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Self-Otherings and Reimaginings of Postcolonial African Women in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013)

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Abstract

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah *(2013) presents a narrative that shifts between different temporalities and spaces, a movement that is particularly experienced by its main character, Ifemelu, as she navigates through her Nigerian, American, and her newly found black identity. Similarly, the novel's narrative attempts to showcase other postcolonial African women like Ifemelu, as well as their ambiguous identities and othered representations. Through this article, we examine the workings of Ifemelu's narration as it shifts from one space to another, specifically from Nigeria to America and vice versa, through a narratological method. We will then focus on how these specific spaces occupied by Ifemelu and other African women, or what Ogundipe-Leslie calls "women's spaces and modes, " work with the bodily experiences of the women and the black Atlantic world at large. Throughout the novel, the hair salon is the women's space that the narration keeps returning to, serving as a bridge between the story's past and present. However, a more constant form of women's spaces also occurs through the narrative body itself, specifically through the narrative form of online blogs that showcase Ifemelu's attempt to find familiarities with other black people of the diaspora. From this article's analysis, we argue that the hair salon and the narration of the online blogs, as "micro-African" spaces, serve as mediums to reclaim and re-write the contingent and negotiated identities of postcolonial African in the new black Atlantic world.*

Keywords: *Postcolonial African women; self-othering; space and temporality; identity*

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Introduction

In *Americanah*, a scene takes place in a black hair salon on the outskirts of Princeton, and here, Ifemelu, a Nigerian and the forefront character of the novel, calls Aisha, a Senegalese immigrant and one of the workers who is doing her hair, "[a] woman [who] had to be a

little mentally unstable" (Adichie, 2013p. 40). This phenomenon calls for a more specific analysis of the workings of African women's representation and how they view one another, and not only merely because they all come from Africa and the West serves as the background that allows them to be called "immigrants." In a conference titled "Women in Africa and the African Diaspora: Bridges Across Activism and the Academy" held in 1992 and reported by Kolawole (2002), the majority of the women present composed a distance from the problematization of the word "feminism" and its relation to the complexities of African and diasporic women. However, at the same time that this debate is put away, the Nigerian poet Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) formulates a specific theory and coins the term STIWA (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa) to specify the needs of African women, saying African women are "[a]t the heart of the discursive storms around voice and voicelessness" (pp. 2–3).

These complexities further call for a deeper analysis on not only African women, but specifically postcolonial African women and their changing and always-renewed identity in the face of a hyper-mobilized world. *Americanah* depicts postcolonial African women within transitory states between countries, cities, people, past, and present. These movements is what Gilroy (1993) calls the movement of the black Atlantic, "the stereophonic, bilingual, or bifocal cultural forms originated by, but no longer the exclusive property of, blacks dispersed within the structures of feeling, producing, communicating, and remembering" (p. 3). Within all this movement, the novel presents the hair salon as a space where the narrative gravitates towards and it is in this space where various "others" and otherings occur among African postcolonial women, as shown by Ifemelu's interaction with Aisha. Thus, an analysis of postcolonial African in the new black Atlantic world is of utmost significance in regards to the study of postcolonialism.

Within the various discussions about *Americanah* and the revisioning of the new diasporic Africa and Nigeria, we will attempt to continue this discourse and garner focus on the issue of women. Chude-Sokei (2014) and Tunca and Ledent (2015) have already given the necessary background needed, in which Africa and the black diaspora are everchanging and demand continuous redefinitions and recategorizations. Through *Americanah*, we will fill in the understudied topic of the interrelations between specific black diaspora by analyzing the experiences and interactions between black female immigrant characters. Additionally, (Goyal, 2014) and Dalley (2013) have included even further issues in the discussion, elaborating how the novel is a "reverse" of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and also subverts itself from other immigrant novels in that it partakes with global issues of race, as well as how Adichie herself steps out of the dominant framework that feeds on territorial limitations as a third generation Nigerian writer.

Americanah's subversions will be able to support our arguments further when talking about the uniqueness of women's experiences within the subversion. The general experiences of immigrants in the novel have been a topic of interest for many, such as Akingbe and Adeniyi (2017) and Amonyeze (2017), using terms like nomadic lifestyles, transculturalism, and adaptive biculturalism to describe the characters' global experiences. However, we would argue that they lack to show how the novel, particularly the narrative structure, is also able to show the complexity and often paradoxical depictions of diaspora. Furthermore, specific arguments, especially around the topic of blog narrative, black hair, and their circulations around the economy, have been discussed by Butler (2022), Hallemeier (2015), Yerima (2017), and Iromuanya (2018). They argue that blog writing, reviving natural black hair, and using the internet to create a collective space is a new way to construct the identity of Africans in the diaspora. At the same time, these spaces, as well as physical ones such as the hair salon, work around the global capitalistic economy and the postcolonial dilemma around feminine beauty, both of which have been centered on Western standards. We would further argue that these spaces, or what Iromuanya (2018) calls "gynocentric spaces," provide a means to show how women identify themselves through each other. Thus, on a larger scale, in this

research, we will demonstrate the narrative portrayals of the female characters' self-otherings, as well as elaborate the workings of the narration and its reimaginings of postcolonial African women.

Methodology

We began our analysis by re-reading the object of study, *Americanah*, and highlighting and commenting on the narrations of postcolonial African women, which are particular found in Ifemelu's focalizations. Then, we continued by dissecting the narrative structure of these narrations. To do this, we inspected the back-and-forth temporal segments in Ifemelu's focalization, and the recurrence and tropes in the narration. Thus, to discuss these two narrative aspects, focalization and order, we utilized Genette's elaboration of them in *Narrative Discourse* (1983), as well as Bal's *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (2017) because it "re-visions" Genette's explanation by building on his theories through a feminist perspective. As we analyzed these structures, we also focused particularly on the feminine spaces where the act of alienation and a differentiation amongst other women occurs, such the hair salon and the "subversions" of narrative structure like the blog format.

Afterwards, we connected the structural patterns that appear in the narrative to the postcolonial feminist issues through two approaches: the black Atlantic proposed by Gilroy (1993) and Stiwanism (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa) theorized by Ogundipe-Leslie (1994). More specifically, the narration of hybrid female characters within the moving spaces of both the narrative and the story level found through the structural analysis were dissected by utilizing Paul Gilroy's theory that black Atlantic spaces transcend strict, defining identities such as nation states and ethnicities. At the same time, our arguments will also tread carefully in determining which women are being specified as well as where and when their experiences occur. Therefore, to specifically address the issues of African women through the female characters in the novel, Ogundipe-Leslie's revising of African women's history and image was utilized to help us elaborate on how the narration reimagines African women, starting from the woman's body and continued up to the international economic order around her.

Results and Discussion

1. Moving through the Narrative Body

To elaborate on issues around African women, Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) argues that "issues around the woman's body, her person, her immediate family, her society, her nation, her continent and their locations within the international economic order" must be included (p. 228). Thus, we will begin with the women to whom the main character, Ifemelu, is closest: Aunty Uju.

The introduction or the first mentions of Aunty Uju, Ifemelu's aunt and muse, is unusual in that it nears that of a stranger for both Ifemelu and the novel. Through Ifemelu's focalization, Aunty Uju is merely mentioned, but never narrated as the main subject of Ifemelu's narrations. This can be seen particularly in Ifemelu's recall of her first days in America and of her cousin and Aunty Uju's son, Dike, as she takes the train to Trenton:

> *During her first year in America, when she took New Jersey Transit to Penn Station and then the subway to visit* ***Aunty Uju*** *[emphasis added] in Flatlands, she was struck by how mostly slim white people got off at the stops in Manhattan…* (Adichie, 2013, p. 5)

> *Not that Dike would ever wear those shoes that looked like espadrilles. Weak kicks, he would call them. It was a new one; he first used it a few days ago when he told her about going shopping with* ***Aunty Uju*** *[emphasis added].* (Adichie, 2013, p. 8)

In these passages, Aunty Uju is only briefly mentioned and is thus similar to that of a passing object, but similarly, as Ifemelu is narrating them, she is also physically "in motion." She is moving from the train station to the train, even inside the train, she is moving with it. The objects that pass her by reminds her of specific things that are only somewhat related to Aunty Uju, but not quiet *about Aunty*

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Uju. In other words, Aunty Uju is in the margins of her memories, but it is also recurring.

It is not until the next mention of Aunty Uju after these passages, when she has already arrived in the hair salon and Aisha, the salon worker, mentions Nigeria, that Aunty Uju becomes the subject of Ifemelu's memories. In the brief flashback, Aunty Uju finds out about Ifemelu's decision to move back to Lagos and criticizes her by saying, "'*You are closing your blog and selling your condo to go back to Lagos and work for a magazine that doesn't pay that well*'" (Adichie, 2013, p. 13). This flashback is only one among the many other instances that are propelled by objects or occurrences in the hair salon during the present. Throughout the rest of the novel, this particular hair salon is a space the narrative comes back to, recurring in the novel as a "portal" to the story's present and as well as to the story's past.

These recurrences are similar to Genette's explanation on "constant motif." He elaborates that "[t]he return of the hours, the days, the seasons, the circularity of the cosmic movement, remains both the most constant motif and the most exact symbol of what I will readily call *Proustian ileratism*" (Genette, 1983, p. 139). However, rather than the return of specific temporalities, *Americanah*'s narrative consists of a rather layered set of returnees. Not only the return of her past to the present (or vice versa), but also the return of the hair salon as a recurring space and Aunty Uju as a recurring character. These layered returnees, as a disaggregation of time and space, is what Dalley (2013) argues as an overlooked phenomenon in the works of Third Generation Nigerian Literature such as Adichie.

The complex set of returnees in *Americanah* can be further elaborated by Bal's notion of "iteration." Bal (2017) argues that iteration occurs when "a whole series of identical events is presented at once" (p. 101). Additionally, it "functions differently in postmodernist narrative" (Bal, 2017, p. 102), in that it is unclear if each iteration is narrating about the same event or not. Aunty Uju's iteration in Chapter 3 is a representation of an iteration in postmodernist and third generation Nigerian narratives because it is unclear whether the multiple but separate mentions of her name in Ifemelu's flashbacks, specifically the second and third flashbacks, occurred at the same day or in close proximity. The narration of Dike's shoes clearly happened "a few days ago," but when Aunty Uju becomes the main subject and Ifemelu narrates Aunty Uju's disapproval of her decision to move back to Lagos, the reader is left with no clue as to when this happened.

Though the iteration of time seems to dominate here, the structural patterns of spatiality also suggest an interpolation of issues in gender. In contrast to the flashbacks occurring as Ifemelu is in motion, when she does talk *about Aunty Uju*, Ifemelu is sitting still in the hair salon, talking with one of the hair salon workers. Thus, she is "in static" when she arrives at the hair salon and only in this "in static" can she finally recall Aunty Uju and her exact words. The contrast of Aunty Uju's mere mentions in the train and the taxi to Aunty Uju as a main subject in the hair salon seem to suggest that only in a private, enclosed and static space can Aunty Uju be voiced. In contrast to the public space, such as the train and the taxi, being occupied by more male counterparts – the boy that reminds her of Dike's shoes and the taxi driver –, the private space of Mariama Hair Salon is occupied by a specific group of people, that is, immigrant African women. The narrative's attempt to show this contrast through the flashbacks and Ifemelu's movements suggests that to talk about women fully is to do so in a strictly feminine space, that is one which is "static" and "constricted." Bartky (1997) argues that "women are more restricted than men in their movement and in their lived spatiality" (p. 97).

However, this contrast between private and public, male and female, or even masculine and feminine, follows a binary "ideal" that does not account for the hybridity of the space itself. Though Bartky (1997) adds that she does not deny the factors brought on by "race, class, locality, ethnicity, or personal taste" (p. 101), our own analysis will have to consider the significance of specificity and context that Bartky seems to gloss over too quickly. As argued by Ogundipe-Leslie (1994), "[a]rguments such as African men occupied the public sphere while women occupied the

private (read: domestic) still need to be challenged" (p. 11). Thus, a binary and generalized argument does not have to be completely refuted, but they must be, in the case of African women, "analysed and studied in the complexity of her existential reality" (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994, p. 9).

It must be reiterated that not only are Aunty Uju and Ifemelu African or Nigerian women, they are also immigrants who chose to move and work in the United States. This places them in the disorienting position of what Chude-Sokei (2014) calls the new diasporic Africans, none of whom has a complete sense of belonging to other Africans, white Americans, or African Americans. Their existential realities circulate in postcolonial and hybrid spaces, in the black Atlantic world resulting in "the stereophonic, bilingual, or bifocal cultural forms" (Gilroy, 1993, p. 3). Hence, a further analysis of the recurring presence of Aunty Uju *specifically* must be done to show the full image of the space occupied by postcolonial African women.

2. Finding the Familiar/Estranged in the Familial

Aunty Uju's narration, in accordance to Gilroy's argument about the black Atlantic, also presents a paradoxical correlation between finding a home and estranging one's self. At the start of the story, particularly when Ifemelu is still in Nigeria during her high school and university years, Aunty Uju is what Ifemelu's own mother calls the "*only person that [Ifemelu] listens to*" (Adichie, 2013, p. 52). When Aunty Uju starts an affair with the General and he gives her a mansion close to Ifemelu's high school, Ifemelu would stay in their house for the week days, unavoidably becoming an observer of Aunty Uju's comings and goings. However, in the midst of Nigeria's political conflicts, the General is killed in a plane crash. Aunty Uju is shamed and threatened by his relatives, causing her and her newly-born boy, Dike, to leave for America. Similarly, Ifemelu's university life in Nigeria becomes unstable and a few years after Aunty Uju's departure to America, Ifemelu would follow in her footsteps to continue her education there.

Ironically, as Ifemelu enters her transitory state in America, Aunty Uju, the very person Ifemelu looks up to and follows, instead becomes estranged or othered from both Ifemelu and the novel. Ifemelu, on seeing her aunt for the first time in America, describes that "*America had subdued her [Aunty Uju]*" (Adichie, 2013, p. 110). Additionally, as the narrative moves forward into the temporal segment of Ifemelu's present body, Aunty Uju's presence becomes less prevalent, though still recurring. Bhabha (2012) describes this phenomenon as an occurrence of alienation, arguing that a new identity will be formed as one moves from the civil state to those in exile and then somewhere in between. Aunty Uju's identity has changed in accordance to her alien presence and as the novel itself shows through the need to come back to the micro-African space of the hair salon, so will Ifemelu's. In the larger context of the movement of Africans throughout history, Gilroy (1993) argues that "[t]he ambivalence over exile and homecoming conveyed by these remarks has a history that is probably as long as the presence of African slaves in the west" (p. 24).

Contrasting this, Ifemelu also differentiates herself from her aunt, particularly, in Chapter 6. Here, Aunty Uju is narrated in greater detail when Ifemelu grows concerned with her as she begins an affair with The General. The narrative clearly shows how Ifemelu sees The General as undeserving of being with someone as smart as Aunty Uju. Aunty Uju, on the other hand is attracted to him not merely because of what Ifemelu sees, but because of what he has and what she can do with it. She tells Ifemelu that "*I did not sleep with him because I wanted something. Ah, this thing called power… I was attracted to his power*" (Adichie, 2013, p. 72). The novel itself shows this through the use of Aunty Uju as the first subject to be uttered in the chapter. Unlike the story of Ifemelu's mother which starts with "*One day, the year Ifemelu turned ten, her mother*…", which is disrupted with the insertion of Ifemelu's name, Aunty Uju's story begins with "*During the week, Aunty Uju hurried home to shower and wait for The General*" (Adichie, 2013, p. 74).

It is as if Aunty Uju, despite still being seen from Ifemelu's eyes, is in control of the novel's

showing of what Ifemelu sees the same way she is able "*to sway [The General's] loyalty*" and to choose not to see other men knowing that she could if she wanted to. Although Ifemelu sees Aunty Uju's decision to stay with The General as a waste of her potential, Aunty Uju is playing with her own power, using her economically advantageous strategy in the context of her middle-class, patriarchal environment and the economic turmoil of Nigeria. This is what we would argue as what Nnaemeka (1995) would call "negofeminism" or a "feminism of negotiation," a strategy in which women "attests to the elasticity of their cultural world" (p. 107). Similarly, Ifemelu also utilizes this strategy when she chooses her natural hair over straightened hair, a phenomenon that Amonyeze (2017) also calls "adaptive biculturalism."

However, their negofeminism while in America attests them to further differences, bringing us to question their similarities and paradoxes even more. Aunty Uju's power-playing narration in Chapter 6 as well as her gradually fading (though still recurring) presence in the novel after arriving in America unfolds itself almost like an "antithesis" of Ifemelu's journey and the strategies that she uses to navigate her alienation in America. Ifemelu choosing her natural hair over straightened hair opposes Aunty Uju's views, who would straighten her hair and change her accent to become more "acceptable" and to be taken more seriously when she, like Ifemelu, looks for a job. At the same time, paradoxically, Ifemelu is also a mirror of her own aunt, marked by how both switch from one job and one relationship to another or what Akingbe and Adeniyi (2017) calls a "nomadic lifestyle." This thin line between antithesis and mirroring is, we would argue, Ifemelu and Aunty Uju's attempt to strategize in the in-between. In spite of the different ways they strategize, both women's situating themselves through their negofeminism shows that the changing postcolonial times and the different hybrid spaces that they manifest forces them to fabricate flexible identities, to braid their own choices.

Thus, we would further argue that this expansive in-between-ness in the narrations of Aunty Uju throughout the whole novel portrays her as a representation of the in-between in the larger black Atlantic world, that is as an in-between of essentialism and generalization. This representation is in itself the black Atlantic, "complementing and extending the work of feminist philosophers who have opposed the figuration of woman as a sign for the repressed" (Gilroy, 1993, p. 45). Ifemelu mirrors this reconstruction in her journey, with the hair salon as her landmark, and though their circumstances, thus, her and Aunty Uju's feminist strategies, are different, they both desire a sense of belonging, or more precisely, of liberation from the shackles of both their unidentified selves and the forced identification of the state.

3. Taken (A)back by One's Roots

Furthermore, the narration of Ifemelu's mother is also another strand within the interconnection of Ifemelu's focalization as well as the novel's attempt at liberation through the black Atlantic. The novel's flashbacks or the retelling of Ifemelu's past also includes scenes with Ifemelu's mother and her bodily relations with the church. In Chapter 3, a chapter almost dedicated solely to Aunty Uju, the novel slips in a narration about Ifemelu's mother moving to four different churches and the changing ways she is dressed alongside this. The positioning of the specific narration of her mother within the chapter itself suggests not only Ifemelu's complex relationship with her mother but also that hair has always been the bodily "organ" that reminds her; thus, the narration itself of her mother.

The chapter starts in the hair salon, and as Aisha is doing Ifemelu's hair while talking about her Igbo boyfriend, she pulls on her hair too hard. Aisha defensively says that Ifemelu's hair is hard, but Ifemelu talks back and says that she is using the wrong comb. The narration then flashbacks to the past, starting with the passage, "*Ifemelu's had grown up in the shadow of her mother's hair*" (Adichie, 2013, p. 41). Thus, the body of the narrative itself works with Ifemelu's body. It starts with the focalizer in the body of Ifemelu and when her hair, a part of her body, is pulled too hard, the focalizer moves to describe another body, one that goes further than even the roots of

Ifemelu's own hair, that is, the roots of her mother's hair.

On this note, going back to one's roots is a trope of Adichie's works, particularly when the characters are placed in situations that force them to be reminded of the "knotted hairs" in their distant (or not so distant) past. Tunca and Ledent (2015) argues that this return to Nigeria serves as a dimension that refuse "to iron out the differences between various African diasporic experiences" (p. 7). We would argue further that it is also part of the larger, black political culture that Gilroy argues are attempts given to the project of liberation. The placement of this "going back" narrative to be just after the scene set at the hair salon, the micro-African place where Ifemelu can differentiate herself, paints this macrocosmic image of the black Atlantic even clearer. In discussing about the three stages in black political culture given to the project of liberation, Gilroy (1993) argues that the first stage is "identified by the attempt to liberate the body of the slave from a rather deeper experience of reification" and the second stage "by the liberation of culture, especially language, as a means of social self-creation" (p. 124).

The liberation of the body is not merely through the explicit narration of hair, but also through the body of the text, the specific placement in which hair is narrated as it moves Ifemelu from the narrative present to the past. Cixous (1976) links the body and the text by elaborating on the act of writing as "the very possibility of change" (p. 879) and as a "return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her" (p. 880). In the narrative's disruption of the present to the past, we would argue that Ifemelu is returned to the past through the body of the text, a result of Adichie's act of writing. This return, however, is not limited to the supposed "universal" application of Cixous' argument, as many African women writers have criticized about the overuse of her theory like Nnaemeka (1995), it is also part of the attempt to liberate oneself from the body of the slave (the past) by *narrating about the past*.

The pulling of this hair, although part of the liberation to remind oneself of the past, is continued by differentiation to the constituent of that past, Ifemelu's mother. Although Ifemelu is not in her older, more present body, the way she perceives her mother is not so much different from the way she others herself from the hair salon workers. She begins with a rather descriptive narration of her mother's hair:

> *It was black-black … when finally released from pink plastic rollers, sprang free and full, flowing down her back like a celebration.* (Adichie, 2013, p. 41)

Then, Ifemelu compares her mother's hair to her own:

> *… Ifemelu would often look in the mirror and pull at her own hair, separate the coils, will it to become like her mother's, but it remained bristly and grew reluctantly*… (Adichie, 2013, p. 41)

Ifemelu's envy of her mother's hair and the self-degradation towards her own marks her self-othering, an attempt to differentiate herself from her mother by being her "shadow" despite the almost violent attempt of pulling her hair to look like her mother's. The forced "pull of her own hair" is a parallel of the pulling done by Aisha in the hair salon. Ifemelu is not merely "going back to her roots," but she is pulled and taken (a)back by her roots. She is violently, yet gentle, with the novel giving a forgivable link between the hair being pulled by Aisha and the sentence about her being the shadow of her mother's hair, pulled to her past body.

Ifemelu's jealousy, narrated through an almost violent form of self-othering, results in the bleeding of a particular stereotype of women, that is their jealousy towards one another as a vehicle of their hidden desires. Cixous argues that "feminine jealousy" is a false stereotype of women, sardonically commenting that and was created by men in order to fulfill their own desire for self-importance. For women, she suggests that "all these drives are our strengths, and among them is the gestation drive-just like the desire to write" (Cixous, 1976, p. 890). To stop the "bleeding" of this stereotype within the narration, the novel points to the women's

desire by telling the story of the woman in question, that is Ifemelu's mother, the woman that almost became the object of the man-made "feminine jealousy" save for the novel's quick turn of events. Thus, we would argue that not only does the novel take the narrator into a "turn of event," but it also turns the focalization of Ifemelu to Ifemelu's mother, turning patriarchy's construction into a re-writing of a woman's true desire.

However, once again, leaning towards the already so-called "canonical" theory, such as by Cixous, is inadequate when discussing the specific contexts of African women's narrations and must be reconstructed by "[listening] more to the rhythm and heartbeat of Igboland" (Nnaemeka, 1995, p. 84). Thus, what makes the turning of feminine jealousy into a re-writing of a woman's story distinct for African women? However, does Adichie want African women in *Americanah* to be distinct? Or perhaps, more precisely, we would argue that she is creating a newer "third space" (a term Nnaemeka uses for borderless territories) for not only African women from "the heart of Igboland," but a third space for *postcolonial* African women or *black Atlantic women*. These women can speak their voices in the borderless territory of the hair salon, and especially in this territory can the story of Ifemelu turn and dislocate itself into a story about her mother.

Thus, only in the new body of her younger past self, in the "other body" of the text, can Ifemelu wean herself from her mother or, perhaps more precisely, only there can Ifemelu differentiate her self from her mother as "her shadow." In a four-page narration through young Ifemelu's focalization, the novel introduces her mother in a "sporadic" journey on finding her church. Yerima (2017) argues that her mother's transitions and the cutting of her hair to symbolize this is Ifemelu's mother juggling between two cultures, between the West and her own beliefs. However, we argue that an examination of her mother in relation to her bodily self and the women around her, such as Ifemelu, rather than the all-too-common binary image of the East and the West, would be in line with the reimagination of African women.

In her mother's first transition from St. Dominic's to Revival Saints, she comes home and suddenly asks for big scissors so she can cut her hair. Ifemelu narrates that *"[h]er mother's words were not hers. She spoke them too rigidly, with a demeanor that belonged to someone else*" (Adichie, 2013, p. 48). Ifemelu's assertion that her mother is "no longer herself" suggests a closeness of Ifemelu's own self to her mother's self. Perhaps, more precisely, it suggests a nearness of the object, Ifemelu, and the shadow, her mother's hair. Thus, Ifemelu believing that she is able to know which is her mother and which is not is an act of seeing that is darkened in the very *shadow* of her mother's hair, rather than just her mother as her full bodily self.

Ifemelu's position as someone *under* her mother's *shadow*, rather than someone who simply sees her mother, can be seen further in the body of the text. This complex focalization shows a juxtaposition at play: the intensity of the detailed story of Ifemelu's mother is narrated through the limitation of Ifemelu's "seeing" of her. However, we would argue that because of this exact juxtaposition can the novel work to suggest a "turning of a wheel," specifically, the turning of a woman's false stereotype into a woman's reimagination of another woman. Ifemelu's mother outreaches the limit of past stereotypical images of African women, especially of her role as the unnamed "mother." Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) writes that the female stereotypes in African literature are limited to the role of either the "sweet mother" or the "erotic lover," with motherhood being the center of a woman's virtue. The narration of Ifemelu's mother through Ifemelu goes against this and, instead, shows a woman who attempts to find herself through religion, or according to Ifemelu, who negotiates with God and makes sense of the people around her through God.

On the other hand, for Ifemelu, God is someone that can be "toyed" with. Through her sarcastic tone, He is someone who, at one point, *controls* and, at another, is *controlled by* her mother. This shows Ifemelu's attempt to differentiate her own, pragmatic view of the things around her from that of her mother. Additionally, when she "accepts" her mother or deems that her mother has "become

herself," it is believed to be at the expense of her advantage. Upon seeing another vision, her mother moves church, from Miracle Spring to the Guiding Assembly. Here, Ifemelu concludes "*[t]he warmth in her mother's eyes was back, and there was a new joy in her bearing*" (Adichie, 2013, p. 50). However, she also says that "*[i]t made her predictable and easy to lie to*" (Adichie, 2013, p. 50). The almost perfectly neatly ended narration of her mother, with Ifemelu receiving her advantage and her mother "back to herself," shows that Ifemelu's differentiation with her mother further reveals a somewhat symbiotic relationship between women who use their own specific strategies in the face of God.

4. Hair Salon and Online Blogs: Postcolonial African Women's Spaces and Modes

Besides Ifemelu's "body, person, and immediate family," the wider spaces that surround her can then be further analyzed and the hair salon is, we would argue, a single space that encompasses all the wider space, or the "society, nation, continent, and location within the international economic order" (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994, p. 228). In the hair salon, the present space where the narration shifts towards, Ifemelu calls one of the workers, Aisha, who is doing her hair, "*[a] woman [who] had to be a little mentally unstable*" (Adichie, 2013, p. 40). Even more so, the narrator contrasts Ifemelu and Aisha by showing what and how they eat. In describing Aisha, the narrator says, "*[she] ate fried chicken wings with her fingers, her eyes on the TV screen*" (Adichie, 2013, p. 102). Meanwhile, "[*Ifemelu eats] some of her carrots*" while she is reading a book. After Aisha and the other salon workers comment about how Africans would never have children as young as the white customer that had just left, "*[t]hey looked at Ifemelu for her agreement, her approval. They expected it, in this shared space of Africanness, but Ifemelu said nothing and turned a page of her novel*" (Adichie, 2013, p. 103).

According to Akingbe and Adeniyi (2017), "[t]he configuration of Other in *Americanah* is in two forms: the geographical ostracism of blacks or the poor from white Americans, and the resentment of Other by another Other" (p. 50) and that the interactions in the hair salon had been one of the instances in which "migrants [are] making racist remarks [about] other Africans" (p. 51). Not only the hair salon in America, but even the Lagos salon is called a space where "*the different ranks of imperial femaleness were best understood*" (Adichie, 2013, p. 77). However, Ifemelu's thoughts also imply that she is othering herself when in the hair salon, she says, "[*t]hey would, she was sure, talk about her when she left*" (Adichie, 2013, p. 103), placing herself as the white woman who had just left, but differentiating herself from the white woman by knowing that her Africanness would still keep the salon workers' sympathy towards her.

Thus, to find what is familiar in America and recreate herself, Ifemelu has to step into another "micro-African" space that she can identify with rather than one she dis-identifies and others her self in, such as in the hair salon. At the same time that the hair salon reoccurs throughout the narrative, the novel also presents Ifemelu's personal blog, an online blog where she writes about her personal experiences as a black African in America. Butler (2022) argues that by dedicating "a large amount of textual space within the novel to the posts and discussion on Ifemelu's blogs, Adichie centers the cultural significance of digital spaces where Black people gather" (p. 289).

The fluidity of this virtual space and the specificity of its purposes take us back to what Gilroy argues about the black Atlantic's history with ships. He argues, "[i]t should be emphasized that ships were the living means by which the points within that Atlantic world were joined. They were mobile elements that stood for the shifting space in between the fixed places that they connected" (Gilroy, 1993, p. 16). Similarly, we would argue that in the context of the postcolonial African woman's space, online blogs' ability to be accessed anywhere and anytime, circulating around these women across the Atlantic are like the ships that join the points within the Atlantic world and even beyond. In other words, in what Goyal (2014) calls as the diasporic writings of "the new Africa," *Americanah* presents a new and, unlike the ships, *reclaimed* form of movement through the online blogs

and the internet as the sea that "carry" these blogs, connecting the economy of the East and the West.

The online blog, like the ship, is a space where fluid identities are also being constructed. It transcends, even, both spatial and temporal border, above the physical border of nations and ethnicities, just as the black Atlantic's modern political and cultural formation "transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity" (Gilroy, 1993, p. 19). Nonetheless, Ifemelu's fluid and always-questioning identity found in the blog eventually gathers back into the physical space of the hair salon, the "ship port" that she finds herself returning to. This is the space where blacks and African women have no choice but to physically see and interact with one another, share each other's frustrations about hair and about being an immigrant as done by the workers, and make judgments of one another as done by Ifemelu. Iromuanya (2018) adds that in the context of hair as an issue, the hair salon can even be seen as a gynocentric space. She argues that in these spaces, even the characters at the margins, such as Aisha, Aunty Uju, and Ranyinudo, Ifemelu's close friend in Nigeria, play a significant role. This particularity is especially the case for African women because it is in line with Ogundipe-Leslie's proposal when she says that "[w]e must look for African women's voices in women's spaces and modes such as in ceremonies and worksongs" (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994, p. 11).

Ironically, unlike the hair salon, the blog's virtual, non-physical communities are a way for her to combat the shame of her physical appearance, the shame of her natural afro hair, which white Americans and even Aunty Uju, who has already succumbed to their expectations, calls "unprofessional." These blog posts, however, are often shown directly in the text, and we would argue that they are a way for the novel to keep Ifemelu from shifting back to the dangerous familiarity of differentiations that often leads to territorial affiliations. Hallemeier (2015) argues that the novel itself resists the hegemonic narrative of the United States identifying Africa as "intolerable," but it instead, "responds by trying to 'fix' it" (p. 242). Ifemelu does indeed resist and break out of the narrative that deems her hair to be "unprofessional," not only through the decision to keep her hair natural but also through the creation of her new blog, The Small Redemptions of Lagos when she is back in Nigeria. In this new blog, she redeems her previously othered self in America and releases herself from her dependency on the familial and the state by creating a room of observation of her own.

Conclusion

The hair salon in Trenton, New Jersey is a space where fluid and overlapping identities of African women collide, often in unharmonious ways, such as the othering between Ifemelu and Aisha, but also resulting in new discourses about the significance of specificity and a new vision(s) of African women in the black Atlantic. Furthermore, *Americanah* weaves through the workings of the hair salon by positioning it as a scene that the story always comes back to after Ifemelu back-and-forth flashbacks. In these narrations, the novel shows the pulling of Ifemelu's hair by Aisha as a transition towards the narration of Ifemelu's mother in the past. This act of going back to the past, a common occurrence in Adichie's texts, illustrates what Gilroy calls as the black political culture's attempt to liberate both the body, through Ifemelu and her mother's contrasted hair, and the culture or the language, through the novel itself. attempt to rewrite African women's stories.

While the hair salon becomes the micro-African, gynocentric space for postcolonial or black Atlantic women, the novel also provides another space in the narrative level through the insertion of online blog excerpts written by Ifemelu in the story. In her online blog called Raceteenth, or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known As Negroes) By a Non-American Black, Ifemelu writes about her race-related experiences in the United States as an African and Nigerian immigrant. The form of the blog narrated in the text shows a further re-writing of African women's experiences in the postcolonial world, as well as an alternative micro-African space created by Ifemelu and for the black Atlantics like her. In contrast with the moving

ships in the old colonial world, the blogs are a moving *re-claimed* space where they can commune, create, and re-create their continual and contextual identities.

Therefore, Adichie's *Americanah* reimagines the new postcolonial African women by re-writing their stories through their bodies (both physical and textual) and the bodily relations they have with (or against) one another. We would argue that this is done in the third stage of Gilroy's project of liberation, in which the liberation of the body and the culture is expressed through the arts. Through Adichie's novel, the structural integration of black hair as a social marker for the fragmented narrative is intertwined with the narration of the communal spaces created by Raceteenth as a subversive from of narration, a reimagining of the new postcolonial African women as black Atlantics who continuously re-write their identities. This still ongoing phenomenon has made us aware that the complexity of the issue itself is a limitation of our research, especially when accounting for the many other contextualities such as the role of class, Ifemelu's new blog when she returns to Nigeria, and England's involvement within the black Atlantic framework. Nevertheless, such future analysis can be done in the hopes that the narration of African women in the increasingly mobilized postcolonial world are studied in accordance to their always changing identities, occurring in spaces which are often overlooked or misrepresented.

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