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“Racial Disorder Syndrome”: Observations on Racism in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013)

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SITUATING ADICHIE’S WORK

IN HER BLOG POST, IFEMELU—the protagonist of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s 2013 novel, *Americanah*—writes: “In America, racism exists but racists are all gone [. . .] the manifestation of racism has changed but the language has not [. . .] maybe it’s time to just scrap the word ‘racist.’ Find something new. Like Racial Disorder Syndrome. And we could have different categories of sufferers: mild, medium, and acute.”¹ While the novel was published in 2013, its topics have remained timely. In fact, they may have acquired renewed significance in light of George Floyd’s death in May 2020, among many others, and the Black Lives Matter movement over the past few years. Racial differences have also been exacerbated during the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 and beyond. According to the CDC, “The COVID-19 pandemic has brought social and racial injustice and inequity to the forefront of public health. It has highlighted that health equity is still not a reality as COVID-19 has unequally affected many racial and ethnic minority groups.”² Adichie’s novel addresses racism and its structural inequalities to showcase the pervasiveness of racist attitudes in the United States of the early 21st century and elsewhere. *Americanah* shows that we are far from living in a post-racial world.

Often hailed as a representative of Afropolitan literature,³ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s work typically explores timely issues of, for example, neo/colonialism, gender, and politics in her novel, *Purple Hibiscus*,⁴ her short story collection, *The Thing Around Your Neck*,⁵ and her short stories, “The Arrangements”⁶ and “Zikora,”⁷ to name but a few. Adichie has also reflected on literary concerns and feminist perspectives in her TED talk, “The Dangers of a Single Story,”⁸ and her essay, *We Should All Be Feminists*.⁹ *Americanah*’s transnational setting spans Nigeria, the United States, and the United Kingdom in a post-9/11 world. The protagonist, Ifemelu, encounters a world full of racial prejudice during her time in the

U.S., which she examines in her anonymous blog titled, “Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black.” Among other issues, she focuses on hair, pan-Africanism, and gender in her meditations and explorations that take on a political overtone. *Americanah* is thus an inquiry into our understanding of home, diasporic and transnational experiences, ethical responsibilities, racial stereotyping, gender issues, and class consciousness. Various scholars have explored issues of transcultural identities and Afropolitanism in *Americanah*.¹⁰ Questions of “race” are an equally prominent topic in the novel, especially when read through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) as explained by scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, and Jean Stefancic.¹¹

“THE PERFECT METAPHOR FOR RACE IN AMERICA RIGHT THERE? HAIR . . .”

Adichie has talked about her own experience with “race” after coming to the U.S. from Nigeria: “race is something that one has to learn. I had to learn what it meant to be black [. . .] When I came to the United States [. . .] I already knew that to be ‘black’ was not a good thing in America, and so I didn’t want to be ‘black.’”¹² At the same time, the author is aware of her status as an outsider: “My experience of blackness is different from African Americans, and for me it’s still a learning process, because there are things that I can’t inhabit. Now I know racial subtleties, now I get it. But I don’t have the history, and it’s different.”¹³ While the narrative may overlap with Adichie’s personal life, it is not necessarily autobiographical writing. Ifemelu is a distinct character who becomes a semi-public persona¹⁴ due to her blog on her observations of “race” in the U.S. In its reflections on everyday life in the U.S., the blog showcases the racism people encounter “while black.”¹⁵ The protagonist functions as an observer who watches from a certain distance, yet is keenly aware of the racial and social tensions in the U.S. Ifemelu starts her blog after her break-up with her white boyfriend, Curt. Ifemelu’s friend from Kenya, Wambui, had encouraged her to start a blog so that more people can benefit from her experiences. The title of the blog, “Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black,” is a take on “Juneteenth” in reference to June 19 or “Emancipation Day.” It is both a historical reference and a reckoning with the blogger’s own status as an outsider who observes and reflects.

The novel addresses the intersections of race and gender, particularly in its treatment of black hair. Living in Princeton, the protagonist is trying to find a salon to have her hair braided: "But she did not like that she had to go to Trenton to braid her hair. It was unreasonable to expect a braiding salon in Princeton—the few black locals she had seen were so light-skinned and lank-haired she could not imagine them wearing braids. . . ."¹⁶ Beyond race and gender, this also shows an awareness of class issues. Princeton is presented as a predominantly white and privileged town, where braiding hair is considered "unreasonable." This discussion of black hair comes up again in a conversation between Ifemelu and Curt, who asks her before her job interview: "Why do you have to do this? Your hair was gorgeous braided. And when you took out the braids the last time and just kind of let it be? It was even more gorgeous, so full and cool."¹⁷ Ifemelu responds: "My full and cool hair would work if I were interviewing to be a back-up singer in a jazz band, but I need to look professional for this interview, and professional means straight is best. . . ."¹⁸ She sees the hair issue from a humorous perspective, indicating that braided hair would work in certain circumstances like singing in a band, but again, her black hair would not be considered "professional" in the context of her upcoming job interview. Despite the fact that she seems to disapprove of this, Ifemelu does not express her anger more clearly. Instead, it is Curt who complains on her behalf: "It's so fucking wrong that you have to do this."¹⁹ Pointing this out as unfair, he takes Ifemelu's side, but both are presented as helpless without any option of changing the situation.

Ashleigh Shelby Rosette and Tracy L. Dumas explore the meaning of hairstyles to a person's individuality and constructions of subjectivity.²⁰ Similarly, Tiffany Thomas finds "an increase in the number of black women returning to their natural hair texture."²¹ The term "natural" indicates that people do not use chemicals to alter, or in this case, straighten their hair. Tabora A. Johnson and Teiahsha Bankhead explain the historical background of black hair in more detail.²² The same authors also establish a connection between social status, self-esteem, and education.²³ Regarding the intersections of race and gender, the policing of black bodies is also evident in the policing of black hair.

The contrast to white hair is established in another blog post: "White girlfriend and I are Michelle Obama groupies. So the other day I say to her—I wonder if Michelle Obama has a weave, her hair looks fuller today, and all that heat every day must damage it. And she says—you mean her hair doesn't grow like that? So is it me or is that the perfect metaphor for race in America right there? Hair. . . ."²⁴ This is the most explicit ref-

erence to black hair in the context of “race” in the novel. The blog post also refers to beauty ideals: “Ever notice makeover shows on TV, how the black woman has natural hair [. . .] in the ugly ‘before’ picture, and in the pretty ‘after’ picture, somebody’s taken a piece of hot metal and singed her hair straight?”²⁵ The blogger criticizes the construction of beauty ideals in popular shows. The blog functions a catalyst of change for her. Writing is her personal therapy.

WRITING ABOUT “RACE”

Another poignant moment is a conversation with Ifemelu’s friend, Shan, who says: “You can’t write an honest novel about race in this country. If you write about how people are really affected by race, it’ll be too *obvious*.”²⁶ Reflecting on the quality of writing by black writers, Shan states: “Black writers who do literary fiction in this country, all three of them, not the ten thousand who write those bullshit ghetto books with the bright covers, have two choices: they can do precious or they can do pretentious.”²⁷ Since “race” is considered such a sensitive topic, it is hard to address it in one’s writing without offending anyone: “So if you’re going to write about race, you have to make sure it’s so lyrical and subtle that the reader who doesn’t know how to read between the lines won’t even know it’s about race [. . .] all watery and fuzzy. . .”²⁸ Their friend Grace counters this with another “solution” immediately: “Or just find a white writer. White writers can be blunt about race and get all activist because their anger isn’t threatening.”²⁹ This conversation shows that the American public is not ready for an honest discussion of race-related issues. Ifemelu points out that she only “became” black in the U.S. after she migrated there from Nigeria.³⁰

This process of “becoming black” also includes what might be interpreted as Ifemelu’s “double-consciousness,”³¹ her feeling inferior and constantly struggling to fit in, having her own standards, yet trying to understand (white) American society and expected norms of behavior, especially when it comes to “race.” The blog highlights people’s unease with questions of “race.”³² *Americanah* makes readers ask such necessary, uncomfortable questions. These are particularly pertinent today with regard to the intersections of race, class, and gender. The blog in the novel provides a medium to explore these questions half humorously, half seriously. It allows the blogger to address the audience directly and to start a long overdue conversation. Adichie also stresses her intention in writing *Americanah*: “I wanted to write about race in a way that was

hopefully annoying, stark, funny, and very, sort of a 'let's stop pretending' kind of thing."³³

Notes

1. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah* (London: Fourth Estate, 2013): 315.
2. "Covid-19: Health Equity Considerations and Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups," *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, Updated 19 Apr. 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/race-ethnicity.html>.
3. James Hodapp, *Afropolitan Literature as World Literature* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).
4. Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* (London: Fourth Estate, 2003).
5. Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck* (London: Fourth Estate, 2009).
6. Adichie, "The Arrangements." *The New York Times*, 28 June 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/03/books/review/melania-trump-in-chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-short-story.html>.
7. Adichie, "Zikora." *Amazon Original Stories*, 2020.
8. Adichie, "The Dangers of a Single Story." TED talk, 2009. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs241zeg>.
9. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014).
10. Chinenye Amonyeyeze, "Writing a New Reputation: Liminality and Bicultural Identity in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*." *SAGE Open* (Apr. 2017); Shane A. McCoy, "The 'Outsider Within': Counter-Narratives of the 'New' African Diaspora in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013)." *Journal of the African Literature Association* 11.3 (2017): 279–294; and Rónke Òkè "Traveling Elsewheres: Afropolitanism, *Americanah*, and the Illocution of Travel." *Critical Philosophy of Race* 7.2 (2019): 289–305.
11. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43.6 (1991): 1241–1299; Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2017).
12. Aaron Bady, "Race Doesn't Occur To Me – Interview with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie." *Salon*, 4 July 2013. https://www.salon.com/2013/07/14/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_race_doesnt_occur_to_me_partner/.
13. Ibid.
14. Serena Guarracino, "Writing 'so raw and true': Blogging in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*." *Between* 4.8 (2014).
15. Adichie, *Americanah*, 330.
16. Ibid, 3.
17. Ibid, 204.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ashleigh Shelby Rosette and Tracy L. Dumas, "The Hair Dilemma: Conform to Mainstream Expectations or Emphasize Racial Identity." *Duke Journal of Gender Law & Policy* 14 (2007): 407–422.
21. Tiffany Thomas. "Hair They Are: The Ideologies of Black Hair." *The York Review* 9.1 (2013): 1.

22. Teiahsha Bankhead and Tabora A. Johnson, "Self-Esteem, Hair-Esteem and Black Women with Natural Hair." *International Journal of Education and Social Science* 1.4 (2014): 92–102.

23. Tabora A. Johnson and Teiahsha Bankhead, "Hair It Is: Examining the Experiences of Black Women with Natural Hair." *Open Journal of Social Sciences* 2 (2014): 86–100.

24. Adichie, *Americanah*, 296–7.

25. *Ibid.*, 297.

26. *Ibid.*, 335, emphasis in the original.

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*, 359.

31. W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* 1903 (Mineola, NY: Dover Thrift, 2016).

32. Adichie, *Americanah*, 350–51.

33. Bady, "Race Doesn't Occur To Me."