

THE DANGER OF A SINGLE STORY

SINGLE STORIES IN A RACIALIZED WORLD AND COUNTER
DISCOURSES IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZIE ADICHIE'S *AMERICANAH*

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Preface

Stories lie at the heart of our society. Story telling is a way to create multiple visions on past events. Main stories reflect the created history, however, these are not always telling the whole story as there are generally side or hidden stories involved to explain the full series of events. “[t]he role of history will, then, be to show that laws deceive, that kings wear masks, that power creates illusions, and that historians tell lies” (Neal 386). Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie’s novel *Americanah* is a fictional work that creates side or hidden stories to explain the full series of events. The novel is an example of another story besides the created history, it is writing against the established single story. Fiction in general can help to constitute a cultural identity, a relation between the I, time and place (Wurth & Rigney 388).

Instead of taking over ruling ideas, fiction creates counter discourses. In Adichie’s Ted Talk *The danger of a Single Story* (2009) Adichie says: “Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower, and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people. But stories can also repair that broken dignity.”(TED, 00:17:36-00:17:55).

Americanah by Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie creates many stories, stories that “can be used to empower, and to humanize.” (TED). Adichie is a Nigerian writer who also lives for part of the year in the United States of America. With her novel *Americanah* she shows the reader the still existing matters of race and how people deny there is race. *Americanah* questions the single story that denies or ignores the presence of racism. The novel is dealing with the cultural identity in a postcolonial time since it shows how fault lines round race and of racism are marked features of the British and American society.

The title of the novel in itself is a strong reaction to the plurality of cultures and identities. The word ‘Americanah’ is first used when Ginika, one of the protagonist’s

(Ifemelu) friends, is moving to the United States. Ranyinudo says Ginika will become a serious *Americanah*: “They roared with laughter, at that word ‘Americianah’, wreathed in glee”. (Adichi 78). Being an ‘Americanah’ is referred to as being posh. When Ifemelu returns to Nigeria she is a different ‘Americanah’. Ranyinudo teases Ifemelu with being one, but not a real one: “You are looking at things with American eyes. But the problem is that you are not even a real Americanah. At least if you had an American accent we would tolerate your complaining!” (Adichie 476). Within the word ‘Americanah’ an ambivalent cultural identity is framed.

Americanah shows the problems of displacement; the difficulties of forming a cultural identity in a postcolonial time. (Wurth & Rigney 389). The novel creates many different stories, the story lines of the main characters Ifemelu and Obinze, the prominent African Emenike and the American Kimberly are a few examples. The characters in the novel are living in Nigeria, Great Britain and the United States. They migrated for different reasons, see society in different ways and have different roots. The matter of race plays a major part in their lives and *Americanah* shows how everyone reacts to this.

Adichie writes against existing hierarchies in Western societies. With her creation of multiple characters within one novel she frames multiple stories together. Because of this and her creation of the powerful main characters with their sense of humour and sharpness and their ability to confront people with the existence of racism, the novel is a solid text in opposite to the existing hierarchies.

I argue that American and English societies are both living with a single story of the black African migrant in Great Britain or African Americans and black immigrants in America. Through the novel, Adichie lets us, the reader, read other stories. These other stories show a variety of discourses. The main focus of this thesis will be on the story lines of Ifemelu and Obinze, the protagonists of the novel. However, all the story lines are important

since the number of stories is the power of the novel.

In this dissertation the dangers of a single story are discussed. In chapter one the concepts of afropolitanism, contrapuntal awareness and living in exile are explained to understand the story lines. Emigration, the ability to reflect and self-reflect and the thoughts of the diverse characters in the novel are points of discussion. The second chapter reflects on power relations and discourse through the different story lines in *Americanah*. This chapter will focus on the story lines that take place or are related to Great Britain, with a main focus on the story line of Obinze. The third chapter is emphasizing power relations and discourse in the United States in *Americanah*. This chapter is focussing on Ifemelu, her blog and her American life. To conclude the main question will be answered. The main question is as follows: How does the novel *Americanah* contribute to the discussion on race in our current society?

Chapter 1 – Story Lines, the Afropolitan and Contrapuntal awareness in *Americanah*

Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie wrote the novel *Americanah* in 2013. The novel is written in English with some sentences in Igbo. Adichie herself says about her use of the English language:

The important thing is to tell African stories. Besides, modern African stories can no longer claim anything like ‘cultural purity.’ I come from a generation of Nigerians who constantly negotiate two languages and sometimes three, if you include Pidgin. For the Igbo in particular, ours is the Engli-Igbo generation and so to somehow claim that Igbo alone can capture our experience is to limit it. Globalization has affected us in profound ways. (Azodo 2)

Language is part of culture and plays a role in the creation of identity. This is important to afropolitans but also to people living in exile. The main character Ifemelu as well as her Aunt Uju use Igbo in the United States. However Aunt Uju does not want her son to speak Igbo and she only uses it when she is angry. Ifemelu is afraid Igbo will become the language of strife for her cousin Dike. The role of language is important through the novel. Ifemelu is confronted by white Americans whether she speaks English as a second language or if it is her mother tongue.

Ojiugo and Nicholas, relatives of Obinze, are dealing with language as well: “You see how she sounds so posh? Ha! My daughter will go places.” (Adichie 299) says Ojiugo about the English accent of their daughter. Nicholas is only speaking in English to his children: “He spoke only in English, careful English, as though he thought that the Igbo he shared with their mother would infect them.” (Adichie 296).

Language is a main part of our identity and Ifemelu uses Igbo words to express herself. For instance she refers to the people she likes with the words Obinze used to describe people he liked: ‘obi ocha’; a clean heart. (Adichie 181).

Living in exile can create a contrapuntal awareness which is the case with Ifemelu and Obinze. The two main characters are not the only significant story lines, there are many people speaking but the main focus in this thesis will be on Obinze and Ifemelu. In this chapter the concepts afropolitan, living in exile and contrapuntal awareness are explained. First the story lines in the novel will be discussed.

Story Lines in *Americanah*

The story lines are reflected through the lives of the fictive characters Ifemelu and Obinze. They are not the only focalizers as there are many people talking in first person. For instance, Auntie Uju, Kimberly, Shan, and Ifemelu’s and Obinze’s mothers are talking in first person as well. The multiple story lines contribute to the formation of the opposite of a single story. I take the story line of Aisha as an example. She is working in a braiding salon in Trenton. Aisha is from Senegal and she wants to marry an Igbo man.

The fact that Ifemelu is Igbo makes Aisha think Ifemelu is connected to her two Igbo boyfriends. She believes her boyfriends when they say Igbo can only marry Igbo, Ifemelu says it is not true and Aisha is desperate to let Ifemelu talk to them. It is the only hope for her to stay in America and to make a reasonable living. Ifemelu “was about to go back home to Nigeria, and she would see her parents, and she could come back to America if she wished, and here was Aisha, hoping but not really believing that she would ever see her mother again.” (Adichie 452).

The contrast between two immigrants from Africa, one from Nigeria and one from Senegal is harrowing and confronting to read. Ifemelu and Aisha are immigrants and they travelled the same way to come to the United States. However Ifemelu has succeeded in

Aisha's eyes since she has legal citizenship. Aisha suffers from the difficulties of immigration. It is important to read about this, since it marks the dichotomy between immigrants. The difference in story lines between Ifemelu and Aisha is evident, however, it is not the only dichotomy in the novel. Adichie shows many stories that create binaries between the characters in the novel. Although many characters are black, they are not similar and they have different stories. Together with the different story lines there are the story lines of the protagonists Ifemelu and Obinze. They are exiles in a floating world with a different gaze. This gaze can be described as a contrapuntal awareness.

Living in Exile and the Contrapuntal awareness

Both Obinze and Ifemelu have a feeling of homesickness while being abroad, but also a feeling of not being at home when they return to Nigeria. "floating in a world where darkness descended too soon and everyone walked around burdened by coats, and flattened by the absence of light." (Adichie 192). This quote is focalized through Ifemelu and it defines her feeling in the United States at the beginning of her stay. Ifemelu describes a feeling of disorientation and living in a distant place. This connects with queer feeling of being lost within her living place. These feelings resemble living in exile. (Barbour 1).

To live in exile is to be torn from "the nourishment of tradition, family and geography" (Barbour 8). Another aspect of living in exile is the ongoing search for a homeland. Ifemelu and Obinze both have a homeland where they can both return to. However, their perspectives have changed and living in Nigeria is not the same as before they left for the States and Great Britain.

Nigeria is different for Obinze and Ifemelu since living in exile creates a new awareness. They both have to ability to engage with new visions and different perspectives. Edward Said is a Palestinian American and a main cultural critic in the field of postcolonial studies. He argues that people in exile can create a contrapuntal awareness. (Said 148).

Said gives name to the possibility to see societies and people different from their current context with the word ‘contrapuntal’. This means a “plurality of visions [that] gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that – to borrow a phrase from music – is *contrapuntal*.” (Said 148). If one has a contrapuntal awareness about certain aspects in life it is possible to see different dimensions of a situation since contrapuntal means to create a vision or opinion from multiple cultural frames of reference.

These frames of reference are important to understand the point of views from the characters in the novel. The characters in the novel also have to deal with differences of descent. Ifemelu, Obinze and most of their friends are African. Africa is a continent with a complex history. If an African emigrates from Africa he or she encounters a new culture. Ifemelu, Obinze and their friends who moved to other countries can be seen as African diasporans. The new term Taiye Selasi invented for the emigrated Africans is ‘Afropolitan’ (*Bye Bye Babar* 2013).

Afropolitanism

The hybridity of language as well as culture, performance, love and art are typical for the afropolitan. Or in words of Chielozona Eze: “Afropolitanism suggests a reading of the African postcolonial identity as necessarily transcultural, transnational, indeed, cosmopolitan; it must embrace the solidarity that these conditions imply.” (241).

The afropolitan is a person with connections to Africa but who is not bound by this connection and is creating a sense of self from different cultures and experiences. (Eze 238). *Americanah* creates many story lines from African diasporans, although not everyone is an afropolitan. Afropolitan is a complex concept since it has different meanings for different people. The concept of the afropolitan as defined by Taiye Selasi in *Bye Bye Babar* (2013) will be used as well as the explanation of Emma Dabiri (2016).

Selasi argues that: “Whether we were ashamed of ourselves for not being more

familiar with our parents, culture, or ashamed of that culture for not being more ‘advanced’, can be unclear. What is manifest is the extent to which the modern adolescent African is tasked to forge a sense of self from wildly disparate sources.” (Selasi 529). Selasi emphasizes the relation between the continent of Africa as well as other locations. These relations can be geographical but mostly cultural.

However, Emma Dabiri argues that afropolitanism is a term too frequently used by Europeans to create a new glossy image of African people as different (105). Afropolitanism stands for the rich middle and upper class. (Dabiri 105). Dabiri is critical about the way afropolitans are positioned in a broader frame. She refers to Fanon with his words: “In its decadent aspect the national bourgeoisie, gets considerable help from the Western bourgeoisie who happen to be tourists enamoured with exoticism”. (Dabiri 106). Her point is that Western people only see the African bourgeoisie and they embrace this exotic new afropolitanism. Not everyone is afropolitan, Dabiri speaks of Pan-Africanism. Contrastingly, Pan-Africanism is more focussed on the continent instead of ‘our Anglo-American superiors’” (Dabiri 107).

Looking at *Americanah*, Emenike is an example of an afropolitan as framed by the west: “Obinze wondered if Emenike had so completely absorbed his own disguise that even when they were alone, he could talk about ‘good furniture,’ as though the idea of ‘good furniture’ was not alien in their Nigerian world” (Adichie 333). “There, it has been said: The man [Emenike] considered himself British.” (Adichie 336).

Ifemelu and Obinze act different than Emenike and do not conform to the Western idea of the afropolitan but instead relate to the afropolitanism Taiye Selasi refers to and the pan-Africanism of Dabiri. At first they seek legitimacy from Anglo-Americans. Then they both stop this search and start to ‘foster a continental internationality’ (Dabiri 107). In this way they relate to the pan-Africanism.

An example of this continental internationality is the moment when someone says to

Ifemelu: “Wow, girl, you’ve got the white-girl swing!” (Adichie 251). Ifemelu is cheerless: “The verve was gone. She did not recognize herself.” (Adichie 251). After Ifemelu received this feedback, she deliberately gets rid of her conditioned behaviour. She starts to accept her black features and behaviour and she stops faking her American accent.

However, Ifemelu and Obinze are not returning to a pure Africanism, they are African cosmopolitans. This is visual when they return to Nigeria. When Ifemelu returns to Nigeria she starts to write a blog in Lagos. She reflects on all the Nigerians who have been living abroad. She notices how this group, where she is part of as well, is complaining about Nigeria and act surprised if things in Nigeria are different. For instance at the gatherings where someone is complaining about the non vegetarian food in Nigeria. Ifemelu writes: “Lagos has never been, will never be, and has never aspired to be like New York” (Adichie 519).

Ifemelu is an afropolitan in the sense that she is driven by love, enters new scenes and notices how her taste has changed. Examples of the new scenes are the art exhibitions with Curt and the salons of Shan, where she invites her “group of friends, mostly artists and writers, and they get together at her place and have really good conversations. (Adichie 391)”, but also the gatherings with Blaine and his friends. Her taste has changed in the sense of food since she loves the stew from her mother but she also misses low fat soya milk when she is back in Nigeria. Furthermore she “learned to admire exposed wooden rafters. (Adichie 535)” and finds the houses in Lagos ugly.

Obinze and Ifemelu have an unconditional love for each other which guides them through the novel. They become cosmopolitans in a world buzzing of new sounds, languages, love and food but they manage to return to their pure love.

Chapter 2 – Black and White Relations through Power Relations and Discourse in Great Britain in *Americanah*

Because of Obinze's contrapuntal awareness and his afropolitanism, he looks at society in Great Britain with a defamiliarizing view. Obinze is living as an illegal person in Great Britain: "Differently from Ifemelu, Obinze will never become his would-be afropolitan self: his story is a bitter parody of her trajectory" (Guarracino 18). Obinze struggles with getting his visa and becoming an English citizen. However, this is not his only struggle since he has to deal with a new society and the problem of race. It is not as evident as in the United States but the English people do not have a veracious image of immigrants.

Obinze argues that "Alexa, and the other guests, and perhaps even Georgina, all understood the fleeing from war, from the kind of poverty that crushed human souls, but they would not understand the need to escape from the oppressive lethargy of choicelessness." (Adichie 341). During dinner at Eminike's place Obinze meets new people and through their conversations it becomes clear that they have a wrong image of the immigrant. Alexa, Mark and Hannah are discussing the immigration problems and they conclude that the immigrants who come to Great-Britain are from Eastern Europe or that "Immigrant, of course, is code for Muslim." (Adichie 339).

Obinze is not from Eastern Europe neither is he a Muslim. The perception of the immigrant is not complete and by excluding people like Obinze they create a single story of the black immigrant. Obinze is seen as someone who fled from war or another horrible situation where he cannot return to without even considering the real reason for Obinze's choice to immigrate. Mark, Alexa and Hannah speak as if they know what they are talking about but they only know this single story.

Discourse and Power

The contrast between Obinze's life in Great Britain and Nigeria are mainly caused by the different discourses and power relations. The novel shows the counter discourses and the power relations. The next quote is from a discussion between Foucault and Deleuze on power. They speak of the prisoners and the prisoners' guards: "Rather, it is because to speak on this subject [the previously unknown], to force the institutionalized networks of information to listen, to produce names, to point the finger of accusation, to find targets is the first step in the reversal of power and the initiation of new struggles against existing forms of power." (Foucault & Deleuze 214).

The prisoners' guards are the ones that exercise power, therefore, they are the ruling class. The Prisoner guards can for example be anyone. In fact, the entire novel can be seen as the counter discourse from the prisoners since the novel is speaking against ruling ideas on race and "struggles against existing forms of power" (Foucault & Deleuze 214). The power relations change in every situation. Where Obinze was not dependent on Emenike back in Nigeria, he becomes financial dependent on him in Great-Britain. Intellectual Obinze is more well-read but Emenike has status in England while Obinze has not. In England Emenike is part of the ruling class and Obinze of the prisoners.

Obinze's way of life in Great Britain is the way of life of an immigrant. He stresses his loss of identity; "This was his weekly treat: to visit the bookshop, buy an overpriced caffeinated drink, read as much as he could for free, and become Obinze again." (Adichie 317).

Obinze is speaking against the ruling discourse about illegal immigrants, this is a discourse created by the one's with power. Obinze's story line in Great Britain is an example of a vulnerable voice marginal to power. His response to the negative discourse about black immigrants is to willingly leave Great Britain the moment he is arrested: "I'm willing to go

back to Nigeria,” Obinze said. The last shard of his dignity was like wrapper slipping off that he was desperate to retie.” (Adichie 345).

Obinze does not have the power anymore to try to stay in Great Britain. His stay has turned him from an intelligent young man to “A thing without breath and mind. A thing” (Adichie 345). The story line of Obinze is stressing the surreal life he leads in Great Britain. On the other hand, *Americanah* also tells the other side of Obinze’s story. Obinze’s return to Nigeria and his life from this point onwards is also part of his story.

Back in Nigeria, Obinze is rebuilding life: “one week he was broke and squatting in his cousin’s flat and the next he had millions of naira in his bank account. Kosi became a touchstone of realness.”(Adichie 565). Back in Nigeria, Obinze is creating the life many Nigerians long for. Obinze does not has to worry about money nor he has to fear the possibility to be treated like ‘a thing’. He has a beautiful wife, a child and a well paid job.

However the moment Ifemelu is back in his life he longs for true love, since he always “knew something was missing” (Adichie 588) in his marriage with Kosi. This something is love, and by bringing Obinze and Ifemelu together at the end of the novel, the story of an illegal immigrant becomes the story of a young Nigerian man that gained insights in the world and who made mistakes every ordinary man could have made. Choosing love over marriage is marked as white people behaviour by his friend Okwudiba. (Adichie 582). Yet Obinze is an afropolitan. Through different places and different cultures he created his identity. As an afropolitan, Obinze decides to choose love over the traditional idea of marriage in Nigeria.

Chapter 3 – Power Relations and Discourse in the United States in

Americanah

Obinze struggles with power relations in Great Britain as an illegal. Ifemelu is a legal student in the United States, however, she struggles with power relations as well. In the United States Ifemelu notices that white people try to avoid calling people black. They try to deny the fact that there are differences between blacks and whites. Ifemelu has the ability to write and starts a blog about this problem. Although people like her blog and she is invited to give talks on the matter of race, she notices no one wants to hear about the existing problems with regard to race: “So light skin is valued in the community of American blacks. But everyone pretends this is no longer so. They say the days of the paper-bag test (look this up) are gone and let’s move forward.” (Adichie 265).

Power relations

“In contrast to the Jim Crow era, where racial inequality was enforced through overt means (e.g., signs saying “No Niggers Welcome Here” or shotgun diplomacy at the voting booth), today racial practices operate in “ ‘now you see it, now you don’t’ fashion.” (Bonilla-Silva 3).

As clear as the separation between black and white was in the United States, as blurred is it today. Ifemelu is not familiar with this separation, since she is born and raised in Nigeria where race issues are not at stake. However, the reaction Bonilla-Silva describes is accurate in *Americanah*. People see the black and white differences but do not act accordingly to it.

Instead of accepting, Americans hide these differences beneath a common fashion of denial.

The way in which power is exerted between black and white people in history is the reason for the still existing racism. However power is exerted in many different ways. *Americanah* shows the reader different power relations.

In this section two different power relations are discussed. The first is about the black

and white power relations in American society. The refusal by some Americans to see differences between blacks and whites in American society is defining this first power relation. The second power relation is about the relation of Non-African blacks and African Americans. Together with these power relations there is Ifemelu's blog 'Raceteenth or Curious Observations by a Non-American Black on the subject of blackness in America'. Previous power relations are manifested through the blog. Together with this, Ifemelu's struggle between her actual ideas as expressed in her blog and the ideas her audience wants to hear at the lectures she gives is discussed. This causes frictions related with the ruling idea of race that white people have.

Power relations between blacks and whites in American Society. After the 'for blacks only' movement of Malcolm X white people started to either accept their own responsibilities for the existing racism or not to think of themselves as racists at all. However, there was also a third reaction. Ironically this reaction that dates from the late 1960s is the main problem in *Americanah*. The third reaction was of people "who considered themselves racists just because they *noticed* differences of colour" (Blauner 17). The temptation to ignore or deny racial matters thus becomes very great.

This means that the biggest problem is not that American society is avoiding any kind of racism. Merely the danger is that most of the white people do not want to think of their subconscious racist reactions and behaviour created by history. Because of this noticing different colours becomes taboo. An example is the class discussion about a movie where the word nigger is bleeped out. Ifemelu is in this class and the discussion is opened. There are some firm opinions. "A firm, female voice [...] with a non-American accent, asked "Why was 'nigger' bleeped out?". (Adichie 168). This question causes a uncomfortable feeling and a lively discussion. In the end the teacher does not dare to go further on the matter of the word nigger and its history and she brings up another topic. Although an African-American girl is

making the point “Hiding it doesn’t make it go away” (Adichie 169) the teacher does not feel comfortable with the discussion and tries to forget about it.

A second example is when Mr. White, a black security guard at the library, gets unjustly arrested for drugs dealing while he is exchanging his car keys with another black man. When Ifemelu asks if everything is fine with him Blaine says: “I think he expects this sort of thing to happen’. ‘That’s the actual tragedy’, Ifemelu said” (Adichie 425).

American and English society are holding up this act of denial. The act works for the people that are not discriminated against. However privileges of white people are not the only way power is exerted. Black people are in relation to white people less privileged and treated different. In addition, the novel also describes other power relations Ifemelu has to deal with.

Power relations between Non-American Blacks and African American s. Ifemelu is a Nigerian woman and a ‘non-American Black’ as she describes herself in her blogs. She is reacting on the power relations within American society. This society consists of many different people with many different skin colours and backgrounds. This becomes clear when Ifemelu is meeting Blaine’s friends. They are reading one of the blogs Ifemelu has written. When Ifemelu speaks about her relatives back in Nigeria, Michael a black American says: “It must be good to have that,’ he said. ‘To have what?’ ‘To know where you’re from. Ancestors going way back, that kind of thing.’” (Adichie 406). With this Michael implies Ifemelu is privileged.

Not only do the friends of Blaine stress the difference that comes with being African American or an immigrant like Ifemelu. Ifemelu is speaking with Boubacar, an African immigrant from a former French colony. Ifemelu and Boubacar are able to make fun of their colonial past in front of each other but if an American black would tease them with this it would be inappropriate. Even Blaine, her boyfriend could not make fun of her colonial past since: “Perhaps Blaine resented this mutuality, something primally African from which he felt

excluded.” (Adichie 421).

African Americans and African immigrants are fundamentally different. Their history is different and they stress this. *Americanah* shows how African Americans, just like white American people, can have a single story of the African immigrant. When Shan is talking about Ifemelu’s blog she says: “She’s writing from the outside. She doesn’t really feel all the stuff she’s writing about. It’s all quaint and curious to her. [...] If she were African American, she’d just be labelled angry and shunned.” (Adichie 418).

Ironically Ifemelu is writing about the problem of the denial of racism by white people. This racism is about black people in general. White people do not separate African Americans or African immigrants, black is black. Ifemelu is not directly involved with the past of African Americans. However the present manifestations of racism are touching her as well. *Americanah* shows the ideas of Shan, Michael, Blaine and other friends. Their common feature is that they are black and marked as such by white people. However, their story lines make clear that they are different. They invalidate the single story of the existence of a single black identity. Being black is not just one identity, it is a plurality of identities.

The way power is exerted always depends on the context people are in. When Ifemelu is among white people she notices certain racist reactions that have to do with her skin colour. When Ifemelu is among Blaine and his friends she is partly excluded or stereotyped since she is not African American .

Power Relations in Ifemelu’s blog ‘Raceteenth or Curious Observations by a Non-American Black on the Subject of Blackness in America’. Ifemelu is writing down her reflections on American society in her blog ‘Raceteenth or Curious Observations by a Non-American Black on the subject of blackness in America’. With this she creates an online platform where people from all over the world are reacting on the matters she writes about. This begins with her reaction on the website ‘happilykinkynappy.com’. This is the week after

Ifemelu decided to cut her hair and wear it in a natural afro style. The blogging of Ifemelu shows that “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.” (Guarracino 20).

At first, Ifemelu does not feel confident wearing her hair natural, but after the approval of her post on the website she accepts that she is in love with her very curly hair. (Adichie 264). Being in love with her hair can be read as a metaphor for accepting her blackness. She is not covering her African hair anymore. Together with the exposure of her natural African hair, she starts blogging, calling her blog ‘Raceteenth or Curious Observations by a Non-American Black on the Subject of Blackness in The United-States’. The blog is functioning as a digital space where Ifemelu shares her ideas online.

Because of the online space a new space is created within the novel. This new space is important since: “new texts such as cybertexts ‘are informed by previous texts just as much as they happen to inform future ones [...] Discourses meander through the centuries leaving their traces in texts, which in turn leave their marks and remember histories into the future’ (2-3).”(qtd. in Adenekan 7).

Cyberspace and space are intertwined since a blog involves the creation of something new in a virtual space inhabited by readers and the writer, with the readers in turn commenting and leaving reactions to the blog. (Adenekan 8). Ifemelu is creating consciousness about race among Americans. The black reader is empowered by such blogs, feeling that he or she is not alone and by writing it down it becomes a serious issue. The white reader, if we can speak of the white reader, becomes aware of the negative outcomes of the denial of racism they perform.

Still we have to ask if there are white readers on the blog. Since Ifemelu is invited to

give talks on the matters she writes about in her blog, it seems white people have read her ideas and are seriously interested. Since “the people who attended her first diversity talk, at a small company in Ohio, wore sneakers. They were all white.” (Adichie 377). However, when Ifemelu ends her first diversity talk, the audience was not amused and the critique was not positive.

After this Ifemelu realised that these people did not read her blog but just heard about it. The white audience wanted Ifemelu’s talk to be a feel good talk instead of being confronted with the consequences of discrimination against black people. So Ifemelu “began to say what they wanted to hear, none of which she would ever write on her blog”(Adichie 378). Ifemelu is aware of the difference between her actual ideas and the ideas she lectures to white people.

The denial of the existence of race and racism, the refusal to acknowledge that damaging consequences of racism still ingrain American society and its stereotyping and partial exclusion offered to the recent migrant from Africa are all aspects of what Ifemelu contradicts through her writing and talks. Ifemelu does seem to break through these boundaries successfully.

Discourses in the United States in *Americanah*

Together with the power relations there are the counter discourses. The general discourse is namely to try not to talk about black and white differences. To discuss black and white differences is for most of the American white people a taboo.

Discourse is in case of Ifemelu not a discourse from an illegal perspective as it is in case of Obinze. Ifemelu has the right to stay in the United States. However she is just like Obinze struggling against the ruling discourse about black people. The ruling discourse in the United States about black people is that one does not openly, in polite conversation, mark people out as black or white: “And admit it – you say ‘I’m not black’ only because you know black is at the bottom of America’s race ladder.”(Adichie 273).

“Looking within ourselves and our common history to (re)member who we are is critical to confronting dominant discourses that seek to define us.” (Okpaolaka & Dillard 122). Where back in Nigeria Obinze’s and Ifemelu’s discourse about the United States was positive and Obinze’s ultimate compliment was “You look like a black American” (Adichie 80) towards Ifemelu. Ifemelu now faces a certain negative attitude towards her blackness in the United States. She notices the unmarked racism: “Why didn’t she just ask, ‘I was waiting for her to ask ‘Was it the one with the two eyes or the one with two legs?’ Why didn’t she just ask ‘Was it the black girl or the white girl?’.” Ginika laughed. “Because this is America. You’re supposed to pretend that you don’t notice certain things.” (Adichie 155).

The leading discourse in the United-States as sketched in *Americanah* about race is that it should not be noticed. People do not want to confront themselves with the fact that they do notice the differences between black and white. Most of the times Ifemelu is not discriminated against on purpose by white people. Mostly they just do not recognize the concealed undertone of racism embedded in their society.

Discourses: The Blog. However with the blog, *Americanah* does succeed in creating a counter discourse against the dominant discourse on race in the United States : “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.” (Guarracino 11).

The blog is confronting people with the dominant discourse about black people by white people. The dominant discourse tries to define Ifemelu. This works at first, when Ifemelu chooses to behave as she should behave according to the white values and general ideas about black people. However when Ifemelu is returning to the pan-Africanism where Dabiri talks and stops faking her American accent and straightening her hair, she starts to speak directly against the ruling discourse.

Discourses: Obama. Another discourse is the discourse around the first black president of the United States, Obama. The ruling discourse is one where a black president is unique and almost impossible. However when Obama is elected the black euphoric crowd is dazzled. A black man is the man that is going to decide on important matters and is going to speak to the people of the United States. He is able to speak against matters without being held back because he is the president of the United States. Dike is texting Ifemelu at that moment and he says: “I can’t believe it. My president is black like me.” (Adichie 447).

Obama is black like Ifemelu, Dike and their other black friends and relatives. In the United States, a black president is important since the ones in favour of Obama think he will change the ongoing racism and separation between black and white that is embedded in American history and present. Still the question arises if the United States is ready for a black president. Ifemelu is reflecting on this question in her blog titled ‘Even the Idea of Being Ready is Ridiculous’: “Does nobody see how absurd it is to ask people if they are ready for a black president? Are you ready for Mickey Mouse to be president? How about Kermit the Frog? And Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer?” (Adichie 408).

With Obama as president, the future could be different from the past. That is the reason “the living room became an altar of disbelieving joy. (Adichie 447)” for Blaine, Ifemelu and their friends on the night Obama got elected.

Conclusion

As written in the introduction, fiction is a way to create counter discourses. Counter discourses are important to see the whole story instead of one, the single story. The danger of a single story about race is evident in *Americanah*. In order to dispose from this single story, many stories are needed. *Americanah* is creating many story lines. These story lines represent different people from different countries, roots and skin colour within one novel. The different fictional characters like Obinze, Ifemelu, Shan, Emenike and so on are the strength of the novel. Adichie invalidates the single story of the immigrant in Great Britain and being black in the United States. The power of the novel is the writing style of Adichie. By the creation of two powerful main characters who are reflecting on society with a sense of humour the reader stays triggered to maintain reading. This causes a high number of readers and a place on the best seller list in 2013. The number of readers is important to be influential. *Americanah* is influential and this is the first point to argue in which ways *Americanah* contributes to the matter of race in our current societies.

The first chapter shows how the story lines and main characters can be analysed. The concepts of afropolitanism, living in exile and the contrapuntal awareness are used. These concepts are important to understand the identity of for instance the immigrated Emenike, Ifemelu, Aisha and Obinze. They do not share the same consciousness about the situation they live in. Emenike and Aisha are not afropolitans like Ifemelu and Obinze. Ifemelu and Obinze are in words of Selasi afropolitan and pan-African in words of Dabiri. While Emenike can be seen as the afropolitan Dabiri describes. Together with the afropolitan identity, the concept of the contrapuntal awareness is important. One can create multiple visions while living in exile. As a reader you get a sense of this through the focalization of Obinze and Ifemelu. It is important to show this to the reader to gain awareness for the difficulties of living in exile and

being an (illegal) migrant. The novel, however, shows at the same time the dichotomies between migrants. There are many different story lines in the novel with different lives.

Together with these concepts there is the problem of power and discourse. The novel does succeed to create a counter discourse to the existing single story of race. The selling numbers of the novel show many people have read it. If we look at the analyses of Foucault and Deleuze, *Americanah* as a whole can be seen as the word of the prisoners. The stories presented in the novel are speaking against the current idea of the single story of being black. Discourse is embedded in society and it is everywhere. Anyone can be the prisoner or the guard. This perspective shifts according to power relations. The power relations in the novel are clearly exposed by the main characters. The blog of Ifemelu succeeds in reaching people to talk about race and how it inflicts on black people's lives. However, at the same time it shows that people do not appreciate the confronting words of Ifemelu. Still, Ifemelu's blog is powerful since it is impregnated with humorous references to black and white dichotomies in American society that show the painful relation of race. Also, the discourses between African Americans and black migrants shows the marked difference between them. The same is visual in the story line of Obinze. He willingly leaves Great Britain to never return again. While other migrants try over and over again although Great Britain threatens them as 'a thing'.

To conclude, we can say that *Americanah* creates many stories that are read by many different readers from all over the world. This can create an understanding of the situation of the black migrant and the African diasporans in a Western society. *Americanah* succeeds in the creation of this understanding because of the creation of the powerful protagonists and the number of characters with their different stories. They are acting in Nigeria, Great Britain and the United States. Race is at stake in Great Britain and the United States. People from Nigeria like Ifemelu and Obinze, other Africans like Aisha and Boubacar and African Americans like Blaine and Shan have in common that they are all black. *Americanah* however gives voice to

the different characters to disprove their identity as equal because of their skin colour. By the creation of the stories of white Americans, white English people, African migrants and African Americans the reader gets to know many different perspectives. These perspectives create binary visions connected to the problem of race. The problem of race is pointed out in *Americanah* by the blog of Ifemelu. However the different stories together are creating a powerful discourse against racism as well. The multiple story lines create an image wherein different cultures and features are framed as distinct in our postcolonial society. Because of the wide range a reader can identify with some stories while at the same time being confronted with new ideas and realities of the characters. These confrontations create consciousness about the matter of race and the inequality among people in society.

Americanah shows through the different stories that being black is not equal to ones identity. The reaction of white people differs as well. The reaction of Mark and Hannah in relation with the migrant problem in Great Britain are not holding up according to the story of Obinze. However Mar and Hannah do not realize they create fault lines round the matter of migration. The same is happening with the hair of Ifemelu. It takes time to embrace her natural hair and to wear it like it naturally grows. She has to put effort to learn to love her hair again since white people do not take Ifemelu serious if she is wearing her hair natural. They do not hate afro hair but they frame it as the hair of jazz singers and artists and not of serious and punctual people. Although the ruling ideas about black people are clearly expressed in *Americanah*, the different characters do not act accordingly. They are individuals who express their identity through their discourse against the ruling powers. The power of *Americanah* is the variety of unique stories and the plurality within the novel this brings about. Or as Adichie says in her TED talk: “Stories can break the dignity of a people. But stories can also repair that broken dignity.”(TED, 00:17:36-00:17:55). *Americanah* shows this to be conceivable.

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