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“Arriving at Your Own Door”: Transnational Identity Formation in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*

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“Arriving at Your Own Door”:
Transnational Identity Formation
in
Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*

Julie Oosterink

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Abstract

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) guides readers through the internal questions and external pressures that contribute to identity formation of her transnational characters. This paper examines the specific ways in which Adichie's protagonist, Ifemelu, engages with both self-discovery and self-fashioning in order to shape the narrative of her past and make a plan for her future. Kwame Anthony Appiah's *The Ethics of Identity* offers a philosophical framework to consider the many components of identity formation and the ways in which individuals form personal and collective identities. Adichie uniquely addresses personal and collective identities through the transnational experiences of her characters. Her protagonist, Ifemelu, experiences Homi K. Bhabha's concept of *unhomeliness* and seeks belonging as she moves from Nigeria to the United States. More importantly, once she finds ways to belong in the United States, she makes the decision to return to Nigeria.

Adichie presents Ifemelu's story through her braided memories by jumping back and forth between varied experiences of the past and the present. Through Ifemelu's reflection on her actions to find belonging and fashion her identity in the United States, she crafts a narrative of her experience which helps justify and empower her in the decision to return to Nigeria. Adichie's characters immerse themselves in literature and the stories around them. Ifemelu, especially, shapes her understanding of the world through the books she reads. She seeks stories which help her imagine her life as a narrative toward self-actualization.

Ifemelu discovers that the "single story" for 21st century immigrants in the United States is one of suppressing alterity in order to assimilate. When she first arrives in America, she follows the advice of fellow African immigrants and begins to hide her identity by imitating an

American accent and relaxing her hair. She even uses another woman's name in order to search for a job while she does not have a green card. However, Ifemelu finds this existence unfulfilling and makes the deliberate decision to stop conforming to the expectations placed on her by others. She stops speaking with an American accent and cuts her hair. Rather than feeling more isolated, Ifemelu finds that embracing her alterity allows her to connect to an online African hair movement. She writes a blog in America and gains financial stability and social connections. By expressing herself through writing, Ifemelu further recognizes how she can delineate her worldview and even influence those around her.

It is when Ifemelu has the option of staying in America, that she realizes her desire to return to Nigeria. The "single story" of immigration celebrates finding a home in the host country, but Adichie presents a different story through Ifemelu. Adichie shows Ifemelu's ability to embrace the parts of her identity like her name and accent that make her unique, while she seeks new stories to guide her self-fashioning. As a transnational migrant, Ifemelu views the world from the threshold. She exists in the liminal space between nations, cultures, and languages. This allows her to imagine many possibilities of her life, choose the life she wants, and inspire others to do likewise.

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Introduction

Stories matter; many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that dignity. (“The Danger of a Single Story”, 2009)

It is through stories that we can define and shape our identities. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie shares many of the stories that influenced her ideas and attitudes in one of her famous TED talks titled “The Danger of a Single Story.” In this speech, she specifically exposes the ways in which stereotypes can reduce the varied stories of a group of people or an individual into a single story. When stories are forced upon people by others, they lose the truth of their formative experiences. Adichie’s *Americanah* addresses the ways in which stories help shape the lives of her protagonists as they navigate the challenges of migration and adopt a transnational identity. This novel highlights not only how reading influences each character’s worldview and self-image, but also how writing allows individuals to take greater ownership of their identity and the ways in which they can influence those around them.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has earned international fame through her inspiring TED talks, compelling short stories, and poignant novels. She challenges the “single stories” of poverty, war, and disease often pushed upon the collective nations of the African continent, by writing, speaking, and teaching writing workshops for the next generation of African authors. She delivers commencement addresses and motivates young people around the world to fully engage with their local and global communities. She encourages challenging conversations by never submitting to the silence surrounding controversies. Socially conscious authors like Adichie consider the many implications of their words or their silence. Adichie wrote deliberately about the Biafran War for independence in Nigeria through her novel *Half of a*

Yellow Sun (2006). She explained at an Igbo Conference in London that she wrote the novel because she found a silence surrounding the war. Very few authors have addressed it, and people did not talk about the conflict or loved ones they had lost to it. Laurie Edson's discussion of *Half of a Yellow Sun* shares how war remains taboo because when the book became a movie, "censors blocked distribution because of fears that the film might intensify tensions" (Edson 132). Though it is a tragic history, Adichie knows that exposing the truth of the past is the best path to reconciliation in the present. She continues to promote this value in her works of fiction and nonfiction, including in *Americanah*.

In a 2010 article titled "The Role of Literature in Modern Africa," Adichie further challenges writers in Nigeria, and all nations pushed to the periphery by colonization, to understand that literature can be key to redefining history for the present. The reading and writing of literature intellectually engages and challenges individuals and nations to be the best versions of themselves: "Literature is about memory, history, reconciliation and identity. I have found, anecdotally, that people who read literature are more likely to be intellectually curious, progressive, humanist, and open-minded – exactly the kind of people a nation needs to succeed" ("Role of Literature" 96). Literature which most promotes intellectual curiosity is that which includes a variety of experiences and breaks the "single story" of a group of people. Adichie accomplishes this by creating characters who represent a variety of human experiences. These are not, generally, experiences of extraordinary or powerful individuals. She does not seek to write about epic Nigerian heroes. Instead, she illuminates the everyday challenges and triumphs of average individuals who want the best life has to offer.

Adichie is not alone in her dedication to Nigerian literature as a key component in shaping the nation's identity. In fact, her TED talk echoes generations of Nigerian writers and literary critics who have devoted their lives to reshaping the images produced by centuries of Western literature and propaganda which denigrated Nigeria and other African nations. As Nora Berning explains in her research on narrative ethics, the first generation of Nigerian authors made it a goal to “search for a coherent narrative of the nation” (3). They wrote novels, plays, and poems which collectively defined a Nigerian literary identity¹. This should not be misconstrued as a single story for Nigeria. As Bill Ashcroft explains in *The Empire Writes Back*, postcolonial authors “argued that not only is the notion of authentic experience as false as its validating concept of the ‘centre,’ but that the inauthentic and marginal is in fact the ‘real’” (40). They produced many narratives that helped represent the variety of hopes and fears of people in Nigeria. Adichie avoids “essentialism and mythical views of authenticity” which tend to create stereotypes around cultural identities, especially for transnational individuals, according to the authors of *Minor Transnationalism* (9).

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie joins writers of the third or fourth generation, who focus on cultural identity in Nigeria and its effect on individuals, especially of those with transnational experiences. Through their examination of the third generational literature, Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton, find that Adichie and her contemporaries often address “nomadism, exile, displacement, and deracination” (16). Through transnational settings, they shape characters who must navigate changes in cultural belonging and personal identities.

Discussions of identity formation have always been significant to postcolonialism. However, as the nature of migration is changing, Adichie's fiction brings new perspectives of

identity formation from a global perspective. Transnational migration, which involves a journey to and from a host country, was considered a new type of immigration as recently as the 1990s. The migration research of Nina Glick Schiller et al. indicates that immigration no longer involves a complete abandonment of a home country. Immigrants can maintain connections between their host and home nations in a variety of ways, and these split ties can have significant effects on their identity formation:

Transnational migration is the process by which immigrants forge and sustain simultaneous multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement. In identifying a new process of migration, scholars of transnational migration emphasize the ongoing and continuing ways in which current-day immigrants construct and reconstitute their simultaneous embeddedness in more than one society. (Schiller 48)

21st Century immigration increases the modes of communication between nations and enhances immigrants' experience of understanding their identity in multiple places. Adichie's protagonist creates different online personas in America and Nigeria depending on her audience and the issues she chooses to address in these societies.

As a part of presenting transnational experiences, Adichie and her contemporaries write to present a variety of narratives about Nigeria, Pan-Africanism, and the diaspora. Writers in the third and fourth generations are "conscious of that collective image within the reins and dynamics of the broader national literary self-imaging" (Adesanmi and Dunton). Adichie seems incredibly aware of literary identity as a writer and a reader. Stories do, indeed, shape our worldview and help us to relate ourselves to the world around us.

Adichie stands out in the third generation for her ability to address many modern social concerns of Nigeria and elsewhere. Several contemporary African authors² have addressed transcultural identity, yet Augustine Uka Nwanyanwu of the University of Port Harcourt identifies *Americanah* as the first popular novel to intentionally address the economic difficulties and limited opportunities faced by Nigerian college students in the 1990s. Adichie shows how these challenges led to significant emigration to the United States and the United Kingdom. She affirms the importance of her decision to write about this time period during the 2017 PEN World Voices Festival:

With *Americanah*, the story called me...I want to write this contemporary thing about love obviously, but also it's the kind of African immigration that I am familiar with. Because I think that the narrative that is common in the Western world about African immigrants is that they are fleeing poverty and war and catastrophe, and obviously those stories are important, but it never feels familiar to me because that's not the story I know. And I wanted to write about the people who are not dying, who haven't been caught up in any war, who are dreaming of more. And for whom more is America." (29:01-29:43)

Adichie does not write *Americanah* as a nonfiction text, but she does use her own experiences as a transnational individual to shape conflicted characters. She and many of the people she loves faced the complexities of identity formation in the liminal space between nations. *Americanah* demonstrates her understanding of how migrants find a sense of belonging. She continues in the PEN World Voices interview to explain more about this type of character who makes the choice to leave and discover how immigration "shapes who you are and your relationship with your

peers... It's very familiar to me. It's the story of the people I know and love" (30:10-30:20). Adichie's characters make the choice to leave Nigeria, and they also choose to take the opportunity to return. They discover freedom and flexibility in their transcultural identities because they can find belonging in many settings. In the end, they can choose a place to call home.

In the same interview, Chris Jackson, editor-in-chief of Random House publishing, asks if Adichie was conscious in writing *Americanah* as a Pan-African novel. Though she denies this deliberate intent, she recognizes that her characters are naturally Pan-African because they travel and encounter people of the diaspora in the United States and England. Adichie's protagonist alters her view of the African diaspora after joining it herself. She experiences this change gradually throughout her thirteen years in America and acutely when she alters her views of African immigrants at a hair salon. Ifemelu feels pride in a Pan-African identity when she decides to return to Nigeria. She recognizes, as Paul Gilroy explains in *The Black Atlantic*, that nationalism promotes faulty and harmful "ideas about the integrity and purity of cultures" (7). The effect of travel is that transnational individuals gain new ways to form relationships that cross cultural divides. This contributes significantly to Pan-African and cosmopolitan thinking. In order to fully achieve a sense of cosmopolitan engagement, the world needs more books like *Americanah*.

Adichie encourages writers throughout Africa and in the diaspora to continue to generate more imaginative and realistic stories. This advocacy for dispelling "the single story" emerges throughout *Americanah*. As Nora Belding explains, "Intercultural novels are particularly well suited for probing into states of otherness which lead to a questioning of the self" (20). It is

through encountering the “other” that characters question their own identities. Adichie had her own experience of this when she left Nigeria. It was in coming to the United States that she began to recognize herself as Nigerian and as part of a greater Pan-African movement of writers. Adichie includes her Pan-African concerns in the lives of characters as a key component of their social identity.

In *Americanah*, Ifemelu works to shape a positive self image despite the racism she feels in common with black Americans and the pity and prejudice she experiences uniquely as a Nigerian immigrant. Adichie expresses in an interview with *NPR* that she did not understand racism until she came to the U.S. In Nigeria, social divisions were not dictated by skin color, but by ethnicity, class, language, or religion: “‘Race is such a strange construct,’ says Adichie, ‘because you have to *learn* what it means to be black in America’” (*NPR* interview).

Americanah shows this unique process of learning to be black in America throughout many of Ifemelu’s moments of cultural confusion. Ifemelu reflects on this experience in a blog post titled: “To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: In America, You Are Black, Baby” (273).

Ifemelu recognizes that immigrants may not feel as comfortable associating with the “black” label because, though they do not know the history of race in America, they recognize that “black is at the bottom of America’s race ladder” (*Americanah* 273). As Titalayo Ufomata describes it in a chapter on “Transnational Memories and Identity,” immigrants:

lack the historical experience of African-Americans and the social experience of segregation and oppression, in their most blatant forms. They are also reluctant to assume the negativism that the larger American society attaches to the label, and

they resent what they identify as latent hostility from African-Americans, who they perceive as not truly accepting them. (238)

Adopting negative stereotypes is not what Ifemelu hopes for when she imagines the possibilities of America. Though she experiences frustrations with the lack of opportunities in Nigeria, she does not anticipate that America will cast her into a role where she will be expected to fail.

Ifemelu experiences significant loss and regret when she becomes the “other” in America. As Ufomata further explains, “People generally take their culture for granted until they encounter another culture or experience some psychological disequilibrium that leads them to ponder who they are” (237). Ifemelu must shape her identity as an individual while confronting stereotypes placed upon her as a black migrant woman. Moreover, Ifemelu’s experience demonstrates the process of discovering race in a racially illiterate society. Paradoxically, as much as race shapes interactions between Americans, conversations about race are forever censored, tense, and full of misunderstanding.

As *Americanah* is set in Nigeria, the United States, and Great Britain, it is considered a transnational novel. It speaks to the complexities immigrants experience when forming their identities while offering an alternative to the traditional assimilation narrative. Historically, the story of migration assumed that immigrants would abandon the parts of their identities that exposed their “otherness.” In an article published in *The Journal for African Culture and Society*, Augustine Uka Nwanyanwu explains, “Migration brings with it loss of identity, depersonalization, and the need self-protectively to submerge oneself in inauthenticity” (398). Rejecting this single story, Adichie promotes a new narrative that uniquely demonstrates how migrant women like Ifemelu can reach Maslow’s concept of self-actualization³ and have the

choice to stay in the host country or return to her home country. This represents a shift in immigration which “recognizes that movement is not necessarily unidirectional and where assimilation is not always a goal” (Ufomata 234). In the old narrative, Ifemelu would be forced to subvert her alterity to find acceptance. Adichie reverses this and displays Ifemelu’s firm resolve to shape her identity as she chooses, which results in her finding a sense of belonging. Though Ifemelu finds her voice and identity in America, she determines that it is Nigeria where she feels the greatest certainty. Nigeria would always be the place she would call home, and she makes the important choice to return there.

Recent literary studies on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie examine a variety of themes and narrative strategies in her novels and short stories. One significant collection of Adichie scholarship compiled by Ernest N. Emenyonu, an Africana studies professor at the University of Michigan - Flint, is *A Companion to Chimamanda Adichie* (2017). This volume includes articles specific to each of her major works of fiction. Responses to *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* generally focus on Adichie’s portrayal of gender roles and binary oppositions. Examinations of *The Thing Around Your Neck* more closely relate to *Americanah*, as Adichie’s collection of short stories depicts many transcultural individuals and the ways in which these characters shape identity. Maitrayee Misra and Manish Shrivastava’s article titled “Dislocation, Cultural Memory, & Transcultural Identity in Select Short Stories from *The Thing Around Your Neck*” helps assessing the literary strategies Adichie has used to shape similar characters and situations in her transnational short stories and novels. The essays on *Americanah* discuss Adichie’s focus on transnational identity through strategies of double consciousness, the bildungsroman narrative structure, and by engaging with the modern natural hair movement.

Beyond this expansive volume, articles on *Americanah* appear in a variety of journals of African Studies, literary criticism, sociology, and feminist studies. Much of this research connects to concerns of identity, and this paper will reference several significant studies.

Discussions of identity and subject formation are integral to postcolonial studies. Therefore, in order to address Adichie's vision of subject formation through the characters of Ifemelu and Obinze, it is essential to define these terms. In her discussion of transnational identities, Titilayo Ufomata explains the ways in which all people can "hold several identities concurrently" (237). Indeed, individuals are identified through ethnicity, race, class, religious association, sexual orientation, gender, etc. The complexity of identity formation in society occurs, however, when the ways one is seen by the world do not align with self-identification. As transnational individuals immerse themselves in several cultures, they begin to recognize themselves in new ways through the eyes of each society. Internal dissonance occurs when faced with views and attitudes of identity that do not match self-fashioning. After all, "the adoption of one identity or another may be a matter of choice, imposition, compulsion, or happenstance. Depending on which it is, one could be blissfully oblivious or very troubled, privileged or marginalized" (Ufomata 237). Both Ifemelu and Obinze move to societies where their alterity as immigrants forces them to the margins. They must make decisions about which labels they will accept and how they can assert their identity in a culture that seems determined to deny them this choice.

All individuals experience identity or subject formation throughout their lives. In this way, one may consider the concept well understood. However, the process of subject formation is experienced differently by everyone. Transnational individuals undergo a unique identity

transformation in the liminal spaces between cultures and nations and are uniquely positioned to interpret and explain the important and complex interactions between people. Historically, the colonized felt obligated to mimic the colonizers in order to avoid labels of inferiority created by Eurocentric ideologies. Postcolonialism emerges as a helpful framework to reference the topic of identity in literature (Tyson 421). In *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha outlines the complexities of identity formation along with social consciousness and national identity. Migrants uniquely experience “unhomeliness” because they are not at home in the culture of origin, but they are also not fully accepted in their new cultural environment.

In the first chapter of *The Ethics of Identity* Kwame Anthony Appiah summarizes two general philosophies which have historically shaped discourse around identity. The first he outlines emerges from the Romantic tradition of thinking and engages with:

the idea of finding one’s self—of discovering, by means of reflection or a careful attention to the world, a meaning for one’s life that is already there, waiting to be found. This is the vision we can call *authenticity*: it is a matter of being true to who you already are, or would be if it weren’t for distorting influences. (17)

In *Americanah* Ifemelu wonders how her “authentic” self will be shaped by the forces of assimilation. The second philosophy of identity discussed by Appiah is more existential and encourages self-fashioning:

Existence precedes essence: that is, you exist first and then have to decide what to exist *as*, who to be, afterward. On an extreme version of this view, we have to

make a self up, as it were out of nothing, like God at the Creation, and individuality is valuable because only a person who has made a self has a life worth living. (17)

In this sense, Ifemelu is fully responsible for her own identity formation. However, Appiah concludes this section by identifying both *authentic* and *existential* philosophies of identity as an incomplete picture. Human identities develop from a combination of the *authentic* self, responses to surroundings, and intentional self-fashioning. All of these factors affecting identity are uniquely brought into an unknown space of unhomeliness through migration. Transnational individuals' *authentic* selves, shaped in their home countries, encounter new cultures, experiences, and expectations in a host country and the *existential* part of their identity can find a creative way to either assimilate or announce their alterity.

In a collection of West African essays on the unique experiences of individuals with transnational identities, Samuel Zalanga discusses his own experience of self-actualization:

A person's identity is shaped by his or her social location, which in turn is shaped by his or her geographical location and the opportunities it provides.

Furthermore, a person's identity is significantly shaped by the extent to which he or she is willing to intentionally engage critically with the paramount historical and existential questions, struggles, and challenges of his or her generation.

Adichie reveals a similar perspective through Ifemelu. *Americanah* shows the ways in which Ifemelu adjusts her identity based on social and geographical locations. By the novel's conclusion, she takes ownership of her identity by connecting and debating with an online community. Ifemelu's journey to self-actualization follows her engagement with society and

politics through reading and writing. As a writer herself, it is not surprising that Adichie would shape Ifemelu's self-fashioning around words.

This paper discusses identity as the culmination of the many experiences shaping an individual's life. Specifically, it examines Adichie's narrative structure and selection of details to track how Ifemelu achieves self-actualization. Bhabha references John Locke's perspective that "as far as this consciousness can be extended *backwards* to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person" (48). In other words, our identities result from the weaving of memories which our conscious mind can recall. Following Ifemelu's braided memories of Nigeria and her life in the U.S. allows readers to see her many permutations of selfhood in varying social contexts. Adichie leads readers through these memories along with Ifemelu as the protagonist determines the best course of action for her future self. Ifemelu learns to "own herself," as Obinze's mother advises, only through the many experiences in which she recognizes a false identity being forced upon her. It is through her rejection of stereotypes and false assumptions that she is able to articulate the difference of her being. At times she finds individuals of resonance in America, but it is mostly through moments of dissonance that she shapes the narrative of her memories. Likewise, in moments of dissonance she can recognize the stereotypes she habitually uses to see the world, and in turn change her own biases and perspectives.

This paper furthers investigations of identity in *Americanah* by bringing together the multiple components of identity formation which Adichie includes in the novel. Admittedly, self-actualization and identity or subject formation are slightly ambiguous and difficult to fully define. Therefore, focus will remain on specific aspects of identity which Adichie emphasizes in

Americanah. Adichie shapes Ifemelu's memories around significant moments of identity formation. This essay has been organized into the following categories: names, language, literature, belonging, and self-expression. First, it addresses concerns of names, language, and identity. Ifemelu consistently comments on the words she notices around her and seeks to find her own words to define herself in the world. Expanding on language's impact on identity, Adichie also discusses the powerful nature of stories in shaping identity. The essay will explore how Adichie presents Ifemelu and Obinze's shared admiration for literature to provide important insight into their journey toward self-actualization. There will then be a discussion on the effects of relationships and belonging on identity. Adichie's use of technology to shape relationships over vast locations is particularly important to this novel. Finally, this essay explores how Adichie uses blogging to break Ifemelu out of silence her own and society's. Finding her voice is the ultimate realization of identity because Ifemelu no longer relies on the stories and language of others to define her worldview. Certainly, Adichie addresses more of the components that contribute to identity, but these five appear in nearly every section of the novel. Furthermore, all of these factors of identity emerge in Ifemelu's present as she gets her hair braided at a salon.

The Mariama African Hair Braiding salon becomes the final stage of Ifemelu's identity formation in America. Though her memories show that she has already found her voice and made her decision to return to Nigeria, her developing relationship with her hair-braider, Aisha, helps her to look beyond herself. Ifemelu transforms from someone who only sees a "single story" for Aisha and tries to avoid conversations to someone who is sympathetic and even offers to help Aisha although they are strangers. Each section of this paper will discuss connections

between Ifemelu's interactions with Aisha and other key moments of identity formation. Ifemelu successfully faces the challenges of migration and adopting a transnational identity, and because of this, she has something to offer an immigrant like Aisha: an immigration narrative that shows a hopeful alternative to her own.

Synopsis of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

Americanah presents the multiperspective journey of Ifemelu and Obinze, a young Nigerian couple growing up in a postcolonial, globalized world, where opportunities seem to simultaneously expand and contract as they learn to understand the communities that shape them and their identity in a world that continually tries to tell them who they are. The narrative structure of *Americanah* jumps between past and present. Adichie braids the voices of Obinze and Ifemelu at different times in their lives to show how these many events lead them to their final decision to return to their relationship with each other. In this way, Adichie addresses the importance of memories in shaping identities. Both Ifemelu and Obinze question their identities and seek a sense of certainty. Their true self-actualization occurs as they reflect on memories and shape a narrative of their experiences. Appiah summarizes John Stuart Mill's view that identity formation involves both a cultivation of past events and, more importantly, a plan for identity growth in the future: "individuality is something that develops in coordination with a 'plan of life'?" (*Ethics of Identity* 6). Over time, both Obinze and Ifemelu are able to own their stories and make a plan for their future. From a postcolonial perspective, Adichie's novel reveals how individuals and whole nations can restructure identities to promote a celebrated vision of history and continued agency in the future.

In some ways, Ifemelu and Obinze's bildungsroman development and identity formation parallels a revision of Nigeria's "single story." Ifemelu and Obinze must emigrate from Nigeria because they find themselves without enough opportunity in Nigeria. The political unsteadiness and strikes on university campuses in the 1990s prevent students from graduating and finding jobs readily. Though Adichie does not specifically write *Americanah* as a novel of historical

fiction, she does address the concerns of this time in history. By doing this, she parallels the challenges Obinze and Ifemelu face as individuals with the country at large. The uncertainty faced by Nigerian citizens stems from the country's tumultuous past, including ethnic and political divisions. However, just as Ifemelu and Obinze gain certainty in their own identities, they also recognize the positive changes in Nigeria.

The novel begins with Ifemelu going to get her hair braided at Mariama African Hair Braiding in Trenton, New Jersey. In some sense, it seems that the story starts at the end because, at this point, Ifemelu has already determined that she will stop writing the blog she started in America and she will return to Nigeria. The braiding of Ifemelu's hair symbolically reflects the braiding of her memories. Just as her hair becomes an authentic expression of her identity, Ifemelu weaves her memories until she fully understands herself and what she wants in her life.

Obinze has not reached this level of certainty when the novel starts. In fact, he reflects, "He was no longer sure, he had in fact never been sure, whether he liked his life because he really did or whether he liked it because he was supposed to" (26). Adichie introduces Obinze as a successful "big man" in Nigeria who lives in a large house with his beautiful wife and daughter. His identity is closely tied to his wealth, status, and connections rather than to any real self-reflection.

Obinze and Ifemelu reflect on their relationship in school when Ifemelu texts Obinze, "*I recently decided to move back to Nigeria*" (19). They remember their flirtatious first meeting, the early years of their relationship in secondary school, and their growing connection throughout the tumultuous years at university. Perhaps intentionally, Adichie does not frame Obinze and Ifemelu's early memories around political concerns in Nigeria. Readers recognize

that political unsteadiness exists when Ifemelu's Aunt Uju dates a General who is later assassinated and when teachers go on strike due to lack of governmental support. Still, these national concerns do not overwhelmingly impact Obinze and Ifemelu's subject formation. In their early years, they do not tie their individual consciousness with the national consciousness. It is only after they leave Nigeria that they recognize themselves as Nigerian and join conversations about the political, economic, and social future of their homeland. In part, this is Ifemelu and Obinze's reaction to the misrepresentation of Nigeria and Africa in the West. They feel motivated to rewrite this story for themselves.

Before Ifemelu leaves for the United States, Obinze's mother tells them to have a plan for their relationship. However, in the trials of unhomeliness, their plan changes. Ifemelu migrates to the United States to study in Philadelphia and Obinze migrates to Great Britain on his mother's travel visa. Both protagonists become disillusioned by the prejudice and lack of opportunity in these Western countries. When they first arrive, they are appalled and concerned by how much their friends and family have changed in order to assimilate. Then, they find themselves compromising and sacrificing aspects of their identity in order to survive. Both must use false names to find work without their own green cards or worker id numbers. Ifemelu works as a nanny, and Obinze cleans toilets. As they take on roles that do not match the dreams of their youth, their relationship strains and communication stops. Ifemelu tries to hold on to the idea of a plan even after she loses touch with Obinze: "she would sometimes remember his mother's words—*make sure you and Obinze have a plan*—and feel comforted" (124).

Ifemelu adjusts to life in America through relationships. She first dates the cousin of her employer, a wealthy white American man named Curt. Their relationship helps her articulate the

racism and sexism she faces in America every day. It is through this relationship that she recognizes her need for self-fashioning. She realizes, “she had not entirely believed herself while with him” and longs to remedy “an incomplete knowledge of herself” (355, 358). Their separation encourages her and frees her to start a blog. Later, her blog connects her with Blaine, a black American professor who immerses her into the world of academia. Both boyfriends affect her identity, but neither can replace the certainty she felt with Obinze.

Outside her romantic relationships, her most significant bond exists with her cousin, Dike. Although Adichie’s main focus in the novel is on characters who have grown up in Nigeria and take on transnational identities later in life, Dike stands out as a character without a clear sense of himself in Nigeria or America. While Ifemelu, Obinze, and other characters can recognize changes within themselves due to their journey to America, Dike does not have the opportunity for this flexibility in his identity. He is born in the United States and lives there after his first birthday. His father dies before he has the chance to know him and his mother never speaks of him out of embarrassment that he was a powerful general and a married man. Dike loses a sense of himself in America and attempts suicide. He sees himself as not truly American but also has no roots in Nigeria. Ifemelu discovers through her own journey in the United States that it is incredibly important to acknowledge all of the parts of your past in understanding your identity.

She criticizes her Aunt Uju after Dike’s suicide attempt: “You told him what he wasn’t but you didn’t tell him what he was” (470). This moment reveals one of Adichie’s most important themes around transnational identity formation. Individuals who travel from nation to nation often discover that their identity does not fit neatly into the societal expectations of either

culture. They seem to exist as an outsider at home and abroad. This is Homi K. Bhabha's concept of "unhomeliness." However, through Dike's recovery Adichie presents a more optimistic vision for transnational identities. He travels to Nigeria to visit Ifemelu and helps her moderate her new blog. As he sees the varying opinions and debates of commenters, he better understands that the world is filled with individuals navigating the layers of culture and identity. There is no correct path to self-actualization other than the one each person shapes on her or his own.

I: What's in a Name? Foundations of Identity

When Ifemelu travels from Princeton to Trenton, New Jersey, to get her hair done at Mariama African Hair Braiding salon, she does not expect to meet anyone who will change her life. In fact, she would prefer to remain as anonymous as possible and does not even introduce herself to Aisha, the Senegalese immigrant who will braid her hair for six hours. She chooses only to answer questions which are posed to her and tries often to avoid speaking altogether. This is quite unlike a white American woman who later enters the salon: “‘I’m Kelsey,’ the woman announced as though to the whole room. She was aggressively friendly” (232). Kelsey shares her opinions loudly and ask personal questions. Though at one point in her life, such a lively stranger could have been useful for her blog, Ifemelu does not want to get to know this woman or share her story with her. Names are the primary and most individualized marker of identity. As part of Ifemelu’s identity formation, she determines with whom she will share her name.

Names often have significant meaning or are chosen in honor of loved and respected family members. Names may also indicate cultural identity. According to Louisa Uchum Egbunike, “Within Igbo culture, an individual’s name serves as a form of incantation or prayer which is repeated each time that person is called. The importance of naming is entwined with the belief in the power of the spoken word, as to repeatedly enunciate an intention is to conceivably usher it into being” (25). It is as though Igbo culture recognizes names as the key to reaching the core of an individual’s identity. Yet, some immigrants feel pressured to change their names in order to assimilate. Like changing her accent, Ifemelu could choose to change her

name to disguise her alterity. Adichie reveals how even this primary and essential aspect of identity may be lost under the guise of assimilation and survival in a new land.

Before examining the significance of names within *Americanah*, it is important to remember that Adichie is responsive to the prejudice she faces herself as a transnational author. Adichie has been questioned about her use of names that are deemed difficult to pronounce by non-Nigerian readers. In this way, she has personally felt the pressure to adjust or adapt names to minimize the alterity of her characters. She explains her resolve to name her characters what she wants, not what would be more easy to pronounce for non-Nigerian readers:

I had someone who very kindly suggested, for example, that since I had become well-known in America, it might be a good idea not to use the difficult name in my most recent book. My book is called *Dear Ijeawele*. It is a name that is difficult even for Nigerian people to pronounce, but it is a name I love. Does it mean that some nice person in Iowa will not buy it because the name is scary? Maybe. But I can live with that. (“2017 PEN World Voices Festival”
00:57:13-00:57:42)

Names of characters should not be changed to appease English speakers. Adichie shows this same resolve through Ifemelu in *Americanah*, as she shapes her transnational identity, which does not need to compromise any part of herself, including her name.

During her first few months in America, Ifemelu does not have a model for this individuality. Instead, she watches with confusion and disbelief as her Aunt Uju accepts that her colleagues do not pronounce her name correctly. Uju even calls herself *you-joo* instead of *oo-joo* (128). Ifemelu’s first model of how life in America will affect her identity is to watch her most

loved and respected aunt become a completely different person. Uju accepts that her American colleagues will not pronounce her name correctly, so she uses a name that was not her own: “America had subdued her” (135). Ifemelu is surprised and appalled by Uju’s choice to be “yoo-joo,” but this is a common decision for immigrants. Obinze meets a man in England who also changes the pronunciation of his name for English speakers. He is happy when he discovers that Obinze could say his whole name: “‘I’m Dee.’ A pause. ‘No, you’re not English. You can pronounce it. My real name is Duerdinhito, but the English, they cannot pronounce, so they call me Dee’” (311). Duerdinhito habitually changes his name to accommodate those around him.

Uju’s willingness to change the pronunciation of her name in order to survive hardens her from recognizing the sacrifice she has made. In the book *West African Migrations: Transnational and Global Pathways in a New Century*, Titilayo Ufomata discusses the determinatal effect of losing a name: “there is the distortion of people’s names for the convenience of others. Naming is a very important aspect of identity. Stripping a person of their name hits the core of their personhood and can result in psychological trauma, especially for young children” (235). Uju feels she must accept a new name in a new country, but she does not admit how challenging and harmful this can be to her sense of self. It is as if she sees the path to citizenship and a successful medical career in the U.S. as only possible if she abandons every part of her individuality. As she has not recognized this trauma herself, she does not understand when her son Dike writes an essay about his identity confusion: “How can he say he does not know what he is? Since when is he conflicted? And even that his name is difficult?” (269). Uju must discover throughout Dike’s teenage years that denying the existence of identity confusion

does not eliminate it. Furthermore, altering the pronunciation of a name for the convenience of others will continue to sound false.

Ifemelu experiences significant unhomeliness and loss when she must use a different name to find work in America. She has to subvert her name and learn to respond to a new name. This is incredibly disorienting. It occurs first when Ifemelu uses Ngozi Okonkwo's license but can't separate herself from her real name. She forgets her fake name and pauses too long when responding to interviewers' questions about the pronunciation of her name. She cannot, like her friend Ginika and Auntie Uju, just make up a false version of herself. Ginika suggests that Ifemelu use Americans' ignorance of Nigeria to cover her mistakes in interviews: "You could have just said Ngozi is your tribal name and Ifemelu is your jungle name and throw in one more as your spiritual name. They'll believe all kinds of shit about Africa" (160). Ifemelu can only start to feel at home in America when she receives junk mail with her real name on it: "That credit card preapproval, with her name correctly spelled and elegantly italicized, had roused her spirits, made her a little less invisible, a little more present. Somebody knew her" (162). Being known for her real name is a piece of home, or "restoration that she is finally acknowledged" (Nwanyanwu 391).

In Nigeria, Ifemelu does not have to worry about someone mispronouncing her name. Instead, as she thinks about returning to Nigeria, she remembers the importance Obinze's mother placed on names. The first time Ifemelu meets Obinze's mother, they discuss the translation of Ifemelunamma. Obinze's mother asks: "Now translating your name from Igbo to English might be Made-in-Good-Times or Beautifully Made, or what do you think?" (83). It can be no coincidence that Adichie chose a name for her protagonist that directly refers to identity

formation. Furthermore, in this scene Obinze's mother recognizes the importance of choice. Part of taking ownership of her identity involves her ability to choose the way in which she wants to translate her name. Alternatively, she has the choice not to translate her name into English at all. In Igbo she is "Made-in-Good-Times" and "Beautifully Made" because it means both of these definitions simultaneously as "Ifemelunamma."

When Ifemelu learns about Obinze's wife Kosi, she immediately wonders if Obinze's mother had the same conversation with her and feels a poignant loss. Discussing the meaning of her name intensified the intimacy she felt with Obinze's mother, and she does not want to allow someone else into that moment of identity revelation:

And when Ranyinudo mentioned his wife's name, Kosisochukwu, an uncommon name, Ifemelu imagined Obinze's mother asking her to translate it. The thought of Obinze's mother and Obinze's wife deciding which translation was better—God's Will or As It Pleases God—felt like a betrayal. That memory, of Obinze's mother saying 'translate it' all those years ago, seemed more precious now that she had passed away. (508)

This moment occurs before she sees Obinze when she returns to Nigeria, and she faces uncertainty about what their relationship will look like after all their years apart. At this time, she does not know that Kosi's name fits her path of identity formation, too. She is a woman who will change her identity and ideas to meet the approval of others. She seeks to please and follow the will of God and everyone around her. Obinze observes that Kosi never expresses her own opinion. She conforms with everyone around her even during disagreements: "She was taking two sides at once, to please everyone; she always chose peace over truth, was always eager to

conform” (36). If a conversation about the translation of names did ever occur with Obinze’s mother, Kosi would certainly agree with everything her mother-in-law said. Adichie’s inclusion of the translation of Ifemelu and Kosi’s names helps show how names can significantly shape identity, especially when characters can have the opportunity to choose what their name means to them and which definition they would share with the world as a presentation of their identities.

In her most recent nonfiction book, *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*, Adichie addresses the importance of names as a part of language in teaching the next generation. Just as she shows Ifemelu’s identity formation through her transnational linguistic experiences, Adichie focuses on the effects language can have on identity formation of young people. She advises her friend who is raising a daughter: “Teach her to question language. Language is the repository of our prejudices, our beliefs, our assumptions” (*Dear Ijeawele* 26). Ifemelu discovers this and alters her own prejudices while she opens a discussion on the prejudiced language of others. She discovers that to change the world, she must change herself. Similarly, Adichie reminds her friend that in order to effectively teach her daughter to be conscious of language, “you will have to question your own language” (ibid. 26). Adichie also addresses the importance of names with her friend. She admires the name her friend chose for her daughter, but she also suggests, “Give her an Igbo nickname” (ibid. 41). Adichie herself was given the nickname “Ada Obodo Dike” by an aunt. She translates her nickname as “Daughter of the Land of Warriors” and revels in the strength this name presents (ibid. 42). Identity formation must utilize language to shape an image and definition of the self. Adichie shapes her fiction and non-fiction to promote an understanding of this empowering process of self-actualization.

II: Language and Identity

As Ifemelu approaches Mariama African Hair Braiding, she predicts the hot, run-down conditions of the salon and the national origins of the workers: “they were full of Francophone West African women braiders, one of whom would be the owner and speak the best English and would answer the phone and be deferred to by the others” (11). While establishing the setting, Adichie provides important commentary on the power of language for transnational individuals. Ifemelu has the advantage of emigrating from an Anglophone nation in Africa. She has an advantage in America that the Francophone women braiders do not have:

The conversations were loud and swift, in French or Wolof or Malinke, and when they spoke English to customers, it was broken, curious, as though they had not quite eased into the language itself before taking on a slangy Americanism. (11)

Immigrants who do not comfortably speak the language of their host country face incredible social and economic obstacles because language influences almost every social interaction. The owner of the hair braiding shop speaks the best English. She gains power through language, where the workers struggle to feel confident while holding a conversation with English-speaking customers. Ifemelu recognizes during her hours-long hair-braiding sessions how language has a tremendous ability to unite or divide individuals. This understanding reflects her many observations about language throughout the novel. Ifemelu recognizes the ways in which Nigerians have lost a sense of value in native languages over English. Similarly, America, a country that prides itself on cultural diversity, has very few non-English speaking citizens (*Ethics of Identity* 115). Individuals who do not speak English or speak English with an accent often face xenophobia. The dominance of English in Ifemelu’s nation’s history and her present

linguistic unhomeliness lead Ifemelu to a linguistic identity crisis. However, through her decision to speak without an American accent and to encourage speaking Igbo, she more confidently fashions the narrative of her life with a variety of languages that help her connect in a variety of social settings.

Perhaps the most significant factor affecting each individual's articulation of identity is language. Language dictates the labels placed on people collectively or individually. Language determines the shape of stories. Appiah argues that everyone develops their understanding of cultural and personal identity through dialogue:

Beginning in infancy, it is in dialogue with other people's understandings of who I am that I develop a conception of my own identity...An identity is always articulated through concepts (and practices) made available to you by religion, society, school, and state, mediated by family, peers, friends. Indeed, the very material out of which our identities are shaped is provided, in part, by what [Charles] Taylor has called our language in "a broad sense," comprising "not only the words we speak, but also other modes of expression whereby we define ourselves, including the 'languages' of art, of gesture, of love, and the like." (20)

Throughout *Americanah*, Ifemelu discovers ways in which language shapes her cultural identity and ways in which she can reinvent herself through linguistic self-fashioning. In every stage of their lives, Ifemelu and Obinze recognize ways in which language connects and divides individuals. They are both fascinated by how their own words and phrases change as they travel and form new relationships. Obinze teases Ifemelu as she starts to sound American: "You know you said, 'excited?'" Obinze asked her one day, his voice amused. "You said you were

excited about your media class” (167). Despite her initial complaint that Americans “overused the word ‘excited,’” Ifemelu finds it difficult to resist the influence of the language surrounding her (165).

As immigrants in the U.S. and the U.K., they feel pressured to conform to American and British ways of speaking when they are confronted with racism and xenophobia. Language plays a significant role in assimilation because accents often reveal the national origins of immigrants. Changing an accent to fit in becomes a tempting solution. However, this altering of identity threatens an individual’s true self and seems to legitimize the prejudiced individuals who seek to bar immigrants from becoming citizens. Adichie addresses how language can be used as a façade or can reveal a more authentic version of an individual's identity.

Ifemelu struggles, like many migrants, to assimilate into a new culture without losing her Nigerian identity. In grade school the students mock Ginika for going to America and possibly becoming an “Americanah.” They assume that she will lose her ability to speak Igbo and that she will pick up unusual American mannerisms when she moves to Missouri (*Americanah* 78). Instead, Ifemelu discovers that Ginika in America has held onto Nigerian expressions that no one uses in their home country uses anymore: “Ginika had lapsed into Nigerian English, a dated, overcooked version, eager to prove how unchanged she was...And now she was saying ‘shay you know’ and Ifemelu did not have the heart to tell her that nobody said ‘shay’ anymore” (150). Resisting change in America, Ginika still loses touch with Nigeria.

A significant part of postcolonial studies investigates how the colonizers took ownership not only of the land and systems of power, but also how these authorities drastically impacted the identity of the colonized. In his famous discussion of colonization, *Black Skin, White Masks*,

Frantz Fanon begins to address the dual consciousness of the colonized by considering language: “Every colonized people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation” (18). Both the colonizers and the colonized recognized the importance of language for cultural identity and social mobility. In Nigeria and other colonized parts of the world, the colonized faced difficult decisions about language. Although preserving a native language is important, learning the language of the colonizers is a key component to gaining power in the colonial system. However, using the language of the colonized may come at the expense of identity. When an individual “adopts a language different from that of the group into which he was born” the result is “a dislocation, a separation” (Fanon 25). Chinenye Amonyeze’s analysis of *Americanah* and uses Robert Scholes’ (1982) grim view of this reality from *Semiotics and Interpretation*: “In language murder, a socially prestigious language gets used in more and more circumstances so that previously bilingual speakers have little opportunity to practice the old language...language death is a social phenomenon, and is triggered by social needs” (4). Indeed, British colonization of Nigeria placed English as the dominant language of business and education.

The establishment of English as the primary language in Nigeria inherently established all other languages as secondary. Speaking English, and speaking English like the British, became an accomplishment of social mobility. Post-colonial literature works to address this idea that “you are the way you speak” (Ashcroft 53). The implication of this is that those who speak like the British can gain social advancement by altering their identities. Those who continue to speak native Nigerian languages cannot. Adichie shows the effects of some Nigerians’ effort to

sound more British, be more British, and gain a sense of superiority in several moments of tension between Ifemelu's generation and the generation of her parents. She recognizes that her father acts like a different person when he speaks English, and she sees through his use of multisyllabic English words to impress others because he feels his job and social status do not demand admiration or respect:

He scolded Ifemelu as a child for being recalcitrant, mutinous, intransigent, words that made her little actions seem epic and almost prideworthy. But his mannered English bothered her as she got older, because it was costume, his shield against insecurity. He was haunted by what he did not have – a postgraduate degree, an upper-middle-class life – and so his affected words became his armor. She preferred it when he spoke Igbo; it was the only time he seemed unconscious of his own anxieties. (58)

Ifemelu connects her father's relationship with English to his experience in missionary schools as a young boy during the period under British imperialism. The generation who most immediately experienced colonization struggles to own language as a part of their identity. Instead, it becomes a mask covering an identity they have been taught to hide. Ifemelu sees a dual identity in her father: one he painfully presents to the world and one he does not need to enact but can simply be.

Still, the use of European languages allowed for greater connectivity between colonized people across the world. English, like other languages spoken by people of many nationalities, has great global maneuverability. Bill Ashcroft explains, "English is continually changing and 'growing' (becoming an 'english') because it realizes potentials which are then accorded to it as

properties” (39). In other words, Englishes around the world allow greater connection among people of various nations. In his collection of essays entitled *The Education of a British-Protected Child*, Chinua Achebe posits the following idea about the English language in Nigeria: “The truth is that we chose English not because the British desired it but because, having tacitly accepted the new nationalities into which colonialism had forced us, we needed its language to transact our business, including the business of overthrowing colonialism itself in the fullness of time” (120). The colonial system forces the colonized to change their individual and cultural identity. In order to survive this uprooting change, the colonized must know how to speak the language of the colonizers. The novels of Chinua Achebe can be read around the world by English speakers without translation. This may not have been the case if Achebe chose to write in Igbo. Still, the legacy and power of colonization’s hold on Nigeria may be seen in the simple fact that *Things Fall Apart*, one of the most celebrated Nigerian novels, has never been translated to Igbo, Achebe’s primary language.

Today the majority of Nigerian authors write in English, instead of Igbo, Yoruba, Fulani, or any other language spoken in the country. This occurs, in part, because of the expanded readership English allows, but it is also because not all Nigerians speak the languages of earlier generations. Colonization has stripped language from entire groups of people by discouraging bilingualism for the next generation. In an interview at the 2018 Igbo Conference at the University of London, Adichie explains how her grade school prohibited students from speaking Igbo in any part of the day other than their specified Igbo course. She even remarks on the many middle class Nigerians who are not teaching their children Yoruba or Igbo (“Chimamanda Adichie in Conversation”). They may not value language as significant in preserving the stories

of past generations because they are looking to a globalized future with multinational languages like English. However, Adichie would argue that transnational individuals show how people of colonized nations can know and speak both national and international languages. Their sense of self can stem from the local and the global. Bilingualism and multilingualism allows for a flexibility to connect to people around the world while shaping a more versatile identity.

Americanah directly addresses this concern of language for transnational individuals. When Ifemelu first moves to America, she discovers that her Aunt Uju does not teach her son Dike how to speak Igbo. In fact, she criticizes Ifemelu for speaking Igbo to the toddler:

‘Dike, *I mechago?*’ Ifemelu asked.

‘Please don’t speak Igbo to him,’ Aunt Uju said. ‘Two languages will confuse him.’

‘What are you talking about, Aunty? We spoke two languages growing up.’

‘This is America. It’s different.’ (134)

Instead, Dike only hears Igbo when his mother is angry with him: “Aunt Uju told him, ‘I will send you back to Nigeria if you do that again!’ speaking Igbo to him only when she was angry, and Ifemelu worried that it would become for him the language of strife” (211). Ifemelu recognizes Igbo as an important piece of Dike’s cultural identity. If he understood Igbo, he could connect to the country of his parents and feel more confident in his transnational identity. Instead, his mother hopes that only speaking English will allow him to easily assimilate. Uju does not acknowledge her own bilingual success and how it is possible and empowering to master more than one language.

Although Adichie has chosen, like Achebe and others, to publish her works in English, she does not compromise her inclusion of Igbo as essential in the lives of her characters. Igbo and English words work together to form her stories. At the 2018 Igbo Conference, Adichie describes her process of publishing her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*. Her editor suggested that she eliminate much of the “dialect” from the novel. By “dialect” she was referring to Adichie’s deliberate use of Igbo along with English. The label of “dialect” has long been used as a way of downgrading the ideas and expressions of people in emerging nations. In his review of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Chinua Achebe satirizes this tendency of western journals: “Language is too grand for these chaps; let’s give them dialects!” (26). Though some progress has been made, this label of “dialect” still seeks to undermine the linguistic pride of Africans across the continent. Adichie’s first editor found the Igbo language unnecessary and confusing. She refused to recognize Igbo as a language which could be used together with English to tell a story.

Americanah includes many Igbo words and phrases, some which are defined in English and some that aren’t. Adichie does not slow down the plot with including too many definitions. She avoids what Ashcroft refers to as glossing, or defining every Igbo word into English, “which may lead to a considerably stilted movement of plot as the story is forced to drag an explanatory machinery behind it” (Ashcroft 61). One example of Igbo being used seamlessly along with the English text by omitting definitions occurs when Aunt Uju tells Ifemelu how she approves of Curt: “‘*O na-eji gi ka akwa,*’ Auntie Uju said, her tone charged with admiration” (271). Although Adichie does not give an exact “gloss” definition directly after this to help non-Igbo speakers learn the exact meaning, readers can easily understand Uju’s approval of Ifemelu and Curt’s relationship. That Uju expresses herself in Igbo shows how important these words are. She

knows Curt and Dike do not understand Igbo, so it is an intimate secret she shares only with her niece.

Adichie writes not necessarily for a Nigerian, American, or British audience. She seems to write the story as she imagines it for herself as a reader/writer. As Adichie herself speaks Igbo and English often at the same time, she wanted this same bilingual continuity to exist in the lives of her characters. By doing this, she “not only registers a sense of cultural distinctiveness but forces the reader into an active engagement with the horizons of the culture in which these terms have meaning” (Ashcroft 64). Allowing the reader to determine the meaning without providing definitions creates a point of connection for Igbo speakers and a sense of intellectual curiosity for non-Igbo speakers. After all, most readers can ask Google to translate if they choose.

Ifemelu and Obinze share intellectual curiosity about classic Igbo proverbs in their first meeting. They flirtatiously compete with their memorization of these phrases and their translations:

“But I bet I speak Igbo better than you.”

“Impossible,” he said, and switched to Igbo. “*Ama m atu inu*. I even know proverbs.”

“Yes. the basic one everybody knows. A frog does not run in the afternoon for nothing.”

“No. I know serious proverbs. *Akota ife ka ubi, e lee oba*. If something bigger than the farm is dug up, the barn is sold.” (*Americanah* 74)

Their shared love of language and stories ignites their fascination with one another and produces an intimacy that Ifemelu does not find with her American boyfriends.

In America, Ifemelu's bilingualism and accented English become traits to be suppressed rather than celebrated, as they were with Obinze. Ifemelu experiences a transformation through language in America, and this becomes an essential piece of her subject formation. Adichie begins this transformation, like many for Ifemelu, with an alarming encounter with an American stranger. When Ifemelu works through paperwork for college registration, she meets Cristina Tomas. This white American university student treats Ifemelu as mentally slow because of her accent. Adichie depicts Tomas' annoying voice and prejudiced attitude through a series of one-word sentences. It is a monotonous speech pattern that Ifemelu and readers find incredibly jarring and unnatural:

Cristina Tomas said, 'I. Need. You. To. Fill. Out. A. Couple. Of. Forms. Do. You. Understand. How. To. Fill. These. Out?' and she realized that Cristina Tomas was speaking like that because of *her*, her foreign accent, and she felt for a moment like a small child, lazy-limbed and drooling.

'I speak English,' she said.

'I bet you do,' Cristina Tomas said. 'I just don't know how *well*.' (163)

After facing xenophobia and being treated as less intelligent for having an accent considered foreign in America, Ifemelu alters her identity by speaking with an American accent even though "she always thought the American twang inchoate" (164). She chooses to avoid dealing with Americans like Christina Tomas by working to blend in.

Avoiding prejudice, however, does not eliminate its existence. After successfully imitating a voice that is not her own, Ifemelu recognizes that she has abandoned something essential to her identity. Instead of resisting or confronting the prejudice of individuals like

Christina Tomas, Ifemelu sought to sound like her. Ifemelu recognizes the damage of this mindset when a telemarketer compliments her for sounding “totally American” (215). She wonders:

Why was it a compliment, an accomplishment, to sound American? She had won; Cristina Tomas, pallid-faced Cristina Tomas under whose gaze she had shrunk like a small, defeated animal, would speak to her normally now. She had won, indeed, but her triumph was full of air. Her fleeting victory had left in its wake a vast, echoing space, because she had taken on, for too long, a pitch of voice and way of being that was not hers. (215-216)

This is one of the transformative moments for Ifemelu. She has perfected the American accent, but then makes the choice not to use it. She will no longer present a false version of her identity. Adichie demonstrates how important Ifemelu’s resolve is when she encounters judgement from women at Mariama’s salon. Halima, a braider, admires her South African customer who has accomplished “this extraordinary feat, an American accent” (231). Although Aisha questions Ifemelu’s Nigerian accent after being in the country for so long, Ifemelu will not change her decision to speak how she chooses.

While language presents an obstacle for Ifemelu at the beginning of her time in America, it becomes one of her greatest strengths as she interacts with more people. Ifemelu masters many “Englishes” throughout her transnational experiences, and her multilingualism grants her great flexibility. Mareline Esplin’s discussion of translation in *Americanah* specifically examines Ifemelu’s development of identity through her comfort in communicating with many languages. This includes Nigerian and American versions of English, British-influenced English, the

academic languages of universities, and the “English of the blogosphere” (Esplin 75). Her many linguistic achievements are essential to her subject formation, as all allow her greater choice. She can speak in different accents or with varying vocabulary and, therefore, demonstrates her agency through language.

Ifemelu is a transnational character who can code-switch from one language to another and code-mesh by using multiple languages within the same conversation. She discovers something different about her identity within each language, and by holding all of these languages she can become a fuller version of herself. Esplin explains: “Adichie illustrates the extent to which various acts of translation and code-switching are woven into the fabric of her characters’ everyday lives and revels in both Igbo, English, and Igbo and English as all the languages that comprise her national and authorial language” (77). Adichie leads Ifemelu through a process of embracing her many languages and brings the reader into this multilingual worldview.

Before Ifemelu can own her use of various languages, she struggles with the divisions language causes in relationships. When she listens to Curt speak with his friends, she discovers that she does not have the same vocabulary and does not want to adopt this language. She responds this way when Curt uses the word “blowhard”: “She was struck by the word, but the irredeemable Americanness of it. Blowhard. It was a word that would never occur to her. To understand this was to realize that Curt and his friends would, on some level, never be fully knowable to her” (256). If words help us distinguish how we see the world, there is a disconnect when our words don’t match. The words Curt’s friends use distance her from their relationship. This similarly occurs in her relationship with Blaine’s friends.

Ifemelu associates with many academics during her fellowship at Princeton and while dating Blaine in New Haven. She determines that there is a pretentiousness in academic conversations that stifle authentic connections between people. Ifemelu tells Blaine that it is almost as if people at universities are “speaking academese instead of English” and because of this “they don’t really know what’s happening in the real world” (*Americanah* 220). At Blaine’s sister’s social parties called “salons,” it seems that everyone is trying to impress one another, but they do not see the world as Ifemelu does. In fact, Shan, Blaine’s sister, often dismisses Ifemelu’s experiences because she is African, not African American. Shan assumes she cannot understand what it means to grow up black in America. Yet, Ifemelu gravitates toward the certainty of Blaine’s crowd. Eventually, she learns to be more assertive with her opinions though they may be unpopular.

She experiences empowerment through “academese,” but she also finds this power can be destructive. After years in America, she uses language as a way of promoting her own superiority at Mariama’s salon, similar to the academics in New Haven:

‘I live in Princeton’

‘Princeton.’ Aisha paused. ‘You student?’

‘I’ve just finished a fellowship,’ she said, knowing that Aisha would not understand what a fellowship was, and in the rare moment that Aisha looked intimidated, Ifemelu felt a perverse pleasure. Yes, Princeton. Yes, the sort of place that Aisha could only imagine, the sort of place that would never have signs that said QUICK TAX REFUND; people in Princeton did not need quick tax refunds. (20)

Though Ifemelu seems to recognize “acadamese” as harmful in authentic human interactions and connecting with the world, she gives in to the temptation of promoting a more powerful version of her identity when she first meets Aisha. It is only through Aisha’s persistence in starting a conversation with Ifemelu, that the linguistic wall between them comes down. By the time Aisha finishes braiding Ifemelu’s hair, they talk about the taboo topic of legal papers for immigrants and their families. Ifemelu even offers to help Aisha convince one of her Igbo boyfriends to propose.

Although differences in language can cause divisions or cause ideas to be miscommunicated in translation, Ifemelu finds language can also be her greatest tool in showing her identity formation. Her initial sense of unhomeliness in becoming an “Americanah” who picks up American phrases while still feeling out of place eventually transforms into her strength. Ifemelu discovers how she can use a blog to connect with an online community and express her identity. Her American blog propels her on a personal transformation that pushes her to return to Nigeria. Once she finds a home again in Lagos, she can begin a Nigerian blog and begin to address the social and political concerns which first influenced her worldview.

III: “Ah, Correct, There is Hope. She Reads” - Literature and Identity

Adichie demonstrates the power of literature to shape identities. She surrounds her characters with books and poems that influence their worldview and create a model for their own narratives. Ifemelu shares a love of reading with Obinze and Uju, and she discovers how important it is to read widely. One particular scene that shows Ifemelu’s convictions about books involves a cheerful white American woman named Kelsey, who asks Ifemelu about her book while they get their hair braided at Mariama African Hair Braiding salon. This is the same Kelsey who announces her presence so loudly and, unsurprisingly, does not know much about African braiding. Kelsey initiates conversation by asking for the premise of the book Ifemelu reads, and Ifemelu thinks, “Why did people ask ‘What is it about?’ as if a novel had to be about only one thing” (233). Ifemelu resents Kelsey’s desire for a simple explanation for Jean Toomer’s *Cane*. As a transnational migrant, she finds that simple answers and viewing the world as something to be explained tend to develop single stories for people and nations. As if confirming her suspicion, Kelsey goes on to ask about Ifemelu’s accent and tells her about her plans to go to Africa: “Congo and Kenya and I’m going to try to see Tanzania too” (233). Kelsey assumes that Ifemelu will be interested in her plans, as she is from the same continent. Despite Ifemelu’s obvious irritation, Kelsey persists in sharing her reading for Africa: “I’ve just read a great book, *A Bend in the River*. It made me truly understand how modern Africa works” (233). The conversation demonstrates Ifemelu’s changing relationship to literature and her identity. She does not want a book to be about one thing. She does not want her identity to be based on a single story. She does not want to be part of a country that likes to make broad assumptions about an entire nation based on one novel. She especially does not need to have an imposing

stranger tell her that the continent of Africa could be “truly understood” by reading *Things Fall Apart* or *A Bend in the River* (233). Ifemelu reclaims her identity from those who would impose “single stories” on her life. Furthermore, she must find a variety of stories to help her shape her own life narrative.

Books enlighten our understanding of ourselves and others. Ifemelu admires Obinze’s mother who reads *The Heart of the Matter* twice a year (*Americanah* 84). Obinze tries to read the novel after his mother dies hoping to reconnect to her memory. He hopes books have the power to connect humanity to past and future generations. Throughout *Americanah*, both Obinze and Ifemelu think of significant moments and formative memories that revolve around the books they read. At various points in the novel, they read, discuss, or think about all of the following books and authors: *Cane*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Heart of the Matter*, *The Fire Next Time*, *The Light in August*, *Things Fall Apart*, *Brideshead*, *Monk Memoirs*, *Dreams of My Father*, James Hadley Chase, Ann Petry, Gayl Jones, and Enid Blyton. They share an appreciation of poets like J.P. Clark, Robert Frost, Yusef Komunyakaa, and Esiaba Irobi. More importantly, they both continue their literary lives as their tastes and interests change. As they alter their identity, they choose to surround themselves with different types of books. They promote a life in which comfort can only be found through a constant pursuit of knowledge and understanding. As Ifemelu finds novels which resonate with her journey to self-actualization, she finds new ways to connect with those around her and shape her own story of the world.

The significant number of references to literature in *Americanah* suggest the importance of these texts in articulating collective and personal identities. Appiah explains this as a human tendency: “one of the things that popular narratives (whether filmed or televised, spoken or

written) do for us is to provide models for telling our lives” (*Ethics of Identity* 22). Ifemelu thinks of the ways in which novels influence her life, and she even begins to construct her own narrative of identity by recalling the events of her years in America. Indeed, the narratives of cultural identity help each person form a personal narrative of identity: “part of the function of our collective identities—of the whole repertory of them that a society makes available to its members—is to structure possible narratives of the individual self” (ibid. 22). From these narrative models, humans gain agency in shaping their own narratives. Everyone is their own autobiographer. : “For modern people, the narrative arc is yet another way in which an individual’s life depends deeply on something socially created and transmitted” (ibid. 23). Though the story of our lives will change with new experiences and our telling of it will change with new insights, by drafting a new story we shape a sense of purpose and belonging.

Obinze and Ifemelu discuss their love of books in their first meeting, and they are forever bonded through literature. At first, Obinze recommends that Ifemelu read many classic American novels that he loves like *Huckleberry Finn*. Ifemelu never takes his recommendations, but she does start to see America as Obinze has imagined it through the books and movies he watches. When she first goes to New York, she tells him: “It’s wonderful but it’s not heaven” (145). It is comforting for Ifemelu to discover that this famous American city is not entirely grand or perfect. Books shaped America as the land of Obinze’s dreams. He argues with his mother, “I read American books because America is the future” (84). However, Obinze, too, finds that America falls short of his expectations. He tells Ifemelu when they reunite for the first time after thirteen years: “I realized I could buy America, and it lost its shine” (535). Obinze wants a life he has to work for:

He read contemporary American fiction, because he hoped to find a resonance, a shaping of his longings, a sense of the America that he has imagined himself a part of. He wanted to know about day-to-day life in America, what people ate and what consumed them, what shamed them and what attracted them, but he read novel after novel and was disappointed: nothing was grave, nothing serious, nothing urgent, and most dissolved into ironic nothingness” (317).

In the end, Obinze not only recognizes that the single story of America as incomplete, but he realizes that it is not a story he admires anymore.

Obinze and Ifemelu discover the need to unlearn books which narrow their view of Africa and the West as binaries, with the West always taking a position of superiority. In Adichie’s “The Danger of a Single Story” TED talk, she shares formative memories from her youth reading British books and later imitating these stories by writing about European characters with lives and settings unlike her own. She did not have many books to read with characters growing up in Nigeria, so she did not have these stories as a script for her own stories or her own life. Her talk articulates concerns similar to those that Chinua Achebe expresses in essays from *The Education of a British-Protected Child*. Like Achebe, Adichie also questions the authority of the West dictating the stories of Africa. This closely resembles Achebe’s own conclusion for the need of African, and specifically Nigerian, literature: “His story had been told for him, and he had found the telling quite unsatisfactory” (118). Lousia Uchum Egbunike frames the experiences of Nigerian students during the postcolonial era with Du Bois’ ideas of double consciousness by writing “they are forced to see themselves and their histories through the eyes of the empire, while maintaining their own truths in rearticulating their collective past” (21). The way in which

the historical narrative of a group of people is presented can have tremendous impact on the cultural identity of that group. When the stories of a group of people are reduced to “the single story” which is likely not fully representative of even one individual within that group, something incredibly important is lost. Even Achebe’s upbringing reflects that of Adichie:

I went to a school modeled on British public schools. I read lots of English books there...But I also encountered Rider Haggard and John Buchan and the rest, and their ‘African books.’ Africa was an enigma to me. I did not see myself as African in these books. I took sides with the white men against the savages.

(British-Protected Child 118)

Achebe had no literary model for a positive self-image or narrative of Nigerians as agents of their own experiences. He looked at his identity as that which was acted upon rather than that which activated world events. In his introduction to *The Empire Writes Back*, Bill Ashcroft explains how literature promotes “an ideological content developed in the colonial context” (3). Supporting a binary of colonizer and colonized, English words elevated the British to the status of *civilized* and *humane*, while native populations took on the labels of “‘savagery’, ‘native’, ‘primitive’” (ibid. 3). Adichie, Achebe, and other postcolonial authors on the continent continue to write new stories which will dispel the monolithic story of Africa as in binary opposition to the West. *Americanah* does this by showing Ifemelu’s agency to choose a life in Nigeria rather than the United States. Ifemelu rejects the narrative of striving for admittance into America through assimilation. Instead, she lives out the possibility of a transnational existence in which she can shape herself with experiences from both nations and choose a place to call home.

Robin Brooks discusses the ways in which *Americanah* works to break the “single story” of the African continent. It is this “single story” which Kenyan author Binyavanga Wainaina satirically comments on in his essay “How to Write about Africa” (Brooks 23). Wainaina recognizes the common tropes of novels about Africa which “treat Africa as if it were one country.” Novels of Africa are assumed by the West to fit into the stereotypes which minimize the vastness and cultural, geographic, political, and religious diversity of the continent: “Despite being a continent encompassing over fifty nations, Africa is often referred to as one country, and the vastness of its geographical size is frequently underestimated” (Brooks 23). National and ethnic origins may have significant impact on identity, and African immigrants tend to face stereotypes which strip them of the distinct location of their identity. This “single story” of Africa is not new. Chinua Achebe emphasizes in his review of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, that the European depictions of Africa place geography over human identity: “Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril” (21). Furthermore, the identity forced upon the entire continent is one of widespread helplessness. The single story of Africa seems intent on keeping Africans in a location to be pitied.

This is exactly the concern Adichie raises in *Americanah*. The contrast between the single story of Africa and the single story of Western nations become particularly important to transnational individuals navigating multiple cultures. Migrants understand how these unreliable stereotypes never show a clear picture of cultural identity or personal identity. Instead, the single story of Africa and the single story of the West perpetuate misunderstanding and global divisions.

Transnational or diaspora writers demonstrate how individuals must navigate multiple identities in various locations. Each new place pushes characters in transnational novels to try on a new self-definition. They may receive this definition through the reactions of their new nation or through their own work at autochthonous self-fashioning. Titilayo Ufomata identifies the important difference between being “of” a location as different than “from” a location (236). One can never change the location where they are “from,” though they may be “of” a new location for a temporary time. Ifemelu and Obinze gain new perspectives on the world, themselves, and each other through abiding in new locations. They are “of” many places, but they will always be “from” Nigeria. While Ifemelu becomes “of” America, she recognizes that she is pitied for where she is “from.” Instead of choosing the West over Africa and living a stereotype she recognizes as false, she chooses to return to Nigeria.

Adichie includes repeated instances in which Ifemelu’s identity becomes misrepresented or overgeneralized due to western stereotypes placed on Africa. This occurs even as she is trying to impress Kimberly, her future employer, during a job interview. Kimberly’s sister, Laura, comments on Ifemelu’s migration due to strikes on college campuses: “Laura nodded knowingly. ‘Horrible, what’s going on in African countries’” (181). Laura immediately relates politics in Nigeria to all African nations and paints a broad brushstroke of pity. Ifemelu uses Laura’s sympathy to her advantage by telling the women how dizzy she became from all of the choices for cereal in the supermarket: “She told this story because she thought it was funny; it appealed harmlessly to the American ego” (181). Over time, Ifemelu discovers that it is not a harmless attitude. In fact, it is a Western perspective that people are divided between the haves and the have nots, between the countries who give and the countries who must beg to receive. At

the end of the interview, Kimberly talks about the charity work she has done in Malawi: “Kimberly’s face softened, her eyes misted over, and for a moment Ifemelu was sorry to have come from Africa, to be the reason that this beautiful woman, with her bleached teeth and bounteous hair, would have to dig deep to feel such pity, such hopelessness. She smiled brightly, hoping to make Kimberly feel better” (185). Ifemelu tries to counteract Kimberly’s sympathy for African countries by putting on a mask of contentedness. Still, she cannot change Kimberly’s view that the location where she is “from” makes Ifemelu in need of charity. This view stems from the single story of Africa, and reveals how powerful it is in perpetuating stereotypes through social interactions. To be from a nation whose story evokes sympathy leads individuals to feel a sense of shame in their own story. It leads to a lack of belonging because where they are “from” is not a place to be admired, and they will never fully fit in with where they are “of” This, perhaps, is why Ifemelu recognizes that she longs to be “of” where she is “from.” It is the only place where she feels certain.

Rejecting the “single story” is not as easy as simple revision or replacement. Ifemelu cannot fully change the way others view her. She can only work to create a new story of transnationalism that rejoices in a return to where she is “from.” Adichie emphasizes in her TED talk why it is so difficult to accomplish this:

To insist on only these negative stories is to flatten my experience and to overlook the many other stories that formed me. The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story. (“The Danger of a Single Story” 13:03-13:23).

In order to change the single story, one must dig deeper into what that story is and where it has come from. Ifemelu does not understand the single story of blackness in America so she turns to literature. Ifemelu seems to gain Obinze's enthusiasm for American literature when she reads James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* in a university library. She goes to the library with the hope of understanding the United States better, and she needs the stories to navigate the unique collective identities of America: "And as she read, America's mythologies began to take on meaning, America's tribalisms – race, ideology, and region—became clear. And she was consoled by her new knowledge" (167). It seems these novels help her make sense of her social interactions and the reasons she finds adapting to life in America so challenging. Appiah emphasizes the importance of knowing the cultural context of social interactions because: "To create a life is to create a life out of the materials that history has given you" (*Ethics of Identity* 19). Ifemelu later reads Faulkner's *Light in August*, and it guides her ideas in conversation about racial slurs in the U.S. The books bolster her ideas and push her to see beyond her own experiences.

Ifemelu discovers the single story for immigrants as she starts her life in America. She finds that many feel they must change themselves to fit in, and that fitting in is the goal of immigration. She continues to see these stereotypes while Aisha braids her hair. Immigrants gain a sense of pride based on how long they have lived in the country. Many immigrants around Ifemelu look at permanent residence in the United States as their goal in life. Therefore, almost everyone from family members to strangers questions her decision to move back to Nigeria. Her boyfriend Blaine demands a reason, and Ifemelu finds this only adds to the certainty in her decision: "He taught ideas of nuance and complexity in his classes and yet he

was asking for a single reason, the *cause*. But she had not had a bold epiphany and there was no cause; it was simply that layer after layer of discontent had settled in her, and formed a mass that now propelled her” (9). Aunt Uju asks, “*Will you be able to cope?*” (20). Later, even the bank asks several times if she is sure she wants to send money to a financially risky country like Nigeria. If they knew that this story was possible for transnational immigrants, they would not be so surprised by her decision.

It becomes easier for Ifemelu to make up a story about her reasons for returning than telling the truth. She tells Aisha that she is going home to see “her man” and thinks, “How easy it was to lie to strangers, to create with strangers versions of our lives that we have imagined” (21). Indeed, this answer does satisfy Aisha, who longs for the immigration security of marriage. Similarly, Ifemelu tells her parents that she is bringing Blaine with her. Even though Ifemelu has no single reason for returning to Nigeria, the novel shows her contemplation of memories to shape a narrative of her life that justifies her decision. She knows that Nigeria is “the only place she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil” (7). This decision begs the question, “How does location affect identity?” Ifemelu does not feel certain of her identity in Nigeria, but she also struggles to find a place of belonging in the US. In many locations, she works through self-fashioning to find the version of herself which is most true.

The single stories for America and Nigeria are not complete and leave Ifemelu feeling a need for belonging. She creates visions of a life narrative with Blaine and Curt, but neither romantic story seems right. With Curt, her “Hot White Ex,” she reflects: “She had not entirely believed herself while with him—happy, handsome Curt, with his ability to twist life into the

shapes he wanted” (355). A key to finding belonging in America is being able to recognize the narrative of her life as a product of her own self-fashioning. With Curt, she becomes too much a part of his story. Similarly, Blaine’s certainty and self-righteousness in his ideals create friction with Ifemelu’s own ideals. She recognizes herself becoming too much like him and even using some of his words: “sometimes she heard in her voice the echo of his” (425). Before they break up, Ifemelu grows in her connection with Blaine through their shared love of Barack Obama’s *Dreams from My Father*. They find common ground in their love for Obama’s memoir and stay together to watch the continuation of his story through the exciting 2008 election process. Ifemelu gains a sense of civic engagement which may not have developed had she not felt intimately connected to Obama through his book. However, the book does not salvage her relationship with Blaine.

Though this is a small part of the novel, it demonstrates an essential piece of Ifemelu’s identity. The book causes her to look hopefully at the future. Adichie deliberately shows how a book and a life narrative about someone breaking stereotypes can inspire a widening perspective. In this moment she becomes more like Obinze, who always imagines his life like a novel. In fact, Ifemelu immediately thinks of Obinze when she finishes reading it: “She was absorbed and moved by the man she met in those pages, an inquiring and intelligent man, a kind man, a man so utterly, helplessly, winningly humane. He reminded her of Obinze’s expression for people he liked. *Obi ocha*. A clean heart” (438). It is as if through reading, Ifemelu understands what she believes and wants in her life and in the world. Furthermore, through Obama’s election, she celebrates a hopeful narrative with Dike. Her nephew faces racism and identity frustration from his alterity throughout his young adulthood. This likely contributes to his suicidal thoughts and

suicide attempt. Yet, in the moment of Obama's election, he has an alternative to the narrative of oppression as a black son of immigrants in America. He excitedly texts Ifemelu: "*I can't believe it. My president is black like me*" (447). Obama's life and book represent a changing of the narrative for American presidents, and Ifemelu recognizes how she herself can change the "single story" of African immigrants by choosing to move to Nigeria.

While comparing transcultural identity formation in *Americanah* and *So the Path Does Not Die* by Pede Hollist, Okolocha writes: "America loses its attraction and power as they realize that there is no place like home in spite of all its problems. Home, a place where one is psychologically connected to one's physical reality, is, undeniably, better than a comfortable but faceless existence in which one's identity is problematic and cultural space is hard to find" (161). Obinze and Ifemelu realize the need for new literature because they did not find happiness outside of Nigeria. America is not the land of dreams, and they do not need to conform to this story. In fact, they became truly themselves only after choosing to return to Nigeria. Ifemelu transforms her relationship with American literature in the U.S., and when she returns to Nigeria, she not only reads but she also chooses to reshape stories returning to Nigeria and by writing her blog. Adichie shows the importance of books in the lives of her characters. Novels and poetry have a profound impact on the identity of a nation and of an individual. This is partially why Ifemelu does not want to speak to Kelsey who views *Things Fall Apart* as "quaint" (233). Ifemelu grows to take pride in the literature of her home nation, the nation to which she chooses to return. She will not accept criticism of the stories that shape her country and herself.

IV: Identity and Belonging

Adichie describes *Americanah* as a romantic novel, yet readers may be surprised hearing this to discover that Ifemelu and Obinze spend very few pages together. They are separated by an ocean for the majority of the novel and can only communicate through texts, emails, and the rare letter. Still, Adichie uses these channels of communication to show how transnational individuals must adjust not only to finding new relationships in their host country, but to maintaining relationships with those they leave behind. Relationships are an essential part of identity formation as they shape a sense of belonging, which is a basic human need for motivation according to Maslow. Appiah explains, "in constructing an identity, one draws, among other things, on the kinds of person available in one's society" (21). Individuals find narrative maps for their own identity formation in the stories of the people most like them.

Perhaps this is why Aisha looks to Ifemelu's transnational experience to shape a positive vision of her own immigrant story. While Aisha braids Ifemelu's hair, she expresses her hope that Ifemelu could convince her Igbo boyfriends to propose. Although Ifemelu denies that "Igbo marry Igbo always," Aisha insists that this is true as it is the stereotype she has been told:

Ifemelu looked at Aisha, a small, ordinary-faced Senegalese woman with patchwork skin who had two Igbo boyfriends, implausible as it seemed, and who was now insistent that Ifemelu should meet them and urge them to marry her. It would have made for a good blog post: "A Peculiar Case of a Non-American Black, or How the Pressures of Immigrant Life Can Make You Act Crazy." (22)

At first, Ifemelu does not relate to Aisha's need to marry for legal papers. This is not the story Ifemelu has shaped for her own romantic connections. However, labeling Aisha as "crazy" is not

entirely fair. As Ifemelu recalls her own initial insecurity in America, she realizes how relationships, romantic and otherwise, helped her find a sense of belonging. She may never have moved to America if Aunt Uju had not gone there first, and she would have faced more obstacles gaining legal status if Curt had not recommended her for a job which sponsored her green card. In fact, Ifemelu's memories of America reveal how significantly the people in her life influence her identity. In the end, she finds a common story with Aisha: "Suddenly, Ifemelu's irritation dissolved, and in its place, a gossamer sense of kinship grew, because Aisha would not have asked if she were not African, and in this new bond, she saw yet another augury of her return home" (450-451). In this moment, Ifemelu shows Aisha a hopeful narrative of an immigrant who is financially able to return home if she chooses. Aisha, too, has something to offer to Ifemelu. She helps Ifemelu recognize that she has made the right decision in returning to Nigeria. In this quiet moment in a hot hair salon, both gain a valuable sense of belonging. Ifemelu learns that without her connection to important individuals, she may be as "crazy" as Aisha. Insecurity and a lack of belonging threaten immigrants' identities, as these are necessary for self-actualization because human beings shape the narrative plan of their life in response to connections to those around them.

The way in which transnational individuals are able to connect with groups and individuals in their home country and host country can have a tremendous impact on their identity. In fact, the authors of *Identity, Belonging, and Migration* suggest that interpersonal connections may be more concrete than the sometimes elusive concept of identity. Therefore, when examining identity formation, one must consider the ways in which relationships shape and reshape individuals: "identities are constructed both 'internally' – by us through our self

(re)presentation and alignment with others – and externally – by the powerful ‘other’” (Jones and Krzyzanowski 44). In other words, migrants must constantly navigate intrapersonal desires and interpersonal pressures and expectations. Adichie reveals many of these through the characters in *Americanah*. Transnational individuals must find ways in which they connect with both their host nation and home nation. In doing so, they create an identity which can belong in multiple settings and groups. Depending on their connections in their home nation, they may reshape aspects of their home culture as immigrants are “frequently reinterpreting or even reinventing national traditions in a new social setting” (Jones and Krzyzanowski 46). Ifemelu discovers this tendency of transnational Nigerians redefining their home culture through Nigerian community blogs and the Nigeropolitan Club. She must navigate her own understanding of her home culture and the Nigerian-American culture in the US to determine the plan for her life.

Before discussing the effects of finding a place of belonging, it is equally important to address the lack of belonging immigrants may experience. In an analysis of *Americanah* Amonyeze references the psychological migration studies of Dinesh Bhugra and Matthew Becker (2005), who “hypothesize that when an immigrant feels isolated from his or her original culture, unaccepted by the majority culture and experiences lack of social support, a consequent sense of rejection and low self-esteem may occur” (3). In general, humans shape identity around significant relationships and work to feel a sense of belonging. If immigrants cannot find relationships that build belonging, they may not be able to reach a sense of self-actualization. They will feel like an outsider in their home or host country. Ifemelu first faces this when she goes to university. She cannot quite fit in with her roommates or classmates until she begins to

form connections with others experiencing the culture shock of immigration. They have a common story that connects them.

In order to establish a sense of belonging in a host country, John A. Arthur's *African Diaspora Identities* outlines four primary associations essential to immigrants: familial, hometown, Pan-African, and alumni-based. As he explains, "The identities that are manifested and represented in these formations often intersect due to the fluidity and continuum of African immigrant identities, their highly vibrant and hybrid forms, and the sheer complexities in their structural and individual contents" (Arthur 91). In other words, immigrants can shape their identities differently depending on the company they keep. Ifemelu experiences all of these group associations as she tries to find a sense of belonging in America. She first encounters America with her Aunt Uju and nephew, Dike. Though the changes in Uju concern Ifemelu, she gains a sense of purpose nannying for Dike. These familial bonds help Ifemelu feel some semblance of home in the host country. Later, she reconnects with Ginika from her home town and is drawn into surprising emotions of nostalgia and homesickness when they see each other again after so many years:

Ifemelu was taken back, for a moment, to secondary school: an image of gossiping girls in their blue-and-white uniforms, felt berets perched on their heads, crowded in the school corridor. She hugged Ginika. The theatrics of their holding each other close, disengaging and then holding each other close again, made her eyes fill, to her mild surprise, with tears. (149)

Ifemelu does not cry because she and Ginika were close in Nigeria. In fact, she remembers slightly envying Ginika for her beauty. Being separated from all that was familiar brings Ifemelu

to a lonely existence in America. She needs to connect with her family and Ginika in order to remember who she used to be and see examples of how others adjust to American society.

The most positive change occurs for Ifemelu when she discovers the African Students Association at her university. This transnational and Pan-African organization helps Ifemelu feel accepted and reminds her that she is not alone. Many immigrants undergo the same identity shock and loneliness if they do not have meaningful connections with people who have experienced something similar. Sharing jokes about America and their home countries, Ifemelu finds a true place of belonging: “Here, Ifemelu felt a gentle, swaying sense of renewal. Here, she did not have to explain herself” (171). Students in the ASA further advise her to make friends with other international students because they can relate to the immigration experience of otherness in America. These new groups can help Ifemelu adapt to life in the US, but none can fully replace the connections she had at home.

Belonging is not just about individual personal connections. It also involves connecting to a location. Ifemelu has two significant romantic relationships in America, but these do more to convince her that America is not the right country in which to shape the next few chapters of her life. Ifemelu decides that America will never be a place to belong. Adichie shows Ifemelu’s inability to find belonging in American cities by presenting many scenes of movement. Beyond the obvious move from Nigeria to America, Ifemelu also moves within the US. She cannot seem to settle in any one place. Ifemelu reflects on her need to set down roots somewhere, but she can never quite find a home in America. Adichie creates a feeling of constant motion while Ifemelu is in America. She jumps from memory to memory and place to place. She rides in taxis, trains, and planes. Sometimes these modes of transportation involve significant life moments, as when

she meets Blaine on a train or when she waits for the subway and learns that Dike has attempted suicide. In all of these moving moments and different locations, she searches for a sense of clarity.

The first lines in the novel introduce her fascination with the distinct smell of each city she visits in America. Olfaction is closely related to memories and nostalgia, so it is appropriate that Ifemelu would characterize these places through scents: “Princeton, in the summer, smelled of nothing...Philadelphia had the musty scent of history. New Haven smelled of neglect. Baltimore smelled of brine, and Brooklyn of sun-warmed garbage. But Princeton had no smell” (4). Her olfactory impressions of these locations illuminate her knowledge that each is not home. She tries cities on like shoes until she realizes she is meant to be in Nigeria, as it is “the only place she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil” (7). Throughout the novel, Ifemelu introduces each city as having a distinct personality. None of these personalities work with Ifemelu. For example, Baltimore has a “scrappy charm” and Philadelphia holds “history in its gentle clasp” (255).

When Ifemelu returns to Nigeria, she imagines Lagos with a distinct personality like the American cities. As Ifemelu did not quite fit with the personalities of those East Coast cities, it is important that she will be able to find her niche in Lagos. At first, it seems this may not be the case: “Lagos assaulted her” (475). She finds both she and the city have changed, but she cannot tell exactly in which ways, and Ranyinudo mocks her for complaining. Later, however, she writes her first blog post about transnational Nigerians who whine about conditions in Lagos after returning from the US and the UK. She recognizes the foolishness of griping and finds, instead, the qualities of Lagos she most admires: “Lagos has never been, will never be, and has

never aspired to be like New York, or anywhere else for that matter. Lagos has always been indisputably itself' (519). This certain and stubborn nature of Lagos is exactly what she loves. In some way, Ifemelu portrays Lagos as a reflection of her own identity transformation. She discovers in America that she does not want to speak or act in a certain way in order to appease those around her. She comes to fully embrace her identity like the city she finally feels a sense of belonging.

V: Braiding and Writing Her Identity

“Color four.”

“Not good color,” Aisha said promptly.

“That’s what I use.”

“It look dirty. You don’t want color one?”

“Color one is too black, it looks fake,” Ifemelu said, loosening her headwrap. “Sometimes use color two but color four is closest to my natural color” (14)

Self-fashioning occurs both internally and externally. Although the majority of the novel focuses on Ifemelu’s reflections and ideas about her personal identity, Adichie also considers how physical appearance impacts a sense of self. Furthermore, she demonstrates how physical and psychological aspects of identity may impact each other. Ifemelu spends the majority of the novel getting her hair braided exactly as she would like for her return to Nigeria. She organizes her memories of America into a narrative while Aisha arranges her hair. The physical appearance of the braid reflects Ifemelu’s internal weaving of a life narrative. Therefore, her physical and psychological components of self-fashioning engage in perfect synergy.

Appiah looks to the philosophy of Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre and John Stuart Mill to explain: “to live our lives as agents requires that we see our actions and experiences as belonging to something like a story” (*Ethics of Identity* 22). The organizational structure of *Americanah* follows Ifemelu’s existential work to shape the narrative of her identity. She jumps between memories of relationships, jobs, cities, and hair styles. It is as though she hopes to justify her decision to move to Nigeria by crafting a story that explains her own plan: “This was

what she had become, a seeker of signs. Nigerian films were good, therefore her move back home would be good” (17). Even though Ifemelu is confident in her decision to return to Nigeria, rewriting the expectations that have been placed on her as an immigrant with an American passport takes bravery and perfectly styled hair.

Sometimes psychological changes can result in physical changes. Therefore, a complete examination of subject formation must consider a character’s relationship with their physical appearance. Adichie uses hair throughout the novel to show changes in characters through self-fashioning. The most significant connection with hair occurs in Ifemelu’s present as she gets her hair braided at Mariama’s. She knows who she is and confidently chooses her hairstyle. She tells Aisha, her stylist, exactly how she would like her hair, how tight, how dark. She will no longer conform to someone else’s idea of beauty for her hair because she wants her hair to represent her as she returns home to Nigeria. This moment of certainty can only occur after Ifemelu takes a journey of self discovery.

Early in her memory, Ifemelu recalls the dramatic effect her mother’s hair had on those around her:

Ifemelu had grown up in the shadow of her mother’s hair. It was black-black, so thick it drank two containers of relaxer at the salon, so full it took hours under the hooded dryer, and, when finally released from pink plastic rollers, sprang free and full, flowing down her back like a celebration. Her father called it a crown of glory. (*Americanah* 49)

In the salon, Ifemelu reveals that she does not have “black-black” hair like her mother. She argues with Aisha to use color 4, which is lighter. At first glance, it may seem that Ifemelu intentionally disagrees with Aisha because she looks down on her. However, this moment of

having her hair done is about so much more than color. Ifemelu will not be persuaded to put in a color that is different than her natural hair even if Aisha considers it more fashionable. She cannot have hair like her mother once had, but she is also not her mother. She wants to be fully herself when she returns to Nigeria, and she will not conform to another's standards for beauty.

This shows how different Ifemelu is than her mother, who willingly lies about the details of her life to present a more socially-acceptable persona. Of all the memories of her mother, one of the most shocking is when her mother cuts all of her hair and burns it after a religious conversion. Ifemelu stares in shock: "the woman who was bald and blank, was not her mother, could not be her mother" (50). In this formative memory, Ifemelu recognizes how someone can change their identity drastically. From this early point in the text, Adichie establishes how hair can signify a change in a person. For Ifemelu, her mother's new hair shows her complete change in personality: "Her mother's words were not hers. She spoke them too rigidly, with a demeanor that belonged to someone else. Even her voice, usually high-pitched and feminine, had deepened and curdled. That afternoon, Ifemelu watched her mother's essence take flight" (50). Ifemelu never connects with her mother. She resents how easily her mother lies to try to appease others, as when she covers up Uju's affair with the general by telling everyone he has become Uju's sponsor for medical school.

At many points of transformation in the novel, Ifemelu alters her hair to take on a new identity. Growing up, Ifemelu tried to have hair like her mother. She recalls, "she would often look in the mirror and pull at her own hair, separate the coils, will it to become like her mother's but it remained bristly and grew reluctantly; braiders said it cut them like a knife" (49). Ifemelu

wills her hair to be different. Later, when Ifemelu moves to America, Aunty Uju explains to her that to get a job in America, you must relax your hair:

“I have to take my braids out for my interview and relax my hair. Kemi told me that I shouldn’t wear braids to the interview. If you have braids, they will think you are unprofessional.”

“So there are no doctors with braided hair in America?” Ifemelu asked.

“I have told you what they told me. You are in a country that is not your own.

You do what you have to do if you want to succeed.” (146)

Although Ifemelu scoffs at Uju’s willingness to change her appearance for employment, she finds herself persuaded to do the same. Ifemelu’s career counselor at the university encourages her to: “Lose the braids and straighten your hair” (250). Similar to her experience changing her accent, Ifemelu earns compliments for her ability to alter herself. The hairdresser tells her, “Wow, girl, you’ve got the white-girl swing!” (251). Ifemelu feels expected to celebrate her ability to have “white” hair rather than her natural, un-relaxed hair, and she grieves this loss:

Her hair was hanging down rather than standing up, straight and sleek, parted at the side and curving to a slight bob at her chin. The verve was gone. She did not recognize herself. She left the salon almost mournfully; while the hairdresser had flat-ironed the ends, the smell of burning, of something organic dying which should not have died, had made her feel a sense of loss. (251)

The relaxer burns her scalp, and she finally decides to cut her hair and stop using chemicals on it, but she feels incredibly alone and depressed until she finds the black hair movement online community. Braiding of hair throughout the novel helps emphasize that individuals can always choose to change the way they braid their hair or tell their stories. The freedom of reinvention is key to adapting in a world heavily dictated by history and conformity to strict social structures.

Adichie leads readers through Ifemelu and Obinze's formative memories of the books, places, and people who influence their identity. These factors tend to contribute to a more *authentic* view of identity formation, which occurs in response to the world that surrounds an individual. All of these factors are filtered through languages. No single part fully shapes the identity of Ifemelu or Obinze. The most important factor of identity formation is how individuals determine their own identity through self-fashioning. In the end, Ifemelu and Obinze must make the *existential* decisions about where they want to be, whom they belong with, and what they will do. Migration promotes a flexibility of self. Though migrants may continue to feel split between different versions of themselves, more often than not, the exploration of the facets of their identity allows them to choose. At first, Ifemelu feels torn between parts of her identity, but eventually she establishes her identity through writing.

Perhaps the most flexible understanding of identity is that it is a creative output from each individual. Ifemelu's identity is a combination of all the relationships, books, languages, and places of belonging that have shaped her, but it is, most importantly, the identity she chooses to share. Stuart Hall makes this observation about transnational identity in *Theorizing Diaspora*: "Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think of identity as a 'production' which is never complete,

always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (234). Indeed, Ifemelu’s identity never fits into a final definition. Her identity, like any larger description of “cultural identity” is “a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as ‘being’” (ibid. 236). Furthermore, it is what Ifemelu can imagine for herself in the future.

When Ifemelu meets Obinze’s mother, she navigates conversations about the young couple’s intimate relationship. Obinze’s mother advises them not to become sexually active “until you own yourself a little more” (*Americanah* 87). Ifemelu does not understand what she means, but she agrees anyway. Throughout her time in America, Ifemelu seems gain an understanding of how she must “own herself.” Ifemelu begins to make conscious decisions to be herself. She alters her appearance, accent, and writing voice to present herself to the world. Her identity reflects what Appiah refers to as the *romantic* and *existential* elements. She both responds to the world to “find herself” and puts her own creativity to work in subject formation.

One key part of Ifemelu’s identity formation involves writing. A unique component of *Americanah* that distinguishes the novel from other postcolonial novels which address concerns of identity and subject formation is Ifemelu’s use of blogging as a way to establish her voice and to connect with the world. In their recent monograph, *Diasporas in the New Media Age: Identity, Politics, and Community*, Andoni Alonso and Pedro J. Oiarzabal present many articles from individuals engaging with technology from a variety of diaspora communities. The sharing of stories online empowers individuals and groups, especially when those stories reveal foundational truths which can dispel stereotypes. Perhaps for this reason, Adichie often creates characters who establish their identities and self-image through writing. Ifemelu creates blogs in Nigeria and America as she observes the world around her and gains a sense of certainty.

While Adichie's characters struggle with their identities, they likewise cannot express themselves through writing. If identity formation, as Appiah suggests, requires connecting to a cultural or personal narrative, it follows that a lack of belonging could surround an individual with silence and identity uncertainty. Ifemelu experiences this when she refuses to respond to letters from Obinze. She cannot admit to herself or to him how miserable her experience has been in the United States. Ifemelu's silence splits the couple by more than miles and leads to their separation. It is the contrast between Ifemelu's silence and her blogging later in the text that helps demonstrate the importance of writing in identity formation.

Before Adichie wrote *Americanah*, her collection of short stories addressed similar concerns of identity and transnational migration. Critical articles on Adichie often draw connections between characters and themes in her works of fiction. In the story which gives the collection its name, "The Thing Around Your Neck," Adichie uses second person perspective to connect with readers and create an instruction book on how to be an immigrant. The guidebook does not, however, help "you" know what to do when faced with sexual harassment, homelessness, or unemployment. In a defeated and lonely place, "you" have to work on survival rather than self-actualization: "Every month. You wrapped the money carefully in white paper but you didn't write a letter. There was nothing to write about" (*TTAYN* 118). The character's inability to write to her family shows her lowered sense of confidence. She cannot write to her parents about how difficult it is to live paycheck to paycheck as an immigrant.

Adichie amplifies her character's frustration with self-expression by repeating the phrase "You wanted to write" six times in one paragraph (*TTAYN* 118-119). It is after "you wrote nobody" that "something would wrap itself around your neck, something that very nearly choked

you before you fell asleep” (*TTAYN* 119). The young woman’s inability to share the experiences of her life with anyone causes her to live in a suffocating silence. When she finally finds the courage to write home, she discovers the truth that her father died five months before and decides that she must return home to her family. The realization that something as life-altering as losing a father could occur without her knowledge causes her to reexamine the current narrative of her life and seek a change: “You...tried to remember what you had been doing when your father died, what you had been doing for all the months when he was already dead” (*TTAYN* 127). This is nearly the same reaction Ifemelu has when Uju tells her that Dike attempted suicide: “She stood on the platform for a long time, and wondered what she had been doing while Dike was swallowing a bottle of pills” (454). While facing a life-altering event, individuals look back to make sense of their own stories.

In some ways, this story parallels *Americanah*. In the story, the main character emigrates from Nigeria and begins a relationship with a white American man. This male character’s wealth and general self-assuredness is incredibly similar to Curt in *Americanah*. Ifemelu and “you” are drawn to these men for their good humor and unwavering confidence. However, it is this same shining certainty that places a wedge that will inevitably lead both relationships to an abrupt end. Ifemelu cannot connect with Curt’s certainty in life: “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” (*Americanah* 243). In “The Thing Around Your Neck” “you” feel baffled by his ownership of life:

He said he had taken a couple of years off to discover himself and travel, mostly

to Africa and Asia. You asked him where he ended up finding himself and he laughed. You did not laugh. You did not know that people could simply choose not to go to school, that people could dictate to life. You were used to accepting what life gave, writing down what life dictated.

By becoming transnational, Ifemelu and “you” discover the power to choose in life and gain an *existential* control. Both protagonists use writing to shape their identity and choose to return to Nigeria. Both Ifemelu and “you” have people telling them that America has a great story where everyone is wealthy, but this single story is not true. More importantly, these characters find a way to make new narratives and overcome silence in their lives.⁴

In America, Ifemelu faces two distinct silences, one personal and the other public. The first she struggles to address is her own silence about the challenges of making rent, finding a job, and dealing with an ever-present loneliness. As mentioned previously, she breaks off communication with Obinze after she is paid to perform sexual favors for a tennis coach. She believes she cannot share this story with anyone: “She would never be able to form the sentences to tell her story” (*Americanah* 195). It is only when she is able to talk to Obinze in person that she can be honest about her experience. They finally can share a silence, not of hidden secrets, but of common understanding: “He took her hand in his, both clasped on the table, and between them silence grew, an ancient silence that they both knew. She was inside this silence and she was safe” (543). When nothing is hidden, silence can be incredibly intimate and comforting. This moment allows them to enter into a more honest future for their relationship.

However, silence more often does not allow for honesty. The second silence affects everyone around her. Ifemelu recognizes that Americans, especially white Americans, avoid addressing race or racism. This first occurs when Ifemelu receives assistance from a black saleswoman at a clothing store and the store cashier describes the two women working in every way without addressing the color of their skin. Ifemelu finds this incredibly unusual:

“Why didn’t she just ask ‘Was it the black girl or the white girl?’”

Ginika laughed. “Because this is America. You’re supposed to pretend that you don’t notice certain things.” (155)

Ifemelu is disturbed that social expectations dictate that race is to be ignored completely, as this also prevents a discussion about the effects of racism she sees everywhere. Later, in a university class, Ifemelu recognizes the tension that emerges in her classmates and professor’s struggle to discuss race after watching *Roots*, which depicts the Atlantic slave trade. Professor Moore asks about “historical representation” in the film, but the conversation quickly shifts to the bleeping of the N-word (168). Classmates argue if the word should be a part of the movie because it is a part of history or if it should always be censored. Wanting to show the truth, however ugly it may be, Ifemelu gravitates toward her classmate who observes, “But it’s like being in denial. If it was used like that, then it should be represented like that. Hiding it doesn’t make it go away” (*Americanah* 169). It is Wambui, “the firm voice” in class, whom Ifemelu meets after this discussion and who introduces her to the ASA (168).

In these conversations, Ifemelu begins to come into her own. This occurs around the same time that she reads Baldwin and Faulkner. The ideas poured into her become the start for her blog in America. It is through a blog that Ifemelu can fully compose her ideas openly and

honestly. She can anonymously shape herself however she would like to be. Ifemelu never identifies specifically as Nigerian or even as African. By doing so, it seems that she is able to avoid being placed into stereotypes surrounding various groups in the African diaspora. She observes racism in American as an outsider, but she does not specify her worldview. Perhaps due to the anonymous nature of the blog, *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*, Ifemelu can write about her life and the world around her exactly as she sees it. She does not feel silenced on the blog as she sometimes does in social situations to make nice and polite small talk with individuals who do not recognize their own privilege and complicity in supporting systems of racism and oppression.

Comparing Ifemelu's blog in America to her blog in Nigeria reveals another significant change in her identity. Initially, she wrote to find a sense of belonging and to speak honestly about racism in America. She began the blog while ending her relationship with Curt and emailing Wambui, her friend from the African Students Association. Her first words, shared with a friend, reveal the truths she thought she could never share with her "Hot White Ex." It was always easier to keep her ideas silent and to herself than to speak them out loud to Curt or anyone else. Ifemelu discovers that the one of the most harmful aspects of white privilege is an ignorance to racism. She writes to Wambui and finds a receptive audience who validates and celebrates her observations of common experiences. This contrasts someone like Curt who seeks explanations and questions her experiences. She tells Wambui: "things she didn't tell Curt, things unsaid and unfinished. It was a long email, digging, questioning, unearthing. Wambui replied to say, 'This is so raw and true. More people should read this. You should start a

blog” (366). Through her blog, Ifemelu addresses the many ways she has felt wide-reaching grasp of racism.

As a part of sharing her experiences, Ifemelu wants to know the experiences of others. Sharing her writing online allows her to connect to the words she suppressed for too long.

Censoring herself prevented her from reaching self-actualization:

Blogs were new, unfamiliar to her. But telling Wambui what happened was not satisfying enough; she longed for other listeners, and she longed to hear the stories of others. How many other people chose silence? How many other people had become black in America? How many had felt as though their world was wrapped in gauze? (366)

Adichie’s use of rhetorical questions exposes Ifemelu’s inner search for identity and connection with others. Through writing, she gains the answers. She gains the authority to share her worldview and connect with others in an open conversation.

Edward W. Said explains in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* that novels and other texts have significant power in the world and have contributed to supporting imperialism. He summarizes Nietzsche’s claims that “texts are fundamentally facts of power, not of democratic exchange” (Said 45). Novels can hold significant authority in the minds of readers. Although Adichie does not reinvent the structure of the novel to make it less of a powerful “being in the world,” as Said would label it, by including Ifemelu’s blogs, she demonstrates how text in the world online has the potential for more democratic sharing of ideas (ibid. 33). Ifemelu’s blog demonstrates one way to break the single story, as it encourages conversations in message boards. Adichie creates a character who must break from the silence around her cultural and

personal identity. In the same way, Said encourages novelists to break the silence surrounding imperialism and colonialism: “What we must ask is why so few ‘great’ novelists deal directly with the major social and economic outside facts of their existence—colonialism and imperialism—and why, too, critics of the novel have continued to honor this remarkable silence” (176-77). *Americanah* is more than a romantic novel or bildungsroman. It demands conversations about the many social concerns it raises. Adichie encourages these conversations by demonstrating the variety of opinions in the comments on Ifemelu’s blog.

Ifemelu interacts with an online community through her blog in America. She gains a significant readership and becomes familiar with the voices of repeat commenters. At first, the comments are thrilling; she has someone to write to, someone who will respond to her ideas. She edits her posts thinking about these readers: “Nine people had read it. Panicked, she took down the post. The next day, she put it up again, modified and edited, ending with words she still so easily remembered” (366). However, the online community cannot replace face-to-face relationships. Even as Ifemelu writes herself into being, she needs to find the people and stories she cares most about.

In her study on internet communication in African literature, Anna-Leena Toivanen notes that Adichie does not include the text of comments in sections about the American blog. She only adds blog comments to the text in response to *The Small Redemptions of Lagos*, her Nigerian blog:

One of her Nigerian blog posts is followed by readers’ comments as if to highlight that the blog is truly interactive. The second post is commented on by a reader whom Ifemelu believes to be Obinze, which obviously gives her Nigeria-based

blog more emotional weight. (Tovianen 144)

Ifemelu is especially excited when a comment on her Lagos blog generates more comments than her original post. This indicates that her Lagos blog becomes both an expression of identity and a place to debate and debunk single stories in her home country.

Digging deeper into the differences between the two blogs raises important questions about how blogging impacts an individual's identity. Through blogging, Ifemelu makes her private ideas public and faces the sometimes visceral comments of readers. Though Adichie does not show the comment board of readers in America, it is very apparent that Ifemelu is affected by their words. She reflects that they sometimes intimidate her: "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" (5-6). It is as though the culture of blogging in America pushes her to prove herself. In Nigeria, it is Ifemelu who takes full control over the comments on her blog: "Ifemelu moderated the comments, deleting anything obscene, reveling in the liveliness of it all, in the sense of herself at the surging forefront of something vibrant" (520). This "vibrant" view of herself at the "forefront" demonstrates her clear sense of her identity as positive.

Even the titles of her blogs reveal important differences in her purpose for writing and the writer's identity. Her American blog's title, *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*, is elongated with qualifiers and prepositions. It establishes a logical, impersonal tone. Every part of the title strives to precisely articulate meaning. Ifemelu even added the parenthetical "*Those Formerly Known as Negroes*" after speaking with her parents and being surprised and embarrassed by their use of the word "negroes" to describe African Americans. This methodical writing extends into

the blog, as Ifemelu writes her precise observations of race in America. In contrast, her blog title in Nigeria has a spiritual and religious tone: *The Small Redemptions of Lagos*. She reflects, “The title for the blog had just come to her” (515). It is as if by divine intervention she knows what to write about. Adichie suggests it is in Nigeria that she can finally trust her own intuition.

While her blog in America starts as an expression of her identity, it becomes something separate and unfamiliar: “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” (6). This begins with her American blog as she becomes more and more invested in the comments. She finds herself encouraged by some and angered by others. The blog becomes synonymous with her identity, and she reflects: “Now that she was asked to speak at roundtables and panels, on public radio and community radio, always identified simply as The Blogger, she felt subsumed by her blog. She had become her blog” (379). While the blog seems to free her to voice her ideas, it also places all of her ideas under the scrutiny and judgement of faceless commenters: “in her mind, a judgmental angry mob waiting for her, biding their time until they could attack her, unmask her” (379). Ifemelu encourages others to be vulnerable by sharing their ideas online but recognizes the challenge this presents. She gently writes to those who “don’t talk about Life Experiences That Have to Do Exclusively with Being Black. Because they want to keep everyone comfortable. Tell your story here. Unzip yourself. This is a safe space” (380). She wants her blog to be a place for others to find their voice, too.

Later, Blaine and Shan comment on her blog as something ineffective and further push Ifemelu to question herself. They demand that she write more purposefully. Blaine, especially, wants Ifemelu to explain and teach in her blog, rather than observe. He tells her to add statistics

and research, but she resists. He says, “Remember people are not reading you as entertainment, they’re reading you as cultural commentary. That’s a real responsibility. There are kids writing college essays about your blog” (386). She made the blog as a place for her own identity formation and worldview formation. Later, Shan dismissively remarks that she could only write these things because she is foreign: “Because she’s African. She’s writing from the outside. She doesn’t really feel all the stuff she’s writing about. It’s all quaint and curious to her. So she can write it and get all of these accolades and get invited to give talks. If she were African American, she’d just be labeled angry and shunned” (418). Obinze even observes that Ifemelu sounds like someone different in her blog: “The blog posts astonished him, they seemed so American and so alien, the irreverent voice with its slanginess, its mix of high and low language, and he could not imagine her writing them” (464). The solution then is for Ifemelu to return to Nigeria. She reaches financial stability and social belonging in America, but she can never fully write for herself until she breaks the single story of immigration by choosing to return home.

Ifemelu’s process of transnational migration and identity formation situates her as particularly capable of adapting and adjusting to various cultures. It also promotes her ability to change the societies which she takes part in. She starts this process with her American blog and continues it with more enthusiasm and artistry through her Nigerian blog. Through both blogs, she is able to accomplish what John A. Arthur describes as a type of dual transformation:

Their identities become circulatory: lived, and experienced in their host societies, and at the same time transposed, acted out, shared, modified, and

recreated back in Africa. When these identities are given African contents and meanings, the goal is often to use and appropriate these identities to restructure, redefine, and change the social, cultural, and economic landscape of the continent. In so doing, these immigrants become agencies of social and cultural changes, using the process of international migration as a strategic social movement designed to mobilize the collective resources of Africans to transform the present and future orderings and structural realignment of the normative and belief systems prevailing on the continent. (10)

Ifemelu changes society by addressing politics and race in the U.S. She addresses social concerns of young people in Nigeria. Perhaps to more fully imagine the lives of her characters, Adichie even continues the *Small Redemptions of Lagos* page on her author website. Adichie demonstrates in *Americanah* and other works the importance of sharing stories. Ifemelu's blog is not merely an output of her ideas; it is a way to emotionally connect with individuals she may never meet. It is a celebration of herself and her view of the world while hoping for the contributions of commenters to continually question and enhance that view. In order to overcome the stereotypes created by single stories, Adichie advocates for the sharing of more stories. In order to overcome personal, national, and global silences, Adichie shapes characters who write to incorporate personal truths into collective narratives.

VI: Doors as Symbols of Decisions: “I Recently Decided to Move Back to Nigeria”

The room was dense with awkwardness, and Ifemelu, as though to dilute it, once again examined her hair in the mirror, patting it lightly as she turned this way and that.

“I will go and see Chijioke tomorrow and I’ll call you,” Ifemelu said. She brushed at her clothes for any stray bits of hair and looked around to make sure she had taken everything.

“Thank you.” Aisha moved towards Ifemelu, as though, to embrace her, then stopped, hesitant. Ifemelu gripped her shoulder gently before turning to the door. (452)

The lives of transnational individuals are often in the threshold, divided between their home and host countries. Perhaps, because of this, Adichie includes doors often throughout the text to symbolize her characters’ identity development in the liminal spaces between nations and cultural identities. A door uniquely represents the immigrant experience because it can be opened or closed. It can be locked. Slammed shut. Unlocked and opened. One can get a foot-in-the-door, or a door-in-the-face. In Nigeria and America, it seems that Ifemelu stands in the doorway of her life. She is neither inside or outside. She is just in the frame of life’s door, trying to decide her next decision. Throughout the novel, doors transform from a symbol of insecurity and closing out the world to a process of decision-making, and crossing the threshold into a new life.

Adichie addresses many aspects of migration throughout *Americanah*, but the most important, perhaps, is her presentation of characters’ decisions in shaping their own fate. Ifemelu

and Obinze struggle to find clear self-knowledge and a sense of certainty. This thread begins, like so many others, in the first chapter. Ifemelu appreciates that she can pretend to be someone else in America, but she also recognizes that this disguise prevents her from discovering who she is. When looking at a place like Princeton, she felt that “she could pretend to be someone else, someone specially admitted into a hallowed American club, someone adorned with certainty” (3). Being around others with certainty does not ensure that Ifemelu will gain it for herself. Instead, Ifemelu must be certain by confidently choosing to return to Nigeria and by braiding the narrative of her former experiences and relationships in the US.

The word “certainty” emerges so often throughout the novel, as a prize, an end point. For Ifemelu, this seems to mean being able to take ownership of one’s identity and not feeling the need to lie or make up excuses to avoid the social judgement of others or her own internal judgement. If she can achieve a sense of certainty, she will not question herself or withdraw from relationships or the world. She will not change her accent or hair or pretend to be from somewhere else.

Ifemelu’s parents do not play an active role in the novel, yet their impact on Ifemelu’s identity is certain. In a pivotal scene revealing the unsteadiness of home, Adichie shows Ifemelu’s parents in desperate need of rent money. Adichie uses the door as a symbol of uncertainty, but also as a symbol of home. The landlord comes and bangs on their door. Adichie emphasizes the importance of the door in italics: “But now he was here in their flat, and the scene jarred her, the landlord was shouting at *their* door, and her father was turning a steely, silent face to him” (59). It is in this scene that Ifemelu loses a sense of security.

When Ifemelu first moves to America, it seems every door remains firmly closed to her. She cannot get a job and, therefore, cannot afford to pay rent. She can hardly afford to feed herself. When her roommate's dog eats her last piece of bacon, Ifemelu internalizes her agony, "she was at war with the world, and woke up each day feeling bruised, imagining a horde of faceless people who were all against her. It terrified her, to be unable to visualize tomorrow" (187). Again, the sense of uncertainty places Ifemelu in a haze and her only way out seems to be to work for the tennis coach. The doors in these moments show how the world is closing in on her.

Adichie uses the symbol of a door in pivotal moments before and after Ifemelu works for the tennis coach. When she isn't hired at first as a babysitter, she sees this as her only way to pay rent. Before she goes to the tennis coach, the roommates passive-aggressively remind her that she hasn't played rent by knocking on her door: "Later, Allison knocked on her door. 'Ifemelu? Just wanted to remind you, your rent check isn't on the table. We're really late'" (188). As she does not "want to be the roommate who had rent problems," just as her family had rent problems, she calls the lecherous tennis coach (188).

In the home of the tennis coach, Ifemelu again feels doors closing on her. She thinks of leaving once she is in his room, but to reach for the door might only confirm how trapped she is: "She moved slowly toward the door, wondering if it was locked, if he had locked it, and then she wondered if he had a gun" (189). When she finally leaves, he tells her to "Shut the door" (190). Adichie's repetition of the door images frames Ifemelu in moments of uncertainty and insecurity. Ifemelu becomes someone she detests: She is not only someone who cannot get a job or afford rent, she is a woman who earns money through sexual acts. It is as though she has closed the

door on her former self. Rather than owning herself, as Obinze's mother advised her, feels she has sold a part of herself. The new Ifemelu cannot continue her relationship with Obinze or show her true self to her friends or family. She plunges herself into silence and shame.

Later, her roommates knock at her door relentlessly. They do not know the sacrifice she made to pay rent and do not seem concerned that she has locked herself in her room. They are merely annoyed that she refuses to answer a phone call from Ginika:

“Allison was banging on her door again. ‘Are you there? Phone call! She says it’s an emergency, for God’s sake! I know you’re there, I heard you flush the toilet a minute ago!’

The flat, dulled banging, as though Allison was hitting the door with an open palm rather than a knuckle, unnerved Ifemelu. ‘She’s not opening,’ she heard Allison say, and then, just when she thought Allison had left, the banging resumed.” (193)

When she finally opens the door and speaks to Ginika, she learns that she has finally earned the babysitting job. If the call had come only a little sooner, she would never have gone to the tennis coach. This is an unspeakable reality: “Ifemelu said nothing, struggling to understand. Words took so long to form meaning” (194). Even though the figurative “door” of a new opportunity presents itself, Ifemelu cannot forget the tennis coach. In order to continue moving forward, she closes her loved ones from the truth of her experiences in America. She closes Obinze out completely.

Later in the novel, when Ifemelu returns to Nigeria, doors continue to act as a symbol of navigating identity through her relationship with Obinze. It seems no time has passed when they

finally reunite. Still, making the decision to have an affair brings Obinze great distress. When Ifemelu pressures him to admit his feelings and reignite their romance, Adichie again uses a door to show his decision-making process:

He got up, his movements deliberate, and at first she thought he was coming closer to her, or perhaps wanted the toilet, but he walked to the front door, opened it, and left. She stared at the door. She sat still for a long time, and then she got up and paced, unable to focus, wondering whether to call him, debating with herself...When her doorbell rang minutes later, a part of her was reluctant to open the door. (550)

In this scene, both Ifemelu and Obinze see the door as a symbol of a turning point. Once they cross the threshold of this relationship, they will not be able to easily return to their former lives. They know the magnetism of their relationship that remained forever in their minds even as they lived an ocean away from each other. They start a relationship while Obinze is a married man, but this cannot last. Both Obinze and Ifemelu struggle throughout the novel to shape an identity which is not a disguise, and having an affair contradicts this goal.

Adichie continues to use doors to show Ifemelu's sense of uncertainty about their relationship. When Obinze leaves her for a few days, she becomes insecure: "She was trying to push away the sense of a coming abandonment; it would overwhelm her as soon as he left and she heard the click of the door closing" (557). Later, it is Ifemelu who refuses to accept Obinze's indecision. When he tells her "I need some time to think things through," she locks him out: "She walked into the bedroom and locked the door" (557). Obinze must be decisive before Ifemelu can trust him. Therefore, Adichie again places her characters in a door frame as Obinze

asks for another chance. In the final words of the novel, Ifemelu and Obinze finally cross into a doorway together: “Ceiling, come in” (588). Ifemelu calls Obinze by her romantic nickname for him and welcomes him into her home and life. They can finally write a narrative together when they both choose it, and when they finally own themselves and their plan for the future.

Conclusion:

*The time will come
when, with elation
you will greet yourself arriving
at your own door, in your own mirror
and each will smile at the other's welcome*

*and say, sit here. Eat.
You will love the stranger who was your self.*

from Derek Walcott, "Love After Love"

Adichie comments in interviews that she often reads poetry while writing fiction. She recommended Derek Walcott's "Love After Love" in response to *The Guardian's* 2012 request for writers to share their favorite love poems. It seems incredibly fitting that she would gravitate toward these lines near the publication of *Americanah*. Though Walcott's poem is generally read as being about romantic love, it also illuminates the joy that can come from an evolving understanding of identity. Transformations of identity are not unique to transnational individuals, and *Americanah* addresses the importance of welcoming these inevitable life changes. In the end, Adichie supports the idea that life is not strictly about the events that happen to us, but how we shape those into our own stories. Ifemelu and Obinze gain new perspectives in their transnational journeys only to find their love for one another anew. They find a balance between shaping their identities around the qualities that seem inherent to their persons and the ways in which they can make decisions to shape their identities into a plan for the future.

In *The Ethics of Identity*, Kwame Anthony Appiah questions the ways in which we view alterations of identity. We see "identity" next to words like "crisis" or "loss" and begin to think

of the process of self-fashioning as filled with risks. Instead of viewing the journey of identity formation with anxiety, Appiah proposes a more optimistic perspective: “we should ask why we speak of *loss*, rather than change” (137). To speak of identity *loss* is to speak in absolutes, and it is much more hopeful to see the changes of identity as an open door for the possibility of something new.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* explores the multifaceted changes transnational individuals experience while navigating social and cultural shifts. Ifemelu does not lose her identity, she experiences linguistic, geographic, and relational changes. By leaving Nigeria, she discovers the “single story” the West creates when discussing African nations. Although she, at first, works to separate herself from this negative stereotype completely by altering her accent, immersing herself in American books, and dating American men, she soon recognizes that this is not the change she hopes for. Transnational individuals do not need to find contentment in a host country. Alternatively, Ifemelu represents a revision of this narrative. She chooses to set down roots where the story of her identity formation began.

Adichie dedicates her novel to several loved ones, but she first states, “*This book is for our next generation, ndi na-abia n’iru.*” In the novel, so much is about education and formation of identity in a globalized, fast-changing, digital society. This dedication demonstrates Adichie’s conscious decision in the novel to write for future generations of readers and writers. As an international bestseller, *Americanah* represents a significant text of the 21st century, which may shape the structure and style of novels in the future. Adichie’s use of multiple perspectives within the novel shows many experiences of transnational migration. Most importantly, as Ifemelu and Obinze return to find happiness in Nigeria, it dispels “Western norms of cultural

assimilation” that assume superiority of the West over the rest of the world (Amonyeze 3). Adichie contrasts the “single story” narrative of immigrants moving to countries like America and Great Britain to find success only as gaining citizenship or being accepted as part of Western cultures. Instead, Amonyeze asserts: “She uses her characters as a subtle political act to interrogate cultural integration and the plight of undocumented immigrants in a diverse Western society that is pluralist in name but non pluralist in reality” (4). *Americanah* extends globally as a novel which speaks to both the connectivity of technology in a globalized world and the increased sense of separation for individuals trying to find certainty in a world of possibilities.

Though the novel is told in reflection of the past for many of the chapters, it is in the present and in their plans for the future that our characters find the most hope. It is in their possibility and uncertain next chapter that readers can relate more and more to Obinze and Ifemelu. Throughout the novel, both Obinze and Ifemelu long to dispel uncertainty. In the end, they gain certainty only with each other. They must both build their identities apart before they can reunite. The next generation will experience a completely different world than their parents. It is only through embracing uncertainty and allowing for change that true positive transformation can happen.

Furthermore, it is in human agency through identity formation that societal change can occur. Ifemelu resists stereotypes and “single stories” forced upon her and asserts her identity through her accent, hair, and writing. She connects to a wide audience with her blogs and uses these to break the silence surrounding society’s greatest ills. In his review of the novel, the late Binyavanga Wainaina writes, “*Americanah* dares to bring us a world of a confident and self-made woman making her way in these complicated times. This is the Africa of our future.

Sublime, powerful and the most political of [Adichie's] novels. She continues to blaze the way forward." Adichie finds that the best way to end the dangerous stereotypes of the single story is to write more varied stories of her own. Through the character of Ifemelu, Adichie's writing attests to her firm belief that "culture does not make people. People make culture," as she expressed in her TED talk "We Should All be Feminists" in 2013. Her protagonists in *Americanah* question their society, assert independence, and build relationships from a place for mutual understanding.

Frantz Fanon concludes *Black Skin, White Masks* with the following idea:

It is through the effort to recapture the self and to scrutinize the self...that men will be able to create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world. Superiority? Inferiority? Why not the quite simply attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself? Was my freedom not given to me then in order to build the world of the *You*? At the conclusion of this study, I want the world to recognize, with me, the open door of every consciousness. (231-32)

Adichie's fiction echoes Fanon's idealistic vision for humanity. If each individual can create a narrative of their own existence, then the stereotypes of single stories lose authoritative power. In a world continually shaped by divisions of nations and cultures, it is through immersion in the meaningful work of identity formation that characters like Ifemelu model how to create positive social change.

Notes

1. Though Nigerian authors like Amos Tutuola and Cyprian Ekwensi set the stage for modern Nigerian literature during the colonial era, the most discussed and celebrated Nigerian authors of the postcolonial era continue to be Chinua Achebe, Woye Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Flora Nwapa (Griswold xvii). They are often referred to as the first generation of Nigerian writers. Later, the second generation brought such names as Niyi Osundare, Femi Osofisan, Festus Iyayi, and others (Adesanmi and Dunton 7). These writers produced works from 1970 to 1983 and addressed the concerns of the developing nation-state. In the 21st century, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie joins writers of the third generation, who focus on the cultural identity of Nigeria and the personal identities of individuals, especially of those with transnational experiences. In their assessment of changes between the second and the third generation, Adesanmi and Dunton determine: "First was a significant generic shift from poetry to the novel and second was the considerable international acclaim with which several novels by previously unknown or little-known writers were greeted" (8).

2. H. Oby Okolocha identifies the following significant novels as contemporary. They are ones which, like Adichie's, address transnational identity formation: "Buchi Emecheta's *The New Tribe* and *Kehinde*, Ike Oguine's *A Squatter's Tale*, Alasan Mansaray's *A Hunting Heritage* and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*" (144).

3. Abraham Maslow's studies of human motivation propose that every person has basic needs which must be met before that person can reach the top of the hierarchy of needs: "From the most to least basic, the hierarchy of needs consists of physiological needs (air, food, water, sleep, etc.), safety (including the physical safety of the body from harm or ill health as well as

safety of the family, access to resources, and employment), belongingness, esteem (including the needs for self-respect and respect by others), and self-actualization and self-transcendence (including the need for creative outlets, moral systems, and intellectual pursuits)” (“Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs”).

4. When comparing Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* to Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Heather Hewett connects the concerns of characters losing their sense of self through silence. In Adichie’s short stories and *Americanah* this trend continues. Hewett particularly points out characters’ inability to share events in their lives which are considered taboo. For instance, when a priestess asks Ekwefi if she was the victim of domestic abuse in *Things Fall Apart*, she can only respond: “I cannot yet find a mouth with which to tell the story” (Achebe 48, qtd. in Hewett 79). Likewise, Adichie’s characters in *Purple Hibiscus* do not share the truth about their father’s violent tendencies at home, despite his devout appearance shared with the world. The characters cannot share the truth of their experiences out of shame or the fear of being pitied. These are not the stories to tell in casual conversation or even to those closest to you for fear of being seen as less than. In *Americanah*, Adichie continues to create characters concerned with identity formation and each individual’s agency in that self-fashioning.

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