

Afropolitanism for Black Women: Sexual Identity and Coming to Voice in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

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Abstract: In discussing Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's award-winning novel *Americanah*, this article aims to expand Taiye Selasi's concept of Afropolitanism. This term holds that Africans of the world "must form an identity along at least three dimensions: national, racial, cultural—with subtle tensions in between," and my article proposes to include a sexual identity category. Considering the ongoing racist stigmatization of black sexuality in Western societies, I want to suggest that Selasi's conceptualization of Afropolitanism, while potentially open to expansion, is currently incomplete. It is crucial for female Afropolitans to form a racialized sexual identity as well. Drawing on black sexuality scholarship as well as insights regarding theories of intersectionality, I argue that through the detailed exploration of the protagonist Ifemelu's sexual identity, *Americanah* broadens the concept of Afropolitan identity construction for black heterosexual women. Ultimately, the novel insinuates that becoming a full subject is only possible when female racialized sexual experiences are consciously lived through and confronted, so that the voices of female Afropolitans can emerge.

In her latest book, *Dear Ijeawele, Or a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*,¹ Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie comments on her reasons for advocating publicly for feminism and gender equality:

[A] writer had accused me of being 'angry,' as though 'being angry' were something to be ashamed of. Of course I am angry. I am angry about racism. I am angry about sexism. But I recently came to the realisation that I am angrier about sexism than I am about racism. Because in my anger about sexism, I often feel lonely. Because I love,

¹ Just like Adichie's previous nonfiction publication *We Should All Be Feminists*—a revised transcript of her TEDx talk with the same name held in 2012—*Dear Ijeawele* is a personal essay. It tackles questions of how to raise one's daughter a feminist in the form of a letter to a friend who

and live among, many people who easily acknowledge race injustice but not gender injustice. (qtd. in Brockes)

Although it raised feminist questions and critiqued sexism, Adichie's fictional work is best-known for creatively tackling issues of racism, the most recent example being *Americanah*, which won the National Book Critics Circle Award. In this novel, Nigerian student Ifemelu immigrates to the US to attend university and find a job, leaving her high school boyfriend Obinze behind. Being confronted with the American conceptualization of blackness and racism for the first time in her life and failing to find work (even illegally), Ifemelu initially struggles to make ends meet. Her financial situation leads her to experience sexual abuse at the hands of an employer and results in her breaking off contact with Obinze. Shortly after, Ifemelu finds work as a babysitter and begins to date a white American, Curt. Following their breakup, Ifemelu starts a blog about her observations on race in America which remains her main source of income during her stay in the US and throughout her relationship with Blaine, an African American. After thirteen years abroad, Ifemelu closes her successful blog and returns to Lagos, where she is reunited with Obinze.

Americanah, as well as its author, are commonly read in the larger context of Afropolitanism (cf., e.g., Ucham and Kangira; Hallemeier; Makokah; Phiri; Piñero), together with other popular African novelists such as Teju Cole, Dinaw Mengestu, and Taiye Selasi. The latter, herself of Nigerian and Ghanaian descent and raised in Massachusetts, introduced the widely-debated concept of Afropolitanism² in her seminal essay "Bye-Bye Barbar." Observing the crowd in a London nightclub, Selasi describes Afropolitans in the following way: "You'll know us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes. Some of us are ethnic mixes, [...] others merely cultural mutts:

asked Adichie for advice. The success of the new book seemed to be a given: *We Should All Be Feminists* became so popular that the Swedish government, led by the Swedish Women's Lobby, distributed a copy of Adichie's book to every sixteen year-old student in the country (Wagner) and that Beyoncé used recordings from Adichie's TEDx talk in her 2013 song *Flawless*.

2 For critiques of Selasi's essay, see, for example, the works of both Marta Tveit and Emma Dabiri. As this article cannot give a complete overview of the academic debate regarding the usefulness of the concept of Afropolitanism due to space constraints, it is instead focused on introducing and then broadening it. Even though Adichie distances herself from Afropolitanism, saying "I'm not an Afropolitan [sic]. I'm African, happily so" (Barber), her work and persona are still often considered to be Afropolitan in scholarship discussing *Americanah* as well as scholarship on Afropolitanism in general. See, for example, J.K.S. Makokah's introduction to the anthology *Negotiating Afropolitanism* (16).

American accent, European affect, African ethos.” As “not citizens, but Africans, of the world,” Afropolitans, according to Selasi, “must form an identity along at least three dimensions: national, racial, cultural—with subtle tensions in between.” In that, Selasi attributes to them “a willingness to complicate Africa [and a] refusal to oversimplify” what it means to be African in the twenty-first century. However, taking Adichie’s statement about the ignorance toward sexism she noticed in her own surroundings as an example, and considering the ongoing stigmatization of black sexuality in Western societies, I suggest that Selasi’s conceptualization of Afropolitanism should be broadened.³ It is crucial for Afropolitans, especially female Afropolitans, to form a racialized sexual identity as well. Phrased in a way that already hints at its incompleteness—“Afropolitans must form an identity along *at least* three dimensions” (my emphasis)—Selasi’s description of the Afropolitan consciousness is set up for expansion and thus a fitting starting point for widening the exploration of black female sexual identity through the analysis of a literary text.

Americanah skillfully details Afropolitans’ inner struggle between their Africanness and the challenges which life in Western cultures brings about. Evoking themes of otherness, home, and identity central to this internal conflict, the novel thus can be considered an epitome of Afropolitan fiction. As the novel is critically acclaimed and widely analyzed, I consider it moreover a text that perfectly lends itself to the expansion of Selasi’s theory of Afropolitan identity formation. Protagonist Ifemelu’s experiences with racism, her self-image as an immigrant, and her relationships with (American) men are crucially influenced by her gender and the conceptions of black sexuality in the West, which is marked by hypersexualization, notions of the exotic Other,⁴ and sexual exploitation. In investigating the protagonist’s gender and sexuality as well as the sexual violence she experiences, this article considers existing scholarship on the novel, such as Valentina Scarsini’s detailed analysis of not only female but also male sexuality and gender identity in *Americanah*. However, more importantly, by broadening the

3 That the consideration of gender is missing in Selasi’s concept is also pointed out by Rocío C. Piñero (85), who additionally highlights the absence of a consideration of illegal migration in the conceptualization of Afropolitanism. Piñero then explores the impact of illegality, but not gender, in her article.

4 In accordance with Jean-François Staszak and his encyclopedia entry on “Other/otherness,” I will capitalize ‘Other’ to underline its function as a subjective and constructed category. See also Michelle M. Wright and Antje Schuhmann in their anthology *Blackness and Sexualities*.

concept of Afropolitanism to include the category of sexual identity, this article also fills a gap in scholarly research on Afropolitan fiction and opens up possibilities for future investigations of literary texts and related theories in academia and beyond.

This article argues that, through the detailed exploration of Ifemelu's sexual identity—that is her gender as well as her sexuality, as further elaborated below—Adichie's *Americanah* broadens the concept of Afropolitan identity construction for black heterosexual women. The novel suggests that becoming a full subject is only possible when racialized sexual experiences are consciously lived and confronted. The subchapters of this article thus consider Ifemelu's sexual abuse, her relationships with a white and an African American man in the United States, and her relationship with Obinze after she returns to Lagos, respectively. Overall, these crucial developments not only further Ifemelu's consciousness of herself as Afropolitan in Selasi's sense (nationally, racially, and culturally—with tensions between the three) but also function as key experiences to her sexual identity formation, which is what this article is most concerned about. However, before a detailed analysis of the literary text can follow, a brief chapter will summarize key concepts and theories.

SEXUAL IDENTITY IN AN AFROPOLITAN CONTEXT

Since the first publication of Taiye Selasi's seminal essay in 2005, her concept has been revisited by other African and Afropolitan scholars who sought to critique and expand it—each bringing a different issue to the forefront. In his article “We, Afropolitans,” Chielozone Eze focuses on mobility as one aspect of Afropolitanism. He holds that Selasi's essay conceives mobility as not being bound to one location as well as, more specifically, an ability to move between Africa and the West. Eze emphasizes that the latter, literal mobility (often associated with class and privilege), can also encompass movement between or within different African cities. While this mobility is crucial to the concept of Afropolitanism, it is, however, more productive for Eze to think of mobility in the Afropolitan context as openness—an openness that expresses the “widening arc of African self-perception, one that goes beyond the conventional postcolonial notions” (115). It is exactly this openness that readers observe also in Ifemelu's literally and philosophically mobile quest for home and belonging. The “absence of fixity to a location” (Eze 115) in Selasi's

conceptualization of Afropolitan mobility is also helpful for the category of sexual identity. Eze asserts that “the truth is that spatial mobility is only symptomatic of our interior mobility. [...] [W]hat really counts is this interior mobility, that is, how negotiable our relation to the world is” (Eze 116). If one agrees with this assertion, Ifemelu’s movements are all intimately connected to her sexual identity as well. To be mobile challenges Ifemelu’s sexual belonging, for better or for worse. As discussed later, Ifemelu perceives herself differently in different sexual relationships she lives through. She must free herself from oppressive forces as well as empower herself to explore her desires.

For the purpose of this article, I subsume the discussion of Ifemelu’s gender and sexuality under the exploration of her sexual identity. The more expansive phrase ‘sexual identity,’ I believe, mirrors the potential of Selasi’s quite open concept of Afropolitan identity formation. It can be easily developed further, and in various directions. I do not employ ‘sexual identity’ as a synonym for ‘sexual orientation,’ as is commonly done, but instead use the phrase as an umbrella term to refer to who one is as a sexual being. It therefore includes, but is not limited to, one’s romantic and sexual experiences, negative as well as positive; how one’s gender is influencing one’s sexual orientation and sexual behavior; one’s sexual desire, needs, and wants; and one’s intersection of sexuality with other facets of one’s identity such as religion, race, class, ethnicity, age etc.⁵ Another important aspect of one’s sexual identity as conceptualized in this article is one’s voice, metaphorically speaking. Having a voice here means being empowered to articulate oneself; it also entails having one’s voice heard and respected. Only then, the expression of one’s sexual identity such as one’s desires and needs is possible—internally as well as externally. As will become clear in my analysis, to find her voice is Ifemelu’s ultimate goal, which she reaches at the end of the novel and which leads to her gaining full subjectivity.

When jointly investigating the racism and sexism that mark Ifemelu’s journey, it is crucial to bear in mind the theory of intersectionality. First developed by law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw in an article published in 1991, this theory illustrated—from a legal perspective—the double oppression based on race as well as gender faced by black women and society’s “tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis” (“Demarginalizing” 139). Crenshaw

5 For a similar conceptualization of sexual identity, see Eric Grollman.

cites multiple court cases in her article, for example, *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors* (1976). General Motors had been hiring white women and black men—but no black women. The court, however, did not see black women as “a special class to be protected from discrimination” (qtd. in Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing” 141).

Today, intersectionality is a widely used concept inside and outside the context of law and has been broadened to also encompass the marginalizations of groups other than black women. As Crenshaw summarizes her idea more than twenty-five years after its emergence:

Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It’s not simply that there’s a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LGBTQ problem there. Many times that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things. (“Kimberlé”)

Crenshaw believes that there is an “intersectional erasure” taking place in today’s political landscape and that “the intersection of maleness and whiteness driv[es] our analysis” (“Kimberlé”). It is crucial for the feminist study of literature that intersectionality continues to be a serious concept of analysis. As the introduction to a recent anthology on gender and intersectionality fittingly puts it,

[r]eciting the ‘race-class-gender’ trinity like a mantra runs the risk of lapsing into uni-dimensionality, even if it is now informed by intersectionality. Unless it examines the processes of exclusion associated with each category and the ways they are interconnected with one another, intersectionality could lead to rhetorically legitimised re-centering. (Lutz et al. 8)

Having laid out the concepts of sexual identity as well as intersectionality as used for the purpose of expanding Selasi’s concept, the following three chapters will be concerned with a detailed discussion of *Americanah*. The analysis of Ifemelu’s sexual abuse, her relationships with Curt and Blaine, and her return to Obinze all support the necessity to include a sexual identity category in Afropolitanism.

IFEMELU’S SEXUAL ABUSE AND ALIENATION: THE SELF AS THE OTHER

Americanah’s Ifemelu experiences her immigration to the United States and the related difficulties she faces, as well as her sexual abuse, in a gendered and racialized

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way. As the instance of sexual abuse coincides with the protagonist's struggle to come to terms with American conceptualizations of blackness and foreignness, the violence she experiences intertwines her racial and sexual identity irreversibly. For the rest of the novel, they cannot be neatly separated as Ifemelu's identity formation and self-perception will be infinitely influenced by sexual encounters.

As one of the most important plot changes in the novel,⁶ the instance of sexual abuse leads to Ifemelu's self-alienation in a multistep process during which she is robbed of her voice, ownership of her sexuality, her body, and finally, her sense of self—she feels fully deadened by the experience. In losing herself that way and since “[o]therness and identity are two inseparable sides of the same coin,” in which “[t]he Other only exists relative to the Self, and vice versa” (Staszak 2), Ifemelu thus becomes her own Other—she is depressed and traumatized, indifferent to herself and utterly unsure of her sexual identity. This process of self-alienation takes place precisely because of Ifemelu's extreme marginalization and lack of agency as a black female lower-class immigrant who is forced to work illegally.

The novel exemplifies this systematic discrimination in Ifemelu's sexual abuse through an unnamed tennis coach who offers her a job—helping him relax. He is aware that Ifemelu only accepts the position out of distress and that prostitution is illegal but still calls it “a great gig” (Adichie, *Americanah* 177). Even though it is Ifemelu who calls the tennis coach to accept the job, she is quickly robbed of her voice when facing her abuser, evidently losing the agency she seemed to have by assenting to the job offer. Getting dressed at home before meeting with the tennis coach, Ifemelu resolves that “[w]hatever happened, [...] she would make it clear to him that there were boundaries she would not cross. She would say, from the beginning, ‘If you expect sex, then I can't help you.’ Or perhaps she would say it more delicately, more suggestively. ‘I'm not comfortable going too far’” (188-89). Not deeming her natural voice capable, Ifemelu privately practices a second, more delicate one, a first step of losing her true voice. However, once she arrives at the coach's house, “[h]er own words had deserted her” (189) and she tries weakly to stand her ground: “‘I can't have sex,’ she said. Her voice felt squeaky, unsure of itself. ‘I can't have sex with you,’ she repeated” (189). This is the only time Ifemelu speaks or is quoted directly during her abuse and even when she is later asked a question by the coach, she says “nothing” (190). Furthermore, Ifemelu's voice is contrasted with

6 As the sexual violence she experiences leads Ifemelu to break off contact with Obinze, I consider it to be one of the most important plot changes.

the tennis coach's, who demonstrates "in his expression and tone, a complete assuredness" (189). Thus, even in the description of their voices, the power imbalance between the white American man and the black immigrant woman is highlighted.⁷

When considering how Ifemelu is robbed of ownership of her sexuality, it is crucial to critique labeling Ifemelu's abuse solely 'self-prostitution,' as some scholars do (cf., e.g., Phiri). While the tennis coach surely does not force Ifemelu to take the job, he has the privilege of not fearing any consequences from his exploitation of women. He is one figure in a systematic chain of disadvantages that specifically targets Ifemelu as a black immigrant woman in an equally racist *and* sexist society—forces of oppression intersect here. As soon as Ifemelu arrives at his house, all the power of their relationship resides with the coach: "[S]he felt defeated. How sordid it was that she was here with a stranger who already knew she would stay. He knew she would stay because she had come" (Adichie, *Americanah* 189). In accepting the job, Ifemelu gives the coach access to herself, turning her sexuality into a commodity that the coach now owns. She further loses control of what sexual and bodily pleasures mean to her—she feels betrayed when her body responds to touch even though her mind is repulsed: "She did not want to be here, did not want his active fingers between her legs, did not want his high-sigh moans in her ear, and yet she felt her body rousing to a sickening wetness. Afterwards, she lay still, coiled and deadened" (189). Already, the damage done to Ifemelu's sexual identity formation is apparent.

In connection to the loss of being able to define what evokes pleasure in her, Ifemelu experiences alienation from her body. She feels "defeated," "sicken[ed]," "deadened" (Adichie, *Americanah* 189) during the sexual activities and, afterward, "[b]loodless, detached, floating" (192), not grounded in her own body and thus an outcast of her own skin. Memory scholars believe that "[t]he body, including the mind, stores memories" and that "therefore, pleasurable experiences [and, in turn, unpleasant ones] may also be stored in the body" (Cunningham 41). This means that "some bodily responses may result directly from memory" (42). In *Americanah*, memories of abuse lead Ifemelu to be repulsed by her own body and eventuate in self-harm:

7 For a discussion of systemic sexual violence in the US against immigrant women, in this case from Latin America, see Miriam Z. Pérez.

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[W]hen he placed her hand between her legs, she had curled and moved her fingers. Now, even after she had washed her hands [...] her fingers still felt sticky; they no longer belonged to her [...] she washed her hands with water so hot that it scalded her fingers, and a small soft welt flowered on her thumb. (190)

Ifemelu wants to punish her body—which has felt alien to her in its reaction to touch and now feels like a strange object which she does not want to touch and which must be cleansed: “She wanted to shower, to scrub herself, but she could not bear the thought of touching her own body, and so she put on her nightdress, gingerly, to touch as little of herself as possible” (190). Overall, Ifemelu suppresses the memories of abuse, which results in a psychological trauma as “forcing forgetting effectively shapes and alters identity” (Cunningham 44). She wants to “reach into herself and yank out the memory of what had just happened” (Adichie, *Americanah* 190), which she achieves not physically but mentally, by detaching herself from her body and from her emotions—from her sexual self overall.

As sexual identity cannot be isolated from other facets of one's identity, Ifemelu is consequently losing her sense of self and “the ability to care” (Adichie, *Americanah* 192), which completes her process of self-alienation. This is conveyed in a cluster of metaphors in which descriptions of nature mirror Ifemelu's emotional and mental state. After she first inquires about the job with the tennis coach, Ifemelu notices that “the trees were awash with colors, red and yellow leaves tinted the air golden” (177). Here, the trees' leaves are still colorful and full of life, just as Ifemelu still has hope to find a job other than sexually serving someone. Nature has changed, however, when Ifemelu accepts the job and loses hope; the leaves have fallen and the trees appear dead: “It was late autumn, the trees had grown antlers, dried leaves were sometimes trailed into the apartment” (185). Finally, immediately after the abuse, the outside world is buried under fresh snow just as Ifemelu is fully weighed down by depression and voicelessness: “That night, it snowed, her first snow, and in the morning, she watched the world outside her window, the parked cars made lumpy, misshapen, by layered snow” (191). Ifemelu's self-alienation comes full circle and she feels entirely deadened by the experience of abuse. She is living only in a vegetative state, neither speaking to anyone nor leaving the house.

As mentioned above, Ifemelu's experiences should be labeled sexual abuse and thus fit into a greater narrative about immigration, race, and rape.⁸ As Western rape culture is inevitably complicated by racism and as it exacerbates the problems of (nonwhite) immigrants, it supports the discourse that "gender and race are already intertwined in the white American and white European imagination: racial 'Others,' always already sexualized" (Wright and Schuhmann 9). *Americanah* exemplifies in Ifemelu's sexual abuse the impact of the intersection of sexual identity and race on female Afropolitans—and thus contributes to demarginalizing black women immigrant experiences. In detailing Ifemelu's self-alienation, it also combats "the myth of black women as hypersexual" which "served to [...] excuse white men's rape of black women. If black women were always ready and willing sexual partners, it was impossible to have sex with them against their will" (Springer 78). *Americanah* underlines that even though Ifemelu went to the job on her own and *even though* the sexual acts cannot be labeled outright rape, as the novel does not mention whether or not penetration was involved, they originate in the same myth of black hypersexuality and serve to excuse (white) men's violence against black women, all while eroticizing female blackness.

Since Ifemelu's self-alienation is portrayed to be simultaneously gendered as well as racialized, her experiences exemplify double oppression, especially when they are juxtaposed with Obinze's struggle as an undocumented male immigrant in London. Obinze has little trouble finding work with someone else's National Insurance number and can even afford to leave behind a cleaning job in search of better work. While *Americanah* makes a point of detailing the ways in which Obinze, like Ifemelu, is stratified by a racist (as well as classist) Western society, it is crucial that he does not face the sexual stigmatization and abuse Ifemelu encounters and does not have to adjust his Afropolitan identity sexually the way she has to. That only two parts—one of them extremely short—out of six parts of the novel are told by Obinze, leads to *Americanah*'s "decidedly female perspective and experiences that horizontally interpellate and refute an overarching heteronormative,

8 While the phrase sexual abuse is used to describe forced sexual contact of various kinds, rape is defined more narrowly. The FBI defines it as "penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim" ("Frequently Asked Questions"). However, many feminists and progressives find this definition failing to explain what constitutes consent; they advocate for a model of affirmative consent also termed 'Yes Means Yes' in which, for example, silence does not count as consent.

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heteropatriarchal narrative of blackness” (Phiri 12). Additionally, Ifemelu’s abuse does not only affect her identity by “forcing forgetting” (Cunningham 44) but, as identity is always connected to home (Ucham and Kangira 49-50), also taints her view of America and prevents it from truly becoming her home. While Obinze gets deported, Ifemelu willingly returns to Lagos to reconnect with her Nigerian self and to work fully through her trauma—coming to terms with her identity on a national, racial, cultural *and* sexual level.

IFEMELU’S RELATIONSHIPS IN AMERICA: SEXUAL AGENCY AND GENDERED EXPERIENCES OF RACE

As Kimberly Springer remarks, “the main way of viewing black female sexuality is as victimized or deviant,” with little room for positive assertions (81). In this light, it is important that Ifemelu, as a victim of sexual abuse, does not remain in this role. Instead, *Americanah* fights back against these two main stereotypes of black women’s sexuality—victim or deviant—through Ifemelu, who is reclaiming pleasurable sexual experiences as well as romantic relationships for herself and thus expanding her Afropolitan identity. Ifemelu’s relationships with American men, white and black, highlight that her romantic experiences are both racialized and gendered. The active role she assumes in her relationships simultaneously characterizes her as a black female subject with agency and breaks the prevalent ‘politics of silence’ surrounding black sexualities. In detailing the erotic and passionate aspects of relationships Ifemelu can freely pursue, *Americanah* moreover negates the role of “the nonsexual black lady” for Ifemelu, which “has become a staple” in popular culture (Springer 80).

Black sexuality has a long history of being stigmatized and othered in Western societies—it has been marked by hypersexualization, exoticism, and exploitation. One of the strategies of resistance developed by the black community in the US is silence.⁹ A ‘politics of silence’ was first described by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, who conceptualizes it as “a political strategy by black women reformers who hoped by their silence and by the promotion of proper Victorian morality to demonstrate the lie of the image of the sexually immoral black woman” (qtd. in Hammonds,

9 For other strategies and new ideas of black female sexual politics and literature, see Trimiko Melancon.

“Black (W)holes”). However, “in choosing silence[,] black women also los[e] the ability to articulate any conception of their sexuality” (“Black (W)holes”), and especially black “female desire and agency” are submerged (Hammonds, “Toward a Genealogy” 102). Evelyn M. Hammonds argues that even today, we know very little about the expression of black women’s sexual desires (“Black (W)holes”). Her argumentation is thus in line with Springer’s assertion that “between respectability and silence, black women found little space to determine who they were as sexual beings” (79). One outcome of the ‘politics of silence’ is the trope of the asexual black lady which, as an extension of the black mammy stereotype, is hurting the black community equally as much, “serv[ing] as a cautionary tale about black women’s sexuality unbound” (79).

Due to sexual abuse, Ifemelu loses not just her respectability in a communal sense but also, initially, respect for herself. Even after she regains self-respect, she chooses to be silent about her experience—a silence she will only break after returning to Nigeria and Obinze. While this silence negates a full coming to terms with her sexual identity, it does not prevent Ifemelu from fulfilling her sexual and emotional needs. Despite using common “metaphors of speechlessness” to characterize the effects of sexual violence, *Americanah* ultimately resists through Ifemelu the “silence, erasure, and invisibility [of sexualities of black women] in dominant discourses” (Hammonds, “Black (W)holes”). As the novel does not explore white women’s sexual identity, Ifemelu’s sexual development is not silenced, compared, or threatened. Crucially, during her time in America Ifemelu still remains her own Other; she “slip[s] out of her old skin” and becomes, “in her mind, a woman free of knots and cares” in her relationships with Curt and Blaine (Adichie, *Americanah* 247, 241).

The first love Ifemelu finds in America is Curt, her boss’s brother and a wealthy white American from a Republican family. Through Curt and his involvement with Ifemelu, *Americanah* not only describes Ifemelu’s desires and how she fulfills them but also discusses notions of exoticism regarding black sexuality, which are connected to the concept of otherness. In the *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, Staszak establishes that “[o]therness is due less to the difference of the Other than to the point of view and the discourse of the person who perceives the Other as such” (1); the Other is not inherently different but instead constructed as such by a dominant group or person. Deriving from this observation, exoticism, which “opposes the abnormality of elsewhere with the normality of here” is defined

as follows: “Exoticism is less the pleasure of confronting otherness than the pleasure of having the satisfaction of experiencing the sight of a reassuring version of this confrontation, true to our fantasies, that comforts us in our identity and superiority” (6).¹⁰ This almost voyeuristic fantasy of a confrontation with an imagined Other that validates the self is personified in Curt. His and Ifemelu’s first sexual contact results in him commodifying Ifemelu’s black body: “Curt had never been with a black woman; he told her this after their first time [...] with a self-mocking toss of his head, as if this were something he should have done long ago but had somehow neglected” (Adichie, *Americanah* 240). As Ifemelu describes the situation, Curt considers having sex with a black woman to be something he alone can decide for or against. Ifemelu’s assessment of his behavior further suggests that he is keeping track of the different bodies of Others he consumes sexually, paying special attention to race and other markers of exoticism.

Ifemelu is, to Curt, the exotic Other as she differs from him in Selasi’s identity categories (nationally, racially, and culturally). She is furthermore his sexual antipole as “‘black sexuality’ in the white imagination functions dialectically, rejecting the Other and at the same time desiring and/or identifying with that Other” (Wright and Schuhmann 9). This implies an attitude toward black and other nonwhite sexual bodies by whites which bell hooks, in her seminal essay of the same title, terms ‘eating the other.’ hooks describes the desire of white men to be changed through sexual encounters with the racial Other and the deliberate consummation of nonwhite bodies which results from that desire (368-69). For Curt, a consummation of Ifemelu’s body can be understood quite literally: “He wanted to suck her finger, to lick honey from her nipple, to smear ice cream on her belly as though it was not enough simply to lie bare skin to bare skin” (Adichie, *Americanah* 241). Just like another fictional character hooks describes, Curt “assume[s] that he alone can decide the nature of his relationship to a black person” (hooks 371). In exchange for the sexual, financial, and social security he offers, Curt demands from Ifemelu to “be the fucking love of [her] life” (Adichie, *Americanah* 278). He expects Ifemelu to forgive him after swapping erotic emails with another woman but calls her “bitch” (357) and leaves her when she cheats on him. Overall, *Americanah* asserts through Curt that “[a]lthough it seems that the Other is sometimes valued, as with exoticism, it is done in a stereotypical, superior fashion

¹⁰ Staszak differentiates between exoticism, which is “characteristic of exotic things/places/people,” and exoticism that describes, in contrast, “a taste for exotic objects/places/people” (1).

that serves to comfort the Self in its feeling of superiority” (Staszak 1). Thus, the novel distinctly demonstrates that Ifemelu’s racial identity formation is complicated through outsiders’ views of her sexual self and that she has to come to terms with this perception of her sexual identity.

Following hooks’s conceptualization of interracial relationships further, it becomes apparent why Ifemelu and Curt’s was doomed to fail. hooks holds that “[m]utual recognition of racism, its impact both on those who are dominated and those who dominate, is the only standpoint that makes possible an encounter between races that is not based on denial and fantasy” (371). When dating Curt, Ifemelu finds that he is not capable of fully apprehending the discrimination she, as a black female immigrant, encounters on a near day-to-day basis, “grasp[ing] one thing but [being] completely tone-deaf to a similar [incident of racism]” (Adichie, *Americanah* 361). As Katherine Hallemeier summarizes, “Curt’s experience of whiteness has left him unprepared to function in a relationship in which his goodness, which is to say his material resources and limited empathy, does not ensure the total and constant affirmation he desires” (239). The novel thus asserts that Ifemelu’s “love for Americans is inexorably delimited by race” (Hallemeier 239).

However, even though Ifemelu’s next boyfriend Blaine, a professor at Yale, is African American, he cannot gain full understanding of her position within American society as his conceptualization of racism is absolute and does not take into account theories of intersectionality. Blaine’s “‘goodness’ extends, unlike Curt’s, beyond personal attributes to social advocacy [and he] feels certain that he knows how the world should be” (Hallemeier 239) so that Ifemelu sometimes “[feels] like his apprentice” (Adichie, *Americanah* 387). Unsurprisingly, their most intimate bonding happens over the issue of race. Both Ifemelu and Blaine support Barack Obama as the presidential candidate in the 2008 election which “unite[s] them in an intimacy they had never had before” (437). Obama is even “there with them [...] like a third emotional presence” when they are having intercourse (442).

Overall, the issues regarding race Ifemelu experiences and shares on her blog while she is in relationships always touch upon her sexual identity as well, underlining again the importance of intersectionality. Gender plays a role, for example, in Barack Obama’s election which is taking place while Ifemelu is with Blaine—“[i]sn’t it funny how they say ‘blacks want Obama’ and ‘women want Hillary,’ but what about black women?” (Adichie, *Americanah* 441)—but is

especially obvious when related to body images and beauty, since “[f]emale beauty” is still mainly “equalized with white femininity” (Reuter 6). Ifemelu experiences harmful racialized gender issues, for example, when a cosmetician refuses to wax her “curly” eyebrows until Curt yells at her (Adichie, *Americanah* 361) or when she must get her hair straightened for a job interview (250), burns her scalp, and suffers from alopecia. In response, Ifemelu seeks out an Internet community and “[i]n this virtual world where natural Black hair is normal and not ‘deviant’ [she] feels at ease” (Reuter 6) for the time being. However, only back in Nigeria can she truly be herself, when she “[gets] off the plane in Lagos and stop[s] being black” (Adichie, *Americanah* 586). In describing Ifemelu’s relationships in America, *Americanah* gives a voice to black female sexual desire and agency through Ifemelu while simultaneously investigating exoticism and the need for feminist intersectionality through the characters of Curt and Blaine. It thus underlines the substantial role sexual identity plays in the formation of a racial consciousness for female Afropolitans.

IFEMELU AND OBINZE: RETURNING TO HER VOICE

As detailed in the previous chapters, Ifemelu’s experiences of discrimination and violence as a black female immigrant in the United States prevent her from fully escaping the role as her own Other. Ifemelu’s return to herself is only complete once she moves to Nigeria and reclaims her voice by finally telling the story of her sexual abuse to Obinze. This is the first time she talks about the sexual violence she suffered. Similar to the multistep process of Ifemelu’s self-alienation after her sexual abuse, the process of coming to voice—that means of successfully crafting her own Afropolitan identity that includes a sexual identity—happens in several steps. After Ifemelu gets hired as a babysitter and the first shock in the aftermath of sexual abuse has passed, she goes through three initial changes toward becoming a full subject while still living in America: retrieving her Nigerian accent, starting a blog, and falling in love with her hair. Her return to Nigeria and the articulation of her experiences of sexual violence then constitute the final, and crucial, step of reversing her self-alienation and coming to voice.

Giving up her carefully practiced American accent is the first advancement in coming to voice for Ifemelu—she “stop[s] faking” and instead speaks in a manner

that is “truly her” (Adichie, *Americanah* 216). Just as metaphors are used when Ifemelu is losing her sense of self—in which the state of her environment indicates Ifemelu’s psychological well-being—descriptions of nature also convey her healing. Accordingly, Ifemelu retrieves her Nigerian voice in the summer: She “decided to stop faking an American accent on a sunlit day in July” (213). Together with the green leaves of trees, Ifemelu’s self-respect and gist for life have returned. Now she is surrounded by “the sounds of late summer” and “music from passing cars” (213), which are no longer buried under snow, just like Ifemelu has unburied herself from depression and silence. Additionally, *Americanah* draws a further connection between voice, agency, and sexual identity when, after returning to her Nigerian accent, Ifemelu is immediately rewarded for the recovery of her true voice with a love interest—she meets Blaine on a train that same day. For the first time after her sexual abuse, Ifemelu acknowledges her desires and “imagine[s] what [Blaine] would be like in bed” (222). Sitting next to him on the train, “she talk[s] and talk[s], perhaps because of the newness of her own voice” (221). By letting Ifemelu’s return to a Nigerian accent and the meeting of a future lover coincide, *Americanah* acknowledges the power of voice for the crafting of an Afropolitan identity—articulation is here crucial for expressing one’s sexual desires and needs both internally and externally.¹¹

In a second and third step of finding her voice and becoming a full subject, Ifemelu starts to write a blog and connects to an online community of black women who help her treasure her hair and take good care of it.¹² Ifemelu starts blogging because “she yearns to be listened to and to exchange her experiences with race and gender with others” and so keeping her own blog can be read as a “liberation of her voice” (Reuter 7). Just as importantly, Ifemelu is an active user of the website *HappilyKinkyNappy.com* and receives tips and support from this virtual natural hair community. In a crucial step toward acceptance of her black body and her true Afropolitan self, Ifemelu’s attitude toward her hair changes: “On an unremarkable day in early spring[,] [...] she looked in the mirror, sank her fingers

¹¹ It is productive to keep in mind here the concept of affirmative consent which suggests that every part of sexual contact should be desired by all parties and expressed as such, so that everyone is actively, willingly engaging in the acts and so that each party knows that their partners are consenting.

¹² As both blogging and Ifemelu’s hair are widely investigated in the work of other scholars, I will only briefly discuss them. For further explorations of the topics, see, for example, Stefanie Reuter; Emelda U. /Ucham and Jairos Kangira; Aretha Phiri; and Serena Guarracino.

into her hair, dense and spongy and glorious, and could not imagine it any other way. That simply, she fell in love with her hair” (Adichie, *Americanah* 264).

In a final step of returning to her voice and regaining full subjectivity, which in America was “constantly violated by forms of discrimination, like racism and/or sexism” (Reuter 2), Ifemelu returns to Nigeria and, even more importantly, finally tells the story of her sexual abuse.¹³ She thus fully reverses the process of self-alienation and ceases to be an Other to herself. As home and Obinze are “nearly synonymous” for Ifemelu, it is fitting that she would reconnect with him upon her return (Austin 13). Seeing Obinze is especially important because Ifemelu had stopped speaking to him immediately after the abuse, which meant that she also lost his voice, the voice of home, in addition to her own. While still living in America, Ifemelu believes that she would not be capable of sharing her experiences of sexual violence with Obinze as “her self-loathing had hardened inside her” and that she “would never be able to form the sentences to tell her story” (Adichie, *Americanah* 195). Talking in person to Obinze back in Lagos, Ifemelu is initially silent out of shame and self-hatred. However, by their second meeting, she already finds the words to describe her abuse. The silence which follows her story and which she shares with Obinze takes on a new quality. It is utterly different from the silence that surrounded her in America; it protects and comforts her: “The tears felt itchy. She made no sound. He took her hand in his, both clasped on the table, and between them the silence grew anew, an ancient silence that they both knew. She was inside this silence and she was safe” (543).

Following this liberating act of sharing her story, Ifemelu becomes her true self. When contrasting how Ifemelu describes her expectations of the days ahead after the abuse and after she has shared her story with Obinze and started a relationship with him, it becomes apparent that she is a full subject—alive instead of deadened, safe instead of terrified, grounded instead of lost. After the abuse, “[s]he woke up torpid each morning, slowed by sadness, frightened by the endless stretch of the day that lay ahead. [...] She knew there was no point in being here, in being alive, but she had no energy to think concretely of how she could kill herself” (Adichie, *Americanah* 192). In contrast, back in Lagos “her heady days full of cliché [began]:

13 While some scholars consider Ifemelu’s choice to return home to Nigeria the last step in her process of becoming a subject (cf. Reuter 9), I disagree. In my reading, giving voice to her experiences of sexual violence is a crucial step needed to accomplish full subjectivity and coming to voice.

she felt fully alive, her heart beat faster when he arrived at her door, and she viewed each morning like the unwrapping of a gift. She would laugh, or cross her legs or slightly sway her hips, with a heightened awareness of herself” (553). Unsurprisingly, as she is sure of herself and grounded in her sexual identity, Ifemelu is comfortable initiating sexual contact with Obinze: “‘I touch myself thinking of you,’ she said. He stared at her, thrown slightly off balance. [...] There was, between them, a weightless, seamless desire. She leaned in and kissed him and at first he was slow in his response, and then he was pulling up her blouse, pushing down her bra cups to free her breasts” (551).

Ifemelu also voices her desires and needs more explicitly than with Curt or Blaine, allowing her more agency and getting to know her sexual self better: “Ifemelu demanded of [Obinze]. ‘No, don’t come yet, I’ll kill you if you come,’ she would say, or ‘No, baby, don’t move,’ then she would dig into his chest and move at her own rhythm, and when finally, she arched her back and let out a sharp cry, he felt accomplished to have satisfied her. She expected to be satisfied” (Adichie, *Americanah* 569). In so explicitly contrasting Ifemelu’s view of daily life and her expression of sexual agency in America and in Lagos, *Americanah* highlights that Ifemelu needs to consciously confront her (traumatic) sexual experiences in order to return to her voice. Ifemelu becomes a full subject when living through her violent past and only then can “finally, [spin] herself fully into being” (586).

For some scholars, Afropolitanism means “refusing to take an identity of a victim” (Mbembe qtd. in Ucham and Kangira 43), a fitting definition also for Ifemelu. She escapes racial and sexual victimization when she breaks her silence, leaves self-loathing behind, and stops blaming herself for a traumatic experience that happened due to systemic oppression. She thus defeats victimization with her voice and simultaneously defines herself as an Afropolitan on a racial, national, cultural, and sexual level. She fully regains her voice, sexuality, body, and sense of self through her return: “[S]he was at peace: to be home, to be writing her blog, to have discovered Lagos again” (Adichie, *Americanah* 586). Through Ifemelu’s journey back to her country of origin, *Americanah* effectively subverts traditional migration narratives, moving from oppression to freedom.

CONCLUSION

In discussing Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's award-winning novel *Americanah*, this article set out to expand Taiye Selasi's concept of Afropolitanism, which holds that Africans of the world "must form an identity along at least three dimensions: national, racial, cultural—with subtle tensions in between," by a sexual identity category. Using insights regarding theories of intersectionality as a departure and drawing on black sexuality scholarship, I argued that, through the detailed exploration of Ifemelu's sexuality, *Americanah* broadens the concept of Afropolitan identity construction for black heterosexual women. The novel insinuates that becoming a full subject is only possible when female racialized sexual experiences are consciously lived and confronted. The three subchapters, investigating Ifemelu's sexual abuse, her relationships in America, and her return to Nigeria and Obinze, detailed Ifemelu's journey of becoming a full subject and finding her Afropolitan identity in her quest for belonging.

When Ucham and Kangira discuss Selasi's Afropolitan identity formation, they add that the process "can be traumatic and painful, both emotionally and physically" (42), a remark that is certainly true for Ifemelu. I want to suggest that the connotations Ucham and Kangira evoke with their assertion are highly gendered and expressed in *Americanah* in the sexual abuse and related trauma and depression Ifemelu experiences and struggles against. Moreover, as Ifemelu not only negotiates her sexuality and gender but also critically engages with her race and class, such as in her blog, she is alerted to postcolonialism and thus can be considered a "critical Afropolitan" (Piñero 87). This is especially apparent upon her return to Lagos, where she is "aware of the postcolonial outcomes in Nigeria and how they affect its citizens" (87). Ifemelu makes personal, cultural, and political observations about postcolonialism, race, and class in her home country which she again deals with in a literary fashion.

While this article broadened Selasi's definition of Afropolitan identity, of course the formation of a sexual identity for Afropolitans in general is an individual process—dependent on the already existing categories of culture, race, and nation, but also connected to sexual orientation, gender, age, and creed, amongst others. As I detailed in my analysis, for Ifemelu, it means consciously confronting abuse, breaking the politics of silence by embracing sexual agency and pleasure, and working through her experiences. In investigating Ifemelu's gendered experiences

of racism, her sexual and romantic agency and desires as well as the sexual violence she experiences, *Americanah* moreover underlines that sexuality is political and that it is intimately intertwined with questions of race, nationality, and culture. This is also suggested by both the open phrasing of Selasi's concept of Afropolitanism and Crenshaw's popular theory of intersectionality. On the whole, the formation of an Afropolitan identity is crucially influenced by sexual identity and cannot be theorized without that category.

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