Abstract

This chapter examines the ethical and political inquiry at the center of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's third novel, *Americanah*, published in 2013. The thinking of Sara Ahmed and Judith Butler helps elucidate the text's exploration of emotion's part in othering encounters and social structures as well as its posing of ethical reorientation and answerability. Ostensibly, *Americanah* offers a dual third-person narrative focus on the mirroring and contrasting migrant lives of Ifemelu and Obinze, and Adichie discusses how she draws on realist traditions in crafting a romance plot between the two characters. Yet, in order to shape her world of stratified, intersectional black identities, global migrant economics and invidious gender protocols—a world of compromise, false positions, entitlement and precarious self-realization—Adichie has made a more complex use of frame narrative, point of view and narrative alignment than previously recognized. Indeed, attention to the novel's narrative contours and metafictional aspects allows a new understanding of the interrelation drawn between affect, ethics and social position. This opens the possibility of approaches to ethics and literature that are reinvigorated via ideological *and* narratological awareness.

Running Head Right-hand: “She Was Miraculously Neutral”

Running Head Left-hand: Jennifer Terry

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“She Was Miraculously Neutral”

Feeling, Ethics and Metafiction in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*

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Introduction

This chapter examines the entanglement of politics, ethics and feeling as explored in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s third novel, *Americanah*, published in 2013. Ostensibly, *Americanah* offers a dual third-person narrative focus on the mirroring and contrasting migrant lives of Ifemelu and Obinze, and Adichie discusses how she draws on realist traditions in crafting a romance plot between the two characters. Yet, in order to shape her world of stratified, intersectional black identities, global migrant economics and invidious gender protocols—a world of compromise, false positions, entitlement and precarious self-realization—Adichie has made a more complex use of frame narrative, point of view and narrative alignment than previously recognized. Indeed, attention to the text’s narrative contours and metafictional aspects allows a new understanding of its modeling of ethical reorientation and, as part of this, inquiry into emotion’s constitutive part within socio-political orders. This opens the possibility of approaches to ethics and literature that are reinvigorated and reimagined via ideological *and* narratological awareness.

Two self-reflexive moments about novels and reading, both drawn from *Americanah*’s frame narrative, serve as my springboard. Chapter One sets up the novel’s interest in attitudes toward emotion. Here we meet Ifemelu on her way to the hair salon, carrying with her a copy of Jean Toomer’s *Cane* to pass the time:

> A precious performance, Blaine had called it, in that gently forbearing tone he used when they talked about novels . . . sure that she . . . would come to accept that the novels he liked were superior, novels written by . . . youngish men and packed with things, a fascinating, confounding accumulation of brands and music and comic

> books and icons, with emotions skimmed over, and each sentence stylishly aware of its own stylishness . . . they were like cotton candy that so easily evaporated from her tongue’s memory.
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> (11–12)

Here the focalization of Ifemelu’s thoughts establishes her reading preferences as different from her ex-boyfriend Blaine’s but also conveys his “forbearing” surety about -- his position of ultimate adjudication on -- which are “superior” novels. The passage describes how Ifemelu is less drawn to fiction written by young men and “packed with things” and, by extension, rejects a hierarchy in which “emotions” are relegated. This both signals Ifemelu’s, and potentially *Americanah*’s, value system and initiates the novel’s metafictional thread. Patricia Waugh describes “metafiction” as a term “given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact,” and this foregrounding is extended in *Americanah* to the discussion of literary reception, evaluation and limiting categories or interpretive frames (Waugh 2).

Sara Ahmed’s work on emotion as cultural practice aids the extrapolation of further dimensions from this extract involving Ifemelu and Blaine. With an emphasis on *process*, Ahmed sets out to consider “the processes whereby ‘being emotional’ comes to be seen as a characteristic of some bodies and not others” (Ahmed, *Emotion* 4). For example, on anti-immigrant rhetoric of “the nation” as a “soft touch,” Ahmed writes,

> The use of metaphors of “softness” and “hardness” shows us how emotions become attributes of collectives, which get constructed as “being” through “feeling.” Such attributes are of course gendered: the soft national body is a feminised body, which is “penetrated” or “invaded” by others.
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> (2)

This relates to a longstanding hierarchical and gendered opposition of emotion and reason, one that *Americanah*’s metafictional literary references infer and Ifemelu recalibrates. Yet what underpins Ahmed’s approach, and my utilization of her work, is recognition of the constructedness, the production of emotion (here soft vulnerability) and stances of rationality (hardness), with both involving emotional narratives.

Assumptions about that deemed emotional and that deemed somehow unemotional relate to not only a gendered binary but also racial hierarchy and positioning within and without the First World. Ahmed asserts, “Attention to emotions allows us to address the question of how subjects become *invested* in particular structures” [original emphasis] (Ahmed, *Emotion* 12). *Americanah* works to uncover some of these investments in the second of my textual departure points. When the start of Chapter Eighteen returns to the hair salon frame, Ifemelu is drawn into a discussion of literary representations of Africa with a fellow customer, a white liberal American, Kelsey, who is about to go traveling on the continent. Ifemelu challenges the woman on her celebratory reading of the “honesty” of V. S. Naipaul’s *A Bend in the River*: “Kelsey looked startled; she had not expected a mini lecture. Then, she said kindly, ‘Oh, well, I see why you would read the novel like that.’ ‘And I see why *you* would read it like you did,’ Ifemelu said” [original emphasis] (190). This metafictional exchange stages two clashing perspectives on the same novel yet, significantly, also examines the white liberal’s assumption of impartiality and attribution of a more subjectively invested reading to Ifemelu, as elaborated by Ifemelu’s riposte to “this girl who somehow believed that *she was miraculously neutral in how she*

read books, while other people read emotionally” [emphasis added] (190). In microcosm of much of the novel, this interaction operates to reveal how invested those who claim “neutrality” are and how emotional narratives play a part in the production of social structures.

Drawing on Judith Butler, Ahmed elucidates how “it is through the repetition of norms that worlds materialise, and that ‘boundary, fixity and surface’ are produced,” a process of iteration and naturalization that other parts of *Americanah* will further bear out (Ahmed, *Emotion* 12). It is in this exploration of emotion, investedness and establishment of norms that the novel refutes concerns that a focus on ethics in literary inquiry constitutes “retreat from a politics of social transformation to privatism” (Buell 12). Indeed, *Americanah* can be said to exemplify the “better synthesis” of the intersubjective with “social and/or political ethics” anticipated by Lawrence Buell (16). The preceding passages from Adichie’s novel reflect an engagement with feeling that is inseparable from both the ethical and the political, and metafictionally gesture toward texts as part of affective economies.

The judgments of Blaine and assumptions about neutrality and subjective investment from Kelsey, related as they are to acts of reading, demonstrate one metafictional avenue. However, *Americanah* also engages other questions of reception via its metafictional aspects, including restrictive frames. As Yogita Goyal highlights, *Americanah* “centers reading and questions of literary form . . . insisting that African literature (like all literature) can’t be reduced to a blueprint . . . for change, nor can it be read only for ethnography or testimony” (Goyal xvi). Other scholarship has also explored the novel’s address to such limited approaches and, via African migrant experience, its focus on global contexts in its examination of the workings of race.[1] Considering social conventions and institutions, Waugh identifies that metafictional texts “focus on the notion that ‘everyday’ language . . . sustains such power structures through a continuous process of naturalization whereby forms of oppression are constructed in apparently ‘innocent’ representations” (Waugh 11). *Americanah* exposes various naturalized “everyday” assumptions and processes, thus supporting the claim that “metafiction helps us to understand how the reality we live day by day is similarly constructed, similarly ‘written’” (18). As we will see, in *Americanah*, metafictional modeling also helps unpack racialization in relation to the intersubjective circulation of affect. Ahmed’s thought on the work of emotion and Judith Butler’s on relational identity and ethical responsibility will provide a dual lens for the rest of my engagement with Adichie’s novel.

Judith Butler and Sara Ahmed: The Politics of Intersubjectivity and Emotion

Bearing in mind my case for *Americanah*’s posing of ethical relations, feeling and social position as entwined, Butler’s work on recognition and answerability, alongside Ahmed’s unraveling of the investment of subjects in structures, heightens our sensitivity to the novel’s inquiry. In *Precarious Life* (2004), Butler advances a model of interdependency that can help us understand recognition (and non-recognition) of others and the fine-

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[1] Katherine Hallemeier focuses on class, capital and “private” life to argue for *Americanah*’s intervention “into ongoing debates about the function and failures of the representation of ‘Africa’ and ‘Africans’ in Euro-America” (Hallemeier 231). Mindful of reductive assumptions, Aretha Phiri poses that Adichie “problematiz[es] blackness as a uniform and shared cultural condition,” looking at “*Americanah*’s Afrodiasporic inflection” in particular (Phiri 125–26). Shane McCoy initiates discussion of how *Americanah* employs “tropes of the ‘old’ African diaspora while crafting a narrative of the ‘new’ African diaspora” (McCoy 279). Meanwhile, Goyal notes U.S.-based reviewers’ hailing of *Americanah* as the next great American novel, before examining how it “stages a self-conscious debate about print culture” (Goyal xvi).

grained exploration of such encounters in Adichie's fiction.[2] Butler draws on Emmanuel Levinas's concept of the face and ethics of alterity. Levinas writes, "It is my inescapable and incontrovertible [exposure and] answerability to the other that makes me an individual 'I'" (Levinas and Kearney 27). Here, any self is relational vis-à-vis the other and defined not by "autonomous freedom" but vulnerability and "heteronomous responsibility" (27). If here alterity is the condition for ethicality, Butler extends from Levinas to explore different relations to familiar others and unfamiliar others, and our potential, through acknowledgment of precariousness and grief, "to forge new ties of identification" (Butler 38).

While, for Levinas, responding to the "face" involves registering its simultaneous communication of precariousness and demand, Butler additionally probes why certain faces fail to elicit such a response, with the aim of combatting how forms of humanity and "normative schemes of intelligibility" have operated destructively, arbitrating "what will and will not be human, what will be a liveable life, what will be a grievable death" (Butler 146). Butler's model of intersubjectivity compels us "to take stock of our interdependence" and attempt to reimagine connection beyond the divisive criteria for normative humanity, reaching for "some keener sense of the value of life, all life" (27, xviii). While the claim that recognition of our own vulnerability can lead to "a consideration of the vulnerability of others" may seem too straightforward, Butler's wish for "insight into the radically inequitable ways that . . . vulnerability is distributed globally" reemphasizes the socio-political in ways that will be useful to my analysis (30).

Ahmed's approach, looking closely at contact between subjects in a decentered form of intersubjectivity, shifts the emphasis from Butler's interdependence and shared precariousness toward a sense of the contingency and circulation of emotions, and the related shaping of boundaries and therefore groups. Ahmed's attentiveness to process in examining the movement of emotion and alignment with collectives aids in further unpicking the telling dynamics of *Americanah*'s migrant interactions. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), Ahmed focuses on "how relations of othering work through emotions; for example, othering takes place through the attribution of feeling to others, or by transforming others into objects of feeling" (Ahmed, *Emotion* 16, ftn 3). Her initial case study of language about the nation and asylum seekers from an early twenty-first-century British National Front poster shows how such discourses "work by aligning subjects with collectives" via emotional narratives (1–2). This affective positioning anticipates Obinze's fear and marginality within a post-September 11 climate of hostility in the U.K. In Ahmed's earlier *Strange Encounters* (2000), she poses that "we can examine differentiation as something that happens at the level of the encounter, rather than 'in' the body of the other with whom I am presented" (Ahmed, *Strange* 145).[3] Adichie's novel, I will argue, dramatizes such processes of differentiation in a way that foregrounds modes and histories of encounter as well as the role of feelings.

Ahmed further offers "an account of how we become invested in social norms," how these are effects of repetition and how "norms appear as forms of life only through the concealment of the work of this repetition" (Ahmed, *Emotion* 12). This will help elucidate

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[2] My use of Butler is indebted to the doctoral work on relationality and feminism of Ayesha Siddiqa.

[3] In *Strange Encounters*, Ahmed references Levinasian ethics more directly, questioning the idea "that we should simply love the stranger as a basis for an ethics of alterity" (Ahmed 4). Here, her sense of how "the other," too often abstracted, should not be cut off from the "modes of encounter," "the particular and worldly encounters in which beings are constituted in and through their relationship to one another," is borne out in, and helps our understanding of, shifting constitutions of identity in *Americanah* (143).

a purposefully iterative pattern to Adichie’s narrative in the accumulation of othering encounters. It also aids in the exposure of naturalized norms, something already seen in Ifemelu’s debunking of Kelsey’s invested assumption of neutrality or universality in opposition to her designation of Ifemelu’s view as emotional and subjective. A key element of Ahmed’s inquiry into emotion as cultural practice is attention to the effect of such social norms and discourses on those who are othered. For example, she asks, “What happens to those bodies that are encountered as objects of hate, as having the characteristic of ‘unlikeness’?” (57). Her questioning of “a tendency to think of hate . . . from the point of view of those who hate rather than those who are hated” is taken up via inversion in the central focus of *Americanah*’s narrative (57). Like Butler’s *Precarious Life*, Ahmed’s later book arises in response to a context of post-September 11 nationalist discourse. Adichie’s novel, published nine years later, also takes this period as a decisive backdrop and similarly examines ongoing processes of boundary formation and alignment.

Othering Encounters

In parallel with Butler’s discussion of norms and allocations of humanity and Ahmed’s starting point of the anti-immigrant rhetoric of the British National Front, both Ifemelu’s and Obinze’s stories involve race and racism as defined in a context of hostility toward those seen as foreigners. Faced with a lack of opportunity, both Adichie’s protagonists leave Nigeria, first Ifemelu, who enters the U.S. on a student visa, and then Obinze, whose shorter and soon undocumented stay in the U.K. coincides with a post-September 11 growth in aggressive nationalism—and both experience othering forms of contact. Often, this is encapsulated in memorable face-to-face encounters where the third-person narrative’s focalization of the protagonists centers—and aligns the reader with—the perspective of she or he who is othered. Such successive encounters accumulate across the accounts of Ifemelu and Obinze’s migrant lives, exploring intersectional matrices of difference and reenacting the repetition that produces social norms. This viewpoint and focus contribute to *Americanah*’s framing of the political, the ethical, the intersubjective and the emotional as mutually informative.

Obinze’s time in the U.K. is dominated by fear -- linked to his status as illegal -- and desperate efforts to make his move a success; we learn “he live[s] in London . . . invisibly, his existence like an erased pencil sketch” (257). The scene is set via one of many acts of reading foregrounded in the narrative: “He . . . only skimmed the British newspapers, because there were more and more articles about immigration, and each one stoked new panic in his chest. *Schools Swamped by Asylum Seekers*” [original emphasis] (256). The novel’s inclusion of early twenty-first-century media language illustrates the work of emotions such as fear and hate in constituting others. As Ahmed writes, “Such narratives work by generating a subject that is endangered by imagining others whose proximity threatens not only to take something away from the subject (jobs, security, wealth), but to take the place of the subject” (Ahmed, *Emotion* 43). The others generated within this relation of danger, the invaders, are invariably racialized and aligned together.

> He sat . . . opposite a woman reading the evening paper. *Speak English at home, Blunkett tells immigrants*. He imagined the article she was reading . . . The wind blowing across the British Isles was odorous with fear of asylum seekers, infecting everybody . . . and so articles were written and read, simply and stridently, as though the writers lived in a world in which the present was unconnected to the past.

(258–9)

Here, Obinze’s thoughts capture the current language of fear and infection, with the rhetoric of British politician David Blunkett providing an immediate context.[4] The headlines are entangled with Obinze’s own anxiety on public transport, suggesting a movement of feeling along the lines of Ahmed, from the emotion-fuelled media narrative of threat to Obinze’s affective response. However, unlike the newspaper articles, Obinze does connect the colonial “past” and the “present,” noting that “the influx into Britain of black and brown people” is “from countries created by Britain” (258–9). Here, *Americanah* also reflects an affective asymmetry as the discourse of the dominant “we” fails to recognize the full lives of others, while Obinze, transposed for a moment, sees the “non-white foreignness of this scene through the suspicious eyes of the white woman on the tube” (259).

In parallel, Ifemelu’s life in the U.S. involves her experience of “becoming black,” learning of her context-related blackness amid what she calls the American tribalisms of race, ideology and region (290). A complex web of social relations produces this process of racialization, but it is most vividly illustrated in several encounters where the protagonist is brought face-to-face with her otherness. One such encounter comes when she registers for college, demonstrating the intersection of her designation as non-American with her race. Addressed slowly and simply as if a child by a white woman because of her “foreign accent” and presumed deficiency, Ifemelu is shaken:

> “I speak English,” she said. “I bet you do,” Cristina Tomas said. “I just don’t know how *well*.” Ifemelu shrank. In that strained, still second when her eyes met Cristina Tomas’s before she took the forms . . . She shrank like a dried leaf. She had spoken English all her life, led the debating society in secondary school . . . she should not have cowered and shrunk, but she did.

(133–4)

Here, a meeting of eyes leads not to recognition—and Butler’s ethical answerability—but an enforcement of superiority and inferiority and a learning of difference. Soon after, Ifemelu begins to “practise an American accent,” only later choosing to “return . . . her voice to herself” (134, 180). Ahmed examines how fear of the foreign figure moves from the threatened white body to that of the one produced as foreigner, and this bears on my reading here: “the fear signified through language and by the white body does not simply begin and end there: rather the fear works through and on the bodies of those who are transformed into its subjects, as well as its objects” (Ahmed, *Emotion* 62). In this process, “The black body is drawn tighter . . . enclosed by the fear, and comes to feel that fear as its own, such that it is felt as an . . . uninhabitable body” (62). In the metaphor of Ifemelu shrinking like a leaf, and the repetition of “shrank,” we find something of the black body drawing “tighter,” after the attribution of unlikeness, becoming “uninhabitable.” The emotions that work within Cristina Tomas’s hostility slide and stick onto Ifemelu, and, experiencing fear and reduction in parallel with Obinze, she subsequently attempts Americanization.

Americanah features other encounters that address the intersection of race and gender and/or race and class, building a picture of racialization as non-uniform and context-

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[4] David Blunkett served as U.K. Home Secretary within the Labour government 2001–4, a role involving responsibility for immigration and citizenship as well as internal affairs.

dependent. For example, introduced to Curt’s old college friends at a wedding as his girlfriend, Ifemelu is met with surprised looks and expressions that ask “Why her?” (292). This puzzlement at the choice of a “black girl,” and not one that is “light-skinned . . . biracial” at that, reveals internalized race-based assumptions about femininity, desire and value (292). Initially, Ifemelu is amused:

> She had seen that look before, on the faces of white women, strangers . . . who would see her hand clasped in Curt’s and instantly cloud their faces . . . It was not merely because Curt was white, it was the kind of white he was . . . the smell, around him, of money.
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> (292–3)

But, repeatedly subject to this reaction, “her amusement curdled into exhaustion . . . She was tired even of Curt’s protection, tired of needing protection” (293). It is the cumulative nature of the “Why her?” looks that leads to exhaustion, looks that necessitate behaviors and feelings from Ifemelu and Curt in response, which Ifemelu experiences as depleting. Thus, this wedding party models the iterative dimension of devaluing and othering, borne out in the multiple such encounters incorporated in the novel, and demonstrates the reopening afresh of “histories of association” linked to race and gender (Ahmed, *Emotion* 54).

The imbrication of race and class is further elaborated upon when Ifemelu works as a childminder for a wealthy white couple during her studies. Answering the door to a carpet cleaner, Ifemelu is once more aligned with threat and attributed as the source of feeling on being mistaken as the homeowner: “He stiffened when he saw her. First surprise flitted over his features, then it ossified to hostility . . . she was not what he had expected to see in this grand stone house with the white pillars” (165–6). Not only does the white man not expect a wealthy customer to be black, but emotions such as fear and hate materialize as hostility in response to a perceived undermining of historical orders, orders in which he is invested. Only when Ifemelu gives away her employment status does the cleaner’s aggressive countenance change, for he then recognizes a more familiar other: “It was like a conjuror’s trick, the swift disappearance of his hostility. His face sank into a grin. She, too, was the help. The universe was once again arranged as it should be” (166). Later Ifemelu will write a blog post, “Sometimes in America, Race Is Class,” based on this incident (166). Indeed, in addition to the third-person narrative focused on Obinze and Ifemelu’s experiences, her first-person blog entries contribute further to the impression of accretive othering interactions. While these almost always involve the reader in the perspective of whoever is being constituted as other, I will later return to a parallel example from the frame narrative that handles this differently and further advances *Americanah*’s inquiry into the work of emotion in (re)producing regimes of difference and the possibility of ethical relation.

False Positions

Americanah’s engagement with migrant experience, global and local socioeconomics, and inter- and intraracial faultlines extends through a preoccupation with characters taking, or being placed in, what I term “false positions.” This concern is not part of a clear-cut narrative scheme of ethical evaluation but, instead, a complex questioning of complacency and privilege in various forms and an exploration of contingency and ethical response. An

episode that develops this avenue is Ifemelu’s exchange of sexual intimacy for money when struggling financially as a student. Following an initial meeting that Ifemelu finds frightening and sordid, her desperate return to accept the white tennis coach’s offer seems a straightforward situation of exploitation. Indeed, the experience leaves Ifemelu traumatized and even more lost in her new life in the U.S.: “She felt like a small ball, adrift and alone . . . wishing she could . . . yank out the memory of what had just happened” (154). Yet, while it constitutes another othering encounter involving gendered objectification and resting on migrant economic vulnerability, the incident also becomes the means to examine a layered sense of failure that is bound up with affective flows and obligations.

The narrative details not only Ifemelu’s shame at this sexual interaction, and her ensuing dissociation (“Between her and what she should feel, there was a gap”), but also a “self loathing” and shame linked to her failure or inability to tell anyone and to tell Obinze in particular (156, 158). It is Ifemelu’s response of breaking off communication that ruptures their long-distance relationship and leaves the romance plot on hold for much of the novel. Following Ahmed, we can connect this to the movement of feeling; Ifemelu’s shame at the sexual exchange migrates to become shame at her shutting out of Obinze: “At first, she gave herself a month . . . But a month passed and still she kept Obinze sealed in silence . . . She felt shamed; she had failed” (159). Ifemelu feels hers is a false position due to a kind of lack of honesty with, and thus a betrayal of, Obinze. The intimation of a breakdown of answerability in Ifemelu’s relationship with Obinze signals how *Americanah* keeps in play a complex sense of the protagonists’ ethicality vis-à-vis others. Yet Ifemelu’s understanding is also shaped by a sense of migrant failure at not succeeding in America, having to resort to a compromising interaction that, in her assessment, diminishes her. The unfolding of the limited options open to her, and her shame at failure, further reveals the inseparability of social (dis)advantage, self-estimation and interpersonal bonds. The novel’s attention to emotion and shifting circumstances means it is able to sketch difficult and contingent ethics.

In the narrative of Obinze’s experiences, the interrelation of historical asymmetries with migrant feelings of failure and falseness is laid out more clearly. Reflecting on people like himself, who migrate “hungry for choice and certainty” rather than because of disaster or atrocity, he limns the “dissatisfaction,” initiated by colonialism, of those “conditioned from birth to look towards somewhere else” (276). Obinze’s shame and sense of being an imposter, resulting from not matching up to aspirations of success and belonging in the U.K. or America, resonates with Ifemelu’s self-loathing after her encounter with the tennis coach. Yet Adichie again presents a personal betrayal layered with this socio-politically shaped situation. Thinking about how his mother assisted his entry into the U.K., Obinze “knew that truth had indeed, in their circumstances, become a luxury. She lied for him . . . and he got the six month visa . . . and he felt, even before he left, like a failure” (234). This quotation indicates the shortfall Obinze perceives in having “made nothing of himself” while abroad but also introduces honesty and falsehood as dependent on context; with circumstances in Nigeria and post-September 11 visa difficulties meaning truth has “become a luxury” they can no longer afford (234). Yet, as with Ifemelu’s silence toward Obinze, entangled with the contextual understanding we additionally find shame at his scrupulously honest mother lying on his behalf and at his subsequent self-imposed estrangement from her, sharing only “a few . . . strained conversations” while gone (234). The paragraph continues, “when he returned home, he would feel disgusted with his own entitlement, his blindness to her, and he spent a lot of time with her, determined to make

amends,” further revealing a sense of culpability—a different failure—on an interpersonal level (235). Just as the narrative of *Americanah* outlines a conceptualization of truth as not absolute but contingent and sometimes a form of privilege,[5] so it also complicates failure and shame as distributed unequally and constituted within a nexus of personal relations and historical, social and economic locations.

Adichie’s novel addresses false positions in another way through its critique of complacent privilege. Obinze’s focalized narrative uses the word “entitlement” in describing his withdrawal from his mother, yet this word features more frequently in relation to white assumptions and socioeconomic advantage. *Americanah*’s narrative often links positions of entitlement with a kind of graceful surety, charity, and naturalized claims to neutrality or universality, all of which are problematized by migrant perspectives and, in some instances, satirical treatment. In an interview contemporaneous with *Americanah*’s publication, Adichie discusses being struck by “how lacking in the knowledge of the other” those in positions of white privilege and power are in the U.S. (Smith n.p.). The novel tellingly opens with Ifemelu admiring Princeton’s affluent ease and “air of earned grace,” musing that here “she could pretend to be someone else, someone specially admitted into a hallowed American Club, someone adorned with certainty” (3). Such certainty is directly coupled with Americanness and, by extension, whiteness. When younger, Ifemelu is “fascinated” by her American roommates’ “assumption of certainty,” and she later forges a more critical view of her wealthy, white boyfriend Curt as “entitled in the way a child was: blindly” (128, 210). Entitlement based on advantages of race, money, nationality and so on is revealed not as blessedness, inherent worth or earned but rather as constructed within an order that disadvantages others, and in this sense, falseness is attached to the complacency and blinkeredness that accompanies privilege.

The interrogation of entitlement is furthered through representations of charity in particular. Working for wealthy and philanthropic Kimberly, Ifemelu discovers something new, “charity towards people whom one did not know,” and she speculates, “perhaps it came from having had yesterday and having today and expecting to have tomorrow” (169). This kind of charity is firmly linked with those “who have” and, it is implied, both rests on and further reinforces the assumptions of privilege rather than being founded on redistribution of benefit. This is more sharply defined in terms of global inequalities when Ifemelu is seized by a wish “to be from the country of people who gave and not those who received, to be one of those who had and could therefore . . . afford copious pity and empathy” (170). Here, not just truth but “pity and empathy” become luxuries; dispositions toward others are revealed as inextricable from social hierarchies and, in the process, the novel punctures First World complacencies and good deeds. Looking at both those who can “afford” pity and those who cannot, and are therefore aligned with the pitied, *Americanah* recalls Ahmed on the work of feeling as well as Butler’s sense of asymmetrical precariousness, even within an ethical model of shared answerability. We might also perceive lines of connection back to the prerogative of universality of the “kindly” white liberal Kelsey, about to go traveling in Africa and instructed about her privilege and subjective investment by Ifemelu in the frame narrative (190).

Consideration of the false positions adopted by Obinze and Ifemelu later in their stories sharpens our view of the novel’s interrelation of ethics and location. After returning to

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[5] This notion recurs in a disagreement between Ifemelu and Blaine in which he believes “in unbending, unambiguous honesties” and she speculates rather “To 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” (320).

Nigeria, Obinze finds quick wealth via dealings with a powerful patron, becoming “bloated from all he had acquired—the family, the houses, the cars, the bank accounts” (21). Obinze is uncomfortable with his new life and perceives a disconnect, a fraudulence, in his inhabitation of it: “This was what he now was, the kind of Nigerian expected to declare a lot of cash at the airport . . . he felt a hollow space between himself and the person he was supposed to be” (27). Now occupying a position of privilege, we learn through focalization, he feels as if his “life [has] become this layer of pretension after pretension” (432). This extends to a representation of dissatisfaction in his marriage, marked by self-aware complicity, as he believes he should never have married Kosi. Although without the wealth of Obinze, Ifemelu’s present-day social position with a green card, fellowship at Princeton and lucrative blog is also, to some extent, linked to a feeling of falseness. In particular, her blog “Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black,” initiated to share frank commentary on race in the U.S., brings compromised success.

Not only does the blog lead to invitations to deliver diversity talks where “They did not want the content of her ideas; they merely wanted the gesture of her presence” (305), but Ifemelu also begins to doubt her voice and motivation in the posts themselves:

> All those readers . . . Readers like SapphicDerrida, who reeled off statistics and used words like “reify” in their comments, made Ifemelu nervous, eager to be fresh and to impress, so that she began, over time, to feel like a vulture hacking into the carcasses of people’s stories for something she could use . . . Sometimes not believing herself. The more she wrote, the less sure she became. Each post scraped off yet one more scale of self until she felt naked and false.
>
> (5)

Ifemelu’s likening of herself to a vulture suggests her questioning of the ethics of her activity. The erosion of belief in what she writes, and the unusual combination of the terms “naked and false,” indicate an evaluation of her writing as both revelatory and, in a way, dishonest and predatory. If we consider the blog as one of the metafictional elements of *Americanah*, in how Ifemelu’s posts are increasingly shaped with awareness of imagined readers, we find a probing of reception influencing production. That is to say, once in the position of having a voice, might Ifemelu’s striving to “impress” her audience take us back to black burdens of representation, cultural hierarchies and limiting frames of literary expectation? The sense of disclosure, but also performance, is reinforced by dinner party scenes where Ifemelu recounts stories about race and racism to guests, eagerly listening “as though she was about to give up a salacious secret that would both titillate and implicate them” (291).

These aspects of Ifemelu’s present life and writing are, however, subject to critical self-scrutiny and not accompanied by the surety of the privileged. While their metafictional character potentially gestures toward the racial and global politics of the book trade, Ifemelu’s reflection and reaching for self-knowledge regarding her work and role brings something else, too. If the earlier migrant experiences of Obinze and Ifemelu establish a form of falseness and shame linked to the “failure” of the disadvantaged, their later acquisition of certain forms of privilege is unfolded along with another, different awareness of pretense and compromise. Indeed, the narrative focalization captures their self-questioning (something that in Ifemelu’s case leads to the closure of her blog), a

questioning related to ethical life and perspectives brought by their former marginalized positions, never witnessed in complacent white figures of entitlement.

Frame Narrative or the Mariama African Hair Braiding Salon

While the inclusion of Ifemelu’s blog posts has received some critical attention (for example, see Goyal, McCoy, Phiri), *Americanah*’s frame narrative, another significant formal feature, has been neglected and opens up further important aspects of the novel’s ethical inquiry. In the narrative present (soon after Barack Obama’s first election as president in 2008) and at the start of the novel, Ifemelu prepares for her intended return to Nigeria by having her hair braided. The hair salon setting introduces *Americanah*’s concern with beauty politics and examination of the stratifications within black and immigrant groups and racially structured U.S. society more broadly. The first 40 chapters (of 55) unfold the protagonists’ past lives, but this retrospective narrative is punctuated by returns to the “present” salon scene at the beginning of Chapters Three, Nine, Eighteen and Forty-One after it is introduced in Chapter One. In a marked shift, from Chapter Forty-Two on, the frame is dispensed with, as Ifemelu leaves the salon and learns of her cousin Dike’s attempted suicide, news that disrupts both her mental health and her departure for Lagos. The remaining narrative follows the changing situation in the U.S. and Nigeria, with movements and renewed communication between Obinze and Ifemelu adding to a new sense of immediacy. In plot terms, the frame narrative creates suspense about their possible reunion, yet its significance is not limited to these parameters. The work of the frame also develops *Americanah*’s engagement with the emotional dynamics and ethical implications of recognition and non-recognition, privilege and connection.

I propose that in Ifemelu’s frame narrative interactions with the hairdresser Aisha, *Americanah* amplifies concerns with othering and ethical relation that reverberate through the rest of the novel. In Chapter One, Ifemelu views the rundown salon with distaste: “the room was thick with disregard, the paint peeling” (9). Later, noting “its stuffy air and rotting ceiling,” she poses, “Why couldn’t these African women keep their salon clean and ventilated?” (363). Here, her judgment and phrasing (“these African women”) distances her and signals Ifemelu assuming the position of American insider vis-à-vis the hairdressers. Focalized through Ifemelu’s perspective throughout, her salon conversations and views are often marked by her own feelings of migrant superiority, having been in the U.S. for thirteen years, and current class privilege. This recalls Ahmed explaining, “how identifications involve dis-identification or an active ‘giving up’ of other possible identifications” (Ahmed, *Emotion* 52). However, at the same time, the narrative conveys Ifemelu’s insecurity about perhaps not being considered still African, one of themselves, by the women. On the cusp of return migration, she appears sensitive about their potential evaluation of her. In Chapter Three, her response to a question about speaking Igbo is “defensive, wondering if Aisha was again suggesting that America had changed her” (40). Ifemelu’s outlook in the frame is thus established as part entitled and part anxious about belonging, and these orientations once more recall Ahmed’s detailing of processes of investment in social structures and alignments that unite and divide.

To her braider, Aisha, a migrant from Senegal, in particular, Ifemelu has a reaction of dislike verging on repulsion, seeking to “curtail the conversation” that might occupy “the six hours it would take to braid her hair” (15). The narrative relays that Aisha has “a skin condition, pinkish-cream whorls of discoloration on her arms and neck” (10). This is put to symbolic work, as Ifemelu, exhibiting fearful boundary formation, believes it “look[s]

worryingly infectious” (10). The initial threat of contagion, ostensibly linked to Aisha’s skin complaint, escalates when Aisha assumes a level of intimacy, talking to Ifemelu about her boyfriends. Ifemelu seeks to resist being drawn into commonality with Aisha, and her response enacts a process of differentiation and alienation: “Aisha was almost whispering . . . and in the mirror, the discoloration on her arms and neck became ghastly sores. Ifemelu imagined some bursting and oozing . . . She looked away” (15). This vision dramatizes the attribution of unlikeness, or Butler’s non-recognition, in startling terms.

In Ifemelu’s distorted mirror view producing “ghastly sores,” we witness her insecure and emotion-driven reaction to Aisha and the graphic materialization of foreignness on the body. As Ahmed points out, “fear does something; it re-establishes distance between bodies whose difference is read off the surface” (Ahmed, *Emotion* 63). The frame narrative here plays out the process of constituting the other and the part of emotion in dis-identification. Further, aligned with Ifemelu through narrative focalization, readers join in the othering of Aisha. This represents a compelling inversion of the positioning found in the multiple othering encounters in the rest of the narrative, for example perspectives from within Ifemelu’s own diminishing experiences as a migrant and as a black woman. Throughout *Americanah,* moments of face-to-face encounter are used to crystallize the operation of America’s hierarchies and exclusions; here, in the frame narrative, something similar happens within a group of African migrants, pushing further the examination of feeling, socioeconomic location and dehumanization as interrelated matters. With returns to the frame punctuating the first three quarters of the novel, we shift between Ifemelu and Obinze’s learning of their difference and marginality, and the hair salon’s echo and reversal of such differentiation. Discussing metafictional scenes, Goyal writes, “Adichie reflects back to American readers their own prejudices and defamiliarizes their sense of themselves as the norm” (Goyal xii). I would add, the critical narrative movement between being othered and othering not only undermines a universalized white perspective, but also engages all readers in a defamiliarizing enactment of how we align ourselves against as well as with others.

In Chapter Forty-One, the last involving the frame narrative, *Americanah* significantly develops the encounter with Aisha, moving from Ifemelu’s self-distancing to recognition, temporary compassion and potential for ethical responsibility. This shift occurs in the salon narrative present, but after the conclusion of the retrospective accounts of Obinze and Ifemelu’s prior experiences. When Aisha asks, “How you get your papers?,” appealing directly to Ifemelu as a fellow African immigrant, Ifemelu starts to envisage connection rather than distinction: “Suddenly, Ifemelu’s irritation dissolved, and in its place, a gossamered sense of kinship grew, because Aisha would not have asked if she were not an African” (363). While Ifemelu sees an “augury of her return home,” this tentative “new bond” also has wider importance for the novel’s engagement with ethics (363).

A further sense of closeness comes when Aisha shares that when her father died, she did not go back to Senegal “Because of papers,” her lack of U.S. legal security (364). The accompanying physical manifestation of grief conveys Aisha’s precariousness and moves Ifemelu to respond differently: “suddenly . . . Aisha began to cry. Her eyes melted, her mouth caved and a terrifying thing happened to her face: it collapsed into despair” (364). This reinforces understanding of the affective dimensions of Aisha’s disempowerment, as economic and legal vulnerability, separation from family, embodied life and the powerful work of emotion are all interrelated. Thinking of her own ease of international travel and imminent reunion with family, that is, her current privilege, Ifemelu is prompted to offer to intercede with one of Aisha’s Igbo boyfriends to secure her a green card. The shifting

scene, and Ifemelu's offer of help, represents an acknowledgment of another's grief, of answerability, and of shared even if unequally constrained life. To return to the thought of Butler, here the formation of "a point of identification with suffering" allows the beginning of a new sense of interdependence and responsibility (Butler 30). In a chapter that by staying with the frame narrative restores its prominence, to use Ahmed's phrase, "something gives" between Ifemelu and Aisha, offering up a suggestive model of reorientation (Ahmed, *Strange* 154).

The breakdown of the boundary—the dis-identification—formerly produced in Ifemelu's interaction with Aisha, and the movement of Ifemelu by Aisha's loss, anticipates the knowledge of Obinze's mother's death and Dike's near death that follows in the narrative soon after. Butler writes, "grief . . . bring[s] to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing . . . ethical responsibility" (Butler 22). This frame narrative encounter is also connected to the representation of love in the very last chapter where, reunited with and then apart from Obinze once more, Ifemelu experiences the separation keenly, recalling Aisha's bereavement: "Each memory stunned her . . . Each brought with it a sense of unassailable loss . . . Love was a kind of grief" (473). Reeling from the news about Dike, Ifemelu does not speak to Aisha's boyfriend on her behalf before leaving the U.S., meaning there is no assured follow-through from the "gossamered sense of kinship." However, notwithstanding asymmetrical access to power, the recognition of another and of common vulnerability indicates new awareness of an interdependence that involves ethical commitment (363). Although complicated and interrupted, Ifemelu and Obinze's subsequent reunion brings them a much-missed sense of understanding and belonging. Because of love, loss, mutual trust and Obinze's capabilities as "an intense, careful listener," Ifemelu is finally able to tell of her encounter with the tennis coach, finding "a silence in which she is safe" (449, 439). This reference back to the protagonist's earlier shame allows a kind of resolution, suggesting the conditions for overcoming a personal estrangement and false position borne of migrant struggle.

A further charting of a revised ethical disposition appears late in the novel with a new blog by Ifemelu. She begins "The Small Redemptions of Lagos" several months into her return with satire of aspects of contemporary Nigerian culture, reveling in "the liveliness of it all, in the sense of herself at the surging forefront of something vibrant" (422). This seems to echo the revelation and "falseness" of her former blog, yet a difference is soon marked out. After a critical piece on "the expensive lifestyles" of young women in Lagos who are supported by wealthy, married men, Ifemelu is challenged by her old friend Ranyinudo: "And who are you to pass judgement? . . . How did you get your job in America? . . . Stop feeling so superior" (422–3). Reminded that her green card followed only after Curt assisted her in getting a job, Ifemelu recognizes her "self-righteous[ness]" or judgment arising from entitlement (425). Ranyinudo's remonstration invokes Ifemelu's past difficulties, resonating with Aisha's thwarted efforts to obtain security via marriage. By calling out Ifemelu's superior stance in the blog, Ranyinudo returns us to both the complacency of the entitled and the ethical compromises of the disadvantaged.

When Ifemelu apologizes for betraying her friend's personal trust and confronts her co-option and judgment of others' lives, we can track a recalibration from the metafiction of the blog addressing the expectations held of black and African writing, to the blog as a device now used to foreground questions of our ethical answerability to one another. It is intimated that future posts will prey less on others, and hence we find, if nothing conclusive, then a gesture toward change and recommitment to self-questioning. The

narrative closes on Ifemelu achieving fresh self-realization, regardless of whether Obinze will ultimately join her or not: “The pain of his absence did not decrease with time . . . Still, she was at peace: to be home, to be writing her blog, to have discovered Lagos again. She had, finally, spun herself fully into being” (475). This rests on her new knowledge about vulnerability and grief and sense of possible connection with, and ethical responsibility for, others.

Conclusion

I have contended that *Americanah*’s exploration of racialization and othering encounters based on race, nationality, gender and class is also a sophisticated engagement with the work of emotion and the processes by which boundaries and social norms come into being. The thinking of Ahmed and Butler has aided in drawing out the novel’s complex examination of asymmetrical modes of contact, historical yet evolving structures, and the affective and ethical dimensions to such schemes. For example, the text probes positions of complacent entitlement and contingent truths, as well as elements of failure and learning in interpersonal relationships, in order to show the imbrication of feeling, ethical disposition toward others and location within social formations.

Narrative construction and metafictional aspects are integral to *Americanah*’s ethical and political inquiry, with the narrative shaping an iterative pattern of differentiating incidents and the reader’s alignment with focalized point of view helping to enact the dynamics of identification and dis-identification. Indeed, in the frame narrative’s foregrounding of Ifemelu’s interactions with Aisha, we find a modeling of othering followed by the possibility of connection and commitment, wherein recognizing vulnerability and loss can lead to alertness to our responsibility toward each other. Waugh poses that metafiction helps us to understand how our everyday realities are also scripted (Waugh 18). While the novel’s literary references self-reflexively call up debates about the framing of black and African literature, I have argued that metafictional developments—such as Ifemelu’s exposure of Kelsey’s belief that “she was miraculously neutral” in her reading—also advance *Americanah*’s interrogation of naturalized investments and the unspoken power of alignment with and against others. If here narrative proves sufficient to the difficult task of exploring the interrelation of the politics of race, ethics and affect, then also made evident is the scope to reimagine approaches to ethics and literature by combining narratological and ideological awareness.

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