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Pluralising globality: Afropolitanism as epistemic self-assertion in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

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In *From Bomba to Hip-Hop* (2000: 193), the Afro-Latino American writer Juan Flores discusses the nature of community—*comunidad* in the Spanish. He says that it is both a phenomenon existing in something akin to a state of nature and as the result of deliberate human interventions. The *comun* part of *comunidad* is the element that does not require human intervention. The *unidad* part is where various forces in society use their situatedness and power to negotiate the nature and shape of the community. Differently situated groups in society have different capacities to shape the nature of the community in which they are co-existing. Their place in a continuum ranging from epistemic and sociopolitical agents to mere states of affairs determines their discursive capacity to shape their world. In this article, I will argue that Afropolitanism should be seen as an attempt by African and Afrodescendant writers to stake a claim in the *unidad* processes and practices through which a becoming-one-again global oecumene is making and remaking itself. I will argue that Afropolitanism is a crucial effort at pluralising the ways of knowing, being and relating. Based on an analysis of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), I will show how African and Afrodescendant writers are playing an important role in dismantling colonial and postcolonial epistemic genealogies and their conceptions of globality. I will demonstrate Afropolitanism's potential to challenge the epistemic, sociopolitical, economic and physical immobilisation of the African and Afrodescendant subjects—narratively and discursively bringing into view these stigmatised and silenced subjects.

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Introduction

While living in Paris, I surprised European and North African students as they suggested that someone like me could become their ‘n----r’. This may have been intended in jest. However, the expression points to the ongoing reality of white tutelage and the coloniality of power (Aníbal Quijano, 2000: 533) in global and shared spaces more generally. Among other things, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s novel *Americanah* (2013/2023) problematises this proclivity for tutelary imaginings towards Africans and Afrodescendants. Centuries after the Middle Passage, the global movement of Africans and Afrodescendants remains subject primarily to the interests of non-Africans and non-Afrodescendants, as codified by the immigration laws of countries in the Global North. Post-independence, as global centre-periphery studies have shown, a tutelary relationship continues between erstwhile coloniser and colonised. At the state level, the United States and the United Kingdom wield tutelary power over Nigeria. At the agential level, a sometimes-gentler adaptation of the Middle Passage obtains among the characters in *Americanah*. However, the novel shows that whether in Africa or away, the African and Afrodescendant remain somebody else’s ward.

Americanah is part of a body of work by Adichie that tackles themes associated with colonialism and its fallout. From her breakout novel *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) to her latest novel *Dream Count* (2025) by way of *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) and her work in other genres (*Decisions*, poetry, 1997; *For Love of Biafra*, play, 1998; *The Thing Around Your Neck*, short stories, 2009; *We Should All be Feminists* and *Dear Ijeawele, Or a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*, essay collections, respectively 2014 and 2017), the trauma of colonial violence comes through. Amutha Monica et al (2023: 1), for instance, say that *Purple Hibiscus* stages ‘the violence that has resulted from the cultural struggle… [It problematises the] epistemic violence that disregards other people’s culture, religion, and beliefs.’ Epistemic violence translates into physical violence in *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *For Love of Biafra*, where the Nigerian state, a colonial project, comes apart at the seams in the Biafran war. But Adichie’s work is also an attempt to champion Igbo and other Nigerian cultures (Ishaya and Gunn, 2022: 74; Nwankwo, 2023: 4; Egbunike 2017: 18–19). It is a staging of the struggle for gender equity and justice (Sebola 2022: 1–2, 6–7; Egbunike 2017: 26; Hewlett 2005: 80; Roifah 2021: 179; Daniels 2022: 54; Abba 2021: 5). Adichie explores the themes of love (Tunca 2018: 112), family, culture, identity, belonging, class, struggle, power, displacement, discrimination, and imperialism, among others (Dube 2019: 222; Hewett 2005: 76, 79–80; Tunca 2010: 296). *Americanah* delves into most of these themes in the larger spatiality of globality, which, following Roland Robertson (1992), I define as an awareness of the world as a single space. This larger spatiality brings with it additional—Afropolitan—themes.

Taiye Selasi (2005/2013) conceptualized Afropolitanism in an essay titled 'Bye-Bye, Babar (Or: What is an Afropolitan?)'. The term combines 'African' and 'cosmopolitanism'. It describes the aspiration and state of being and belonging in global and shared spaces as experienced by Africans and Afrodescendants. Achille Mbembe's influential essay 'Afropolitanism' (2007) helped develop the concept.

Afropolitanism is a posture of 'epistemic resistance' (Medina, 2013) to what Quijano calls the coloniality of power. Afropolitanism aims to normalise African and Afrodescendant presence, visibility, audibility and mobility in global and shared spaces. That is also, I shall argue, an important aim of Adichie's novel. *Americanah* 'traces the learning process which leads to a critical consciousness regarding race and [the] position' of an African newly arrived in a Eurodescendant-majority society (Reuter 2015: 1). It grapples with the realities of race in America (Reed, 2013) and exposes the particular ways in which misogyny intersects with racism. Rónké Òké (2019) and Ángela Suárez-Rodríguez (2022) highlight the themes of home, travel, and return in *Americanah*. For Òké, because of the theme of reverse migration, *Americanah* is 'an interesting counterweight to Afropolitanism' which, for her, advocates for 'departure from the Continent' (2019: 290). But Édouard Glissant (1997), Achille Mbembe (2017, 2013/2021), and Felwinne Sarr (2017) do not see things in such stark and compartmentalised terms. Rather, they see a more complex picture—an 'aesthetics of entanglement' (Mbembe, 2021) which simultaneously ties the Afropolitan to multiple geographies, cultures and histories without denying the authenticity of their Africanness. The Afropolitan project aims to complexify and pluralise the sensibilities of globality. As Mahamadou Famanta (2023: 45) says, '[Afropolitanism's] focus on a complex and relational notion of Africa allows to newly perceive narratives of worldliness that are based on an inclusive notion of the world'.

Adichie has expressed misgivings about Afropolitanism. In an interview with The Africa Report's Clarisse Juompan-Yakam in 2020, she said that Afropolitanism appeared to justify an unstated belief that Africans should justify their presence in global spaces. Adichie felt that this belief originating in Euro-America had been internalised by Africans themselves. Different rules were applied to Africans which, among other things, suggested that Africans living in global spaces somehow lost their 'authenticity' while Europeans kept theirs (Juompan-Yakam, 2020).

Adichie's reason for rejecting Afropolitanism lies in a legitimate grievance. When it comes to global mobility, audibility and visibility, a different standard is applied to Africans by the regimes that rationalise transnational migration. Ashleigh Harris (2019/2020), for instance, has dismissed African writing from abroad as inauthentic—a 'de-realising' of Africa by the very virtue of being 'extroverted'. Harris, Susanne

Gehrmann (2016) and others argue that the provenance of the term and its articulation from the perspective of an African or Afrodescendant member of the global elites necessarily discredits it. I will argue that this position amounts to epistemic injustice in the form of silencing. I will argue that if the experiences of Africa's subaltern classes may be considered authentic and 'real', so also should those of Africa's other classes. Harris's and Gehrmann's purist and monolithic idea of African authenticity immobilises African identities, failing to recognise that all cultural history is subject to

> itinerancy, mobility and displacement, [and that] the history of itinerancy and mobility means talking about mixing, blending and superimposing. In opposition to the fundamentalists preaching 'custom' and 'autochthony', we can go as far as to assert that, in fact, what we call 'tradition' does not exist (Mbembe, 2007: 26–30).

Harris's argument that African and Afrodescendant writing that is not geographically limited to Africa is not genuinely African risks falling into the fundamentalist category of which Mbembe writes. African identities are varied and dynamic. Afropolitanism is a praxis that seeks to encourage and map the evolution of African and Afrodescendant identities into global and shared spaces.

I will argue that Adichie is fighting the same corner as Afropolitanism (which imagines a way of being both cosmopolitan and authentically African) and critical Afropolitanism (which challenges stereotypes and asserts the right of Africans and Afrodescendants to occupy shared and global spaces freely). Selasi (2005) defines Afropolitans as 'Africans of the world', echoing Glissant's *'tout-monde'* Africa (1997) and Mbembe's and Sarr's '*Afrique-monde*' (2017). And Chielezona Eze (2016: 114) writes that the Afropolitan is 'one who, on the strength of birth or affinity, can call any place in Africa his or her place, while at the same time being open to the world'. He argues that Afropolitanism is a mindset, an 'interior mobility' that defies 'the psychic boundaries erected by nativism, autochthony, heritage and other mythologies of authenticity' (2016: 117). Following Eze, I will suggest that the Afropolitan is part of a world at once defined by individuation and interconnectedness—by individual subjects and ethno-racial and sociocultural communities open to giving and taking, sustainably, in the manner authentic to all natural systems. Afropolitanism acknowledges a world of fluid identities 'constituted by relation rather than opposition', a world, shrunk by globalisation, in which 'elective affinities' (Eze 2014: 235) at the psychical level mirror the dynamic integrity of a physical universe in constant flux and its constituent parts. As Mbembe puts it,

> Awareness of the interweaving of the here and there, the presence of the elsewhere in the here and vice versa, the relativisation of primary roots and memberships and the way of embracing, with full knowledge of the facts, strangeness, foreignness

> and remoteness, the ability to recognise one's face in that of a foreigner and make the most of the traces of remoteness in closeness, to domesticate the unfamiliar, to work with what seem to be opposites – it is this cultural, historical and aesthetic sensitivity that underlies the term 'Afropolitanism' (2007: 28).

Chinua Achebe spent his career championing the African identity. He also acknowledged that identities are dynamic. He told Kwame Anthony Appiah in an interview:

> It is, of course true that the African identity is still in the making. There isn't a final identity that is African. But, at the same time, there is an identity coming into existence. And it has a certain context and a certain meaning. If somebody meets me, say, in a shop in Cambridge [England], he says 'Are you African?' Which means that Africa means something to some people. Each of these tags has a meaning, and a penalty and a responsibility. All these tags, unfortunately for the black man, are tags of disability (1992: 73–74).

Adichie considers what these tags mean for 'the black woman' as well. I will argue with Caroline Lyle (2018) that, in *Americanah*, Adichie stages a completion of Selasi's incomplete conceptualisation of Afropolitanism. Lyle writes:

> 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 (2018: 101).

As a discursively and epistemically marginalised community, Africans and Afrodescendants must live with the loss of a vernacular for expressing full, unfettered and sovereign participation in the human experience. I will argue that Afropolitanism is a discursive effort to bring back into view what should never have been banished out of sight to begin with: African and Afrodescendant humanity. It is an act of epistemic self-assertion.

Americanah reminds us that Africans love and long for distant shores. That Africans migrate as they '[flee] not from starvation but from discontent, and [reach] for dreams' (Adichie, 2023). That given a choice, Africans may very well choose cosmopolitan and multilocal (Selasi, 2015) lives. That Africans are human. Moreover, as Bridget Tetteh-Batsa (2018) observes, in problematising the experiences of African and Afrodescendant women in global and shared spaces, *Americanah* confronts the danger of 'reinforcing the injustice we address'—in this case, failing to account for 'the African female migrant

whose non-American identity supposes voicelessness and/or invisibility in discourses of national exclusion' (v, vi). *Americanah* imagines a gender-equitable Afropolitanism in which female migrants go 'in search of global identity' and 'feminism… assumes the dimension of Afropolitanism' (Eke and Njoku, 2020: 151).

To be human and be fully acknowledged as such is to 'be-with' (Jean-Luc Nancy, 2013) and 'in-common' (Mbembe, 2021) with others and equitably exchange ontological, epistemological and relational flows with them at the agential and communal levels. It is to acknowledge the dynamic individuation that separates but also joins all biological and physical systems. Afropolitanism is a response to the Eurocentric logos of dominant cosmopolitanisms and globalities. It is a struggle imposed upon African and Afrodiasporic subjects to stake their rightful claim to the exchanges that are shaping globality. Appiah (2006) refers to these exchanges, somewhat apologetically, as 'contamination'. I favour the more positive term cross-pollination. The burnt-earth self-absorption of hegemonistic projects renders such cross-pollination inequitable. Afropolitanism seeks to counter this. As Simon Gikandi puts it, Afropolitanism

> has been prompted by the desire to think of African identities as both rooted in specific local geographies but also transcendental of them. To be Afropolitan is to be connected to knowable African communities, languages and states. It is to embrace and celebrate a state of cultural hybridity – to be of African and other worlds at the same time (2010: 9).

Americanah critiques various forms of Americana – broadly and loosely defined as US epistemologies, ontologies and relationalities. *Americanah* co-locates Americana alongside Africana (that is, things that are peculiarly and distinguishably African) – juxtaposing and staging an encounter between two distinct worlds. *Americanah* is set in the UK as well as Nigeria and the US. But the name of the novel acknowledges the location of America – 'the imperial republic' (Raymond Aron, 1973) – at the heart of the Eurocentric logos of globalisation.

The word 'Americanah' appears innocently enough in the novel. Ginika – a school friend of Ifemelu, the main character – is preparing to leave for the US. Her friends come to bid her farewell. It is during this visit at Ginika's house that the following conversation takes place:

> "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 (72).

The ‘ah’ at the end of ‘Americanah’ indicates an affected way of pronouncing ‘American’. It is a not-so-gentle mockery of a certain kind of Nigerian returnee who is so taken with the idea of American superiority that they try to subsume their Nigerianness under their newly acquired American self, to use Adichie’s own phrasing. ‘Americanah’ is an aberrant kind of Africana. It is a metaphor for the internalisation of Euro-America’s epistemic violence (Spivak, 1988: 280). ‘Americanah’ also refers to a contrived flattening of the human experience that denies the natural plurality of human ontologies. As Frantz Fanon (1967: 109–112) argues, this flat-earth logic amounts to epistemic violence— objectifying, demeaning and othering African and Afrodescendant peoples as a way of setting the stage for predatory practices.

Adichie describes her motivation for writing *Americanah* in her 2023 introduction to a reprint of the novel. She outlines what I read as a desire to (re)inscribe African and Afrodescendant ontologies, epistemologies and relationalities in global spaces, an undertaking that can be described as (critical) Afropolitanism. She writes:

> With *Americanah*[...] I wanted to write of an American perspective that I had not seen elsewhere about Blackness and about Black women’s hair, about immigration and about longing. [...] Of all the complicated emotions that animated the conception of this novel, bewilderment was the most present. Why were the ordinary things of Blackness so niche, so unfamiliar, to the American mainstream? American Blackness was fundamental and foundational to America, after all, but Black life appeared not only set apart but unequally so (10).

Adichie comes to America and suddenly discovers that she is, alas, ‘black’. In the continent-size reservation of Africa, Adichie constructs a sense of self removed from the psychical and physical violence of racism in European and Eurodescendant-majority spaces. Adichie writes:

> I became Black in America. It was not a choice—my chocolate-coloured skin saw to that—but it became a revelation. I had never before thought of myself as “Black”;
>
> I did not need to [...]
>
> To be Black in America was to feel bulldozed by the weight of history and stereotypes, to know that race was always a possible reason, or cause, or explanation for the big and small interactions that make up our fragile lives. To be Black was to realize that it was impossible for people to approach one another with the simple wonder of being human, without the spectre of race lying somewhere in the shadows. To be Black was to feel, in different circumstances, frustration, anger, irritation, and wry amusement (9).

Adichie's encounter with a larger world which does not account for her difference alienates her. America does not just provincialise her Africanness – but it fails to account for the legitimacy of its existence. In the obliviously transparent Eurodescendant subjectivity (Flagg, 1997) of mainstream America, Africanness is exotic at best and aberrant at worst.

The deterritorialisation of the colony and the colonial metropolis as distinct geographies and their reterritorialisation and spatialisation into a global quasi-polity result in a world in which Africans and Afrodescendants are unexpected and oftentimes unwanted guests. The foundational myth of the neoliberal world order only truly accounts for the free movement of goods, capital and Eurodescendants. Globally mobile Africans such as Adichie and the fictional Ifemelu find themselves grappling with the reality of shared spaces that do not account for their difference. I would like, therefore, to read *Americanah* as an Afropolitan text – one that consciously and intentionally (re)inscribes African and Afrodescendant corporealities, languages, hopes, dreams, histories, thoughts, and lived experiences in the common fabric of humanity. It is part of a body of works that offers a modest but determined counterpoint to the crushing monolithism of a globality dictated from the North Atlantic.

Suárez-Rodríguez (2019) sees Ifemelu as a 'cosmopolitan stranger'—a returnee alienated both by her native Nigeria and American second home. Suárez-Rodríguez misses the implications of those 13 years spent abroad. Unlike Adichie, who can go back and forth between America and Nigeria, Ifemelu is only finally able to access such possibilities 13 years after leaving home. She and Obinze—her newly rich boyfriend, who owns property in Dubai and has contemplated buying a house in America—can now come and go as they please. After many years of struggle, Ifemelu and Obinze have overcome many immobilising obstacles and achieved the possibility of living global, multilocal and Afropolitan lives.

Aretha Phiri's analysis ascribes to *Americanah* a capacity to '[expand] black repertoires and discourses' (2017). She posits that the novel acknowledges 'the complex plurality and mutability of black subjectivity' (Phiri, 2017). For Phiri, *Americanah* can be seen as 'reinscribing black diaspora cultures' (Phiri, 2023). However, all this does not preclude the important work of the novel as a tool for normalising African and Afrodescendant cosmopolitanisms and globalities. Òké, Phiri, Suárez-Rodríguez and others underline in *Americanah* dualities of home and away, departure and return, and localised and 'extroverted' writing. I argue, with Eric Kipkoech Mutai (2020), Dobrota Pucherova (2021), and others that *Americanah* does much more than address these well-worn themes, and breaks fallow ground by multilocally 'taking up space' (Kwakye and Ogunbiyi, 2019) in globality on behalf of Africans and Afrodescendants.

Pluralising globality in *Americanah*

As John Thompson writes, the social imaginary is 'the creative and symbolic dimension of the social world, the dimension through which human beings create their ways of living together and their ways of representing their collective life' (1984: 6). And Manfred Steger and Paul James add that 'imaginaries are patterned convocations of the social whole' (2013: 1). They write that 'these deep-seated modes of understanding provide largely pre-reflexive parameters within which people imagine their social existence— expressed, for example, in conceptions of "the global," "the national," "the moral order of our time" (2013: 2).' The (post-)colonial state crafted by colonial violence imposes the labour of reimagining themselves as one people on culturally, linguistically and politically disparate nations. Not only does this patchwork community now need to discover a new set of values, institutions, laws and symbols through which to imagine itself as a social whole—but it must also do so in a language alien to its histories, cultures and epistemologies.

The linguistic encounter is the site of the epistemic violence of colonialism. It is the site where hegemonic epistemologies burst upon the epistemic universes contained in subjugated languages. The slash-and-burn violence of colonial knowledge practices calls into question the legitimacy of local languages and, along with them, immobilises precolonial epistemologies. *Americanah* shows how language serves as a primary site of class differentiation in the afterlives of colonialism. A confluence of language, race and ethnicity serves to assign individuals their station in a world in which the colony is delocalised and reterritorialised into a global space. In globality, race is class. The colonial subject—acculturated for centuries into an acquired pre-reflexive sense of the superiority of the coloniser's language—internalises the subordination of their language and the epistemic universes that it contains, as we see here:

> "How is your child? Has she started school?" Mrs Akin-Cole asked. "You must send her to the French school. They are very good, very rigorous. Of course they teach in French but it can only be good for the child to learn another civilized language, since she already learns English at home." "Okay, ma. I'll look at the French school," Kosi said (35).

This transtemporalily (Sarah Colvin, 2022) occluded regimentation of a correlation between language and class is reinforced both by snobbery and necessity. *Americanah* acknowledges and mocks the unquestioning acceptance of colonial languages as the touchstone for a 'civilised' subjectivity. Being able to speak the language of 'white' people like 'white' people lends class, credibility and visibility to the (post-)colonial

subject; it exceptionalises them. Norbert Elias (1939) writes of the 'civilising process' as beginning from the palaces of Europe before extending to their cities and then the rest of the kingdom. I argue that this logic extends as far back as classical Europe and continues into globality. In classical antiquity, the Senate is the seat of civilised subjectification. Latin and Greek are the linguistic site of civilised subjectification. Rome is the city that demonstrates and takes 'civilisation' to the barbarians. The 'civilising mission' of modernity follows a similar line of reasoning, and so also does the Eurocentric logos of globalisation. European languages make the (post-)colonial subject intelligible. They are the means through which this subject may 'enter history' (Nicolas Sarkozy, quoting GWF Hegel, as reported in *Le Monde*, 2007) and humanity itself. In the 'interlocked expanses of variegated totalities' (Warwick Research Collective, 2015: 2) created by the inequitable geographies of globality, entering humanity, so to speak, becomes a daily struggle for survival in part expressed through constant codeswitching. This codeswitching is accompanied by painful to-ing and fro-ing among 'personas' or 'selves', as the narrator of *Americanah* calls them:

> "Dike, put it back," Aunty Uju said, with the nasal, sliding accent she put on when she spoke to white Americans, in the presence of white Americans, in the hearing of white Americans. *Pooh-reet-back.* And with the accent emerged a new persona, apologetic and self-abasing (104).

Ifemelu is confronted with the othering violence of language in America. She is so traumatised that she decides to learn to speak with an American accent:

> [W]hen Ifemelu returned with the letter, Cristina Tomas said, "I. Need. You. To. Fill. Out. A. Couple. Of. Forms. Do. You. Understand. How. To. Fill. These. Out?" and she realized that Cristina Tomas was speaking like that because of *her,* her foreign accent, and she felt for a moment like a small child, lazy-limbed and drooling. "I speak English," she said. "I bet you do," Cristina Tomas said. "I just don't know how well." Ifemelu shrank [...] And in the following weeks, as autumn's coolness descended, she began to practise an American accent (124).

The dominant positionality of a Cristina Tomas means that they do not need to know about people from other parts of the world and their lives. They can be actively ignorant (Medina, 2013) and smug about it. Their victims are banished to the purgatory of unnecessary and ignorable knowledge. They are obliged to erase important aspects of who they are –in this case, an accent—to facilitate interactions with dominant knowers. To revert to their 'true' selves—using the languages and voices they grew up with—is a source of physical and psychical relief:

> They [Ifemelu and Kayode, an old school friend] hugged, looked at each other, said all the things people said who had not seen each other in many years, both lapsing into their Nigerian voices and their Nigerian selves, louder, more heightened, adding "o" to their sentences (204).

Beginning in modernity and consolidating the process in globality, colonial epistemologies lend a transparently pseudo-universal subjectivity to Euro-Americans. They are the subjectivation destination that colonial knowledge practices have programmed everyone else to want to arrive at, as we see in Ifemelu's blog:

> [W]hiteness is the thing to aspire to. Not everyone does, of course (please, commenters, don't state the obvious) but many minorities have a conflicted longing for WASP whiteness or, more accurately, for the privileges of WASP whiteness. They probably don't really like pale skin but they certainly like walking into a store without some security dude following them (189).

In *Americanah*, some Africans and Afrodescendants consciously aspire to whiteness— or more realistically white privilege. Emenike finally achieves his dream of a white British life. For him, switching among the multiple personas imposed upon him is a labour of love. It is an opportunity to perform and show that he has 'made it'. Obinze is taken aback at the transformation when Emenike talks to his European friends about a racism encounter he had earlier told him about:

> He told the story of the taxi that he had hailed one night, on Upper Street; from afar the cab light was on but as the cab approached him, the light went off, and he assumed the driver was not on duty. After the cab passed him by, he looked back idly and saw that the cab light was back on and that, a little way up the street, it stopped for two white women.
>
> Emenike had told Obinze this story before and he was struck now by how differently Emenike told it. He did not mention the rage he had felt standing on that street and looking at the cab. He was shaking, he had told Obinze, his hands trembling for a long time, a little frightened by his own feelings. But now, sipping the last of his red wine, flowers floating in front of him, he spoke in a tone cleansed of anger, thick only with a kind of superior amusement (248).

The asymmetries of power allow the Euro-American subject to dictate the terms upon which 'the creative and symbolic dimension of the social world, the dimension through which human beings create their ways of living together and their ways of representing their collective life' (Thompson, 1984: 6) is crafted in shared spaces. The

ontological, epistemological and behavioural codes arrived at in the Roman Senate and the European Court become law in the metropolitan city and, by extension, in the variegated spatialities of a globally dispersed coloniality. Emenike performs the finer points of this etiquette with the glee of a circus act, down to the part where he must not be so crass as to show feelings on the uglier side of the spectrum. The violence of this adaptation dissociates him from the person he truly is. It is a kind of violence whose impact on Emenike the Europeans in his new world appear unable to pick up on. It derealises and voids aspects of his African subjectivity and renders him almost as transparent as his European circle. Only his phenotype is present—the rest of what expresses his difference and uniqueness is silenced, rendered invisible, immobilised. Emenike chooses ontological and epistemic surrender over subversion and self-assertion.

Across the Atlantic, the same logic obtains. Codes dictated by Eurodescendant America dictate social exchanges and meaning making in shared spaces. The regimentation of these codes astounds Ifemelu:

> There were codes Ginika knew, ways of being that she had mastered. Unlike Aunty Uju, Ginika had come to America with the flexibility and fluidness of youth, the cultural cues had seeped into her skin, and now she went bowling, and knew what Tobey Maguire was about, and found double-dipping gross (117).

In the US and in shared and global spaces, Ifemelu learns that one gets told who they are and what their station is. One gets told what to think and what to feel, as she explains in her blog:

> Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop arguing. Stop saying I'm Jamaican or I'm Ghanaian. America doesn't care. So what if you weren't "black" in your country? You're in America now. We all have our moments of initiation into the Society of Former Negroes [...] You must show that you are offended when such words as "watermelon" or "tar baby" are used in jokes, even if you don't know what the hell is being talked about [...] Even though you would like to be able to decide for yourself how offended to be, or whether to be offended at all, you must nevertheless be very offended [...] If you're telling a non-black person about something racist that happened to you, make sure you are not bitter. Don't complain. Be forgiving. If possible, make it funny. Most of all, do not be angry. Black people are not supposed to be angry about racism (202).

Hegemonic epistemologies aim to justify and/or disguise a predatory system. However, the relational and spatial proximity imposed by the racially interwoven geographies of shared global spaces makes it impossible to conceal their contradictions and injustices. Globality requires ontological, epistemological and relational practices that soon unmask hegemonic epistemologies. In *Americanah*, America and the world it weaves around itself are revealed to be a caste system based on racial colour coding and cultural provenance. On the surface of it, this is a blog about America's problem with race. But other blogs by Ifemelu and, indeed, the novel as a whole show that this is a snapshot of a global problem. This passage captures the Eurocentric and white supremacist configuration imposed on globality. It is a close-up and concentrated image of a becoming-one-again oecumene in which the unjust and inequitable epistemologies of modernity reveal their ugly ontological and relational imprint on collective and individual psyches.

Dispersed in space and time, colonial violence is occluded and its connections to current realities harder to make out. Regardless, this violence informs the coloniality of relations in larger global contexts such as immigration laws, international trade protocols, filmic and mediatic representation, academic production, philanthropy, diplomacy, intelligence gathering, military exchanges, the Internet of things, etc. An Afropolitan prism allied with a transtemporal perspective makes it possible to relocate analyses of the violence of colonial racism in a Eurodescendant-dominated society, as problematised in this fictional blog, from the confines of a nation state, province or urban area as traditional enquiry would normally have us do and place it in its historic and global context. Viewed with a global—or Afropolitan—optic, the nuances of difference among African and Afrodescendant populations reveal similarities and varieties in the way physical and psychical colonial violence leaves its mark.

Observing Blaine, an upper-crust African American teaching at an Ivy League school interact with an African American guard, Ifemelu, an African immigrant, inscribes an African perspective and sensibility into the scene, giving it a uniquely Afropolitan dimension. She causes Blaine to reflect on language, race and positionality in America:

> "Funny how I've never heard you speak Ebonics before," [Ifemelu] told Blaine, the first time she heard him talking to Mr White [the guard]. His syntax was different, his cadences more rhythmic.
>
> "I guess I've become too used to my White People Are Watching Us voice," he said. "And you know, younger black folk don't really do code-switching anymore. The middle-class kids can't speak Ebonics and the inner-city kids speak only Ebonics and they don't have the fluidity that my generation has" (303).

The white gaze—a construct of hegemonic epistemologies—forces even Ivy League professors to reinvent themselves and switch personas. Not to do so is to lose a part of their subjectivity just as the middle-class kids who can't speak Ebonics do or risk the silencing, invisibilisation and immobilisation that inner-city kids who can only speak Ebonics face. In modernity as in globality, the language of the (post-)colonial subject, like the subjects themselves, is relegated to a rung beneath desirability and even propriety. Whether it is Ebonics or Igbo, it is the language that is supposed to evoke negative ontological, epistemological and relational possibilities. It is the language that is supposed to denote the violence of exclusion, as we see here:

> His [Ifemelu's cousin Dike's] grades were falling. Aunty Uju threatened him more often. The last time Ifemelu visited, Aunty Uju told him, "I will send you back to Nigeria if you do that again!" speaking Igbo as she did to him only when she was angry, and Ifemelu worried that it would become for him the language of strife (159).

Unlike Blaine and Ifemelu, Aunty Uju is hardwired by the Eurocentric acculturation bequeathed by colonial epistemologies to perceive her native Igbo and Nigeria, respectively, as the language and geography of undesirability—the barbarian outer darkness. Igbo is not just the language of strife—but it is the language of everything inferior and negative. For her, Nigeria and its languages are best left behind. She will not hear of her son learning Igbo because, she says, 'two languages will confuse him' (105).

She is hyper-focused on providing her son with the best in life—including, as she sees it, a subjectivity as unimbricated, unclouded and purebred as possible—a Euro-American subjectivity. Later, when Dike finally visits his native Nigeria, which he left as an infant, he recognises the loss of his own language:

> "I wish I spoke Igbo," he told [Ifemelu] after they had spent an evening with her parents.
>
> "But you understand perfectly," she said.
>
> "I just wish I spoke."
>
> "You can still learn," she said, suddenly feeling desperate, unsure how much this mattered to him [...]
>
> "Yes, I guess so," he said, and shrugged, as though to say it was already too late (366).

Americanah, however, does not end on this negative note. Ifemelu and Obinze travel the world and return to Lagos changed and remade into more grownup and Afropolitan versions of themselves—at home in their African skins and Nigerian selves. In the chaos, cacophony and corruption of Nigeria, a society forced to (re)imagine itself overnight, as it were, they find their places as Afropolitan citizens of the world, free to come and go around the world as they please, ensconced in the warmth of a love once rudely interrupted by the injustices of the immobility imposed on Africans by (post-) colonial violence. After years of interruption, their teenage love resumes in the city that birthed it.

Subversion, reinscription, and an attempt to make globality more inclusive

Afropolitanism approaches its world(re)making project from the inglorious margins to which non-Euro-American ontologies, epistemologies and relationalities have been banished by a Eurocentric oecumene. Its project is perceived from the centre—and, to some extent, from the periphery—as a self-indulgence and a non-starter. Because of the immense discursive success of the narratives that appear to have established an undisputably Eurocentric logos of globalisation, projects that aim to pluralise globality such as Afropolitanism come with a baggage of perceived frivolousness and illegitimacy.

Adichie's deployment of heterolingualism (Grutman, 1997) maps out a more accurate and representative linguistic (and epistemological) reality. Writing for a global audience, she repopulates the collective human psyche with the graphemic and symbolic possibilities of diverse languages and their interplay. She uses a wide range of Igbo, Yoruba, Pidgin and other Nigerian codes both in the narrative and dialogues. The dialogues are rich with typically Nigerian interjections. One can imagine Nigerians expressing their unique body languages as one reads expressions like *Abegeee! Ahn-ahn! Chai! Shiiii! Mtchewww!* Adichie introduces phrases from Igbo and Pidgin especially, sometimes translating them directly or indirectly and sometimes leaving it to the imagination of the reader who does not speak these languages to figure out the meaning. In secondary school, Emenike pretends that his father is the igwe (223) of his hometown. In London, an old school friend notes that

> "He's doing very well and he lives in Islington, with his oyinbo wife [...] He has become posh o" (323).

The words 'igwe' and 'oyinbo' add to the authenticity and uniqueness of this Nigerian dash of humanity. The 'o' after 'posh', at once an interjection and a qualifier, plays a similar role. It is ubiquitous in Nigerian speech, a linguistic bridgehead into shared

and global spaces. In the context of 'English's tendency, as an imperial language, to obliterate other languages' (Bwesigye bwa Mwesigire, 2018), Adichie dares to imagine a global audience willing to entertain and sample a different expression of the human.

The affective and full import of the deeply and intimately relational—such as the attempt by Dike, Ifemelu's treasured cousin, to commit suicide—is best captured in long-shared codes:

> [Ifemelu's] phone rang [...] [B]ecause Aunty Uju was incoherent, talking and sobbing at the same time, Ifemelu thought she said that Dike was dead. But what Aunty Uju was saying was *o nwuchagokwa, Dike anwuchagokwa.* Dike had nearly died (323).

The ultimate (pan-)human subjectivity as conceived of in *Americanah* is first described in Igbo and then translated into English—as if English by itself could not possibly do it justice:

> She read *Dreams from My Father* in a day and a half [...] She was absorbed and moved by the man she met in those pages, an enquiring and intelligent man, a kind man, a man so utterly, helplessly, winningly humane. He reminded her of Obinze's expression for people he liked. *Obi ocha.* A clean heart. She believed Barack Obama [to be the real deal] (313).

Codeswitching reveals the characters' relationships with their own positionality in a polyglossic globality. It exposes their real sense of self, their social aspirations, and their lingering insecurities—the hidden scars of colonial violence:

> At first Vincent affected a British accent, saying "innit" too many times.
>
> "This is business, innit, but I'm helping you. You can use my NI [National Insurance] number [needed to work] and pay me forty per cent of what you make," Vincent said. "It's business, innit. If I don't get what we agree on, I will report you." [...]
>
> "This is business." He had lost his accent and now spoke Nigerian English" (216).

The use of Pidgin at a detention centre in Dover establishes a certain sense of mutuality. In this shadow global space marked by the figure of the fugitive would-be migrant, it can also be read as an expression of defiance in the face of the language of reification and exclusion. In Pidgin, the othered Nigerian subject takes English and bends it to their will. It is an act of subversion—a weak but real gesture towards a pluralisation of spaces from which they are literally and otherwise excluded:

> [The lawyer] was going to tick on a form that his client was willing to be removed. "Removed." That word made Obinze feel inanimate. A thing to be removed. A thing without breath and mind. A thing [...]
>
> In the TV room, there was a group of men, many of them Nigerians, talking loudly [...]
>
> "Ah this na my second time. The first time I come with different passport," one of them said.
>
> "Na for work wey they get me o."
>
> "E get one guy wey they deport, him don come back get him paper. Na him wey go help me," another said (251).

At the salon in Trenton, this most marginal of Western institutions—a salon catering to African hair—represents an important subversion and repopulation of the panhuman psyche. Whereas many come here to straighten their hair and cause it to conform to a European ideal of the corporeal, others come here to get manifestly African hairstyles.

Kelsey—despite her superficial relationship with the African other—is here to get an African hairstyle. It is a small redemption on the part of an actively ignorant Eurodescendant subject—a perhaps misplaced admission of alternative ontologies. Ifemelu is here after a long journey of reassessing her relationship with her positionality in global spaces. She has come to the place where she is happy to wear her hair naturally and—after a recent epiphany—speak English with her original Igbo accent. Aisha, the hair stylist, is unconvinced by Ifemelu's wordliness:

> Aisha looked on, sly and quiet. Later, she whispered to Ifemelu, her expression suspicious, "You here fifteen years, but you don't have American accent. Why?" (173).

The expectation is that anyone who has lived long enough in America has had sufficient leisure to lose their non-American accent—an accent that locates them on the outer fringes of an already racialised and disadvantaged demographic. The burden of distancing oneself from the undifferentiated out-there-somewhere-ness of non-Western countries of origin makes Ifemelu add years to how long she has lived in America. To the American cognizant subject, Burkina Faso might as well be in Latin America (124) and Nigeria—'Isn't there a war going on there?' (122) At the time, there was none. The average Euro-American knower is socialised much like the Greco-Roman citizen of antiquity—to see anything else out there as being the same and necessarily inferior.

Ifemelu, however, has been going through a time of reflection and self-contemplation. Despite the lingering insecurities that still make her add years to the real ones that she has spent in America to add to her 'street cred', she has made peace with the accent she grew up with and her corporeality. Her decision to lose the American accent is prompted by an interaction with an otherwise pleasant young telemarketer who thinks London is the capital of France:

> Ifemelu decided to stop faking an American accent [...] It was convincing [...] but the accent creaked with consciousness, it was an act of will. It took an effort, the twisting of lip, the curling of tongue. If she were in a panic, or terrified, or jerked awake during a fire, she would not remember how to produce those American sounds (160).

Reverting to her original accent is an act of epistemic self-assertion. It affirms the legitimacy and belonging of African inflections on colonial languages and, by extension, the global knowledge economies that these languages dominate. It undoes the erasure of an important part of who Ifemelu is—her Nigerian accent—performed by Cristina Tomas, an actively ignorant Eurodescendant, all those years back. It pushes back against the implicit claim of the American—or Western—accent as the touchstone of a civilised subjectivity. It provincialises English and makes it just another among many equally human languages. It makes audible in shared and global spaces a subalternated subjectivity.

Ifemelu goes through a similar process with her hair and her body in general. Not unlike her Nigerian accent, her hair—when worn naturally—is considered undesirable in most of the spaces where she desires to go in America. Likewise, her body, which tends to fill out and become plump, does not fit the American ideal. She learns that in America— unlike in Nigeria—'fat' is an insult and 'thin' is a compliment (116). African and Afrodescendant corporealities are subordinated to white aesthetics. This is an experience that Ifemelu is spared for the most part during her time growing up in Nigeria. In America, the pressure is on to suppress the visibility of her Africanness and lose herself—if that were possible—in a certain Euro-American ideal of feminine corporeality. In shared and global spaces, the white gaze demands her self-erasure. It demands that she make as much of her difference as possible invisible. Shared and global spaces demand that she becomes as Eurodescendant-looking as possible. Otherwise, she might for instance be considered 'unprofessional' for going to work with her natural hair. She initially thinks Aunty Uju is being ridiculous when she says that she is going to lose her braids before going for a job interview. But she soon learns that shared and global spaces—ruled by the white gaze—do not accept natural African

hair. Finally she yields to the pressure and gets her hair straightened out with hot irons as she prepares for her first job after graduation. Her hairstylist compliments her:

> "Just a little burn," the hairdresser said. "But look how pretty it is. Wow, girl, you've got the white-girl swing!" (188).

The 'white-girl swing'—an imitation of the corporeality expected in shared and global spaces.

In the end, however, Ifemelu becomes convinced that her natural look does belong in these spaces too. She is encouraged by, among others, her college friend Wambui, who has been wearing her hair natural all this time. Soon she discovers a small but growing community of African and Afrodescendant women who insist on wearing their hair natural and encourage one another to do so. Another person who encourages her to wear her hair natural is Curt, her Eurodescendant boyfriend. Despite his openness to difference—which he does not share with his upper-class mother—Curt remains an actively ignorant knower. Ifemelu must take him to the supermarket to show him that fashion magazines catering to African and Afrodescendant needs have arisen because preexisting ones only catered to European and Eurodescendant corporealities. The injustice and significance of it escapes him even after Ifemelu shows him an abundance of evidence. Finally Ifemelu decides to wear her hair natural at work. Even the Afrodescendant woman at the office canteen reacts negatively:

> At the cafeteria, Miss Margaret, the bosomy African American woman who presided over the counter—and, apart from two security guards, the only other black person in the company—asked, "Why did you cut your hair, hon? Are you a lesbian?"
>
> "No, Miss Margaret, at least not yet."
>
> Some years later, on the day Ifemelu resigned, she went into the cafeteria for a last lunch. "You leaving?" Miss Margaret asked, downcast. "Sorry, hon. They need to treat folk better around here. You think your hair was part of the problem?" (195).

Adichie's decadal anniversary introduction to the novel stresses her desire to make African corporealities visible to the point of being expected in the same way as Eurodescendant corporealities in shared and global spaces:

> In college, I once got my hair braided over spring break and, back in class, a non-Black classmate told me, in pleasant surprise, "Wow, your hair really grew long." A view promptly echoed by a few others, all in admiration. Mainstream American

> women's magazines wrote fluidly of blonde and brunette hair, of flat-ironing and keratin treatments. But my classmates knew nothing of braids, one of the most common contemporary hairstyles for Black women.
>
> Many years later, when I told a writer friend that I wanted to write a novel about Black women's hair, I did mean hair as just hair, but also as plot device, as descriptor and as metaphor (10).

In this novel as in other Afropolitan texts, hair—and especially female hair—becomes a metaphor for African and Afrodescendant corporealities and visibility in shared and global spaces (see for example *Le ventre de l'Atlantique*, by Fatou Diome, and *Esse Cabelo*, by Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida). Natural African and Afrodescendant hair seems strange and out-of-place in these spaces because Africans and Afrodescendants seem strange and out-of-place in shared and global spaces. Writing about African and Afrodescendant corporealities is an act of epistemic militance—normalising the African presence in these spaces. It is also, as Eke and Njoku (2021) note, a deliberate and powerfully symbolic act of resistance against the violence against women in global and shared spaces:

> Adichie's approach to Afropolitanism and its use to x-ray the vision of these ambitious women herald an attempt to deploy semiotic properties inherent in Afropolitanism. For instance, the use of fashion to portray protest against ill-treatment and a disposition to freedom is a perfect example of non-verbal statement and so also is the Afro natural hair which displays a new state of the mind, self-rediscovery, on the part of these women imbued with high level of social awareness and feminist emancipation (167).

Locating Obinze in the relatively posh circles that Emenike inhabits in London plays a similarly subversive and reinscriptive role. Whereas Emenike and others such as Obinze's cousin Nicholas have allowed themselves to be swallowed up by their new surroundings, Obinze retains his original Nigerian sense of self. England has yet to knock the stuffing out of him as it has Nicholas. Unlike Emenike—perhaps because he is more 'besotted with America', as his mother puts it, than with England—he sees no need to lose himself into an acquired English self. *Americanah* holds up Obinze's as the ideal African subjectivity. To a significant degree, his is a static character to Ifemelu's more dynamic one. Ifemelu goes through a time of adaptation and self-remaking to accommodate the white gaze before rebelling and reverting to who she originally was. Obinze, on the other hand, remains the same—only losing his incommensurate

love for the United States. According to Adichie, Obinze is the character she most identifies with in the novel. Like Adichie, he observes the world ‘away’ from Nigeria with great perceptiveness. His intuitive reading of human nature and character informs the reader’s understanding of motives and interactions among unequally situated individuals in shared and global spaces.

Adichie uses Emenike to insert Obinze as an Afropolitan agent in English suburbia. He is the figure of the fugitive slave, the unaccompanied negro, nobody’s n----r. In Emenike’s Islington home, informed and educated fugitivity confronts the active ignorance of white privilege. The novel opposes Obinze’s Nigerian sophistication with the smug insularity of Alexa’s brand of cosmopolitanism. Alexa, a Eurodescendant Englishwoman who has lived in France for years, is condescending towards things American, having been to the US only once as a schoolgirl. She is convinced that she has the workings of the world pat. Alexa expects Obinze to just sit there and look decorative. When Obinze opens his mouth to speak, ‘Alexa turn[s] to him in slight surprise, as though she had not expected him to speak’ (244). Her ignorance is accentuated by her misplaced sense of worldliness. She repeatedly says things that irk the plainspoken Mark, a doctor from Grimsby who cannot stand her pretensions. She expresses a kind of moral indignation that African doctors and nurses are leaving home, where they are badly needed, to go and practise in the West. Mark is unimpressed.

> “Speaking of which, I’ve just got involved with this fantastic charity that’s trying to stop the UK from hiring so many African health workers,” Alexa said. “There are simply no doctors and nurses left on that continent. It’s an absolute tragedy! African doctors should stay in Africa.”
>
> “Why shouldn’t they want to practise where there is regular electricity and regular pay?” Mark asked, his tone flat. Obinze sensed that he did not like Alexa at all. “I’m from Grimsby and I certainly don’t want to work in a district hospital there” (246).

Mark points out the double standards of Alexa. She enjoys the freedom of choosing where to live—France and then fashionable Holland Park—and yet is involved in ‘charity work’ aimed at depriving others of a similar choice. By saying African doctors should stay in Africa, she might as well be saying that Africans should stay in Africa. Her sense of white tutelage as privilege expresses itself in a more pernicious way than that of the other guests at the table who dutifully ooh and aah at the service merely because it was handcrafted by poor people in a faraway place. It is more harmful than that of the guests at the house of Kimberley—for whom Ifemelu babysits—who speak of their charity work in Africa with self-congratulatory satisfaction. Alexa’s ignorance

has the capacity and intent to immobilise, invisibilise and silence. It represents at the agential level a mindset that pervades globality on an institutional and structural level.

Having left Nigeria for America and England, respectively, burdened down by a miasmic and potentially immobilising choicelessness, Ifemelu and Obinze return home to Lagos and soon rekindle their love. They now can come and go as they please. Their Afropolitan awakening is accompanied by a reconnection with their Nigerian identities. Unlike certain members of the Nigerpolitan Club—made up of returnees from America mainly—they see no contradiction between their Nigerian and Afropolitan selves. They are Nigerian at home and Nigerian away. In their own small way, they have staked an Afropolitan claim to shared and global spaces.

Conclusion

The immediate function of an Afropolitan work such as *Americanah* is to serve as a metaphor of presence—a portrayal of the world as it is (racist) and could be (inclusive). It uses the power of suggestion to fire and mobilise imaginations. It deploys an aesthetics of reinscription to bring back into shared and global spaces African epistemologies, ontologies and relationalities. *Americanah* dares to reimagine global spaces with Africans coming and going as they wish. It uses the considerable discursive freedom of fictional worlds to conceive and bring into the collective view the possibility of Africans and Afrodescendants released from silencing, invisibilisation and immobilisation in shared and global spaces.

Read as an Afropolitan novel, *Americanah* shows that racism and other forms of violence that exploit difference are the result of hegemonic epistemologies. *Americanah* enables the reader to take in a fuller view of the vast range of spatialities in which the violence of racism whose roots lie in colonialism is enacted from the ghetto to the globe by way of hair salons and consular services. It allows the reader to make the hidden connections among the interlinked geographies and temporalities of colonial violence. *Americanah* shows how (post-)colonial knowledge practices are used to conceal the divisive and exploitative ends of empire and the world market in specious narratives that seek to justify a racialised regimentation of global spatialities, mobilities, audibilities, and visibilities. The novel repopulates the shared ontologies, epistemologies, geographies and relationalities of globality with things African—things unquestioningly tarred as alien, exotic or dangerous: sights, sounds, smells, tactilities, tastes. It stages Afropolitanism as a praxis of epistemic self-assertion.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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