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Reimagining African Authenticity Through Adichie's Imitation Motif

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

REIMAGINING AFRICAN AUTHENTICITY THROUGH ADICHIE'S IMITATION MOTIF

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

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by

Ivette Rodriguez

2017

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

This thesis, written by Ivette Rodriguez, and entitled Reimagining African Authenticity Through Adichie's Imitation Motif, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

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The thesis of Ivette Rodriguez is approved.

Dean Michael R.. Heithaus
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Florida International University, 2017

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

REIMAGINING AFRICAN AUTHENTICITY THROUGH ADICHIE'S IMITATION

MOTIF

by

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In *An Image of Africa*, Chinua Achebe indicts Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* for exemplifying the kind of purist rhetoric that has long benefited Western ontology while propagating reductive renderings of African experience. Edward Said refers to this dynamic as the way in which societies define themselves contextually against an imagined Other. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's fiction exposes how, by occupying cultural dominance, Western, white male values are normalized as universal. Nevertheless, these values are de-naturalized by their inconsistencies in the lived experiences of Adichie's black, African women. Women who are at once aware of and participant in, the pretensions that underlie social interaction—pointing to the inevitability of performativity and disrupting the illusion of pure identity. These realizations interrupt Conrad's essentialist conception of identity and reclaims diverse ontological possibilities for the Other.

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The Problem With Pure Identity

Structuralist and post structuralist theories of language maintain that words do not have inherent meaning; each is only the negation of all the rest. Such reasoning carries over into the realm of human relations in the form of continental philosophical thought—the other is that which I am not, but which plays a role in defining me. In a larger scale, societies too define themselves contextually. Following this notion, leading cultural theorist Edward W. Said argues that as Europe’s “cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other...the Orient has helped to define the West as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience” (1). Now, because of Europe’s superior position of power at the time of significant contact, this relation of meaning is not innocent but necessarily one of hierarchical dominion where “the imaginative examination of things Oriental was derived more or less exclusively from a sovereign Western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality an Oriental world emerged”(8). Hence, the ‘knowledge’ subsequently produced must be understood as conceived from a particular ideological lens that shapes what can be seen, said, and written about in the West regarding this imaginative ‘other’ which it necessarily polarizes in order to define and understand itself.

In denouncement of the epistemological bias Said describes, Chinua Achebe’s seminal essay *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness* ascribes the canonical novel’s reductionist portrayal of Africa and Africans to “the need in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations...in comparison with which Europe’s own state of spiritual grace will be manifest”(2). Thus Conrad’s is an Orientalist image of Africa created by Europe’s need for self-assertion. Indeed,

“Conrad did not originate the image of Africa which we find in his book. It was and is the dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination and Conrad merely brought the particular gifts of his own mind to bear on it” (19). The Africa of Conrad’s novel is therefore the Africa of his readership’s imaginary, much in line with Said’s argument that “what the Orientalist does is to confirm the Orient in his reader’s eyes; he neither tries nor wants to unsettle already firm convictions” (65).

Similarly, Achebe contends that Conrad “served as purveyor of comforting myths,” (5) myths that reinforce a Western humanity against the backdrop of an a-historic, culturally static, ‘natural’ Africa. A humanity that Conrad reinforces in order to make the case against Western imperialist exploits, a noble argument indeed yet ironically destructive to the humanity of Africans since in reinforcing European humanity Conrad bypasses Africans’. He obscures African institutions of governments, religion, and culture thereby positioning the continent in a state of cognitive darkness directly opposed to Western enlightenment. In *Theorizing Always Needs A Savage*, the concluding section of *The Neo-Primitivist Turn*, the ultimate contention is that an assertion necessitates a negation, even if it needs to be idealized: “The primitive ‘other,’ even if does not exist, has to be imagined in order for us to entertain...the possibility of critical reflexivity in general” (221). It follows that we can read *Heart of Darkness* as a critical self-reflection of Western identity for which Africa exists, to use Achebe’s words, as a place of negation. Understandably, Achebe takes great issue with this rhetoric which fixes Africans in a state of static primitivism; he points to the novel’s divisive word choice setting the European and African as counterpoints—respectively, the one is master of language and grace while the other dwells in an “incomprehensible frenzy” (5).

Conrad's "adjectival insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery" (4) in regards to Africa then, creates that negation against which the West can assert itself. Hence the novel stages contact between the two worlds as resulting in a fall from civilized grace for the European and a ridiculous imposition of modernity on the 'natural' state of the African. Kurtz loses his mind for instance, and an African man dressed in a suit (arguably a symbol of civilization and modernity here) is described as looking like a "dog in a parody of breeches." The assumption is that human institutions and systems like language, government, and morality belongs solely to the civilized world of the European and the idea of its primordial 'other' participating in European society is laughable. In Conrad's tableau, African's institutions of government, religion, economy, and overall culture is obscured, satisfying a preconceived notion of reality derived from a logic of binaries that Said marks as the manner in which societies gain a sense of identity: "It is enough for "us" to set up these boundaries in our own minds; "they" become "they" accordingly, and both their territory and their mentality are designated as different from "ours" (54).

In order to revise Conrad's idealized image of Africa created to "fulfill(s) a structural requirement of the story; a savage counterpart to the refined, European" (Achebe 6-8), Achebe famously declared to have written *Things Fall Apart* and other iconic works of fiction between the late '50s and mid '80s. These novels were especially politically charged because Nigeria was at the same time gaining its independence from Britain, hence a deeply anti-colonial rhetoric over determined Achebe's literature. Two decades later Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's fiction follows Achebe's legacy in that it too revises reductionist portrayals of Africa and Africans that continue to plague mainstream

literature as a result of the same underling *Conradesque* fixation with setting up Africa and the West in a binary opposition. Nevertheless, her work shifts from Achebe's nationalistic prose to a reflection of contemporary middle-class Nigerian cosmopolitanism—a trend that has been referred to as “Afropolitanism.” In doing so, Adichie challenges the idea that African literature must be activist literature in the mimetic way of Achebe's own fiction. In fact, in *The Thing Around Your Neck* she comments on this particular expectation for African writers. One of the short stories in the collection shows a young Nigerian writer joining a workshop sponsored by the British government and lead by Edward Campbell, an “African Scholar,” In it, writers from across the continent are selected to produce stories, one of which will be ultimately selected for publication. However, Edward's feedback soon makes it clear that the winning story will not be judged based on craft and how true it rings to the experiences of the participants, but on Edward's conception of the ‘real’ Africa and ‘real’ African concerns. Like Conrad, Edward intercepts the literature with a prepackaged image of Africa. And because he critiques and ultimately chooses which stories are published, the workshop will only produce a story that propagates Conrad's reductive rhetoric though an African writer will technically write it.

Like Conrad, Edward encloses Africa to fit a usable identity. Conrad's image of Africa served as ‘natural’ backdrop to European civilization. Each fixed to a role. With great sarcasm, Achebe points out that Conrad is really a romantic when he mocks an African wearing a suit: “though he might not exactly admire savages clapping their hands and stamping their feet...they have at least the merit of being in their place, unlike this dog in a parody of breeches.” He continues, “For Conrad, things being in their place is of

the utmost importance. Fine fellows—cannibals, in their place, he tells us pointedly. Tragedy begins when things leave their accustomed place, like Europe leaving its safe stronghold between the policeman and the baker to take a peep into the heart of darkness” (7). Edward’s insistence that one participant’s story about coming out to her parents and another’s about experiencing sexual harassment in the workplace are not “reflective of Africa” (Adichie 109) mirror the kind of reductive image of Africa that *Heart of Darkness* allows. More broadly, Edward’s policing of African identity through an assumed knowledge of the ‘real’ Africa represents the kind of purist rhetoric that allows reductive mainstream representations of the gender, sexual, and cultural potentiality of the ‘other’ beyond the ‘one’ with the power to define.

Adichie’s Imitation Motif

Edward represents the values that dominate a global social hierarchy, in fact Adichie provides a symbolic image of his influence when she writes, “The smoke from Edward’s pipe hung over the room” (107). From a place of contention against the kind of authority that Edward exemplifies, Adichie creates African women whose experiences undermine him. Nkem, Chika, Kamara, Ujunwa, Chinaza, and Ifemelu offer complex characterizations of African subjectivity that refute the Conradesque flattening Edward urges on the workshop participants. Fittingly, *The Thing Around Your Neck* and *Americanah* situates descriptive focus on the pressure to imitate that is placed on black, African women as the ‘other’ beyond the defining ‘one.’ These pretensions are frequently highlighted by a retroactive narrative style that positions a moment of climatic clarity for the protagonist early in the story, thus lending a dramatic irony to what follows. An irony that de-familiarizes aspects of the protagonist’s life revealing the partial values that have,

as Edward's smoke over the room, influenced it. Conversely, in total rejection of subtlety of nuanced meaning, Ifemelu's blog in *Americanah* straightforwardly ridicules the 'tribalisms' of American culture that academic and literary prose may water down in abstractions. For instance, Ifemelu points to the pretensions of political correctness as one of the hindrances to honest, intimate connections between black and white people and therefore to the deep yet swept-over problem of racism in the U.S.—a problem that complicates the essentialist “progressive West” versus “atavistic Africa” dichotomy traditionally propagated in Western literature.

By way of disrupting this illusion of 'pure' identity used by the dominant structure to frame the 'other' in relation to and service to itself, Adichie points to the inevitability of imitation. Thus dismissing ontologically the validity of Edward's claim that stories of Africans who live in the cosmopolitan city of Lagos does not represent 'real' Africans. 'Real Americans' are equally ephemeral in Ifemelu's blog where she writes that in America everyone aspires to white, Anglo-Saxon, protestant privilege and even those who fall in that category must aspire to some 'higher' social stratus: "...what do WASPs aspire to? Does anyone know?" (*Americanah* 254) The question suggests that there is no escaping mimicry, it follows that there is also no "authentic" identity that can be imposed as a standard. There's but what we aspire to. This point destabilizes the binary structures that reductively conceptualize human experience, disrupting Conrad's purist rhetoric, which fixes African and Western ontology in polarizing images. It follows that sexual, gender, and racial identities are de-naturalized allowing the black African female subject equal claim to diversity of representation.

Edward's authority threatens this diversity of representation as he expects the

workshop participants to represent, in their own behavior as well as through the stories they write, his single image of Africa and African writing, an image that prompts him to opine about one of the participant's stories that "homosexual stories of this sort weren't reflective of Africa, really." To which she tellingly blurts out, "Which Africa?" (108) Indeed, Edward is not interested in the participant's various representations of African experience but on their ability to represent this 'real' Africa he claims to know as "one who was keen on the real Africa and not imposing of Western ideas on African venues" he continues, "This may indeed be the year 2000, but how African is it for a person to tell her family that she is homosexual?" (108) Ironically, his insistence on "not imposing Western ideas on African venues" results in an overt imposition. Similarly, when he pronounces that one of the participant's stories "begged the question "So what?" That, "There was something terribly "passé" about it when one considered all the other things happening in Zimbabwe under horrible Mugabe" (107) he defines what African literature as only "that which exposes atrocity in order to redress injustice" and the African author as "obliged to produce artwork that enacts positive, calculable political change in a direct, mimetic manner" (Eisenberg 13). As a result, the writers mimic the kind of stories they are expected to write as *African* writers. Ironically, Edward's demand for 'real' African stories results in mere copies of the same tropes. Like *Heart Of Darkness*, the workshop yields writing that superimposes an identity on the African subject though it is on the surface a workshop that produces African stories by African writers.

By commenting through her fiction on the position from which African writers produce in Western-dominated publishing, Adichie is doing the revisionary work that was Achebe's legacy though she may not follow his anti-colonial themes. Like Achebe,

her stories fulfill a need to see herself in fiction—a need that Conradesque caricatures of Africans in Western fiction create. The Africans she recognizes are not those Edward insists are the ‘real’ Africans—a claim that relies on an essentialist conception of identity that sets Western and African ontologies in a fixed binary. So rather than perpetuate this dichotomy, Adichie’s fiction *challenges* mythologies of Africa and the United States that break down this binary opposition through which they have been traditionally imagined. Africans become the observers and definers of *Western* ‘tribalisms’ and the “orientalist images of the passive African awaiting the benevolent actions of the western subject” (242) converts into Nigerians extending *their* pity and empathy to the United States” (243). And the African pessimism reflected in the media’s coverage of a single story of Africa as a place of disease, war, and poverty needing the foreign aid of its Western savior counterpart, is replaced with an image of an Africa that is cosmopolitan and participatory in the capitalist global stage. An image that revises the limited portrayal of Africans that Achebe sought to expand before Adichie in his own fiction.

Thus Adichie’s image of Africa, as did Achebe’s before her, challenges expectations of the ‘other’ and of the West’s own sense of ‘self.’ It embraces globalization and in-betweens because it reflects the reality of Africans today rather than insist, as African writers are pressured to do, on repeating the anti-colonial tropes iconized by Achebe. Of these tropes, a resistance to colonialism is one, but under Edwards’s supervision this theme becomes, ironically oppressive since it is demanded of the writers. Their stories about sexual harassment or homosexual desire are considered too ‘passé’ amidst Achebe’s legacy of activist writing against Western oppression. The legacy they are expected to follow and which thereby reduces their creative possibilities

and the production of modern and diverse images of contemporary African experience. In her famous *The Danger of the Single Story* Ted Talk, Adichie formulates this very argument emphasizing the importance of having a “balance of stories” or risk flattening an entire people. *Americanah* and *The Thing Around Your Neck* tell such stories, marking “a new age in African literature that has come and with it, perhaps, a wholesome widening of the horizon to embrace the different faces of African, and indeed, global realities” (110).

Specifically, *Americanah* and *The Thing Around Your Neck* depict a merging of Nigeria-U.S. communal borders that breaks down the historically imagined dichotomy between the two societies by showing, for instance, a running thread of patriarchy across the two nations. Thus Adichie shows us a tableau of the world in which, “whether one resides in the U.S., Nigeria, or the U.K., economic advancement depends upon one’s connections with relatively wealthy and documented men” (Hallameier 238). The workshop itself is shaped by this energy since Edward makes frequent underhanded sexual comments about the female protagonist that, because of his position of power, she allows. Nevertheless in her fiction, Ujunwa writes about the sexual harassment she’s experienced while looking for employment in Lagos, a story that Edward ironically dismisses as unrepresentative of African struggles. And so as they move across from Nigeria to the U.S. the women of Adichie’s work encounter similar pressures to perform: “As Chioma sits and stares at Yinka, settled on the Alhaji’s lap, she feels as if she is acting a play” (110). So whether they are in the ‘third-world’ or the first, power remains in the hands of men. Thus Chimamanda reminds us that at least for women, the world is still very much ‘backwards’ even in the ‘progressive West.’ Their experiences are a

reminder of a patriarchal point of intersection that disrupts the imagined dichotomy between the “West and the rest” that Conrad’s colonial and Edward’s neocolonial closure of African identity intend to obscure.

Beyond disrupting this longstanding idealized opposition, the women of Adichie’s fiction break out of the fixed parameters they are expected to represent in a way that reclaims, as Achebe did before her for the African subject, the full and complex humanity of Africans. In *The Thing Around Your Neck* these women are at once secular and pious for instance, and because of these kinds of inconsistencies, deconstructive of the dangerous rhetoric of pure identity. Ifemelu’s blog for instance, in that it is written by an African woman living in America, is already a rupture of a longstanding subject/object relationship in which the white male of the West observes and defines its ‘other’ in direct opposition to itself in order to assert its own superiority. This same reversal of the normalized gaze occurs in *Imitation*, where a Nigerian woman living in the states questions the nobility of an ancient African mask which, for her, rather than honor and strength signifies arbitrary tyranny and oppression. This alternative perspective complicates previously taken-for granted meaning and reveals its unnaturalness showing it to be, in actuality, meaning created by and to secure power.

Likewise, in *Monday of Last Week*, the protagonist’s desire for her female employer defies Edwards idealized African woman thus reveals the artificiality of Edward’s definition of African identity in which homosexuality is the sole property of the West. Similarly, in *A Private Experience* the artificiality of institutional identities is revealed when two women of different African ethnic groups take shelter from a Muslims versus Christians riot in which it becomes apparent that they are equal victims of a power

structure that pins them against each other through a created binary of religion that benefits those who've created it, leaving them especially vulnerable to the violence that ensues. Thus in each of these stories, the imposition of identities that benefit the status quo is exposed through a focus on the imitative aspect of social interaction, where the lived experience is incongruous with the terms used to frame it. Hence counteracting the kind of rigid parameters Edward imposes on the African writer's characters. Finally, Ifemelu's blog stands as the kind of modern, globally participatory literature that Edward would regard as un-African and consider too "passé" because it concerns things like how to take care of black women's hair.

The Thing Around Your Neck

Edward's insistence that because they are African writers the participants only write stories that expose atrocities in Africa prevents them from representing their varied experiences and concerns. In *Imitation* Nkem is similarly silent about her dissatisfaction with her husband working and living in Nigeria for ten months of the year while she sits in her comfortable home amongst the things he brings her on each visit. The story opens with her holding and thinking about the Benin mask that he brought on his last. She just found out her husband has moved his mistress into their house in Nigeria so she is looking at the mask differently. Though her husband and the neighbors marvel at it and call it "noble" while complain about how impossible it is to find the originals, she wonders about the "young men wishing they did not have to behead strangers to bury their king, wishing they could use the masks to protect themselves too, wishing they had a say" (23). Nkem's questioning about the others not on the receiving end of the mask's power complicates the gratuitous goodness with which the mask is endowed because it

comes from the ‘real’ Africa before Western interference. But in romanticizing this mask because it represents the ‘authentic’ Africa, they reduce the complexities of its history and miss the intricacies of contemporary African lives like Nkem’s. A life feigning to be happy because she’s been taught that going from being a ‘bush’ girl to joining the class of women who marry ‘Big’ men and are kept in luxurious houses abroad is unquestionably good. In actuality, she pretends she doesn’t know about her husband’s affairs, mimics the hairstyles and beauty routines that he prefers. And keeps a firm hand over her maid Amaechi, lest the façade of master and servant disintegrate to reveal a friendship that is her only source of companionship in America. On his last visit, Nkem’s husband finally brings back an original pre-colonial artifact still; it feels just as cold and out of place as the imitations. Ultimately, Nkem decides to cut her hair, stop waxing her body, and move back to live with her husband in Nigeria—to stop idealizing what feels cold and irrelevant to her life.

Chinaza too arrives to the U.S. under the false promise of a utopian future as the wife of nothing less than “an American doctor!” Her aunt and uncle urge her to take this unequalled opportunity and forget about retaking the University entrance exam as she originally hoped to. But upon her arrival to the states, Chinaza’s fantasies about the U.S. and her doctor husband wear away. Her new house is nothing “like those of the white newlyweds in America films that NTA showed on Saturday nights,” (167) until he finishes residency and pays off extensive student loans, they live amongst other poor Americans. She observes that poor Americans are overweight; she watches them eat at the mall and finds something undignified about “a sea of people sitting around circular tables, hunched over paper plates of greasy food” (176). The myth of the land of equality

and of plenty is broken. What her uncles fail to tell her too, was that she'd have to bare the unpleasant breath, the snoring, and the uncomfortable love making of a man she does not know. A man who wants so urgently to fit in that he speaks in a ridiculously phony American accent and tries to hide any sign that might give away his foreignness. Having gotten here following her family's ideals, Chinaza must now follows her new husband's as she is "expected to be the grateful and dutiful wife who will embrace a false identity that is modeled by her husband" (Sackeyfio 107). So she accepts when he changes her Igbo name and forbids her from cooking Nigerian food. It isn't until she meets her next-door neighbor Nia that she feels joy for the first time since her arrival. Nia would have been judged as a prostitute by her aunt for her colorful makeup. And her new husband warns her to stay away as she is a bad influence. But Nia is neither of those things; she owns her own beauty salon and does not try to conceal rather she embraces her African culture. For instance in Nia's apartment is a huge wooden mask that suggests a healthy tribute to African antiquity unlike that of the mask in *Imitation*, since Nia has also recently traveled to different countries of the continent, is as interested in an African present. And when she offers Chinaza the possibility of a job, the prospect of having something that is not her family's nor her husbands but hers alone "Something leaped inside..." as Nia said, "you can apply for benefits while you get your shit together, and then you'll get a job and find a place and support yourself and start afresh. This is the U.S. of fucking A., for God's sake." (181-5) In Nia's words the glimmer of a new future designed by Chinaza's own desires seems possible and the loss of the fantastical promises of her family and husband is replaced by a exciting, tangible independence.

In *Monday Of Last Week*, Kamara is like Chinaza in that she too has come to the U.S.

under the impression that she will be happy alongside her husband. But upon reuniting with him in Philadelphia, she finds that the long years apart have created an impassable chasm between them and she feels no joy in her new life in the U.S. alongside him. It isn't until she meets her new employer Tracy that Kamara experiences excitement for the first time since her arrival. The story begins retroactively with Kamara looking at her "lumpy middle" in the mirror and imagining Tracy "caressing it with those paint-stained fingers" (74). It has been a week since Kamara met Tracy and a week since she's cared about her appearance since her arrival in the states. Following this moment we learn the details of her first months settling in with her husband, and because we have been privy to her present state of infatuation with her boss, the ordinary details of that first arrival take on the dramatic irony of an assured failure of the marriage and her initially imagined life. The story then ends when Kamara's reinvigoration is cut short by the realization that Tracy was not in fact flirting with her but indiscriminately with all her employees. The disappointment deflates her newfound enthusiasm and she flops back onto the couch grabbing a cookie, ceremoniously recusing back into a state of apathy about her looks, her life. Nevertheless, Kamara's shattered expectations significantly complicate the simplistic binary of an American utopia versus a dystopian African experience. And the story's placement adjacent to *Jumping Monkey Hill*, make Edward's assertions that homosexual desire is "un African" seem even more ridiculous when read after this story of unproblematic same-sex desire by an African woman. Kamara's attraction to Tracy's "fluid" "womanly body" juxtaposes with Edward's refusal to admit such stories in the workshop claiming they are unrepresentative of real Africans. Yet uninterested in "Edward's defense of 'real' African culture by pointing out how African same-sex desire

can only happen as the result of Euro-West influence,” (Eisenberg 16) Adichie writes that Kamara’s “was a flowering of extravagant hope, because what now propelled her life was the thought that Tracy would come upstairs again” (80). The fact that Kamara was apathetic about her life in Nigeria as in the U.S. and it wasn’t until she met Tracy that she was excited by the prospects of her future, demystify longstanding expectations of African pessimism versus American idealism as well as heteronormative limitations on African identity.

Similarly, in *The Shivering*, Chinedu thinks of himself as an “African man” and leads a pious church-going life while also being openly gay. In fact, he never expresses internal conflict as a result of holding these seemingly contradictory identities. His lack of a visa and the experience of a past heartbreak preoccupy him most. The mutual existence of African tradition, a religious following, and homosexuality in this one character is a significant re-imagining of African complexity and of diverse African sexuality and African homosexuality. Taken together, *Jumping Monkey Hill*, *Monday of Last Week* and *The Shivering*, counteract the “single story of homophobia in Africa, a story that sees homophobia in Africa as somehow uniquely horrible and that posits Africa once again in the role of the backwards continent.” (Simms 144) Together they demystify the essentialist idea that “a sexually corrupt West can be posited against a pure Africa” (140) which seemingly honors African culture but actually propagates heteronormative constrictions and silences literary depictions of “stories about the love, joy, and heartbreak of African men who love men and women who love women” (141) in polythematic and un-moralistic ways.

Many times it is the bond, romantic or not, between women, that serves to unmask the

pretensions in the lived experiences of Adichie's characters as they are expected to follow idealized values that they do not desire. In *A Private Experience* two women of opposing religions take shelter during a violent riot between Igbo-Christians and Muslims. At the time they do not know the reasons for the riot and they help each other survive through it. Adichie superimposes a narrative voice telling us, "Later, Chika will learn that, as she and the woman are speaking, Hausa Muslims are hacking down Igbo Christians with machetes, clubbing them with stones." In contrast Adichie writes, "But now she says, Thank you for calling me... Thank you" (44). By making the reader privy to the future events Adichie makes the time these two women spend together treating each other with kindness have profound significance in deconstructing the simple terminologies, "Igbo Christian," "Hausa Muslim," that pin them against each other. Later too, the radio will use simple terms to wrap up the riot as a result of ethnic rivalry and Chika will know it isn't that simple, that people do not fit in those terms and it is precisely that erasure that pins them against each other. Because though each belongs to the opposing side, they are bound by a shared fear for their own safety and that of their loved ones outside—the Muslim woman fears for her daughter's life, and Chika for her sister's. Beyond the political situation that positions them as enemies, they rely on each other for the eminent survival of themselves and the women they love. Underlying the immediacy of the private moment however, they are connected by their lack of power in the politics that have brought them here. In fact Chika, the younger of the two, thinks about her sister "explaining that riots do not happen in a vacuum, that religion and ethnicity are often politicized because the ruler is safe if the hungry ruled are killing one another" (48). Thus although a male-dominated system of power identifies them as enemies, the vulnerability

of their physical bodies in this moment, of the bodies of their daughters and sisters, and their lack of participation in the system that has created this vulnerability, binds them. Their shared female body is what allows these women to feel safe alone with each other though they are strangers and it is what makes them feel equally vulnerable and thereby reliant on each other for survival. It is this shared experience of inhabiting the female form that allows them to transcend the public sphere that men dominate. There is an especially private moment between the two when the older woman who's birthed several children learns the other is studying to be a doctor and asks her to inspect and provide a remedy for her painful nipples: "Cocoa butter. The cracks healed fast." Eh?" The woman watches Chika for a while, as if this disclosure has created a bond. "All right, I get it and use" (50). The moment is intimate enough to create a bond between them despite their social differences. In fact, before this experience, Chika is cynical about religion while the Muslim woman frequently positions herself facing east to pray and yet, afterwards Chika "prays that a taxi will appear, by magic, by luck, by God's hand" (53). Suggesting that in a moment of helplessness, Chika was no different than the Muslim woman in turning to faith—the immediate bodily experience of fear, again disrupting social differences and thereby revealing their constructedness: Later, Chika will read in *The Guardian* that "the reactionary Hausa-speaking Muslims in the North have a history of violence against non-Muslims," and in the middle of her grief, she will stop to remember that she examined the nipples and experienced the gentleness of a woman who is Hausa and Muslim" (55). She will also listen to the radio and hear the riot explained away as "Religious with undertones of ethnic tension." And she will fling the radio to the wall and a fierce red rage will run through her at how it has all been packaged and sanitized" (54).

The statements on the radio then, is the return to essentializing language, to institutions and identities used to organize living and breathing human beings who do not, as Chika experienced with the Muslim woman, fit into them. In a dire moment like this, it is only the common bodies, the common humanity of people that is real; and as Chika leaves the hideout to look through the burned bodies for her sister “it will strike her that she cannot tell if the partly burned man is Igbo or Hausa, Christian or Muslim, from looking at the charred flesh” (53). Here too, Adichie employs a retroactive use of time to add meaning. As Chika returns to the store that has served them as shelter to return the Muslim woman’s scarf she has been using to tourniquet a small wound, we know that her sister has been killed in the riot and their small acts of reciprocity take on a colossal dimension of meaning and complexity that the radio announcers miss when they report on the riot and the people involved.

Americanah: Ifemelu’s Blog

In *Americanah* particularly, Adichie offsets the reductive image of Africa by giving a modern African subject the narrative perspective. Ifemelu is middle-class, well educated, and transnational. She has her own opinions about the strange U.S. *American* tribalisms—norms that she picks apart in her blog in an interesting reversal of the traditional Western gaze. For instance, one of Ifemelu’s first blog posts starts with: “In America, tribalism is alive and well. There are four kinds—class, ideology, region, and race” (227). A statement that immediately challenges U.S. ideological sovereignty and progressive superiority. Indeed Ifemelu’s presence in the blogosphere gazing over the strange U.S. terrain decenters the traditional western, white male gaze placing Ifemelu, an African woman, in the role of definer. As such, she plainly identifies U.S. mythologies.

Her tone is direct as she demystifies norms as cultural rather than universal ‘truths’ in a manner reminiscent of Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies* where he explains that myth is social usage added to objects giving them seemingly inherent meaning. Of these U.S. American mythologies, Ifemelu takes to task which, because it affects her in a way that it didn’t in Nigeria she is particularly aware of, is race. In the U.S. her body takes on new meanings. She is no longer Nigerian first but “black,” an identity she decodes through her blog thus at the same time undoing it. Race in the U.S. means class, she writes. (253) “And admit it—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). Ifemelu holds no punches here as she bypasses the abstractions of literary prose and directly addresses the pretensions of her readers to reveal the U.S.’s established social hierarchy. The blog form allows for such frank speech as seems necessary to Ifemelu to expose the dominant values we scramble to imitate.

Ifemelu’s status as an outsider unfamiliar with U.S. norms makes her a detailed observer of everyday life there, forcing the reader to examine what he/she would otherwise take for granted. In *The Strange Familiar: Structure, Infrastructure, and Adichie’s Americanah* Caroline Levine argues that literature in general and realism in particular, is a genre especially equipped to make “finely observed, psychological arresting scenes of the everyday” (593) shaking off the dust of habituation and allowing us to re-examine casually accepted ‘truths’ revealing their constructedness. Such close attention to habituated experience, serves to de-cloak from its guise of universality what is actually a *cultural* reality particular to a society with its own codes of significance and meaning. As we saw, blackness is specifically interrogated in the blog through close

observations of everyday biases on skin color that have come to be part of ‘normal’ life but which the protagonist confronts as new, strange particularities of uniquely *U.S. American* experience. For instance, Ifemelu learns that in the U.S. being black is an all-encompassing identity that supersedes all other orientations such as a Nigerian nationality or an Igbo descent. Ifemelu learns too, that Africa is similarly reduced of complexity in the U.S. imagination. Ironically, her new knowledge becomes, to the acculturated U.S. American reader, a destabilizing of his/hers previous knowledge. In this manner the novel problematizes certain ways of understanding that are accepted as ‘natural.’

Hair is another one of those cultural objects that the novel deconstructs revealing the power structure that has defined its meaning in deference to itself. The way Barthes unpacks the meaning wine has taken on in French society, Ifemelu examines the meaning black women’s hair has in the U.S. In a blog post titled “Michelle Obama Shout-Out Plus Hair as Race Metaphor” Ifemelu reads the signification of black women’s hair in the U.S. as denoting “not professional, sophisticated, whatever, it is just not damn normal” she continues, “When you DO have natural Negro hair, people think you “did” something to your hair. Actually, the folk with the Afros and dreads are the ones who haven’t “done” anything to their hair” (368-9). And so she debunks the myth that straight hair is ‘natural,’ a value imposed by the dominant power structure.

Coming from a nation where most people are black, racism in the U.S. proves to be the most shocking atrocity for Ifemelu about the U.S.—an observation that reverses the expected roles of savior and victim. Here is an African subject defining the U.S.’ own odd customs and superstitions. Indeed, Ifemelu’s voice is straight-forward without academic abstractions, studying the objects of U.S. American culture in a matter-of-fact

manner unlike the usual political correctness that Ifemelu finds as America's peculiar way of pretending that race is not an issue. After the scientific methodology, she half-mockingly arranges the racial tribes in the U.S. based on a hierarchy of privilege in which blacks are at the bottom of the social ladder and the country aspires, whether it admits it or not, to WASP (white Anglo-Saxon protestant) privilege. This desire is reminiscent of colonized nations and a reminder of the U.S.' own colonial past under British rule and history of enslavement, which stands in stark contrast to the U.S.' own image as leader of modernity and progress. This reminder complicates the African/West dichotomy allowing an aperture in understanding of the other that is less limiting. Actually, there is a subtle pity in the blog's tone—an extension of sympathy to the U.S. that refigures Africa. Such sympathy is especially extended to black American women who Ifemelu considers to be the most invisible in U.S. society. One of the entries opines on U.S. media where “most of the American blacks who are successful as entertainers and as public figures are light, especially women” (265). Ifemelu goes on to observe that in American TV and film, dark black women are casted as the sassy best friend or wise mammy figure that “never gets to be the hot woman, beautiful and desired” (266) while the white woman gets to find love. Her own relationship with Curt or the “hot white ex” as she refers to him on her blog, breaks this schema since her own skin is dark and Curt experiences an instant and continuously strong physical attraction to Ifemelu.

Nevertheless, their relationship is not without its obstructions. For one, Curt's friends appear surprised that he would date Ifemelu being a rich and attractive white man. And though he never behaves from a superior stance, the fact that he expects Ifemelu to adore him as a given, reveals the ways in which he has inevitably bought into American's social

hierarchy. (Hallemeier 237) Empowered by this security, Ifemelu observes that he moves about the world in a self-assured way that perhaps attributes to his flirtation with other women without much fear of consequences. Curt's behavior in the relationship as a direct result of his privileged status in U.S. society belies the expectation that in the first-world individuals are free from socio-political considerations yet African experience is always-already an allegory of the region's embattled situation. (237) Through Ifemelu's relationship with "the hot white ex" we see that "The personal freedom intrinsic to the "American dream" is limited by ongoing histories of racism" (237). Similarly, her relationship with "professor hunk" as she refers to her African-American boyfriend on her blog reveals the ways in which racism shapes the lives of U.S. Americans though it is a country of the first-world and does not imagine itself in terms of social unrest. Ifemelu and "professor hunk" finally drift apart when they do not experience the same devotion to the cause of racism, as Ifemelu's experience of growing up in Nigeria, a predominantly black state and Blaine's experience of growing up black in the U.S. have been radically different. Because for Blaine "racism has been a daily certainty in the U.S." his "opposition to racism has likewise had to be absolute" (240).

Thus Ifemelu's blog complicates the overly simplistic view of a utopian U.S. reality in which all U.S. Americans are like the white middle-class characters in Hollywood films and a pessimistic view that all African people as either characters from an Achebe novel or emaciated child from a charity campaign. Further, the blog form signifies a modern presence of Africans in the global stage, a presence that is legitimized by Ifemelu's claim to the power to define what is Western. This reversal of the power to define takes away the West's power to say, as Edward would, that she does not represent

a ‘real’ African voice or ‘real’ African concerns because her blog does not discuss atrocities but women’s hair and online dating. In fact, while posting about these seemingly ‘passé’ topics, Ifemelu brings attention to U.S. deep-seeded problem of racism and positions Nigeria as an alternative where “the pursuit of capital and love alike is not restricted by histories of white supremacy” (242).

Conclusion

Returning to my theoretical framework, allow me to restate the structuralist understanding of reality that undercuts the arguments I’ve so far presented. For if we conceive of reality as meaningful through a system of binary oppositions (male/female, rational/emotional) that post structuralism further complicates as erroneously based on a false hierarchical relation of the terms—dominant/subservient, then we can admit Edward Said’s contention that Western knowledge of ‘The Orient’ is necessarily created to position the West as the dominant term in contrast to which the oppositional and subservient ‘other’ exists. We can then accept too, Chinua Achebe’s argument that Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* falsely depicts the African as a savage, non-human ‘other’ against whom the European can come to mean ‘humanity’ and ‘civilization’ itself.

Specifically, in *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness* Chinua Achebe argues that Conrad and his book are participating in a long tradition of Western imagining of Africa as “antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization.” In his seminal book *Orientalism*, Edward Said makes a similar argument about the way the U.S. conceives of the Middle East. Both contend that the way the dominant West chooses to imagine and represent the other is de-humanizing because it reduces an entire people and culture to a set of stereotypes that eludes the diverse humanity and experience of reality

there. Using Achebe and Said's explications of the ways in which 'the other' is robbed of complexity and therefore of humanity, I showed that Adichie's story collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* and Ifemelu's blog in *Americanah* revise this narrative by reversing the traditional gaze to that of the black, African female.

When she becomes the observers of the strange *U.S.* terrain, she escapes the reductive definitions that the westerns, white, male has traditionally had the power to impose. Further, she reveals the fluidity of identity as it is dependent on the definer and not based on essential natures. This distinction is important because purist rhetoric allows for those in power to enclose those who are not into limited parameters of ontological possibility. Thus the character's questioning of the values that shape their lives releases them from being reduced to those parameters. Additionally, Adichie's subtle suggestion through a prevalence of imitation across Nigeria and the U.S. that makes it impossible to locate 'real' Americans as much as 'real' Nigerians, releases her from an obligation of staying in the parameters that have been imposed on her as an African writer to represent 'real' Africa—a pressure to which she responds through one of her characters who says, “which Africa?” when she is told her story does not properly reflect it. Suggesting that there is more than one Africa as there is more than one way to be European for instance. There are middle-class, cosmopolitan Africans though this may not be the prevailing image in mainstream media or literature and Adichie's fiction gives these the same legitimacy as subjects of African literature though they are not the victims of war, poverty, or Western imperialism. Instead, they are participatory of global capitalist modernity. Ifemelu's blog exemplifies this African presence—a presence that breaks down the single image of Africa as cause rather than actor.

As writers, readers, and people in the world, it is important to recognize cognitive biases that may lead us to write, read, and behave in ways that are limited by our frames of reference. In a most inspiring TED talk, Adichie speaks about the *Danger of the Single Story* that is, what happens when we are only exposed to one narrative about a whole people—how it leads to a reductive idea of an entire group of complex and multi-faceted human beings. As an antidote, she prescribed the proliferation of stories, of tales where Africans are represented in a multitude of ways to offset the impoverished image of Africa as merely a place of beautiful nature, disease, and war.

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