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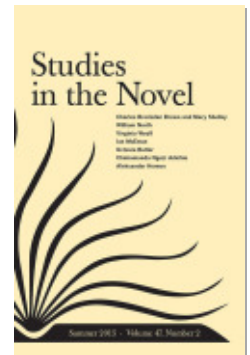
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## **“To Be from the Country of People Who Gave”: National Allegory and the United States of Adichie’s *Americanah***

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## “TO BE FROM THE COUNTRY OF PEOPLE WHO GAVE”: NATIONAL ALLEGORY AND THE UNITED STATES OF ADICHIE’S *AMERICANAH*

KATHERINE HALLEMEIER

Early reviews of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013) have alternately lauded and criticized the novel for its representation of Nigerians. Writing in *Book Forum*, Ruth Franklin praises Adichie for writing “a novel that genuinely alters one’s view of the world” (42). Franklin claims that the novel foregrounds her own potential to be “a privileged white woman who does not notice another’s agony,” while also subverting white privilege through its sympathetic portrayal of its Nigerian protagonists (42). Yemisi Ogbe, in contrast, writing in the *Chronic Review*, contends that, in Adichie’s book, “Nigeria is really ‘just’ the preamble to a place where real self-awareness detonates, to America where life breaks up into many vibrant colours and to Obama” (11). The representation of Nigerians, Ogbe argues, is in turn reductive and cliché; the novel includes “references to the usual suspects of 419 pastors, university lecturers’ strikes and corruption” (11). Whereas Franklin argues that *Americanah* challenges stereotypes and Ogbe contends it perpetuates them, both reviewers read Adichie’s work in terms of how it depicts the reality of Nigerian lives to an American audience.

*Americanah*, then, may be readily interpolated into ongoing debates about the function and failures of the representation of “Africa” and “Africans” in Euro-America broadly and the United States specifically. This paper outlines the contours of these debates in a contemporary moment in which the rise of both the Internet and a generation of Afropolitan artists have become integral to discussions of African identity within Anglophone literature. It goes on to suggest that, while this debate about representation and identity highlights questions of class that are central to Adichie’s novel, it also tends to perpetuate the assumption that the United States stands at the center of economic and cultural geopolitics. Following Eric Cazdyn and Imre Szeman

in *After Globalization* (2011), the essay explores how interrogating the “now near-universal political and cultural discourse” of American hegemonic power “can allow us to discover unexpected geographies of the current character of global power” (14). Against Ogbé, I contend that self-centeredness and self-awareness are the purview not of *Americanah*’s Americans, but of its Nigerians. I also argue, contra Franklin, that it is American citizens, and not Nigerians, who become objects of sympathy in Adichie’s book. By assuming the economic and political privilege of its Nigerian protagonists and pitying Americans for their limited opportunities, *Americanah* presents an alternative, utopic vision of global power in which the United States stands as a foil to the promising future of late Nigerian capitalism.

### Contesting “Africa” from Nigeria

In his seminal “An Image of Africa” (1977), Chinua Achebe identifies and condemns the racist trope wherein “Africa” is the “setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor” (788). The “age-long attitude” that “thus reduc[es] Africa to the role of props” for European psychological adventures, Achebe argues, fosters “and continues to foster” the “dehumanization of Africa and Africans” (788). It is a critical commonplace to note that since the essay’s publication, the dehumanizing representation that Achebe describes continues to permeate both European and North American representations of “Africa.”<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, critiques of such representations are ongoing. Recently, arguments that resist representations of “Africa” as an ahistorical backdrop have proliferated in electronic media. Olatunji Ogunyemi notes that “[t]here is growing evidence of the articulation of geopolitical and sociocultural issues from African perspectives on the Internet” and celebrates the potential of the Internet to challenge problematic western representations of Africa by encouraging “communication from African perspectives” (460, 458). The growing prominence of blogs such as *Africa is a Country*, which promises “to introduce our readers to work by Africans and non-Africans about the continent and its diaspora that have worked against the old and tired images of Africa,” supports Ogunyemi’s qualified optimism, even as that blog itself flags the depressing frequency with which “Africa” is reduced in western media to “famine, Bono, or Barack Obama.”

The project of contesting dehumanizing, stereotypical notions of Africa and Africans on the Internet has proven to be closely tied to what Helon Habila has identified as a “post-national” turn in African literature, whereby a new generation of writers “liberate[s] itself from the often predictable, almost obligatory obsession of the African writer with the nation and with national politics” (viii). Such “post-national” authors have also been categorized as “Afropolitan,” a term popularized by Taiye Selasi (Tuakli-Wosornu). Whatever the label, literature by international authors with African heritage undoubtedly complicates and enriches representations of “Africa” in the

broadly defined west. Notably, high-profile authors with Nigerian heritage such as Teju Cole and Selasi herself extend their authorial presences from the novel to the Internet by cultivating active online presences through their Twitter accounts. Their tweets explicitly and implicitly engage with questions of African representation, and the immediacy of the medium seems appropriate to the urgency of their messages. Cole has tweeted that “People in the richer nations need a more robust sense of the lives being lived in the darker nations”: “Connectivity issues on your BlackBerry, cost of car repair, how to sync your iPad, what brand of noodles to buy: Third World problems.” Selasi tends to be less didactic but consistently performs the Afropolitan aesthetic she articulates in “Bye-Bye Babar” (2005). A typical series of tweets covets Moroccan interior décor, celebrates Ghanaian independence, and quotes Frederic Chopin. Both authors insist upon conceiving of African agents who shape, respond to, and have purchase in global economic flows and pressures, as opposed to African subjects who passively provide the backdrop for transnational capitalist exploits.

The potentially paradoxical logic whereby Afropolitan writers assert Africans’ agency by highlighting their interpolation within a global consumerist culture has been frequently remarked. Critics of Afropolitanism have condemned it as assimilationist, classist, and exclusionary. If, as Selasi argues, media representations of war and hunger in Africa “won’t do” (Tuakli-Wosornu), do not Afropolitan representations of African life risk eliding the injustices that yet persist on the continent (Bwesigye), as well as the experiences of non-affluent members of African diasporas (Tveit)? Selasi’s *Ghana Must Go* (2013) and Cole’s *Every Day is For the Thief* (2007) and *Open City* (2011), like Adichie’s *Americanah*, feature upper-middle-class protagonists who reflect the economic privilege of a portion of the African diaspora that has been rapidly expanding since the 1970s. The popularity of these texts to Euro-American audiences means that, even as Afropolitanism challenges a “single story” centered on “Afro-pessimism,” it also risks becoming a “dominant narrative,” albeit of “African success” (Dabiri).

The current debate around representations of “Africa” in the west has often been a negative one, in the sense that challenging and preventing insidious stereotypes in the western media has been a primary concern to proponents and critics of Afropolitanism alike. The debate has also included, however, analyses of the positive content of Afropolitan literature and other media. As Cole argues in a series of tweets, “the discourse around Afropolitanism foregrounds questions of class in ways that the ‘I’m not Afropolitan’ crowd don’t want to deal with (and in ways the ‘I’m Afropolitan crowd’ are often too blithe about).” Aaron Bady, expanding on Cole’s observations, argues that “[f]or the literary left, Africa has long served a particular symbolic function in the West, standing in as the racial proletariat par excellence.” Afropolitanism, he concludes, points to the fact that “‘Africa’

can no longer serve as the perfect figure for the global proletarian struggle” because “Africa has its West.” While making use of technologies aimed at a transnational audience and offering narratives focused on upper-middle-class lives, authors such as Cole, Selasi, and Adichie draw attention to questions of class that have perhaps been too easily overlooked in academic discussions of African literature and identity.

In other words, it may be easier to imagine African economic realities in terms of exploitative neo-colonial elites who are in the pockets of white global capitalists on the one hand and the potentially revolutionary, impoverished many on the other, but such an imaginary is insufficient for describing shifting and emergent class structures that are themselves informed and shaped by divergent attitudes toward and engagements with so-called western modernity. The point resonates with that made by Neil Lazarus in “‘Third Worldism’ and the Political Imaginary of Postcolonial Studies” (2013), which argues against the tendency of postcolonial studies “to cast imperialism as pre-eminently a political dispensation and to refer it, in civilizational terms, to ‘the west,’ rather than to the specific dynamics of capitalist development” (333). Postcolonial studies, argues Lazarus, would do well to abandon conceiving of social relations in terms of “‘core’/‘periphery’ (or ‘First World’/‘Third World,’ or ‘north’/‘south’)” and think instead of “capitalist imperialism and the counter-history of resistance to it” (331, 337). Recent efforts to complicate representations of “Africa” and “Africans” in the west reflect a resurgent concern in postcolonial studies with foregrounding questions of class and capital that have become increasingly stark after “years of neoliberal austerity, structural adjustment, and political rollback” (Lazarus 328). In light of Lazarus’s argument, Afropolitanism can be conceived as an “-ism” that highlights how Africans are at once complicit in and generative of, as well as opposed to, capitalist imperialism.

To read Afropolitanism in terms of its insistence on the centrality of global capitalism to African life is to conceive the debate over African identity and African literature along lines that resonate with Wole Soyinka’s claim, made over twenty years ago, that his “African world” is “a little more intricate” than what his leftist Nigerian critics, living in the United States, allowed: this world “embraces precision machinery, oil rigs, hydro-electricity, my typewriter, railway trains (not iron snakes!), machine guns, bronze sculpture, etc., plus an ontological relationship with the universe including . . . pumpkins and iron bells” (38). Soyinka, like Afropolitan writers such as Cole, Selasi, and Adichie, claims as African technologies, industries, and businesses too easily essentialized as western. As Reed Way Dasenbrock helpfully glosses Soyinka’s position, the author conceives of decolonization not as the rejection of purportedly western technologies and economies, but as the task of learning how “to use [them] in a different (i.e., ontologically different) way” (8). Soyinka, Dasenbrock explains, “has a vision of an African future in which precision machinery and African

ontology can somehow coexist” (8). Soyinka’s account of an ever-changing African culture points toward a productive way of conceiving the Afropolitan project: not as either opposing western stereotypes of impoverished “Africans” or as assimilating western capitalist values, but as manifesting capitalism vis-à-vis African lived experiences.

Inspired by Soyinka, this essay offers a reading of Adichie’s Internet-savvy, Afropolitan novel *Americanah* (2013) that considers not how it negates or complicates American stereotypes of Africa and Africans through its narrative of middle- and upper-class lives, but rather how it imagines a distinctively Nigerian iteration of middle-class mobility. At the same time, the essay works to push further Soyinka’s understanding of cultural and historical hybridity by following Jean and John Comaroff in assuming that the very trappings of modernity that are frequently figured as originating in Euro-America—precision machinery, but also, importantly, global capitalism—are themselves products of ongoing global exchange in which Africa has always been integral (4).

Adichie’s rendering of Nigerian middle-class mobility, I suggest, hinges upon a comparative approach that examines the centrality of the United States to a Nigerian middle-class imaginary. The aspirational Nigerian middle class that *Americanah* celebrates, however, is by no means an iteration of its American counterpart. Adichie’s novel challenges a narrative in which the US models class mobility for the world in favor of one in which contemporaneous national histories have produced different potentials and limitations for the individual, and especially for the black woman, who aspires to a normative middle-class life. *Americanah* does not so much speak *to* the US of the present reality of African lives as it speaks *of* the US in order to better articulate a desirable Nigerian future.

### **Capitalisms in *Americanah***

As a novel published in the wake of the 2008 global economic crisis, the plot of *Americanah* is surprising in at least three ways. First, the protagonist, Ifemelu, having immigrated to the United States from Nigeria, enjoys outstanding economic success working as a writer whose blog about her life as a “non-American black” leads to speaking engagements and a fellowship at Princeton. Even though much of the novel takes place in the lead-up to Obama’s first election in 2007, the economic meltdown in the United States that became central to that election (and the viability of freelance writing) is of little concern to the novel’s heroine. Her writing career promises to be nothing but stellar for as long as she chooses to pursue it. Second, Ifemelu decides *not* to continue in her occupation. While the reasons for Ifemelu’s initial emigration repeat familiar tropes that position the US as a land of opportunity, if also of struggle, the reasons for return are more inscrutable: “Nigeria became where she was supposed to be, the only place she could sink her roots in without the

constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil. And, of course, there was also Obinze” (6). Ifemelu’s decision to become an Americanah—a Nigerian in America who returns to Nigeria—after living for thirteen years in the US hinges upon an ineffable sense of potential rootedness and a lingering love for a man she has not spoken with in over a decade. The destabilized global economy does not affect her determination to leave a promising career behind and start over in Lagos. Third, after moving to Lagos, Ifemelu finds success again by establishing *another* blog, this one titled *The Small Redemptions of Lagos* (421).<sup>2</sup> The contraction of the Nigerian economy in the wake of the global financial crisis has no effect on her prospects or prosperity.<sup>3</sup> While *Americanah* stands as a self-consciously global novel, as metonymically encapsulated by Ifemelu’s transnational blogging, questions of global economic history appear marginal to the novel’s central love story.

The stunning economic security and creative employment that Ifemelu enjoys arguably support the claims of critics who maintain that Afropolitan novels such as Adichie’s address an exclusive realm of class privilege and fail to account for broader political and economic realities. Yet, Ifemelu’s relatively blithe prosperity also arguably supports those who maintain that Afropolitan literature challenges problematic expectations that African literature *ought* to always account for such realities. The novel’s decentralization of global economic history, in other words, may be read as deliberately undermining expectations that the African novel is always already politically-oriented, expectations that have been prominent in American literary scholarship at least since Fredric Jameson’s controversial yet influential “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism” (1986). In this essay, Jameson proposes that “third-world texts,” no matter how seemingly invested in the “private” and “libidinal,” project “a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society” (69). No one objects when Jeffrey Eugenides, a white American author, reduces the political economy to a minor plot point in *The Marriage Plot* (2011), a novel which, like *Americanah*, explores the love lives of its university-educated protagonists. As Ron Charles summarizes in his review of Eugenides’s text, “Madeleine and both her beaux are knocked a little senseless by graduating from a top university in the midst of a moribund economy that has no use for them.” There is no expectation, however, that the relationships between Madeleine and her beaux should engage substantively with accelerating global inequities. By treating the political economy as a minor plot point in the romance between Ifemelu and Obinze, Adichie’s novel belies expectations that African literature ought to do otherwise. Like Afropolitan literature more generally, *Americanah* might be critiqued or celebrated for eschewing “the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society” and favoring the embattled love lives of educated Nigerian individuals.

Yet, I contend, neither critique nor celebration does full justice to the novel's treatment of class and capital. *Americanah*, I argue, does not simply appropriate as Nigerian the "radical split between the private and the public" that Jameson identifies as "one of the determinants of capitalist culture, that is the culture of the western realist and modernist novel" (69). Adichie's text does not, in other words, exemplify how African culture and society has "caught up" to the capitalist culture of the west. Instead, it offers what is in effect a tale of two capitalisms. Through its depiction of Ifemelu's romantic relationships with two American citizens, *Americanah* presents a national allegory of the embattled situation of the public *first-world* culture and society, in which capitalism's entwinement with white supremacy delimits citizens' capacity to apprehend how their seemingly personal beliefs are structured by specific and contingent political conditions.<sup>4</sup> The personal freedom intrinsic to the "American dream" is limited by ongoing histories of racism. Ifemelu's relationship with Obinze, in contrast, stands as an alternative "Nigerian dream," in which capital is disentangled from white supremacy. The absence of the 2007 global crisis can be read not as the abnegation of the global political economy, but as a reframing of how to understand its injustices. Although *Americanah* does not unequivocally denounce the inequities of global capitalism *tout de suite*—saving a critical portrayal of its patriarchal character—it yet denounces the high personal and public costs of a particularly American manifestation of capitalism in which material prosperity offers no freedom from the absolutisms of a racist society.

### The United States of *Americanah*

*Americanah* is an optimistic text in part because of the remarkable economic security Ifemelu comes to enjoy. This security, however, does not materialize because the United States (or Nigeria) is exceptionally just when it comes to ensuring economic opportunity for all. Initially, the novel holds out the dream of American economic mobility. Ifemelu and her friends in Nigeria grow up agreeing that the "American passport is the coolest thing" (65), and Ifemelu's mother claims "Jesus told her in a dream that Ifemelu would prosper in America" (101). In fact, money is initially a big problem for the protagonist. Relatively soon after her arrival to the US, with her visa expired and no source of income, Ifemelu enters a period of deep depression. In desperation, she responds to an ad in the *City Paper* for a "female personal assistant" (145) and suffers through a "sordid," exploitative sexual encounter with a man named Trevor (156). The ensuing hurt and shame cause her to break off all communication with Obinze, her lover and intended, until just before her return to Nigeria. Ifemelu's struggles are echoed in the novel's subplots. Ifemelu's Aunt Uju suffers during her first years in the US, not least because of a relationship with the unprepossessing Bartholomew, a cold Nigerian who wants Aunt Uju to "hand over my salary to him and cook peppered gizzard for him on Saturdays" (220). Aisha, Ifemelu's Senegalese hairdresser, likewise



struggles to thrive in the US. She was unable to travel home when her father died “[b]ecause of papers”; her mother is ill (364). The United States, the novel suggests, thwarts more than it abets the aspirations of women of color who are either or both undocumented and living in poverty.

On this count, the US is unexceptional. The global capitalism that *Americanah* depicts is as a whole distinctly patriarchal in character. Whether one resides in the United States, Nigeria, or the United Kingdom, economic advancement depends upon one’s connections with relatively wealthy and documented men. In the UK, this patriarchal capitalism manifests as a cold, bureaucratic system. Obinze’s miserable, poverty-stricken trip to London ends with his deportation on the cusp of completing a green card marriage arranged by a male “friend.” In Nigeria, patriarchal capitalism takes another form, one which hinges upon obsequiousness before the powerful. Obinze’s extreme economic success in Nigeria depends upon his having gained the favor of Chief, a fickle, powerful man whom Obinze imagines may ask him “to organize an assassination” (28). In the United States of *Americanah*, patriarchal capitalism expresses itself through familial and romantic relationships.

In other words, in the US economic opportunity and political security alike require the love of the relatively powerful, as opposed to simply their payment or patronage. Ifemelu’s friend Ginika becomes a lawyer with relative ease, as she enjoys the care of her father who has a teaching job in Missouri. Aisha pleads with Ifemelu to approach Aisha’s Igbo boyfriend (who has a green card) and convince him to agree to marry Aisha (18). Auntie Uju becomes a doctor and secures financial independence after breaking up with Bartholomew and entering into a relationship with Kweku, a divorced Ghanaian doctor who “treats me like a princess” (301). Even Ifemelu’s success as a blogger depends upon a man’s affection. The character’s prospects significantly improve after she enters into a long-term relationship with a wealthy white American named Curt. Curt knows “some people my dad did business with” and helps Ifemelu find a job in public relations with a company that sponsors her for a green card, which in turn gives her the time and leisure to launch her blog (204). While *Americanah* is critical of the patriarchal system of patronage that characterizes global capitalism, insofar as it prefers economic independence for its heroines and abhors the desperation of a young Ifemelu, it seems circumspect about the ways in which the system of American patronage may be regarded as more yielding and sentimental than its counterparts in both Britain and Nigeria—Curt, for example, does not insist on the financial dependence demanded by the novel’s powerful Nigerian men, nor does he require ongoing bureaucratic negotiations like his British counterparts. For a beloved woman, Adichie suggests, the path to financial solvency and independence may be most pleasurable and possible in America.

Even as the novel proffers a sentimental account of the relation between love and money in the US, however, it also works to undercut that account

by intimating that the love of Americans is inexorably delimited by race. Ifemelu's relationship with Curt, for example, is structured by Curt's optimism and his entitlement, both of which are a function of his whiteness. Curt's optimism is unfettered and alternately baffling, admirable, and repellant to Ifemelu: "He believed in good omens and positive thoughts and happy endings to films, a trouble-free belief, because he had not considered them deeply before choosing to believe; he just simply believed" (199). This belief that things will work out well is closely related to a belief that things *should* work out well: "There was something in him, lighter than ego but darker than insecurity that needed constant buffing, polishing, waxing" (209). Thus, he encourages the flirtatious emails of a woman he met at a conference, while anticipating Ifemelu's forgiveness in light of the purity of his intentions (213). Because he is "so good" to Ifemelu, he expects to be the "fucking love of [her] life" (291, 226): he requires her absolute gratitude and fidelity. Although Curt does not pretend "that being black and being white were the same in America," he is yet alternately "completely tone-deaf" to and "crippled" by Ifemelu's daily experiences of racism (293). After Curt and Ifemelu break up, Ifemelu uses her reflections on their relationship to start her blog on "the subject of blackness in America" (298). Her first post offers the "simplest solution to the problem of race in America": "Romantic love" (298). This solution, however, by both Ifemelu's and the novel's reckoning, is also in many ways constitutively *the* problem of race in America: "because American society is set up to make it [romantic love] even rarer between American Black and American White, the problem of race in America will never be solved" (298). Curt's experience of whiteness has left him unprepared to function in a relationship in which his goodness, which is to say his material resources and limited empathy, does not ensure the total and constant affirmation he desires and expects.

Ifemelu's long-term relationship with Blaine, a handsome professor of comparative politics at Yale, extends the novel's critique of the racialization of romantic love in the US to include relationships between black Americans and black non-Americans by describing a love-interest whose belief in his "goodness" extends, unlike Curt's, beyond personal attributes to social advocacy yet remains, like Curt's, absolute and certain. Both Blaine and his circle of friends astonish Ifemelu with their optimism. Although these intellectuals are dissatisfied with how things are, they yet imagine perfectibility in how things might be: "They looked at the world with an impractical, luminous earnestness that moved her, but never convinced her" (315). If Curt feels certain that things should work out for him, Blaine feels certain that he knows how the world should be. He believes in "unbending, unambiguous honesties" (321): "His positions were firm, so thought-through and fully realized in his own mind that he sometimes seemed surprised that she, too, had not arrived at them herself" (314). Blaine's earnest certainty, in the novel's rendering, is not a personal

idiosyncrasy but rather a trait that is symptomatic of the singular experience of being black in the United States. Ifemelu characterizes this experience as such: “I came from a country where race was not an issue; I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America” (292). The point is one that she makes repeatedly; while racism certainly structured British colonialism in Nigeria, the daily lived experience of “race” in a country in which the majority of the population is black has been markedly different from that in the US (362). Because racism has been a daily certainty in the US, opposition to racism has likewise had to be absolute. Yet, Blaine’s absolute commitment to addressing all instances of racial injustice proves estranging to Ifemelu. When Ifemelu decides to attend a university luncheon rather than join a protest held on behalf of a black university employee, the couple fights. Ifemelu finds in Blaine’s tone “a subtle accusation . . . about her Africanness; she was not sufficiently furious because she was African, not African American” (346). Blaine’s experience of growing up black in America has left him unprepared to function in a relationship in which his goodness, which is to say his advocacy for racial justice, does not result in the absolute solidarity he desires and expects.

In short, Ifemelu’s relationships with Curt and Blaine may be read as allegories for understanding “the question” of race in the United States. As such, *Americanah* reworks Jameson’s argument that western culture is characterized by “a radical split between the private and the public, between the poetic and the political, between what we have come to think of as the domain of sexuality and the unconscious and that of the public world of classes, of the economic, and of secular political power” (69). The novel supports Jameson’s argument that “we”—and by “we” he means North American and European middle-class white citizens—have “been trained in a deep cultural conviction that the lived experience of our private existences is somehow incommensurable with the abstractions of economic science and political dynamics” and that reading “third-world” literature exposes “western” readers to a “different ratio of the political to the personal” (69). *Americanah* accomplishes this exposition, however, by elucidating the profound effect of racist economics, politics, and history on the private sphere in the United States. Adichie’s novel performs in fiction what Jameson articulates in theory: the “first world” tendency to conceive of individual psychology as radically separate from the historical situation. *Americanah* also concretizes, albeit for the United States, Jameson’s suggestion that reading third-world literature as national allegory enables “the whole laborious telling of the experience of the collectivity itself,” in contrast to the “epistemologically crippling” tendency to reiterate subjects’ “placeless individuality” (85-86). Ifemelu’s relationships with Curt and Blaine suggest the stifling effects of American certitudes that are experienced and understood as private, despite having been profoundly shaped by a long shared history of white supremacy.

### *Americanah's* Nigeria

On the one hand, *Americanah* exemplifies Jameson's account of third-world literature, insofar as it eschews representations of self-contained, autonomous individuals in favor of individuals whose lives are dramatically shaped by particular historical contexts. On the other hand, the novel departs from Jameson's account by addressing the collective history—the crises and embattled situation—of the first world, rather than the third. The novel's representation of first-world ontology suggests that what Jameson identifies as the “deep cultural conviction” of a separation between the private and the public is at least in part a function of a deeply racist culture. The novel's representation of third-world ontology similarly resonates with and departs from Jameson's theory of third-world literature.

*Americanah's* representation of Ifemelu's life in Nigeria resonates with Jameson's claim that “third-world culture... must be situational and materialist despite itself” and, as such, offers the potential for imagining a future apart from “the poverty of the individual experience of isolated monads” (85). Ifemelu avers in an argument with Blaine that “[t]o be a child of the Third World is to be aware of the many different constituencies you have and how honesty and truth must always depend on context” (321). Her faith in context is shared by Obinze, and context, not the supposed self-contained private individual, governs options and potentials in the central love story. The novel's ending, in which Ifemelu admits Obinze to her home though he is still married, though presumably happy, is also contingent and provisional. Relatively detached from the virulent history of racism in the United States, neither Nigerian experiences the personal in absolute terms: they do not desire or require absolute affirmation or solidarity from the other.

The association of Nigeria with the contextual in *Americanah*, like Jameson's association of the third world and the material, can be critiqued as reductive. As some reviewers have pointed out, Ifemelu's description of a Nigerian history detached from white supremacy is undoubtedly idealized (Carlucci).<sup>5</sup> The risk of such idealization, like the risk of national allegory as Jameson discusses it, is the formulation of an identity politics that locates something essentially salutary or “grounded” within the Nigerian national character. *Americanah*, like Jameson's essay, is admittedly utopic, and perhaps reductive, in its rendering of African individuals attuned to context and constituencies, to the ways in which the public structures the private.

Importantly, however, neither Adichie nor Jameson is unselfconscious about their utopic writing. As I read the unification of Ifemelu and Obinze, it does not so much signal a celebration of extant nationalism or essential ontology as an attempt to imagine future possibilities for Nigerians. This reading is informed by Imre Szeman's clarifying analysis of Jameson's theory of national allegory in “Who's Afraid of National Allegory? Jameson, Literary Criticism, Globalization” (2001). In Szeman's argument, “[w]hat Jameson describes as

national allegory could just as easily have been called political allegory” (816). This is to say that Jameson’s essay does not look to recoup discredited ideals of nationhood or nationalism in a globalized world through a consideration of third-world texts. Rather, as Szeman suggests by surveying Jameson’s wider critical oeuvre, “the nation names for Jameson the possibility of new social relations and forms of collectivity not just ‘other’ to neoliberal globalization, but the possibility of imagining these kinds of relation at all” (820). As Szeman summarizes, in Jameson’s work, “[o]ther ‘national situations’ offer models of different forms of collective and social life” that are “frankly utopic” in character (822). The other national situation that *Americanah* proffers enacts the kind of dialectical work that Szeman’s reading of Jameson identifies as central to the project of national allegory. The political collectivity that the novel imagines in Nigeria is one in which the pursuit of capital and love alike is not restricted by histories of white supremacy.

In its imagining of a utopic political community, *Americanah* exemplifies one of Jameson’s reasons for valuing third-world literature. Its articulation of *why* such imaginative labor is required, however, diverges from Jameson’s theory. Jameson promotes third-world literature to American readers because Americans, as “masters of the world,” occupy an “epistemologically crippling” position that, in the Hegelian tradition, promotes the illusions of “placeless individuality” and “structural idealism” (85). Third-world literature offers, in Jameson’s account, the opportunity of apprehending “the experience of the collectivity itself” (86). Such exposure to the “collective totality” is “often intolerable” as well as salutary; “the daily reality of the other two-thirds of the globe” is the material reality of the costs of displaced collectivity and privatization that Americans too often fail to grasp (86). In this formulation, middle-class Americans stand to apprehend the intolerable reality of global capitalism by looking outside the United States. *Americanah*, in contrast, articulates the intolerable reality of racialized capitalism within middle-class America. Within the novel, “the daily reality of the other two-thirds of the globe,” or at least of middle-class Nigerians, is relatively attractive.

By highlighting the particular misery of capitalism in a thoroughly white-supremacist nation-state, *Americanah* resists a status quo in which the United States habitually identifies the reality of Africa as “intolerable” and responds by trying to “fix” it. Jameson’s essay, written almost thirty years ago, writes against the isolationism of Reagan’s America, in which foreign policy toward Africa tended to prioritize the containment of Soviet influence and “narrow economic interests” (Shepard 5). Adichie’s novel, in contrast, appears in a context in which, as Joanne Sharp argues, “the US has drawn Africa back into the colonial geopolitical fold” in the wake of the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Towers and the Pentagon (238), and US development and security policies reinforce “orientalist images of the passive African awaiting the benevolent actions of the western subject” (242). The dynamic is one that

Ifemelu encounters and resists. When she meets yet another American who desires to save “Africa,” she wants “suddenly and desperately, to be from the country of people who gave and not those who received, to be one of those who had and could therefore bask in the grace of having given, to be among those who could afford copious pity and empathy” (Adichie 172). By extending pity and empathy to the United States for the intolerability of its history, *Americanah* inaugurates Nigeria as being such a country.

### Conclusion

*Americanah*, like other Afropolitan novels, lacks the wholesale condemnation of global capitalism found in earlier works of third world literature that Jameson and other leftist American academics have celebrated for their radical potential. It does not invite, for example, the devastating conclusions impelled by Buchi Emecheta’s seminal *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), in which Nnu Ego, who is assumed to be “a rich madam” because her son is “in ‘Emelika,” dies alone, “with no child to hold her hand” (224). Nnu Ego’s death and burial pillory the capitalist culture that compels Nigerian children to desert their parents. Emecheta’s novel translates the American dream into a Nigerian nightmare.

*Americanah*, in contrast, considers whether and how the capitalist economic system that structures the American dream may yet work for Nigerians. The “Nigerian dream” with which *Americanah* ends is one that to some degree upholds material aspirations: both Obinze and Ifemelu are wealthy, thriving professionals. In *Americanah*’s closing chapters, their reunification would seem to demarcate a political collectivity that is undoubtedly capitalist. In this sense, Adichie’s work resonates with Olakunle George’s argument that D. O. Fagunwa’s fiction anticipates and complicates Jameson by offering a national allegory of the Nigerian nation-state in which “the discourse of nation is simultaneously, but covertly, a discourse of a particular class,” namely of “the educated elite” (108). At the same time, however, the couple’s reunification eschews political and personal certainties, such as those forged in the crucible of white supremacy, that center on expectations for a good or better future. Obinze “sometimes feel[s] as if the money I have isn’t really mine” (533). Ifemelu writes on her Lagos blog: “We are just one step away from this life in a slum, all of us who live air-conditioned middle-class lives” (585). Adichie’s novel questions the “floating-along contentment” that characterizes many of its wealthy Americans and Nigerians and favors instead the “millions of uncertainties” that characterize the love of Ifemelu and Obinze (588, 542). *Americanah* modestly, yet perhaps effectively, envisions a global capitalist system in which race does not exhaustively and exhaustingly delimit the affective bonds that enable financial success. It neither embraces nor rejects the pursuit of wealth, but certainly casts its goodness into doubt.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> For one relatively recent overview of representations of Africa in the global North, see John Kiarie Wa'Njogu's "Representation of Africa in the Western Media: Challenges and Opportunities" (2009).

<sup>2</sup> Adichie has maintained an online version of *The Small Redemptions of Lagos* at americanahblog.com. The blog appears to follow Ifemelu and Obinze after the end of the novel. The masthead picture of "a beautiful house" in "magnificent ruin" corresponds to that described in the book (538). The first entry is dated August 2014.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of the effects of the 2008 recession on the Nigerian economy, see Olu Ajakaiye and 'Tayo Fakiyesi's report in the *Global Crisis Discussion Series*.

<sup>4</sup> By reading Adichie's novel as developing Jameson's theory of national allegory, my work complements Susan Z. Andrade's *The Nation Writ Small: African Fictions and Feminism, 1958-1988* (2011). Andrade argues that europhone African women's novels have functioned "as a deconstructive supplement to Jameson's argument" by demonstrating "the consolidation and dispersal of social power" within the domestic sphere (39, 34). Whereas Andrade focuses on how African women's literature complicates Jameson's account of the so-called Third World, my essay focuses on how Adichie's novel engages with his account of the so-called First World.

<sup>5</sup> The widespread internalization of white supremacist ideology is attested to in Achebe's "The Novelist as Teacher" (1965): "I would be quite satisfied if my novels... did no more than teach my readers that their past... was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them" (30).

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