

# Writing «so raw and true»: Blogging in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*\*

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When the reader meets Ifemelu, the main character from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's recent novel *Americanah*, she is going to have her hair braided as one final act before moving back from Princeton to Lagos. During the short train trip to the salon, the protagonist muses about a fellow passenger and how, 'before', she would have started a conversation with him for her blog – before she decided she wanted to return to live in her home country Nigeria, and to shut down her anonymous blog on race in the US, «*Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*» (Adichie 2014: 4).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> While the novel starts from this moment, its structure moves relentlessly back and forth in time while telling the story of Ifemelu and, partially, of Obinze. While doing her hair, Ifemelu goes through a long flashback (part 1, 2 and 4) on her adolescence in Lagos and her love story with Obinze, followed by her moving to the US to finish university. Due to an episode of sexual abuse she falls into depression and cuts off Obinze; the novel then continues with her life in the US which includes two important relationships, white upper-class Curt and African-American Princeton professor Blaine. Some details of Obinze's current life in Nigeria as an estate businessman are disseminated in these parts (including his marriage to Kosi), while part 3 is dedicated to his previous stay in Britain as an illegal

When asked on the “International Author’s Stage” (2014) why she made her character a blogger, Adichie answered: «I wanted this novel to also be social commentary, but I wanted to say it in ways that are different from what one is supposed to say in literary fiction». Blog writing, or blogging, features prominently in the novel as such a space, both embedded in but also outside creative writing, and as a place where social realities of race can be discussed without the trappings of character and action. Yet, the separation between blogging and fiction in *Americanah* is far less clear-cut than Adichie’s remark seems to imply. Actually, as the novel progresses its social commentary moves back and forth, from the blog to the novel and vice versa, contaminating fiction with the drive for elaboration expressed by blogging but also infusing blog entries of the emotional entanglements of creative writing.

Because of this very peculiar structure, *Americanah* offers a good case study for some reflections on the role of technology in writing, and especially on the global resonance of postcolonial writing. The postcolonial writer has emerged as a conspicuous *persona* in contemporary media and literary discourse (see Guarracino 2013a), and Adichie herself owns a sort of celebrity status: her videos show an impressive number of online views, making her a ‘viral’ public figure both inside and outside the traditional boundaries of postcolonial academic discourse. *Americanah* exists in an almost seamless continuity with these media flows by and about Adichie, as she prolongs there the role of opinion maker she has recently assumed on matters such as race, gender, and the comparison between Nigeria and the US, her country of adoption.<sup>2</sup> As such, this article maintains that the novel

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immigrant. Parts 5, 6, and 7 follow Ifemelu’s return to Lagos and her renewed relationship with Obinze.

<sup>2</sup> This emerges from the many interviews on these subjects available on widespread platforms such as YouTube. Some of these videos are user-generated content taken off mainstream media, uploaded and titled in ways that underline the relevance of Adichie’s opinion on the subject referred to,

represents another instalment of the writer's public persona; yet it also elaborates on the issues of shaping public opinion via the Internet by using a blog as a metanarrative device.

## **The market and the postcolonial**

Before publishing *Americanah* in 2013, Adichie had already been hailed as one of the most promising young Nigerian writers: her career, started while she was attending graduate school in the US, skyrocketed when she was awarded the O. Henry Prize in 2003. Her first novel *Purple Hibiscus*, published the same year, was shortlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction, a prize dedicated to women writers in English, and longlisted for the Booker Prize (see Hewett 2005: 75); she eventually won the Orange in 2007 with her second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

Adichie has also been mentioned as part of what recent literary criticism has defined the 'third generation' of Nigerian writers, a generation concerned with «nomadism, exile, displacement, and deracination» (Adesanmi and Dunton 2005, 16) more than with political and anti-colonial struggle. This new generation of writers, also including Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani and Teju Cole, has recently been the focus of a large body of scholarship that, as Hamish Dalley poignantly notes, has in fact produced this definition, opening to questions such as «what it means for literature to belong to a generation, and to a nation» (2013: 17). Indeed, the writers encompassed in the burgeoning corpus of third generation Nigerian literature do not operate on a national level – if this were ever possible in a postcolonial context – but necessarily face the many challenges of a context in which «Nigerian publishers number in the dozens, and Nigerian readers in the millions» (Griswold 2000: 4), both in Nigeria

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as for example in “Author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie on love, race and hair” and “Chimamanda Adichie: Beauty does not solve any problem”.

and abroad, while the global market, including literary prizes, is still mostly located in the West and driven by Western economic forces.

In her recent *The Postcolonial Cultural Industry*, Sandra Ponzanesi underlines the role of prizes in creating celebrities and bestowing literary worth – a role previously played by aesthetic criteria – and especially mentions the Orange, which «with its system of long and short lists, has certainly helped to increase the visibility of female writers and to scout new postcolonial talents such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie» (2014: 68). By overviewing the relationship between literary prizes and postcolonial literary production, Ponzanesi means to establish that the link between postcolonial studies and the cultural industry is something that cannot be overlooked when engaging with works produced in and for this market. This, as I hope to show in my analysis of *Americanah*, does not mean they cannot provide insights in postcolonial elaborations of individual and collective identities. On the contrary, most of these works show a lucid awareness of the processes they are participating into: these works relate to the market with a contrapuntal attitude that both endorses and critiques it, embracing instead of removing the dichotomy between postcolonialism as anti-colonial critical practice and postcoloniality as the marketability of exoticism in commercial as well as academic terms (see Huggan 2001: 6).

As a consequence, *Americanah* and similar works call for what Sarah Brouillette defines as the need for a responsible reading of postcolonial texts (see Brouillette 2007: 21ff.).<sup>3</sup> This responsible readership is interpellated by postcolonial writing such as Adichie's, which produces what Ponzanesi defines «a multi-sited reading which varies not only across space and time but also according to the 'postcolonial literacies' entailed in the decoding» of postcolonial textualities (2014: 47). Instead of disowning and disengaging with these novels, the postcolonial reader can claim them against the grain,

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<sup>3</sup> An overview on the argument between Huggan and Brouillette on the ideological implications of the contemporary marketability of the postcolonial can be found in Ponzanesi 2014: 45-46.

enacting what Edward Said called a 'contrapuntal reading' of their implications in the global dynamics of cultural production related to postcolonial countries (see Said 1993: 51).

Brouillette's and Ponzanesi's framework clearly takes into account recent studies on participatory culture, where audiences, users and readers are considered not only as consumers but also as producers. Here the cultural industry becomes a field of interaction shaped by multinationals of cultural production as well as by what Manuel Castells calls 'creative audience', who actively «carv[e] out its meaning by contrasting its experience with the one-directional flows of information it receives» (2009: 132). Blogs, with their foregrounding and sharing of personal experiences and opinions, belong to this interactive landscape in which power – cultural and otherwise – is elaborated on shared platforms. Even when managed by multinationals – most blogs exist on platforms such as Wordpress or Blogspot – blogs still need both individual and collective engagement to be effective. Shared experience is the only one that matters, the only one that becomes 'real' and shapes people's imaginary and life: «Everybody and everything finds a way of existence in this intertwined, multimodal, interactive communication text» (Castells 2009: 136).

Putting aside the obvious question of the digital divide and of the very local ways in which 'everybody and everything' may have access to the global network – a question that is of special relevance in postcolonial countries<sup>4</sup> – I want to focus here on how a traditionally solitary activity such as reading finds its own 'way of existence' in the

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<sup>4</sup> Although it goes beyond the scope of this essay to assess digital literacy in postcolonial contexts, it must be mentioned that Nigeria actually features one of the highest rates of internet penetration: one in two Nigerians own an internet-connected device (most frequently a mobile phone), although their use is overwhelmingly concentrated in large urban areas (see Open Society Foundations 2012). Internet use in Nigeria is also notoriously related to the so-called 419 or "Nigerian scams", i.e. online frauds, which are also mentioned in the novel (see Adichie 2014: 62).

communication age. A novel can be considered as a product which acquires meaning as it finds its way to more and more readers: this happens via a network of power relations including publishers, prizes, the writer's public persona, but also through platforms such as Amazon reviews and individual blogs as well networks of user-generated content such as Goodreads and aNobii.

Contemporary Nigerian writers are part and parcel of this cultural and commercial landscape, as they hover between the role of the storyteller of local – albeit cosmopolitan – life and that of the native informant, elaborating 'Africa' for Western understanding and consumption. The term 'native informant' comes from ethnography, where it defines "a figure who ... can only provide data, to be interpreted by the knowing subject for reading" (Spivak 1999: 49). Spivak has notoriously appropriated the term to define "the limited access to being-human" of the postcolonial subject (30), and can be recognized in the risk run by Adichie and other postcolonial writers to become interpreters of their own land of origin for a mainly Western and English-speaking audience:

Writing fiction is the contemporary analogue to telling tales in the moonlit village, and Nigerian novelists see themselves as storytellers. They tell stories of a particular kind and with a particular intent, however, for these writers understand themselves to be bearing witness to Nigerian social experience. (Griswold 2000: 3)

This appropriation of the 'native informant' persona is also endowed with the will and agency to redress and rewrite media representations of postcolonial countries, as 'bearing witness to Nigerian social experience' often means to challenge and overturn representations of Nigeria and Africa broadcasted by the media.<sup>5</sup> In a

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<sup>5</sup> A limit in the use of the 'native informant' paradigm to understand contemporary postcolonial fiction also resides in the often contrasting positions sustained by different writers, as emerges from the debate of Afropolitanism I discuss in the following paragraph which also shows the

widely quoted TED talk titled “The Danger of a Single Story” (2009), Adichie has confronted the issue by commenting, in classic postcolonial rhetoric, on the power of stories to influence people’s elaboration of reality: «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’, here, indicate literary fiction but also a wider range of activities – including lecturing, especially when lectures are peopled with characters and anecdotes as in Adichie’s case. Her most viewed and popular lecture, a TEDxEuston lecture titled “We Should All Be Feminists” (2013), is filled with stories featuring herself and others, such as her first encounter with the word “feminist” through a friend’s comment, or her being prevented to be class monitor in primary school – although she had scored better than all the other pupils – because the class monitor was supposed to be male.

The anecdotes are told in a variety of tones, but always with a good deal of humour and the right timing to draw laughter and applause from the audience. Part of the lecture has been sampled in Beyoncé’s 2013 single “\*\*\*Flawless”, thus making this video even more popular, with a record of 1.193.590 views and 9.908 comments on YouTube.<sup>6</sup> Stories travel then, not only via the more traditional medium of novels and creative fiction but also through a more disseminated network: Adichie can thus be considered as part of a wide social network which articulates a continuous flow of framing and counter-framing involving a collectivity of participating subjects.

### ***Americanah: an Afropolitan novel?***

This phenomenon can be surely considered part of the landscape of global marketing of exotic commodities Ponzanesi describes, where writers become ‘brand names’ contributing to «a cosmopolitan culture

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heterogeneity of both ‘Western’ and ‘African’ audiences engaged by Adichie’s work.

<sup>6</sup> Data referring to August 25<sup>th</sup>, 2014.

of distinction, through which the consumption of postcolonial products is not just a sign of exoticism but also of worldliness and intercultural sophistication» (2014: 4). What Joel Whitney calls 'immigrant fiction' is surely a prominent feature of the book market, as the many prizes garnered by postcolonial writers both sustain and witness: «how to be your own doppelganger, culturally speaking, is the great subject of the global age – how to be at odds with yourself as you toggle between cultures» (2010: 20). *Americanah* is paradigmatic in this respect by having its two main characters Ifemelu and Obinze struggling with the many identities they have to wear, both as Nigerians and as migrants in the US and in Britain respectively. However, while tapping into well-known tropes of postcolonial fiction such as dislocation and plurilinguism, their experience also mirrors that of a new readership, the Nigerian urban youth who enjoy postcolonial cultural products: their practices are remindful of the ones Ponzanesi discusses in relation to South Asian young elites and their appropriation of Indo-chic, where «the consumption of 'postcolonial products' is also done by the so-called upper-middle postcolonial classes that are demographically young and urban in location, but cosmopolitan in orientation» (Ponzanesi 2014: 35).

This African young and urban upper middle class has recently been coalescing around the neologism 'Afropolitanism', which has acquired currency – and criticism – both in the academia and in the wider cultural commentary.<sup>7</sup> In his preface to *Negotiating Afropolitanism*, Simon Gikandi underlines the attempt of contemporary debate on Africa to «overcome the malady of Afro-pessimism – the belief that the continent and its populace is hopelessly imprisoned in its past, trapped [in] a vicious circle of underdevelopment, and held hostage to corrupt institutions» (2011: 9). This vision has been recently

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<sup>7</sup> The following does not mean to be a comprehensive overview of scholarship on Afropolitanism and its role in contemporary cultural commentary, but responds to the need to place it within the wider debate on the postcolonial cultural market and the role of the media in literature consumption.

counteracted by a «hermeneutics of redemption» (id.), of which Afropolitanism is part. A portmanteau of 'African' and 'cosmopolitan', this term has been first devised by Achille Mbembe as a way to overcome Afrocentrism and the ensuing conflict between internationalism and nativism in cultural productions from and about Africa: Afropolitan, in Mbembe's intention, is «a way of being 'African' open to difference and conceived as transcending race» (2008).

This neologism hence identifies what it means to be rooted both in Africa and elsewhere. This rhetoric values hybridity, Whitney's "toggling between cultures" so prized by the postcolonial cultural industry, as clearly emerges from Gikandi's own definition of the Afropolitan:

Afropolitan is to be connected to knowable African communities, nations, and traditions; but it is also to live a life divided across cultures, languages, and states. It is to embrace and celebrate a state of cultural hybridity – to be of Africa and of other worlds at the same time. (2011: 9)

The language of Afropolitanism celebrates movement and syncretism, and aims at complicating African identities as featured in global media by focusing on migrant subjects. Among the cultural narratives pivotal to this shift in representations of the African continent, J.K.S. Makokha mentions the «parameters of literary criticism» (2011: 17), thus electing literature as the locus for the elaboration of new African identities. Together but also in some way before and against popular culture and the media, literary fiction appears as a fertile ground for Afropolitan cultural elaboration.

Although its concerns are shared throughout the African intellectual community, Afropolitanism itself has been subject to a wide range of criticism. In a review of *Negotiating Afropolitanism*, South African poet and scholar Raphael d'Abdon notes how «the idiom of Afropolitanism refers to a small minority of Africans who are nonetheless intellectually and culturally (and thus politically) relevant within the academia and the arena of arts» (2011: 149). Kenyan writer

Binyavanga Wainaina has also addressed the issue in an ASAUK 2012 address titled “I am a Pan-Africanist, not an Afropolitan”, where he denounced Afropolitanism as yet another cultural commodification of African culture, quoting the South-Africa-based magazine *The Afropolitan* and the shopping website *The Afropolitan Shop* as examples (see Bosch Santana 2013). However, although media and fashion appear as major players in creating a market for ‘the Afropolitan’ Wainaina – as, in different terms, Makhoka before him – focuses on literature as one of the main vehicles for the spread of a commodified Afropolitanism: as Bosch Santana comments, «overall, a spirit of Afropolitanism has led to texts that are product, rather than *process* focused, a trend that can perhaps be changed as more and more literature goes digital» (2013; italics in the text).

Adichie’s career, started in 2003 and peaked in 2007 with the Orange Prize, is coterminous with the rise and fall of Afropolitanism both as theoretical framework and cultural market. Her notion, expressed in the already quoted 2009 lecture “The Dangers of a Single Story”, that new stories are necessary to redress the representation of Africa in the media sounds distinctly Afropolitan, as do the episodes she relates to support her claim: for example, her first US roommate – and many other people she met in the US – experience Nigeria and Africa as «a single story of catastrophe» which excites «patronizing, well-meaning pity» but «no possibility of a connection as human equals» with her. The need for new stories of Nigerian migrants is equally addressed in *Americanah*: here Obinze, only son of a university professor, who grows up reading only American novels and watching only American films, just manages to go to Britain, and on a temporary visa; his attempt to obtain a European passport through a sham marriage miserably fails. During his stay in Britain, he muses:

all understood the fleeting from war, from the kind of poverty that crushes human souls, but they would not understand the need to escape from the oppressive lethargy of choicelessness. They would not understand why people like him, who were raised well fed and watered but mired in dissatisfaction,

conditioned from birth to look towards somewhere else, eternally convinced that real lives happened in that somewhere else, were now resolved to do dangerous things, illegal things, so as to leave, none of them starving, or raped, or from burned villages, but merely hungry for choice and certainty. (Adichie 2014: 341)

However, although some analogies are evident and maybe somewhat inevitable, Adichie has never identified herself as Afropolitan, and has actually rejected the term in a recent *Globe and Mail* interview: «I'm not an Afropolitan. I'm African, happily so ... I'm comfortable in the world, and it's not that unusual. Many Africans are happily African and don't think they need a new term» (Barber 2014). She also never uses the term in the novel; yet her public persona and her work have been appropriated by the Afropolitan global community: for example, the blog *The Afrolibrarians* identify her as "The Afropolitan Anthropologist", and she features multiple times on a Pinterest board titled "Stylish Afropolitan Woman".

The term also surfaces in reviews for *Americanah*: in *Under the Neem Tree* Ndeye Sene Mbaye couples the novel with Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* as «the Afropolitans [sic.] books everyone is talking about» (2014);<sup>8</sup> while Edem Torkornoo in *Ayiba*, an online magazine on contemporary Africa, writes: «*Americanah* may be about a Nigerian character but it ends up echoing the story of the afropolitan» (2014). I believe this happens because *Americanah* is (among other things) a story that self-consciously engages with the tropes of Afropolitanism in its own arena, social media, by having its character writing a blog not just on Nigeria or the US, but on race as a global discourse.

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<sup>8</sup> It must be noted here that, differently from Adichie, Tayie Selasi has embraced and even pioneered Afropolitanism since her 2005 article "Bye Bye Barbar", where she unequivocally claims the term for her generation of (upper) middle class African professionals: "They (read: we) are Afropolitans – the newest generation of African emigrants, coming soon or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you" (Selasi 2005).

The title of the novel itself is a mock epithet for *been-tos*, as emerges from its first mention in the novel. As Ifemelu's high-school friend Ginika is leaving for the US and is distributing her clothes to her friends:

"She'll come back and be a serious Americanah like Bisi," Ranyinudo said.

They roared with laughter, at that word "Americanah," wreathed in glee, the fourth syllable extended, and at the thought of Bisi, a girl in the form below them, who had come back from a short trip to America with odd affectations, pretending she no longer understood Yoruba, adding a slurred *r* to every English word she spoke. (Adichie 2014: 156)

As Ifemelu is moving to the US thanks to a university scholarship, she also enacts the ritual division of clothing, and the word resurfaces again: «Ifem, you know you'll have any kind of dress you want in America and next time we see you, you will be a serious Americanah» (123).

Here the word emerges more markedly as attributed not only to language – a dear theme of postcolonial fiction – but also to clothing and more generally to 'style': an 'Americanah' can be markedly distinguished by her speaking affectations as well as by her choice of clothes which marks her new affluence and her knowhow on up-to-date fashion trends. The subject of fashion, clearly resonant of the debate about Afropolitanism as commodity culture, recurs in the novel and especially in Ifemelu's blogging, which is often concerned with the different cultural codes embedded in sartorial practices, as when Ifemelu's first experience of partying in the US forces her to confront the dressing policies of her new country.<sup>9</sup> This experience will be then retold in her blog, where the surprise and feeling of not fitting in of the young expatriate is parenthetically elaborated into a judgmental opinion of American dress codes:

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<sup>9</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of fashion as social and cultural signifier see Calefato 2004.

(Years later, a blog post would read: When it comes to dressing well, American culture is so self-fulfilled that it has not only disregarded this courtesy of self-presentation, but has turned that disregard into a virtue. “We are too superior/busy/cool/not-uptight to bother about how we look to other people, and so we can wear pajamas to school and underwear to the mall.”) (157)

### **From writing to blogging – and back again**

This is a typical example of how blogging emerges early in the novel. As I have already mentioned, Ifemelu’s story starts in flash-forward – at the time when, after thirteen years in the US, she closes her blog and decides to move back to Lagos. A long flashback follows, telling the story of Ifemelu’s early years in Lagos and then in the US, where the reader is also told about her experience as a blogger. Yet blog entries appear far earlier than the blog’s own inception in the plot. These posts, often introduced by the adverbial “years later”, upset the chronology of the storyline by projecting it flash-forward to the moment when Ifemelu’s life will be processed by writing. The chronological shift allows for a double take on many of the character’s experiences as a black migrant in the US, so that the reader confronts the young Ifemelu’s sense of bewilderment and emotional pain together with the older Ifemelu’s more distanced elaboration of the same episodes and issues. Her dealing with depression is symptomatic of this double chronology:

Depression was what happened to Americans, with their self-absolving need to turn everything into an illness. She was not suffering from depression; she was merely a little tired and a little slow. “I don’t have depression,” she said. Years later, she would blog about this: “On the Subject of Non-American Blacks Suffering from Illnesses Whose Names They Refuse to Know.” (194)<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> A similar double chronology emerges for the post «Sometimes in America, Race Is Class» (205), dedicated to the white workman who

Through the more and more persistent presence of blog entries in the novel, *Americanah* describes the main character's coming to writing – not to creative writing, though, but to blogging as a hybrid form that brings together storytelling, reportage, and emotional value. In his *Blog Theory*, Jodi Dean expands on the peculiarity of blog authorship: «blogs offer exposure and anonymity at the same time. As bloggers we expose ourselves, our feelings and experiences, loves and hates, desires and aversions» (2010: 72). Bloggers here look like the uncanny double of the brand writer in the contemporary cultural market: they are anonymous where published authors experience extra-visibility; their writing is specifically concerned with their own “feelings and experiences” against the fiction of creative writing. These elements are all highlighted in Ifemelu's blogging experience; and the novel exalts the potentiality of critique literature exerts on these forms of writing by staging how it is elaborated, produced and disseminated. Without creating any hierarchies, blog writing is enfolded in the novel, hosting most – if not all – social commentary. At the same time, as the discrepancy among the different chronological planes of the novel begins to thin down, the novel starts to absorb elements of blogging in its third-person narrator's growing social comments.

The birth of the blog is narrated about half-way in the novel in a moment of heightened chronological complexity. The tale is part of a long recollection inserted in the wider flashback frame of the novel: after Ifemelu splits up with her white boyfriend Curt, she starts musing about why she had needed to spoil the apparent happiness of their relationship. A series of anecdotes from their life together show racial issues and Ifemelu's deep dissatisfaction, which she shares with her university fellow Wambui in a long e-mail. It is from this young

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sympathizes with her the very moment he realized she is not the landlady but only the babysitter in the opulent house where he has come to clean carpets; as well as for her meeting with a taxi driver in Baltimore who advised her that «You have to be very careful or America will corrupt you», who ‘years later’ features in the entry «On the Divisions Within the Membership of Non-American Blacks in America» (255).

Kenyan woman activist, a role model for the main character throughout the novel, that the idea of a blog eventually emerges: «Wambui replied to say, “This is so raw and true. More people should read this. You should start a blog”» (366).

The starting of the blog hence coincides with Ifemelu’s breakup with Curt, shaping a wider moment of racial self-awareness of which the blog is the elaboration in writing. However, this “raw and true” quality, the emotional side of blogging as Dean highlights, becomes more and more questioned as both the blogging and the novel progress. In a later exchange with her boyfriend Blaine, aka “Professor Hunk” as she refers to him in the blog, Ifemelu notes: «I don’t want to explain, I want to observe» (386). Here the character shows the presumption of being able to give objective (true) and unprocessed (raw) accounts of what happens to her. On the other hand, Blaine remarks what has already emerged in the aforementioned post about depression: blogging implies an elaboration of (more or less remote) past experiences, which are also shaped by her exchange with her readers and their comments: «Remember people are not reading you as entertainment, they’re reading you as cultural commentary. That’s a real responsibility» (id.).

At this point blog entries have started to appear typographically separated by the main body of the text. This first happens for a post related to the definition of race in the US and the meaning of the classification «Hispanic» (128-129). From its entrance into the storyline of the novel in part 4, blog entries become chronologically unmarked, far more frequent and situated at the end of every chapter. In some cases the correlation between what happens at that point in the novel and the topic of each entry is explicit: the moment of epiphany when Ifemelu, after years of fighting, finally “falls in love” with her naturally kinky hair is followed by a post on «Why Dark-Skinned Black Women – Both American And Non-American – Love Barack Obama», where the president-to-be’s success is attributed to his having married «one of their own», thus breaking a pattern that values lighter skin, especially in women (264). Some other cases, though, are less easy to pinpoint: the crisis resulting by her nephew Dike being refused sunscreen by his

teacher because «she said I didn't need it» (203) is followed by a post titled «Understanding America for the Non-American Black: American Tribalism» (227); and when Ifemelu applies for her first regular job – and painfully decides to straighten her hair for the interview – the following entry elaborates on «Understanding America for the Non-American Black: What Do WASPs Aspire To» (253).

Leaving readers to figure out the relation severs the self-referential back-and-forth from novel to blog by introducing an “audience”, an active element in the creation of the text. Blog readers – which may or may not be considered a proxy for readers of the novel – are always a relevant presence in Ifemelu's blogging, and allow for some interesting insights on the process of writing in the presence of immediate and continuous feedback. And while these insights may not be intended to be part of a wider reflection on writing as a collaborative art form in the digital age, such considerations slowly become more and more relevant, especially as the blog becomes a source of revenue. This is a central element in blogging, as Dean highlights while commenting on the successful *Whateverlife.com*: started by teenager Ashley Qualls as a place «to express herself creatively» (2010: 62), the blog started as a community for girls with useful free tips to devise MySpace pages, but shortly developed an ad-related revenue of over a million dollar a year. The relationship between affective flows and money flows becomes apparent here: blogs «produce affective spaces where [bloggers] express themselves, share their feelings, and reach out with a little hope that someone will be touched and reach back. ... With a little luck, we could even earn revenue on ads accompanying each and every heartfelt expression. Feelings can be profitable» (63).

For Ifemelu this shift is accompanied by the uncomfortable feeling of being dispossessed of her own writing:

e-mails came from readers who wanted to support the blog. Support. That word made the blog even more apart from her, a separate thing that could thrive or not, sometimes without her and sometimes with her. (375)

As the novel proceeds, Ifemelu's separation from the results of her labour soon leads to a deeper feeling of subordination and annihilation: «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» (330). Readers and their comments are discussed at length, showing their influence of blog as a place of social commentary and – not always polite – cultural debate, thus suggesting that the blog becomes more and more a shared space where the blogger has only limited agency.<sup>11</sup>

This situation may partially account for the unease that befoul Ifemelu's otherwise agreeable life in the US: «Her blog was doing well, with thousands of unique visitors each month, and she was earning good speaking fees, and she had a fellowship at Princeton and a relationship with Blaine ... and yet there was cement in her soul» (Adichie 2014: 7). As the novel proceeds in its idiosyncratic starts and stops, it emerges that it is Ifemelu's own predatory attitude towards the world, fuelled by blogging, which makes her uncomfortable. The "raw and true" writing that had first prompted her to open the blog has slowly become an exacting job, leaving her in constant search for new material:

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<sup>11</sup> For example, the aforementioned post on depression also discusses a comment from one of the readers, reflecting the collective elaboration of experience the blogosphere allows against the isolation experienced by the migrant subject: «A Congolese woman wrote a long comment in response: She had moved to Virginia from Kinshasa and, months into her first semester of college, begun to feel dizzy in the morning, her heart pounding as though in flight from her, her stomach fraught with nausea, her fingers tingling. She went to see a doctor. And even though she checked "yes" to all the symptoms on the card the doctor gave her, she refused to accept the diagnosis of panic attacks because panic attacks happened only to Americans» (Adichie 2014: 194).

she began, over time, to feel like a vulture hacking into the carcasses of people's stories for something she could use. Sometimes making fragile links to race. Sometimes not believing herself. The more she wrote, the less sure she became. Each post scraped off yet one more scale of self until she felt naked and false.  
(6)

The formal and narrative cannibal drive of blog writing comes to an abrupt end at the final chapter of part 4, when Ifemelu is reached by the news that her nephew has attempted suicide, thus delaying her leaving for Nigeria. The remainder of the novel sees a waning of blog entries as Ifemelu copes with Dike's suicide attempt and then finally moves to Lagos. Here, with blogging temporarily disappeared from the texture of the novel and the chronology and narrative finally coinciding, the novel moves between Ifemelu's perspective and Obinze's.

Differently from Ifemelu, Obinze will never become his would-be Afropolitan self: his story is a bitter parody of her trajectory, as only when deported back to Nigeria will he obtain the money and social status that will allow him to live comfortably. He also attains economical and social success by the help of a shady character called "Chief" – his cosmopolitan Africanness deeply embedded in the criminality and corruption that Afropolitanism means to reverse. Obinze's Chief is the later version of Chief Omenka, a rich scammer who financed Ifemelu's school earlier in the novel, and also of the General, the 'patron' of Ifemelu's aunt Uju in Nigeria and father of her nephew Dike. Their insidious presence emphasize the conspicuous absence in Ifemelu's blog of any reference to her own earlier life in Nigeria: her 'non-American black' self is at the centre of an imaginary where Africa features as freely kinky hair or the otherwise enriching experience US racial dynamics offer from a foreigner's point of view. On the other hand, these 'Chiefs' embody a Nigeria of corruption and criminality: these characters live outside blogging, and represent the bottom ground of Nigerian culture that Afropolitanism cannot elaborate. They are not part of Ifemelu's blogging persona, yet their

presence in the novel shows how they will not be pushed out of the picture altogether. On the contrary, they appear at the beginning and at the end of the novel as framing references for the Afropolitan dream that cannot really be.

Back in Lagos, the reader is introduced to new social environments where the metanarrative dialogue between blogging and fiction is staged with far more evidence than previously in the novel: Ifemelu's high-school friends Raniynudo, Tochi and Pryie, but also her colleagues at *Zoe* magazine all represent an occasion to comment on the ways and habits of contemporary Lagos. Against this background, at first Ifemelu plays the enlightened cultural commentator against her interlocutors' mostly myopic views about Nigeria: this clearly emerges during her visit to the 'Nigerpolitan Club', where returnees meet to exchange experiences and complaints about their country. Here a long discussion on Nollywood films takes place in which Ifemelu – who in an earlier time declared not to like them (Adichie 2014: 16) – endorses the genre to express her willful distancing herself from the Nigerpolitan crowd:

[Fred:] "Nollywood is really public theater, and if you understand it like that, then it is more tolerable. ..." He was looking at her, soliciting her agreement with his eyes: they were not supposed to watch Nollywood, people like them, and if they did, then only as amusing anthropology.

"I like Nollywood," Ifemelu said .... The urge to be contrarian was strong. If she set herself apart, perhaps she would be less of the person she feared she had become. (504)

Ifemelu's upsetting experience in the company of other returnees, with whom she shares the dissatisfaction with the complexities of Nigerian life, prompts her to start blogging again in order to project these emotions onto another writer/blogger persona: titled *The Small Redemption of Lagos*, the new blog features an entry on the Nigerpolitan Club, which reprises what the reader has already experienced through

Ifemelu's words but in a different register, with irony taking the place of emotional turmoil.

Yet blogging in Nigeria proves different from blogging in the US, as the relational nature of writing here becomes explicit and unavoidable, and the separation between blogger and character far less secure. This becomes evident when Ifemelu writes an entry on «young women in Lagos with Unknown Sources of Wealth» (521) inspired by the life of her friend Ranyinudo, whose lover finances her home and lifestyle. Eventually, though, she decides to take down her post after Ranyinudo's violent reaction as she finds herself the unnamed central character of the entry. In Lagos, it is not possible for the blogger to claim only "to observe", as Ifemelu had previously asserted: by underlining the parallels between Ifemelu's life and her own, Ranyinudo's retort shows how the character's detachment from the things she writes is just a fiction created by blogging: «How is it different from you and the rich white guy in America? ... You need to stop this nonsense. Stop feeling so superior!» (521).

The novel does not make clear if Ifemelu stops feeling superior: she certainly refuses to become Obinze's mistress, and at the very end of the novel he leaves his wife to be with her. This romantic ending puts Ifemelu's newly-started writing career suddenly in the background, yet the novel devotes some effort in showing how blogging has now taken a more emotional and relational quality – as for example when, during a short break in their relationship, the blog becomes a way to at least imaginarily keep in touch with Obinze: «She wrote her blog posts wondering what he would make of them» (585), the intimate relation with her reader substituting for the fear of the many anonymous, unknown readers of her previous blog.

The main character's return to blogging shows that the novel's critique to the modes of cultural production in the global, internet-driven market is not all-encompassing; on the contrary, the interaction of different modes of writing expands on the complex relations among different experiences, and also an awareness of the wider debate on Afropolitanism as one of the main global discourses on African and African-American cultural production today. Ifemelu's trajectory does

not disown the Afropolitan need to rewrite Africa's catastrophic and pitiable narrative, yet it does not embrace the possibility of doing so by marketing the experience of privileged migrants as the new global fashion trend. Among the entries on fashion shows and Nigerpolitan attitudes, a more entangled, less self-satisfied sensitivity to social issues emerges: «*We are just one step away from this life in a slum, all of us who live air-conditioned middle-class lives*, she wrote, and wondered if Obinze would agree» (585). Obinze's counterpoint signals the presence of the Nigeria of Chiefs and locally-based businessmen alongside that of intellectual migrants with foreign PhDs: and it is in this ongoing dialogue that the blog becomes finally and acknowledgedly Ifemelu's, one of the backbones of a new identity emerging out of homecoming, discovery, and blogging: «She was at peace: to be home, to be writing her blog, to have discovered Lagos again. She had, finally, spun herself fully into being» (586).

### ***Coda: The Small Redemptions of Lagos***

On August 27, 2014 (just a few days after this article was first submitted) the first entry of a blog was published, titled *The Small Redemption of Lagos*. Here, among comments on Nigerian and global contemporary issues (in the section "Problem and Solution") as well as on lipstick and vaginal douches ("Style"), *Americanah* characters spill out into the blogosphere, as the first person blogger posts about "Ifem & Ceiling" (nicknames for Ifemelu and Obinze from the novel) and their life in Nigeria: «Ceiling and I have been spending a lot of time in Enugu. I love Enugu, the sense of restfulness; it has a certain ambition about it – the mall, the new roads – but it retains a small-town feel» ("Ifem & Ceiling 1").

Blog entries have been posted on the Adichie's Facebook page (managed by her publisher Alfred A. Knopf), yet the blog features no mention of Adichie or of the novel from which the characters are taken except in its Internet address (<http://americanahblog.com>). This marketing strategy achieves heightened visibility and circulation for the book, as characters from the novel keep expanding beyond its

finished confines; yet it does so by endorsing the invisibility of the blogger and/as writer. Hence, the distinction between writer and character, person and persona, becomes more and more a dangerous territory where traditional signposts are displaced by the specificities of blog writing. Posts about “Ifem & Ceiling” as well as those about Ifem’s friends, which include personal care tips under the name “Aruidimma” (from «*aru idi mma*, the wellbeing of your body», “Aruidimma 1”), actually sound like a traditional first-person narrative; yet in Adichie’s public persona emerges in comments on articles from the *UK Telegraph* (“Problem and Solution 2”) or on the obituary for Kenyan professor Ali Mazrui by *The New York Times* (“Problem and Solution 8”).

The interstices among these posts – and between the blog and the novel – highlight the criticalities regarding the question of authoriality and authorship in contemporary writing, postcolonial and otherwise. This writing requires Ponzanesi’s ‘multi-sited reading’ (mentioned at the beginning of this article), as fiction reacts creatively to the intersections between traditionally published literature and the growing field of writing in the digital sphere. This field is still mostly uncharted territory for literary criticism: works such as Adichie’s prompt the critic to devise new tools for cultural analysis, tools able to account for the overlap between technology and new articulations of literary writing.

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