

## “In America, You Are Black, Baby”

### Negotiating Colour-Blindness in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013)

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While race and racism have always been present issues in the United States, the ideology of a post-racial American society and the growing awareness of the importance of transnational identity and sensibility have only reached the literary discourse at the end of the twentieth century. In this context, Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has become one of the most well-known and widely discussed writers in contemporary anglophone literature. Her work, comprising her novels *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) and

**The four central frames of color-blindness – naturalization, cultural racism, abstract liberalism, and minimization**

*Americanah* (2013), as well as various short stories and her prominent TEDx talk “We should all be feminists”, deals with topics like feminism, racism and transnational identity. Her latest novel, *Americanah*,<sup>1</sup> mainly focuses on the position of the Nigerian protagonist Ifemelu in the United States and discusses the struggle of identity formation when being caught between different racial identities. The U.S. as the main setting of *Americanah* in connection with race is not coincidental: one of the dominant narratives in the U.S. today is that the country has arrived in a post-racial era. Not only is America oftentimes considered to be desegregated, but it is also habitually said to be a color-blind nation, where every person is treated equally, regardless of their race or ethnicity. However, it can be argued that *Americanah* sheds light on the color-blindness

phenomenon through the story of the protagonist's experience, her inter- and intraracial relationships, and their impact on a non-American African living in the U.S. By examining the protagonist's three amorous relationships as archetypes for cross-racial relations, this essay will show how the novel illustrates that color-blindness in its normative form not only does not challenge, but indeed contributes to racism in America.

#### “RACISM WITHOUT RACISTS”: THE COLOR-BLIND IDEOLOGY

Racial inequality and discrimination patterns have had an infamous history in the United States and still represent current problems in American society. Nevertheless, “I don't see any color, just people” is one of the most-heard answers when white people in the United States are asked about race (Bonilla-Silva 1). The color-blind ideology evolved in the late 1960s and corroborates the widely held belief in the U.S. nowadays that the country is situated in a post-racial stage, in which racial inequality is not an outcome of racial dynamics but depends on individual life choices (2). Surveys show that, for instance, employment discrimination of people of color is commonly believed to be connected to personal failure and does not include underlying racial injustice (48). Furthermore, the color-blind ideology states that racial inequality may be a product of naturalization, which would mean that racially motivated events could be explained away by white people as naturally given and therefore as persistent phenomena: “For example, whites can claim ‘segregation’ is natural because people from all backgrounds gravitate toward likeness” (56).

<sup>1</sup> All references to *Americanah* are to the following edition: Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Americanah*. Fourth Estate, 2017.: further references in the text, abbreviated as “A”.

Naturalization is one of four key terms with regard to color-blind racism. In addition to naturalization, abstract liberalism, cultural racism, and minimization are also crucial elements used by white people to frame color-blindness (74). Abstract liberalism

involves using ideas associated with political liberalism (e.g. 'equal opportunity', the idea that force should not be used to achieve social policy) and economic liberalism (e.g. choice, individualism) in an abstract manner to explain racial matters. By framing race-related issues in the language of liberalism, whites can appear 'reasonable'. (Bonilla-Silva 56)

Minimization suggests that discrimination lies in the past and does not affect minorities anymore (57). The key term cultural racism relies on "cultural based arguments such as 'Mexicans do not put much emphasis on education' or 'blacks have too many babies' to explain the standing of minorities in society" (56). This generalization, marked by words and phrases like "they" and "all of them", was used as a legitimation to openly exclude and discriminate against ethnic minorities especially in the Jim Crow era (1876–1964), but its structures still affect American society today. In contrast to the Jim Crow era, when racial inequality was openly enforced, racism through so-called color-blindness is covert but still has a similar effect on marginalized groups. Bonilla-Silva coined the term "racism lite" or "racism without racists": in American society, he argues, racial definers like "black" are avoided and replaced by softer and more subtle expressions (3). For example, the topic interracial marriage, which would have been called "wrong" a few years earlier, is now "problematic" (3). Both naturalization and minimization in addition to cultural racism and abstract liberalism, are crucial components to use color-blindness as a shield for white privilege:

The color-blind perspective removes from personal thought and public discussion any

taint or suggestion of white supremacy or white guilt while legitimating the existing social, political and economic arrangements which privilege whites. This perspective insinuates that class and culture, and not institutional racism, are responsible for social inequality. Colorblindness hides white privilege behind a mask of assumed meritocracy while rendering invisible the institutional arrangements that perpetuate racial inequality. (Gallagher 26)

It is this contradiction between the prominent loyalty to color-blindness on the one hand and institutionalized racism on the other that constantly rewards white people based on patriarchal whiteness (Ionnide 11). Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* highlights color-blindness in its normative form and manages to show that this ideology indeed contributes to racial inequality and discrimination by maintaining patriarchal white privilege.

CURT, BLAINE AND OBINZE:

THREE AMOROUS RELATIONSHIPS SEEN THROUGH THE COLOR-BLIND GAZE

Throughout the novel, Ifemelu engages in three serious relationships with men from different ethnic backgrounds: Obinze, her first black boyfriend in Nigeria, whom she leaves behind when she comes to the U.S.; Curt, a white man whom she gets introduced to by her employer Kimberley; and Blaine, an African American professor. Adichie uses these relationships as models for different approaches regarding race in various cultural and ethnic contexts. Especially the relationships with Curt and Blaine, which take place in the U.S., can be read through the color-blind gaze. The text's portrayal of the relationship between Ifemelu and Curt emphasizes the tension that race as a matter of contention creates between a black and a white person, especially in the context of romance:

We don't even tell our white partners the

small things that piss us off and the things we wish they understood better, because we're worried they will say we're overreacting, or we're being too sensitive. [...] We say that race doesn't matter because that's what we're supposed to say, to keep our nice liberal friends comfortable. It's true. I speak from experience. (A 291)

The novel challenges the reader to think about race in everyday life and Curt's expectation of Ifemelu as the white boyfriend: to not talk about the underlying pressure of race as a social construct and its effect on black people in the U.S. He does not recognize racial inequality; thus, the novel points out that color-blindness is directly linked to and increases white privilege (Gallagher 22): "And Curt said it was not about race, it was just that his aunt was hyper-aware of difference, any difference" (A 293). To Curt, race as a demarcation does not exist. Ironically, he speaks of difference in the same context and consequently enlarges the constructed racial gap between Ifemelu and himself. By saying that race is "just" difference, Curt not only understates that being black is oftentimes linked to certain stereotypes, but also assigns himself the role of defining differences between one person and another ("Othering"). Gallagher describes this process as "an 'us vs. them' dichotomy where the 'us' is defined by membership in the dominant group where racial identity can typically be ignored" (31). Although Curt does not want to acknowledge that he is being racist he unconsciously sees Ifemelu and their relationship through the white gaze: he thinks that he grasps the world in a realistic way and is not influenced by underlying racist patterns (Griffin 197). This behavior serves as an example of how color-blindness works: Curt thinks that discrimination is not racially motivated and thereby understates the mostly painful effect it has on black people in general and on Ifemelu in particular. Race as an obstacle does not exist for him because he, as a white male, has never experienced race as a barrier, which recurrently increases his ignorance of racial injustice.

Ifemelu's second boyfriend in the U.S., Blaine, is African American. While Curt is too unaware of race, Blaine sees matters of race everywhere. In contrast to Ifemelu's former relationship with a white American, Adichie "extends the novel's critique of the racialization of romantic love in the U.S. [and] include[s] relationships between black Americans and black non-Americans" (Hallemeier 239). During her relationship with Curt, Ifemelu was the one who pointed out structures of racism to him and others; however, her relationship with Blaine is highly influenced by his constant awareness of racial injustice and activism against it. Situations that she considers harmless he rates racist:

"Your hair is so beautiful, can I touch it?" ... The [white] woman sank her fingers into her Afro. She [Ifemelu] sensed Blaine tense, saw the pulsing at his temples. "How could you let her do that", he asked afterwards. "Why not? How else will she know what hair like mine feels like? She probably doesn't know any black people." "And so you have to be her guinea pig?" Blaine asked. He expected her to feel what she did not know how to feel. (A 313)

The text uses the character Blaine as a lens to point out internalized racism and stereotyping, issues that the concept of color-blindness claims not to exert anymore (Bonilla-Silva 48). The quote above does not coincidentally deal with the topic hair in regard to racism: Adichie presents Ifemelu's hair as a symbol for her experiences with race in the U.S. throughout the novel. Ifemelu's various hairstyles mark different stations in her adaptation to American society and shed light on her struggle to find her identity and be comfortable with herself as a black woman in the U.S. The novel points out the process of "Othering" carried out by the white woman, accentuating Ifemelu's hair as foreign, and highlighting color-blind racism in form of generalization. The text furthermore uses hair as a symbol for "racial differences [that] are marked via the non-

white body, with the white body taken as the norm” (McMann 3). Blaine, as Adichie’s model for an African American, is attuned to matters of race and does not believe the illusion that the U.S. is a color-blind society because he as a black man experiences racism first hand: “So in NYC, Professor Hunk [Blaine] was stopped by the police. American Blacks and American Whites use drugs at the same rate (look this up), but say the word ‘drugs’ and see what image comes to everyone’s mind” (A 375). His experiences in the past are examples of naturalization:

When we first met, he told me how he wanted to get straight As in high school because of a white teacher who told him to “focus on getting a basketball scholarship, black people are physically inclined and white people are intellectually inclined, it’s not good or bad, just different.” (A 375)

The word “different” at the end of the teacher’s speech serves as an example of expressions commonly used to soften racist utterances of white supremacy (Bonilla-Silva 3).

In Ifemelu’s relationship with her first boyfriend Obinze, with whom she reconciles when she returns to Nigeria later in the novel, race seems not to be an issue at all, neither in their youth nor when she comes back to Nigeria after spending fifteen years in the United States. Obinze is a Nigerian man, so they both share similar cultural experiences (A 457). The novel barely addresses race in the Nigerian context: “I came from a country where race was not an issue, I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America” (290). It clearly brushes off that race might be worth speaking about in Nigeria and links the construct of being “black” directly to the U.S. Obinze’s experiences with racism only focus on his time in London:

... articles were written and read, simply and stridently, as though the writers lived in a world in which the present was unconnected to the past, and they had never considered

this to be the normal course of history: the influx into Britain of black and brown people from countries created by Britain. Yet he understood. It had to be comforting, this denial of history. (A 258)

This occurrence in Obinze’s storyline is the only time color-blindness is addressed outside of the American context. With the expression “It had to be comforting”, the text adds a yearning tone to the situation and clearly states that the detachment of present problems from the past may be an opportunity for white people but is not and will never be the reality for black people, which is underlined through the word “denial”. The last sentence of the quote also adds a certain irony to the situation; it herewith highlights the difference between the perceptions of black and white people regarding the reality of matters of race. Apart from Obinze’s life in London, race is not a topic in the relationship between him and Ifemelu as it is in the relationships described above. When Obinze and Ifemelu are together in Nigeria, money, strikes, and corruption are central issues in their conversations, but race is never of any importance (A 98; 431). The novel presents Obinze as an example of an African black person who is not in touch with racial discrimination in the United States and therefore completely ignores the topic in his relationship with Ifemelu.

Looking at Ifemelu’s relationships with Curt, Blaine, and Obinze, it becomes conspicuous that reading through the color-blind gaze gets less and less applicable from Curt to Obinze. Adichie uses Curt as the archetype for white people in the U.S. and distinctly shows how color-blindness leaves its mark in the discrimination patterns of white supremacy. Hereby, *Americanah* creates a strong contradiction between Ifemelu’s life in the U.S. and Nigeria and deliberately attributes the constructedness of race to white people in the U.S. In addition, Adichie shows that the results of it affect black people in the U.S., while it seems to be of no relevance for people of color outside the United States, specifically Nigeria.

It becomes obvious that color-blindness in its normative form is a current phenomenon in the United States and that its unique dynamics have an exceptional effect on American society. The four central frames of color-blindness – naturalization, cultural racism, abstract liberalism, and minimization (Bonilla-Silva 74) – help maintain the racist patterns of white supremacy. Thus, they make it even more difficult for minorities to fully grasp racist utterances or actions, which results in a constant struggle to be heard and taken seriously.

*Americanah* addresses current problems in the U.S. such as racial inequality, social injustice – especially for people of color, and the struggles mixed-raced relationships face in a unique way. It has received a lot of positive feedback, especially for its diverse representation of characters of different ethnic backgrounds. On the other hand, it is striking that Adichie's protagonist Ifemelu engages in relationships with a white American, an African American and a Nigerian, but not with another Non-American African who lives in the United States. Furthermore, the world in Adichie's *Americanah* is merely placed in the upper-middle class and upper-class society and only deals with the lower class in Obinze's storyline in London, where the lower class is directly linked to criminality and illegal residency in England. Although dealing with racism in the upper class is of importance as well, merely focusing on it erases crucial elements of racism in American society and leaves the story, even though a variety of characters are introduced, deficient in its representation of the effect that racism has on people of color of all classes. Nevertheless, the novel accentuates the dynamics of contemporary racist structures and sheds light on the color-blind phenomenon, in which generalization especially supports internalized racism and the marginalization of people of color, and lays the blame for racial injustice on external, institutionalized factors, leaving white Americans with clean hands. With *Americanah*, Adichie corroborates the fact that America is not, nor has ever been, a color-blind society.

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