, yet as this realization dawns on Obinze, he also begins to see that the reason he even had social power was because of gender and class hierarchies in Nigeria (31, 35). Nevertheless, the powerlessness that he feels in England, the powerlessness that strips him of his humanity, is similar to what many women in his country endure simply because of their gender. Similar to Aunty Uju’s relationship with The General where he held social power over Aunty Uju because of his economic status and his maleness in a culture that elevates men.

Deported back to Nigeria, Obinze returns to the dominant group, and, after taking a new job as a corrupt businessman who engages in property value under-assessment for personal gain, he quickly expands his power and retakes the traditional masculine mantel. Obtaining his new job while “still reeling from what had happened to him in England, still insulated in layers of his own self-pity,’’ Obinze also finds himself rising in social class as he begins to make a fortune (28). The experiences that Obinze has had with racism allow him to recognize the privilege that he has been granted in a society that privileges males, so his time in England ensures that he does not adopt the male-dominating-female aspect of Nigerian masculinity. In fact, several incidents bring to light his acute awareness of the issues facing Nigerian women. When his wife Kosi hires a new house girl, she shames Marie for what she interprets as loose morals, and when Marie explains that she brought condoms with her because “[i]n my last job, my madam’s husband was always forcing me’’” (41). As a lower-class woman, Marie, stripped of power, was exploited by a privileged man with social power and economic wealth. It is Obinze who finds her actions
reasonable while Kosi declares that he does not know the ways of house girls, insinuating that Marie is responsible for the way her autonomy had been stripped from her (42). Furthermore, while Obinze’s marriage to Kosi contents him, “a part of him hoped she would ask a question or challenge him, though he knew she would not” (27). Kosi’s strict adherence to traditionally feminine characteristics causes her to avoid any confrontations with her husband: she is subdued. After his early years with Ifemelu, who was willing to challenge him on gender issues, Obinze realizes that he enjoys being around women who are not bound by patriarchal gender roles. As Obinze recognizes the restrictive nature of these binary and hierarchical roles, he begins to long for a society and a partner who defies tradition by adopting both conventionally masculine and feminine traits.

Growing up, Obinze was subjected to a culture that allowed him privileges simply because of his gender, and, even if his mother did not reinforce the lessons, Nigerian culture taught Obinze that to be a man meant to be domineering and strong. Thus, when Obinze plummets from his place in the dominant group because his geographic location changes, Obinze has to realign his definition of masculinity. By doing so, Obinze widens his understanding of the problems that women face in his own patriarchal society. Before Ifemelu returns to Nigeria, the narrator reports that adult Obinze

had begun, in the past months, to feel bloated from all he had acquired—the family, the houses, the cars, the bank accounts—and would, from time to time, be overcome by the urge to prick everything with a pin, to deflate it all, to be free. He was no longer sure, he had in fact never been sure, whether he liked his life because he really did or whether he liked it because he was supposed to. (26)
His eye-opening experiences as a member of an oppressed group in a patriarchal society keeps the problems with adapting the typical dominating masculine role at the forefront of Obinze’s mind as he awaits Ifemelu’s return to Nigeria.

In *Americanah*, Adichie answers hooks’s plea for individuals to

> call attention to the importance of creating a theory that can advance renewed feminist movements, particularly highlighting that theory which seeks to further feminist opposition to sexism and sexist oppression. Doing this, we necessarily celebrate and value theory that can be and is shared in oral as well as written narrative. (“Theory as Liberatory Practice” 41-2)

Recognizing literary work as theory might sound odd to some, but a novel like this illuminates the issues of race and gender inequality and provides readers with one possible solution for eradicating power imbalances. As Obinze realizes after undergoing racial oppression, the circumstances that women in a patriarchal society face every day of their lives are stifling, and he represents the push in the feminist movement for men to ally themselves with women to fight for equality for all. Documenting this new shift in Nigeria’s definition of masculinity, Andrea Cornwall writes, “Men as agents actively make and shape these identities, rather than simply play out scripts that are given to them” (244). Thus, Cornwall sees men beginning to change by choosing how to be a man instead of blindly adopting a masculine role. While this is not true for many of the men in the novel, Obinze stands as an example of how one can turn from society’s dictated behavior and assist those to whom society has denied preference.
Adichie’s *Americanah* speaks to the fluctuations in gender constructs based on geographic location, and, at the end of the novel, Ifemelu and Obinze exist as a woman and a man who refuse to fulfill patriarchal Nigerian gender expectations. As Adichie recently wrote, “The problem with gender is that it prescribes how we *should* be rather than recognizing how we are” (*We should*... 34, italics in original). The main characters wrestle with gender throughout the novel because it has been a prescriptive part of their lives; they realize that stereotypical gender traits are harmful and choose to shed what does not apply to them. Affected by their respective time abroad, Ifemelu takes on the bold and courageous traits usually attributed to men and is described as “the kind of woman who would make a man easily uproot his life, the kind who, because she did not expect or ask for certainty, made a certain kind of sureness become possible” (*Americanah* 39). After experiencing what it means to be the oppressed party, Obinze finds himself unwilling to perpetuate a façade of male domination. Though he could remain in his loveless marriage to Kosi, he chooses to not subject her to a sham marriage simply because society finds it more respectful. The final lines of the novel catapult readers through seven months, and when Obinze appears on Ifemelu’s doorstep, he declares “‘Ifem, I’m chasing you. I’m going to chase you until you give this a chance’” (588). Ifemelu grants him his wish, and, by doing so, she displays her autonomy; she does not settle because society says she needs a husband—she chooses to let Obinze enter her life again.
CHAPTER 2
GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION AND RACIALIZATION IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE’S *AMERICANAH*

Three years before Frantz Fanon released *Black Skin, White Masks* in France, Simone de Beauvoir had published *The Second Sex*, an exploration of society’s historical treatment of women, in which she showcased the idea of “Othering” as specifically applied to gender. For her, Othering is the process by which a group or individual defines another group or individual as different or Other, based on their perceived characteristics and differences (Beauvoir 6-7). In essence, Othering leads to a binary society with two choices for classification; through deductive reasoning, if a person is not the “One,” s/he must fulfill the category of “Other.” In the case of women, men, defining themselves as the Beauvoir’s One, leave women to fulfill the role of the Other. Furthermore, Beauvoir deemed this cataloging as a common human practice since “Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought” (7). Beauvoir believed that humans reasonably compare themselves to one another constantly causing the Othering effect; yet, problems arise when one group or individual also exists as a dominant party which is what has led to women—and subordinate groups at large—being Othered in contemporary patriarchal societies. Indeed, while de Beauvoir mostly focused her attention on how Othering plays out between women and men, the “process of Othering” applies to many other socially-constructed categories, including race and nationality. Briefly touching on this expansion of Othering, Beauvoir wrote, “For the native of a country inhabitants of other countries are viewed as ‘foreigners’; Jews are the ‘others’ for anti-Semites, blacks for racist Americans, indigenous
people for colonists” (6). Othering occurs for every facet of identity because as individuals define themselves, they places themselves as the One leaving those unlike themselves as Others.

In their work on racial formation, Michael Omi and Howard Winant define race as “*a concept that signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies*” (110, italics in original). Thus, race constitutes a category into which humans can be relegated. As Omi and Winant further explain, “Race-making can also be understood as a process of ‘othering.’ . . . Classifying people as other, and making use of various perceived attributes in order to do so, is a universal phenomenon that also classifies those who do the classifying” (105). Updating and expanding Beauvoir’s and Fanon’s argument, Omi and Winant have researched the Othering phenomenon within the United States in terms of the dominant white group labeling itself as the One and all other races or ethnicities as Others. In contemporary times, race exists as a category with polarized Others in most Western countries. Nevertheless, race is a social construction, and it comes about merely because humans have, historically, categorized themselves and, thus, generated Others; race is, typically, a visible physical difference used to stigmatize an individual or group as Other and subordinate (Fanon 110-16). As seen in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*, it is into this world focused on Othering non-white races that Ifemelu and Obinze find themselves upon their immigrations to America and England, respectively.

In her latest work, Adichie provides the tale of two Nigerian emigrants – Ifemelu and Obinze, and how changing their geographic locations alters their understanding of social categories such as race, class, and gender. In this chapter, I will be examining each character individually and the alteration and transformation in their conceptualization of race as they embark on their foreign forays, and the effects this travel eventually has on their understanding
of Nigeria’s patriarchal society. In order to facilitate this discussion, I will establish the impression of race originally held by Ifemelu and Obinze while in Nigeria in order to contrast it with their reformulated conception of race upon migration. Though Ifemelu’s story is central in the novel, Adichie provides the opening for a conversation that assesses the intersections of race and geographic location through a Nigerian male’s migration experience by including Obinze as an auxiliary protagonist.

To set the stage for my discussion, I wish to turn to a moment in the text depicting Ifemelu and Obinze’s young college years while establishing the extent to which they have grossly misconceived race in a white-centric country. Readers are told that for Obinze “‘You look like a black American’ was his ultimate compliment, which he told [Ifemelu] when she wore a nice dress, or when her hair was done in large braids” (Americanah 80). For Obinze, America is a mystical land, and his naivety shines through in this scene. While his interpretation of race acknowledges it as a category, he utterly fails to realize that because of the U.S.’s race hierarchy, being Black in America generates a number of discriminations. Coming from Nigeria, neither Ifemelu nor Obinze had experienced racist prejudices or even racialization, but this clearly changes because of their transnational experiences. In this chapter, I will first be exploring how Ifemelu realizes America’s construction of race and how it impedes her life in numerous ways, paying close attention to the blogs that Ifemelu composes. Secondly, a brief discussion of Obinze’s experience of subtle and overt forms of racism as he enters the job market.

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10 For the purpose of this essay, I am defining racialization as “the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group” (Omi and Winant 111, italics in original).
11 The title of Ifemelu’s blog is “Raceteenth or Various Observations about American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black” (Adichie Americanah 4, italics in original).
as a Black man in England will be explored to round out the intersections of gender, race, and class that Obinze has encountered while residing in England.

Ifemelu’s Experience of Becoming Black in America

The collected data by Ezekial Ette Umo in his book *Nigerian Immigrants in the United States* reveals that America’s race constructs influence many new immigrants as they attempt to figure out how to navigate a new country while also being forced by society to recognize their being Othered because they are people of color. After reviewing his data, Ette reported,

Many Nigerians said they did not have all the information about their new society that they needed to make critical decisions. Those who came as students were more likely to report that they lacked information on racism as a barrier than others. Perhaps, this may be related to age and maturity at the time of emigration. The students are likely to come to America at a younger age and to have idealized the American society. (130)

Thus, Nigerian students arrive in America lacking crucial information on how racism will affect their day-to-day lives. Even as a fictional character, Ifemelu fulfills this description as she comes to the U.S. as a young impressionable undergraduate, unaware and uninformed about racial stratifications in America, and, with Obinze’s unrealistic visions of America retained in her memories. When she arrives at Princeton for orientation and registration, the professional staff member Cristina Tomas initiates Ifemelu to the assumptions that are going to be made about her
based on her physical appearance and accent. After inquiring if she was in the correct place for freshman registration, Ifemelu is told by Cristina


(163 italics in original)

A college coordinator, Tomas’s assumptions about Ifemelu and her ability take precedence over who Ifemelu is and introduces Ifemelu to the hasty reactions that some individuals are going to have about her simply because of her skin color and accent. By seeing Ifemelu as an undereducated student, Tomas effectively Others her because of her audible and physical difference. Thus, Ifemelu’s experience is sadly all too realistic for the Nigerian immigrant who arrives in America to obtain a foreign higher education.

Though Ifemelu arrives in the U.S. with a pristine and hopeful vision of her time in America, she is almost immediately inundated with America’s racialization of her. As Ette reports, “Nearly all the Nigerians I have spoken with mentioned racism as a barrier to adjustment. Some reported that they were not familiar with racism before coming to the United
States. Some mentioned that they read about racism but did not experience it at home prior to coming here” (129). The same is true for Ifemelu: her very first encounter with racism occurs shortly after her arrival in America. Ironically, the first example of racist behavior that Ifemelu experiences is not directed at her by a white individual, but instead, enacted by her Aunty Uju’s neighbor Jane, also originally from Africa. Spending the summer babysitting Dike—Aunty Uju’s son, Ifemelu and Jane grow close and bound over their similar childhoods. One day when Jane is bemoaning her daughter’s behavior, she informs Ifemelu that her daughter is “already trying to be a drama queen. We pay good money for her to go to private school because the public schools here are useless. Marlon [her husband] says we’ll move to the suburbs soon so they can go to better schools. Otherwise she will start behaving like these black Americans” (Americanah 137).

In this moment as Jane perpetuates racism, Ifemelu begins to see the intra-racial hierarchy as it exists in America. Eventually, possibly pulling from this moment, Ifemelu blogs, “You say ‘I’m not black’ only because you know black is at the bottom of America’s race ladder. And you want none of that” (273). With Jane, Ifemelu observes that in America race can be nuanced depending on both geographic and ancestral origins. Being they are Africans, Jane and Ifemelu, if they decide to, can raise themselves up a rung or two on the race ladder simply by refusing to be classified as African Americans. Therefore, while racialized and cast as Others in America, Jane and Ifemelu still recognize that their countries of origin may grant them a certain social privilege over African Americans.

The immigrants in Americanah find themselves faced with the stereotypes that surround race in their new country. Returning to The Second Sex, Beauvoir commented on the race hierarchy that exists in America and even today continues to complicate the immigration of any individual of color. Beauvoir writes, “One of the benefits that oppression secures for the
oppressor is that the humblest among them feels *superior*: in the United States a ‘poor white’ from the South can console himself for not being a ‘dirty nigger’” (13, italics in original). As new immigrants, Jane and Ifemelu realize that the color of their skin leads to subtle and blatant instances of racism; thus, Jane begins to separate herself from African Americans as underlined above. In effect, Jane sees African Americans as Others, and she wants her children to identify as African and not as African American. Though spending only a short time at Aunty Uju before traveling to Princeton, Ifemelu’s introduction to the concept of racism demonstrates how stratified the hierarchy is, who can employ it, and how Jane amongst many others attempt to raise herself above the lowest group—African Americans—in America’s racial hierarchy.

From the moment she picks Ifemelu up at the bus terminal in New Jersey, Ginika, a Nigerian childhood friend, begins to provide Ifemelu with both social cues and advice on how to behave and act in America as an African woman. Essentially, by relating her own experiences, Ginika hopes to assist Ifemelu in avoiding the same social blunders that she has experienced since moving to America as a teenager. To begin, Ginika quickly relates America’s intense focus on political correctness with an anecdote. Narrating a high school memory, Ginika informs Ifemelu, “I was telling them [her classmates] about back home and how all the boys were chasing me because I was half-caste, and they said I was dissing myself. So now I say bi-racial, and I am supposed to be offended when somebody says half-caste” (151). First, a cultural difference appears here in this interaction as “half-caste” fails to translate adequately across cultures. Nevertheless, with this short story, Ginika introduces Ifemelu to the nuances that Americans add to race through language. Though the terms are used to describe an individual who is biracial, Americans view half-caste as a derogatory term. The reason Ginika labelled herself as half-caste in Nigeria was because of Nigeria’s focus on class, whereas in America
where race takes precedence, Ginika has to be introduced to the appropriate term to label the her
two heritages. Even though Ginika’s culture allows her to use and identify with the term, her
American classmates strip her of the ability to do so. There are appropriate things that can be
said, and then there is highly offensive “racist” language that is not to be uttered. During her
undergraduate years, Ifemelu questions this subtle racism in a class after previewing Roots when
she realizes that the word “nigger” has been bleeped from the movie to make it suitable for
public broadcasting (168-9). During a class debate, Ifemelu puts forth her own opinion declaring,
“I don’t think it’s always hurtful. I think it depends on the intent and also on who is using it”
(169). Even from this early moment, Ifemelu recognizes the ways power is stripped from the
Black community and stifled by a political correctness that tells individuals what they are
allowed to say and use as identifiers. Adichie also stresses here the social hypocrisy at stake:
although derogatory language is proscribed or taboo, Ifemelu and her fellow Nigerian
emigrants—as well as African Americans—remain blatantly and subtly discriminated against in
American society. Thus political correctness does not put an end to the process of Othering.

Though she has friends like Ginika to assist her in learning the American ways, Ifemelu
constantly tussles with the typical American understanding of racial equality. While living in
America, Ifemelu realizes the difference between her perception of color and Americans’
perceptions. As Mike Peed commented in his New York Times Book Review, “Adichie’s
characters aren’t, in fact, black. They’re ‘sable’ or ‘gingerbread’ or ‘caramel.’ Sometimes their
skin is so dark it has ‘an undertone of blueberries’” (12). As Ifemelu sees these different shades
and even ethnicities when she observes Black people, Ifemelu does not understand why
Americans claim to not see the differences. She does not agree with the belief that her friend
proselytizes, “Because this is America. You’re supposed to pretend that you don’t notice certain
things” (155). Ifemelu wants to celebrate the diversity of fellow Black individuals, but society, including her close friends, caution her against making such distinctions. During an outing to a mall, one incident exemplifies all that Ifemelu declares to be wrong in America. When the sales associate tries to identify whether the white or “chocolate-skinned” saleswoman helped Ifemelu, she discreetly asks, “Was it the one with long hair” or “The one with dark hair” even though both women had long dark hair. Ifemelu does not understand the unnecessary confusion and questions Ginika, “Why didn’t she just ask ‘Was it the black girl or the white girl?’” (154-5). If one worker is Black and the other white, Ifemelu does not understand the unnecessary confusion, and she questions Ginika as to why she cannot use skin color as the identifying feature to distinguish between the individuals. As her comprehension that Americans refuse to embrace and recognize dissimilarities grows, Ifemelu considers that it could be because recognizing that the dissimilarities occur would also mean analyzing how they are immediately reflected in daily oppression. In addition, one can see this passage how, while in a Nigerian context, Ifemelu was not racialized and therefore could use some words or distinctions that, in her new context, are now prohibited.

Once she begins her college coursework, Ifemelu realizes how little she truly knows about American culture, and she sets out to acquire as much knowledge as possible. Still in regular contact with Obinze, he suggests that she finally reads the great American novels that he has continually asked her to devour. So, Ifemelu finds herself engrossed in novels, and “[a]s she read, America’s mythologies began to take on meaning, America’s tribalisms – race, ideology, and religion – became clear. And she was consoled by her new knowledge” (167). Being removed from the experience and having already come face-to-face with some of America’s cultural specificities, reading opens a safe new world of understanding for Ifemelu. The one text
mentioned by name is James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*; a work in which Baldwin outlines and decries the race problems of the 1960s. Baldwin’s work resounds with Ifemelu as she encounters similar problems a half-century later. As merely an observer of the text and not an active participant, Ifemelu gathers knowledge while avoiding similar social missteps. However, what Ifemelu does not grasp is by acquainting herself with the social habits of Americans, she is effectively shaping her own racial identity. In *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*, Linda Martin Alcoff has elaborated on racial identity’s formation and effect claiming, “Racial identity, then, permeates our being in the world, our being-for-others, and our consciousness of our self as a being-for-others” (194). By conducting this novel reading, Ifemelu gathers information about race in America that she could not have previously interwoven in her identity. As Ifemelu uses these novels to submerge herself into American customs, some of that information is being incorporated into her own being and identity as she recognizes how she fits within the American system.

Ifemelu also finds solace as she meets other Africans attending Princeton and bonds with these students undergoing similar experiences of racism. As she enters this exclusive crowd formed around their birthplace and childhood continent, Ifemelu relishes this time where she dismantles the veneer that she cultivates for public interactions where she must guard against being perceived as behaving inappropriately. Here in her new community “[t]hey mimicked what Americans told them: *You speak such good English. How bad is AIDS in your country? It’s so sad that people live on less than a dollar a day in Africa*” (170, italics in original). In the text, these phrases are presented as a collective summary of the group’s conversations, emphasizing the universality of Ifemelu’s experience as she encounters stereotypes and prejudices; most of the other students have had similar if not the same experience. Knowing that others are
struggling adapting to America brings some peace to Ifemelu as she realizes that she does not have to allow herself to be incorporated into the racialized system, and, eventually, she chooses to retain her Nigerian accent and a natural (not braided or relaxed) hairstyle (213, 263).

As briefly discussed in the opening to this chapter, Ifemelu had no context for understanding race until she traveled to America. Therefore, when Ifemelu first arrives in America, her family, friends, and neighbors introduce her to racial constructs there. As a Nigerian foreign national in the U.S., Ifemelu experiences America’s conceptualization and categorization of race as a mature adult woman. As a consequence, her realizations fuel her quest to disseminate her own accumulated experiences and personal knowledge to other Black immigrants. Thus, Ifemelu’s blog is born, and she eventually blogs almost as if to her old self (the newly immigrated Ifemelu): “Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black” as well as “So what if you weren’t ‘black’ in your country? You’re in America now” (273). Thus, through her time immersed in American society, Ifemelu has other individuals place upon her body racial meaning that, hitherto, had not been an identifiable or labeled piece of her identity: in America—hence a country and culture that perceives itself as predominantly white, her color, race or assumed ethnicity become inescapable and make her hypervisible.

Broadly comparing Ifemelu’s blogs, one quickly sees that none of the entries give specific dates for the events reported by Ifemelu, allowing the blogs to transcend time for some readers. When one avoids dating an entry, a reader can read a post that is four years old and still find it inherently valuable and applicable to his own situation, whereas when one knows exactly when a post was written the time and date can induce doubts about the timeliness of a post. Adichie does not avoid all mention of time in Ifemelu’s postings and instead follows linguist
Greg Myers’s description of relative time. As Myers writes, “The relational kind of time is signaled linguistically in many ways, in verb tense and aspect, in deictic expression, in names of days or seasons, in links to events, and in adverbials that say how the time is relevant to the action” (67). Seen in her entries that focus on telling a story as opposed to only providing information, Ifemelu uses links to other events that she has written on to situate the chronology of her blog posts. In multiple posts, Ifemelu retells stories from “undergrad” (227). By referring to her undergraduate years, the stories that she tells are understood to be the experiences of a younger, college-aged woman, but Ifemelu avoids saying exactly how long ago these experiences happened, making the events seem timeless and as though they could have happened last year. Furthermore, by situating multiple anecdotes in her undergraduate years, Ifemelu’s audience can gather a sense of her time spent in college without knowing exactly when she was attending classes or limiting the effectiveness of her stories because they happened a certain number of years ago. In creating Ifemelu’s blog, Adichie followed blogging conventions of avoiding distinct time and place, which allows the blog to have a greater influence on modern readers who are ever-obsessed with ensuring that they have the latest information on any subject.

Adichie also composed Ifemelu’s blogs on race with terms used by race theorists to complete the authentic blog voice. When writing a blog focused on a theme, one must confirm that the word choice reflects the language used by the groups concerned with the topic. In this case, Ifemelu uses the jargon of popular race theorists to refer to certain topics of concern in the community. This jargon appears in Ifemelu’s blog through terms like “the oppression Olympics,” “white privilege,” and “playing the race card” (Americanah 253, 429, 448). These terms denote the interests that individuals who feel the effects of race construction use to dissect and discuss their experiences, yet the last term listed tends to be used more frequently by opponents of racial
equality movements like affirmative action. In the end, Adichie writes Ifemelu’s blogs to both participate in and add to the discourse on race, and some of her success comes from using appropriate jargon to highlight her familiarity with the concerns and discussions occurring within the group.

Furthermore as part of her resistance to the overwhelming forces that she encounters daily due to race issues, Ifemelu blogs about race, gender, and sexuality to provide her readers a critical and distanced perspective. Recording her observations, Ifemelu blogs about seeing other groups racialized beyond the black community. As Ifemelu reports,

Hispanic means a slight step above American blacks in the American race ladder, Hispanic means the chocolate-skinned women from Peru, Hispanic means the indigenous people of Mexico. Hispanic means the biracial-looking folks from the Dominican Republic. Hispanic means the paler folks from Puerto Rico. Hispanic also means the blond, blue-eyed guy from Argentina. All you need to be is Spanish-speaking but not from Spain and voilà, you’re a race called Hispanic. (129)

Attempting to learn all the gradations of race in America is seemingly impossible for Ifemelu, the rationale behind the grouping of people seems arbitrary, and it is being determined by society as opposed to a personal decision. As Mary C. Waters records in “Optional Ethnicities,” “His freedom to include or exclude ancestries in your identification to yourself and others would not be the same for those defined racially in our society. They are constrained to identify with the part of their ancestry that has been socially defined as the ‘essential’ part” (133). Africans, Hispanics, and African Americans are forced to identify with the ancestry
determined by society with little regard paid to the fact that a Black woman might identify solely as a Canadian if Americans did not define her first as Black. As Omi and Winant report, “Race is often seen as a social category that is either objective or illusory. When viewed as an objective matter, race is usually understood as rooted in biological differences” (109). Though Hispanics are supposedly divided objectively, Ifemelu sees the category more clearly as an illusion because the criteria are not stable. In her eyes, the individuals range from white to a variety of colors and also differ in geographical location causing her to not see any substantial reason behind how this racial category has been constructed. Nevertheless, Ifemelu does remind her blog readers that the only main two categories to pay attention to are the very top and the very bottom. As she writes to her followers, “There’s a ladder of racial hierarchy in America. White is always on top, specifically White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, otherwise known as WASP, and American Black is always on the bottom, and what’s in the middle depends on time and place” (Americanah 227).

After spending a few years in America, Ifemelu has begun to realize that if one is not a white privileged individual the ladder of privileges allows for some degree of scaling and sliding.

While Ifemelu blogs about many of her experiences with race, I want to look specifically at her time spent being a nanny for Kimberly and Dan, upper-class wealthy white homeowners, as well as when she dates Kimberly’s brother, Curt. These occurrences happen before she begins to blog, and they represent Ifemelu’s greatest elevation on the social and race ladder simply because she is interacting with WASPs. Ifemelu begins her relationship with this family as the babysitter for Dan and Kimberly’s two children, and the family’s focus on being politically correct comes through almost immediately with Kimberly’s rhetoric. Ifemelu recalls Kimberly’s specific use of the word ‘beautiful’ and writes, “Kimberly used ‘beautiful’ in a peculiar way” (180). Ifemelu quickly realizes that Kimberly used ‘beautiful’ to denote a black subject as
Ifemelu recalls, “the women she referred to would turn out to be quite ordinary-looking but always black” (180). Especially, considering that research has been conducted by Hughes and Herring on the U.S.A. beauty myth founded on a white ideal, Kimberly always professing and labeling black women as beautiful rings false, but a change occurs as Ifemelu teaches Kimberly that it is acceptable to not label every black women as beautiful because just like white women not every woman is as physically attractive as the next. Eventually, Ifemelu advocates for a new social system based on knowledge that could potentially help people realize if their, possibly good, intentions are resulting in racist behavior as Ifemelu seems to suggest that even when individuals are racist they are usually unaware of it, especially if it is subtle. As a member of the privileged white race, Kimberly’s exaggerated politically-correct behavior demonstrates a problematic outcome of focusing on race; one can become so afraid of acknowledging differences and being labeled a racist that problems surrounding race become reinstated and glossed over.

As she grows closer to the family, Ifemelu eventually meets Curt, the younger and wilder brother, and she falls in love with him. What she later relates to Obinze about her American ex-boyfriends, the passages speak volumes about the relationship in itself, Ifemelu remembers, “The thing about cross-cultural relationships is that you spend so much time explaining. My ex-boyfriends and I spent a lot of time explaining. I sometimes wondered whether we would even have anything at all to say to each other if we were from the same place” (563). Though she loved Curt, they came from very different worlds, and she recognized her role as a prize for him to have on his arm and in his bed (244). In addition, Ifemelu recognized her stark difference from his family because of her skin color which was reinforced by their treatment of her. From Don, Curt’s brother-in-law, to whom “it did not occur” “to think of both of them, together, entangled
in the delicate threads of romance,” to Curt’s mother treated him as “her adventurer who would bring back exotic species—he had dated a Japanese girl, a Venezuelan girl—but would, with time, settle down properly” (240, 244). Curt seems to genuinely be in love with Ifemelu, but his initial attraction to her stems from his exoticization of her. In the end, Ifemelu is another girl on his long list of exotic women, but she does enjoy the relationship while it lasts and learns from her time with him. Curt’s family allows Ifemelu a rare glimpse inside the wealthy WASPs’ social circle; outside they practice openness and acceptance, but minorities remain Others, mere accessories to their comfortable lifestyles.

Moving towards the end of her time in America, Ifemelu begins to see the problems with oppressed individuals refusing to bond together to strive for better treatment, and she remembers individuals, like Jane, Aunty Uju’s neighbor, perpetuating the racialization enacted by the dominant racial group. Published as a blog entry, Ifemelu’s viewpoint on the issue is delivered passionately as she writes, “[T]here IS an oppression Olympics going on. American racial minorities—blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and Jews—all get shit from white folks, different kinds of shit, but shit still. Each secretly believes that it gets the worst shit. So, no, there is no United League of the Oppressed. However, all the others think they’re better than blacks because, well, they’re not black” (253, capitals in original). As she is introduced to America’s conception of race, Ifemelu realizes the unspoken rule, one is already better if s/he can simply declare his or her difference from African Americans at the lowest rungs of the social ladder. Yet, she recognizes the possibilities that could come about simply if the groups would end their bickering and come together as one powerful force. A solidary front of oppressed individuals could demand and achieve societal change. One of the main problems Ifemelu observes in such a social movement is the racism that groups perpetuate against one another. In a blog titled, “Job
Vacancy in America – National Arbiter in Chief of ‘Who is Racist,’” Ifemelu brings this issue to light. As she blogs, “In America, racism exists but racists are all gone” (390). By using present tense with “racism” and past tense with “racists”, she does not limit this proclamation to any one month or year, leaving her readers the ease of agreeing with this statement whether it was written today or ten years ago. With too many individuals simply allowing their racism to simmer below the surface, how can racists even be identified or policed? Ifemelu wants readers to understand that the racist individual is no longer the “thin-lipped mean white people,” because now racism can be expressed in more subtle yet still harmful forms (390). Because of the shift in racist attitudes and the increase in people who perpetuate racism, Ifemelu cheekily suggests that “maybe it’s time to just scrap the word ‘racist’. Find something new. Like Racial Disorder Syndrome. And we could have different categories for sufferers of this syndrome: mild, medium, and acute” (390). Though humorous, Ifemelu gets to the heart of her argument in these lines; racists tend to not self-identify as such, but to avoid the problems that keep occurring a new system must be in place.

Maybe it is due to the lack of solidarity that she advocates for or maybe it is because others are not openly conversing about how to end the Othering that occurs according to race, but Ifemelu finds herself making assumptions. Even as Ifemelu experiences unjust labeling by random strangers, she implicates herself in judging individuals on their appearance and stereotyping their attitudes and actions, but she realizes the flaw that she herself succumbs to (4-5). She records these interactions in her blog starting with one entry titled “Not All Dreadlocked White American Guys Are Down” (5). After telling this white man with dreads that she writes a blog about race, he passionately replies, “‘Race is totally overhyped these days, black people need to get over themselves, it’s all about class now, the have and the have-nots’” (4-5). As one
can tell from the title of this blog, Ifemelu did not expect this man to reject her experiences as a Black individual, but rather she supposed they had a kinship and, maybe, believed there might be some affirmation for her and her writing. Yet, this white man creates a hierarchy of discrimination while wholly ignoring the racism that Ifemelu experienced. As she realizes, just as she wishes to not be judged on her appearance, she should not stereotype another human, especially after repeatedly being cast by other people in an ill-fitting role.

Nevertheless, this is not the only time she has such an experience, as she writes another blog entitled, “Badly-Dressed White Middle Managers from Ohio Are Not Always What You Think” (5). When she met this white man, Ifemelu believed his response would be similar to the man with dreadlocks. Instead of affirming her work, she supposed he would discredit her writing or avoid further discussing it, so it comes as a surprise when upon hearing she writes a blog about race the man eagerly asks, “Ever write about adoption? Nobody wants black babies in this country, and I don’t mean biracial, I mean black. Even the black families don’t want them” (5). The reason for his interest? This middle-class white man and his wife have adopted a black child and taken him/her into their home only to be seen as “martyrs for a dubious cause” by their neighbors (5). Between these two random conversations, Ifemelu reevaluates her own tendency to prejudge, and how hard it is to avoid doing so. Ifemelu’s reality reminds readers that humans are susceptible to classifying and labeling people for convenience—we regularly engage in Othering. Americanah reminds readers that Othering ruthlessly limit one’s experiences while highlighting the potential awareness that can be lost simply because of this prejudicial stereotyping.

Americanah proposes that race can and should be acknowledged with the caveat that no one should be discriminated against because of this acknowledgment. In America, most citizens
get confused and believe in recognizing everyone as physically identical in order to assist in equality, but Ifemelu does not understand how being colorblind can truly assist in achieving equality. Unfortunately, some of the problem might lay with the belief that Aunty Uju and other Nigerians hold. As she tells Ifemelu, “All of us look alike to white people” (148). This thought being held by Nigerian immigrants confirms the clear problem that runs through Ifemelu’s mind several times; immigrants are not being accepted and allowed to enter into America’s society as equals because of racial differences. As Ronald Takaki acknowledges in *A Different Mirror*, “We originally came from many different shores, and our diversity has been at the center of the making of America” (438). The hypocrisy and absurdity surrounding race have been recognized by many before Adichie’s Ifemelu, but immigrants still face subtle or blatant forms of racism that prevent them from continuing to contribute to America’s best self. Hence, when Ifemelu finds herself at a dinner party close to the time when she is preparing to return home, she refuses to allow a Haitian female poet claim that she never encountered a race-based problem with her white lover (*Americanah* 359). After Ifemelu’s own experiences with Curt, she personally knows the difficulty that comes from being in an interracial relationship in America. So, Ifemelu boldly declares the woman a liar stating for all to hear,

The only reason you say that race was not an issue is because you wish it was not. We all wish it was not. But it’s a lie. 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. When you are black in America and you fall in love with a white person, race doesn’t matter when you’re alone together because it’s just you and your love. But the minute you step outside, race matters. (359)
It is here in this statement that America’s race issues and her experiences with them culminate for Ifemelu. She traveled to America and was racialized, and it affected the most intimate parts of her relationship and life. Unlike a white woman, a date with Curt assured that Ifemelu would undergo harsh scrutiny as white people questioned the authenticity of their relationship and black people felt she was betraying the social bond of oppressed groups. She was guilty of cavorting with the enemy, and both her and Curt were judged by society for loving someone and ignoring the racial barrier. Yet, this moment is also where Ifemelu provides a possible, yet unachievable, solution to America’s problems with race. As this dinner party, Ifemelu recites to the Haitian poet and the rest of the dinner party her very first blog posting. Immediately after breaking up with Curt, Ifemelu had written that the solution to America’s problems with race is

real deep romantic love, the kind that twists you and wrings you out and makes you breathe through the nostrils of your beloved. And because that real deep romantic love is so rare, and because American society is set up to make it even rarer between American Black and American White, the problem of race will never be solved. (367)

After spending decades in America, Ifemelu leaves the country with the same belief formed when she had only been in America for a few years: America’s problem with race is unsolvable. Leaving readers in a very uncomfortable position and wondering whether Ifemelu’s forecast is real: Can America change its racially stratified system and stop “Othering” racial minorities or is it unable to do so?
Subtle and Overt Racism in the Blue-Collar World

Coming to my final section on Obinze, I wish to engage with his experiences with race in light of his immigration to England. Once again, since Obinze is an auxiliary character, the narrative does not focus as significantly as for Ifemelu on his experience with a shifting notion of race. Still, his perspective provides for an interesting contrast and parallel to how individuals become racialized. As already discussed, Obinze held a rosy and idealized image of Western culture which jars with the reality that he experiences as a young undocumented immigrant. While his experiences could have been different if he had had a work permit, the jobs that Obinze finds best illuminate the disparity between where race relations are thought to be and where they truly are for a working-class individual.

Similarly to Ifemelu’s experience with Tomas, Obinze’s first encounter with overt racism—more specifically, with the negative stereotypes associated with men of African descent that exist in the Western world—occurs with the Western gatekeepers of his final immigration destination. Trying to leave Nigeria in a post-9/11 world, Obinze repeatedly applies for a visa to America, but “each time he was told, without a glance at his documents, ‘Sorry, you don’t qualify’” (289). In her work on reconfiguring racism in the aftermath of 9/11, Elizabeth Sweet provides a reason for Obinze’s inability to gain a visa. Sweet writes, “A new, post 9/11 racism has emerged, which encompasses, race, gender, and perceived immigration status” (255). While Western countries had been historically discriminative towards Black male immigrants prior to the American national tragedy, the latter individuals are absolutely feared since the World Trade center attacks. Obinze’s mother correctly attributes each denial to fear declaring, “It’s the
terrorism fears . . . The Americans are now averse to foreign young men” (Americanah 289).

After waiting for several months, Obinze tries to take matters into his own hands, but he fails. He is not used to being denied access to what he wants because he lives in a society that provides him with gender and class privileges. Nevertheless, he makes it to England, not because of anything he does, but because of his mother’s social acumen; she lists him as her assistant when she visits England, and he simply stays there, undocumented (290).

As Obinze transitions from being part of the privileged “One” group to becoming a racialized and working-class “Other,” he realizes the power withheld from subordinate groups. As Alcoff declares, “[R]ace is determinant of a great deal of social reality, even while our scientists, policymakers and philosophers would have us deny its existence” (181). In contemporary Western culture, most individuals avoid blatant racism, but that does not mean that racism does no longer exist. Rather this racism now tends to run below the surface, namely through daily micro-aggressions that make discriminative practices increasingly challenging to pinpoint. When Obinze is hired for a temporary job, his new boss introduces himself; “‘I’m Dee.’ A pause. ‘No, you’re not English. You can pronounce it. My real name is Duerdinhito, but the English, they cannot pronounce, so they call me Dee” (Americanah 312). Obinze’s new manager has an identity linked to his name, but the British refuse to acknowledge this when they rename Duerdinhito. The British denial of his autonomy can be read as a moment of racism. In effect, Duerdinhito is denied full existence by the dominant culture simply because they cannot be troubled to pronounce his name correctly.

Towards the end of his time in England, Obinze enters into the warehouse delivery job market. Once hired, he receives the lowest status job. Working as a laborer, he is paired with a driver, and these one-on-one working conditions place Obinze in situations that highlight his
color. In regards to race as a visual identity, Alcoff declares, “There is a visual registry operating in social relations that is socially constructed, historically evolving, and culturally variegated but nonetheless powerfully determinant over the individual experience” (194). Obinze’s personal experience is shaded by his coworkers’ emphasis on race, and their insistence on recognizing him as Other. As he works longer in the job, “Obinze sensed the drivers’ dislike. Once, when he tripped and landed on his knee, a fall so heavy that he limped back to the truck, the driver told the others at the warehouse. ‘His knee is bad because he’s a knee-grow!’ They laughed” (Americanah 312). Refusing to see past his physical appearance, Obinze’s coworkers hold racist sentiments, and they construct Obinze’s color as his defining characteristic. Yet, not every worker feels the need to treat Obinze poorly because he is a man of color. Though Nigel is not by any means an angelic character, he “was the only driver who split the tips down the middle with Obinze; the others pretended not to remember to share” (316). As an undocumented inhabitant of England, Obinze struggles to find a safe place, and, even when working in a place where the law dictates that racism shall not occur, Obinze faces oppression because of his color. When one of his friends declares, “London is a leveler. We are now all in London and we are now all the same” (408), Obinze connects his experiences with those shared by many others, including Ifemelu, who reside in Western countries—the common connection being their color.
CONCLUSION

In 2013 as I was completing my undergraduate thesis on *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie published *Americanah*—a novel that closely explored the journey and social socialization of two Nigerian emigrants, Ifemelu and Obinze. In this thesis, I have embraced Crenshaw’s intersectionality theory in order to adequately analyze their experiences. In my first thesis chapter, I explored the ways in which gender and geographic location intersect and change as Ifemelu and Obinze cross borders. Examining the privileges and obstacles that existed in regards to gender for each character prior to their immigration allowed for the ways in which their concept and performance of gender changed as they entered white-centric countries to be teased apart. From her friends and boyfriends, Ifemelu is introduced to social norms regarding gender performance in the U.S., and Obinze finds himself stripped of his power because of intersections of race and gender. While Ifemelu finds herself constantly ignoring one part of her identity, Obinze, through his sharp fall from social power, realizes the social position that women have been relegated to within Nigeria. While abroad, their experiences allow the two to each devise a plan on how to challenge Nigerian society when they finally return home. Ultimately, their experiences with gender socialization in America and England lead to Ifemelu pushing for women’s equality through her blog and magazine writing, and Obinze gaining a level of nuanced understanding of the gender hierarchy that exists in his homeland as well as solidarity for the equality battles facing women.

After examining how differing gender expectations altered Ifemelu and Obinze’s identities and behavior, I turned to the racialization that both characters experienced as they came out of a country where citizens are not classified into race categories. Referencing
Beauvoir’s notion of Othering, I established how Ifemelu moves from being Othered mainly because of her gender in Nigeria to being Othered in America due to race and gender. In light of the many subtle forms of racism that she encounters, Ifemelu begins blogging to inform her readers what the reality of being a woman of color is in America. Even Obinze’s brief section provides confirmation that Ifemelu’s experiences with racism were nothing if not common. In order to avoid being racist, some Americans have tried to adopt a policy of colorblindness, and Adichie speaks directly to the politically correct individuals who are promoting this idea. The colorblindness attitude perpetuates the racism that already occurs by further refusing to allow people of color the opportunity to identify in ways that have been restricted by the dominant culture. At the end of this section, it became clear that Adichie is not merely noting a social problem, but she is providing some small initial steps in eradicating the oppressions that continue to plague members of marginalized groups.

As I began the second chapter with Beauvoir, it seems fitting that I end my thesis with Judith Butler, the contemporary gender scholar who has consistently updated and furthered Beauvoir’s original text. In her renowned *Gender Trouble*, Butler converses constantly with de Beauvoir’s text in an attempt to update Beauvoir’s own, at the time, revolutionary ideas. In this work, Butler questions western society’s construction of a binary gender system while showing the harm that it causes when people fail to perform gender “correctly.” While Adichie’s *Americanah* provides a narrative that lends itself to a gender theory analysis, the characters experience gender performance alterations often as the result of shifts in another facet of their identity such as their race, thus complicating a gender-only analysis. Exploring Ifemelu and Obinze’s experiences simply through an understanding of gender fails to assess their multi-faceted identities. Nevertheless in Butler’s theorizing, she waited almost ten years before
acknowledging publicly the limitations of her work (Salih 7), but she never returned to rectify some of the gaps in her writing. Yet, maybe it is not up to Butler to fill in the gaps. As authors like Adichie highlight the intersections in the lives of individuals, analyses will need to adapt to ensure thoroughness.

In a world of increasing globalization, both Beauvoir and Butler’s early work on gender remains highly relevant, but it fails to be inclusive and recognize more than one facet of identity at work in one’s actions as intersectionality theory does. In her second book published a few years after the first, Butler alludes to the importance of understanding patriarchal power in terms of different facets: “This demand to think contemporary power in its complexity and interarticulations remains incontrovertibly important even in its impossibility” (Bodies that Matter 19). Yet, Butler finds writing about every nuance of identity impossible, and she instead focuses on only gender. While I agree that it might be impossible, I believe that scholars must continue to expand their discussion beyond any one facet of identity because humans are incredibly complex and cannot be reduced to only one definition. When Ifemelu arrives in America, she is shocked by Aunty Uju’s changed mannerisms, to which Aunty Uju replies, “You are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do if you want to succeed” (Adichie 146). Throughout Americanah, the characters change who they are to flourish in their new countries, and their changes stem from acquaintance with new gender roles, their immigration status, their race, and many other experiences. In Americanah, Adichie provides readers with characters who demand to be examined in multiple ways and refuses examination through only one lens of Othering.

Americanah leaves readers wondering what it means to be a woman, a man, and a Black individual in the Global North and Global South and why these definitions vary across cultures
to the degree that they do. Adichie’s *Americanah* will more than likely endure because of its success at addressing topics that resonant with readers: the formation of immigrants’ identity, the harmful perpetuation of a rigid social stratification system, and, thus, the need for patriarchal societies to examine and change the way they construct class, gender, and race.


