

**Riffing on Adichie's *Americanah*:  
International Journeys, the Hybrid Life, and Thoughtful Engagement**

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Lecture to the First Year Class, September 1, 2014  
Macalester College

Good morning everyone. It's a pleasure to be here and thank you to Ann Minnick for the kind introduction. I am, really, truly honored to be co-delivering the class of 2018's first lecture. I'm teaching a first year seminar this year, the Geography of Africa, and therefore have already met a subset of your peers, not to mention their parents. While I can't say this for the parental units, everyone in the class showed up on time, eager and ready to engage. We are off to a good start on our joint adventure over the next four years.

So let us begin.

I was talking to my partner a few months ago, who also happens to have read the book *Americanah*, and she said: "why are they having you give this lecture?" At the time, she was looking at me, clearly in interrogation mode, in our domestic space where I'm just a dude, where my PhD means absolutely nothing. I responded that "I'm a geographer who works in West Africa." "I suppose they want me to give some international perspective, to provide context on Nigeria and the experience of Africans who immigrate to the US." She scoffed, "but the book is about race relations in the US." Furthermore, she said, eyebrows raised, "I think a feminist scholar would have a field day with this text. The main character, Ifemelu, only seems to find fulfillment through her relationships with men. Why aren't her relationships with female friends more developed? What the hell is that all about, geography man?"

Indeed, this novel has a lot to say about race relations in the US - and I will not be talking about that. Professor Brown clearly is more qualified than I to provide you with commentary along these lines. I also will not be deconstructing the novel from a critical feminist perspective. What I will do, as hinted at earlier, is give you a little background and context regarding Nigeria. I then want to focus on three themes that this novel prompted me to consider: 1) international journeys (or the process of going away and coming back home); 2) privilege and hybridity; and 3) praxis or thoughtful action.

### **Context on Nigeria**

So first, let me provide a bit of background on Nigeria. Nigeria is by far and away the largest country in Africa in terms of population. At 178 million people, its population is twice as large as that of the next two countries, both Ethiopia and Egypt at around 85 million. Nigeria is a middle income country. Its economy is the largest in Africa and ranks 26<sup>th</sup> in the world in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

Nigeria is a former British colony, winning independence in 1960. Oil was discovered in Nigeria in 1956 and production began in 1958. Nigeria's crude oil is of particularly high quality

– meaning that it has relatively low sulfur content. The United States has long been engaged in Nigeria’s petroleum industry and is its top customer – purchasing roughly 40% of its oil exports.

While the country has over 300 different ethnic groups, there are three main groups which are the majority in different regions of the country: 1) the Hausa and Fulani in the North who are predominantly Muslim, 2) the Yoruba in the southwest (where Lagos is located) who are predominantly Christian, and 3) the Igbo in the southeast who are also predominantly Christian. In the novel, both Ifemelu and Obinze are supposed to be Igbo – as is our author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

One of the most significant events in post-colonial Nigeria was the Biafran war where the Igbo in the southeast part of the country tried to secede to create the independent state of Biafara. This civil war lasted from roughly 1967 to 1970 and was particularly bloody – with roughly a million people dying from the fighting and related famine. The war was in part about ethnic tensions, but also about control of the oil fields on Igbo lands. Today ethnic and religious tensions still persist between the largely Muslim north and the Christian south. There is also a long simmering environmental justice crisis in the oil producing regions of the country where local people have protested against oil related environmental degradation – a struggle made famous by the now deceased activist Ken Saro-Wiwa.

Nigeria used to have one of the more dynamic manufacturing sectors in West Africa. It was also largely self sufficient in food production. However, as the oil industry grew more prominent, both manufacturing and agriculture atrophied. Oil accounts for 98% of Nigeria’s exports today. Nigeria also has a long history of coup d’etats and involvement of the military in politics (a fact that some social scientists link to the oil industry). The 70s, 80s and 90s were filled with coups and a series of military juntas, but the country now has had a democratically elected government since 1999.

I believe this context on Nigeria is useful because it helps us understand that the fictional story which Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is sharing with us reflects a great deal of the realities of contemporary Nigeria, as well as its colonial and post colonial history. These realities include ethnic tensions in the country, the uncertainty created by military coups, the aspirations of middle class families, and the appeal of the United States as a destination for study, business or employment. There are also the challenges of religious fundamentalism in the country, the complications faced by young men in obtaining visas to go to other nations, and the differential power relations between men and women. I also think it is interesting to consider which of Nigeria’s realities Adichie does not highlight in the book. There is, for example, almost no mention of the oil industry in the novel and how this is: a source of much of Nigeria’s money; the country’s close relationship with the US in the post-colonial period; and (arguably) much of the political instability in the country.

### **International Journeys**

I would now like to move on to my three themes of 1) international journeys; 2) privilege and hybridity; and 3) praxis or thoughtful action. First is our topic international journeys. *Americanah* is, in large part, a book about the journey of going to another country, spending time there, and then coming back home. Part of this journey is the vividness of impressions you have

when you arrive in a new place (or how this place is different from your home). On the flip side, once one is acculturated to this other place, and then comes back home, one is extra aware of what is peculiar or different about your home. The result in this case is a double critique: a critique of US society and a critique of Nigerian society. But more broadly, let us consider more carefully the insights such journeys might produce, how they change us, and the hybrid persons they produce.

So let me ask a question. How many of you have left your home country and travelled to another country for any length of time? How many stayed in that other country for at least 2 months (everyone else sit down)? At least a year (everyone else sit down)? For those of you who remained standing after my first question, you should, at a minimum, be able relate to the themes in this book. If I were to ask this question four years from now, at graduation time, many more of you will have stood and remained standing as I asked my questions. The real import of this query, however, is not whether you travelled, but what you gain from that experience and how you use those insights.

In the “Innocents Abroad,” 19<sup>th</sup> century American author Mark Twain wrote: “Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime.” Twain’s famous quote highlights the potential virtues of travel, but I want to be clear that this is an ideal scenario, and furthermore, that travel is a privilege not accessible to everyone.

Travel does not always make for better person as Twain has articulated. A potential problem with shorter term travel is that you may have a superficial experience with the culture which only serves to reinforce stereotypical impressions. The classic example of this might be a packaged tour with well rehearsed cultural experiences that cater to outsider expectations rather than the internal realities of a place.

If you stay longer in a place, say a few months or an entire semester, you may begin to push through the veneer of initial impressions and expectations – and begin to grapple with the realities of a place. I’ve led study abroad programs for Macalester three times now, and there is a predictable pattern of adjustment. It begins with initial euphoria (because everything is new, cool and interesting), followed – about a month into the experience – by depression and frustration with the realities, challenges and differences of a new place. This is coupled with a realization that you’ll actually have to deal with these challenges because you’re not leaving tomorrow. Then, if students are lucky, they emerge from this funk with a more grounded and nuanced understanding of this new place. Then they go back home and see where they came from with a different set of eyes.

Adichie, through the voice of Ifem, spends a lot of time commenting on race dynamics in the US, but we also hear about other issues, such as: how her own initial expectations for America are smashed, the challenges of adjusting to a new educational culture, or her commentary on certain American practices. For starters, her initial beliefs (e.g., that it is always cold in America or that there is no poverty) are practically upended on day one. Her challenges in the American classroom should have resonated with, or at least been of interest to, many of the international

students in this audience. She learns, for example, to speak in a certain way in the American classroom and to adjust to a new educational culture. At home in the Nigerian classroom memorization was most important, and now she finds herself in a setting where class participation is highly valued.

Most interesting to me were her comments on some practices in the US, practices that we have normalized, yet – under a slightly different guise – also categorize as wrong or backward in other cultural contexts. I love, for example, her commentary on tipping culture in the US. What is the difference between tipping and bribing? At the end of day, the difference may not be one of substance, but rather whether or not a practice is socially sanctioned. Americans give money to underpaid wait staff as a reward for good service. There's an unspoken deal – we'll pay you a little more if you take good care of us. But then Americans often wag their fingers at African governments where corruption and bribing are seen as rampant: where someone might pay a little extra to an underpaid government civil servant to get something done, or to get better service. While I am not defending this practice, the difference between this and paying a little extra for good service in a restaurant does seem nominal.

Ifem also returns to Nigeria as a different person than the one she left as. Superficially, she may exhibit certain American affectations, she is an 'Americanah,' but she is also a changed person and therefore sees and views her home differently. Having dwelt in more than one place, she is a hybrid of sorts. She sees what is good, but she also sees what is bad. She likes being back home, feeling at ease in a place where no one questions her identity, but she also wonders about the material and consumer culture of Nigeria's growing upper middle class, the conspicuous consumption, and the emptiness of the drive to accumulate goods.

My own experience in this regard was when I served as a Peace Corps volunteer for 2.5 yrs in Mali, West Africa in the 1980s. I would subsequently work for longer periods of time abroad, but what was unique about this time in the Peace Corps was that it was in the pre-internet, pre-cell phone era, and (furthermore) I did not have the resources to come home during the entire period. So, there I was, serving in a village of 200 people as agricultural agent, and the only connection I had to my home was letters (which took a month to get home, and a month in return for a response) and twice yearly phone calls.

This time in Mali was a transformational experience for me. I, like Ifem, was hyper aware of all the differences when I arrived in my new home: the new smells, sounds, and cultural practices. I also had a lot of my stereotypes and assumptions challenged upon arriving in Mali. I remember being terrified that my presence in this small village of 200 people would disrupt their local culture. That I might inadvertently create new desires and wants which would destroy their 'pristine' way of life. I distinctly recall hanging out with my Malian friends one evening, dinking strong tea, as we almost always did, and I wanted to trim my toe nails. Of course, I had a toe nail clipper, but I thought if I publicly used this I would inflame a desire for this new imported object. So I set about trying to trim my nails with a large hunting knife, coming perilously close to removing a few digits. Fortunately my Malian friends, looking upon in horror, stopped me. One held up a pair of toe nail clippers, saying that here this is what they used. Clearly my belief that this was a primitive, isolated culture was misguided. This place had long been connected to the rest of the world and I needed to recognize that. I was not the imperial

agent, the potential destroyer of local culture I imagined. I subsequently fell in love Mali and especially Malians' agricultural and natural resource management practices. These interests explain much of who I am today – a geographer who studies food and agriculture in Africa. But this experience also forever changed the way I looked at the US. I came home a different person who could never see his own culture in the same way again. I had become hybridized.

### **Privilege and Hybridity**

So now let's talk about privilege and hybridity. In an interview with NPR last year, Chimanda Ngozi Adichie said that she recognized she was extremely privileged to have studied in the US and to now effectively live in two places: Baltimore in the US and Lagos in Nigeria. Clearly, international journeys are a privilege and the vast majority of the global population never has had the possibility to have such an experience. Or, perhaps the international journey was not one of choice. In many cases people have been forced to leave home because of strife, political persecution, an environmental disaster or economic destitution. This sets up a different dynamic than the middle class student coming to the US for an education, or the middle class American studying or working abroad.

But what about those folks who could afford to travel in terms of time and money, but chose to never engage in a cross-cultural experience? [Why is that? It could be a lack of education, having never learned enough to spark curiosity and interest in other parts of the world? I don't know.] But what if cross-cultural journeys were an obligation? Some of you may be familiar with the practice of the Haj in Islam (this is one of the faith's 5 pillars or tenants). It suggests that all of the faithful should make a pilgrimage to the Holy City of Mecca during their lifetimes if possible. What if cross-cultural journeys were like the Haj? That is, everyone who had the means to do so was obligated to engage in a cross-cultural journey during their lifetime based a belief that this would make you a better person and that society overall would benefit from such experiences. That dwelling in two different places and cultures breeds hybridity and insight. Now the reality is that we don't have an obligation to engage in cross-cultural journeys in our society, but we do encourage it at places like Macalester for some of the reasons just mentioned. This is often in the form of study away (whether it is in another country or another community in the USA) or a post graduation experience.

With the privilege of being able to engage in a cross-cultural journey comes the responsibility of sharing new understanding and, perhaps, the responsibility to act on that new understanding.

### **Praxis**

The last item I would like to discuss with you today is praxis. With new found understanding often comes the desire or need to act, to do something to make the world a better place. The desire to do something is not unusual, and, in fact, quite common amongst many Macalester students. My hope, however, is that Macalester College produces students who want to do more than simply act on an impulse or insight to make the world a better place. Rather, they opt to go about this in a thoughtful and theoretically informed manner, something known as praxis.

Over the years, I have encountered students who have an allergic reaction to theory. They eschew theory because they believe it to be irrelevant, impractical and esoteric – they just want to do stuff. Well, the reality is that nobody just does stuff, we are all, consciously or

unconsciously, acting on some mental model of how the world functions. Theory is exactly that, a simplified model for the way the world works. We can't survive without these models as we need them to process and organize information. That said, the sooner we become aware of our own mental models, the sooner we recognize the connections between the world of ideas and the realm of action, and the sooner we can interrogate our own models and iteratively improve them over time (a process which leads to more thoughtful action or praxis).

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie does a good job of peeling back the facade of contemporary American and Nigerian society to show us all the problems underneath. What she does not provide us with, in my view, is an explanation for the problems she brings to light. If anything we are left to conclude that racism in America, or conspicuous consumption and corruption in Nigeria, are a product of local culture – full stop. In all fairness, perhaps explanation is not the job of a novelist. But as a social scientist, trying to explain the process behind what we observe is critical. And, furthermore, these explanations often involve theory and models of how the world functions.

Take the case of corruption in Nigeria. It is tempting to see this as a purely local problem. One that is attributable to local ethics, culture, attitudes or behavior. But one could have an explanation that is more structural in nature, one that is informed by ideas like Andre Gunder Frank's dependency theory. Frank argues that countries like Nigeria were basically underdeveloped during the colonial era. While Nigeria was once largely self-sufficient with an economy that catered to its own needs, colonial policies such as a head tax pushed Nigerians to produce less food for their own households and commodity crops for export to Europe so they could earn the money to pay taxes. This led to famines in the colonial era which, ironically, were blamed on backward agricultural practices and overpopulation – with no recognition that it was the colonial policies that might lie behind these outbreaks of hunger.

In a similar vein, Britain and the US have been deeply involved in the Nigerian petroleum industry – warping the economy and developing what some would call a petro state. In other words – our (American) consumption habits are deeply connected to contemporary political, environmental and social problems in Nigeria. This is a very different explanation, or theory, than one that frames these problems as primarily local.

The implications for action are huge in this instance. Mindless activism means going over to Nigeria and trying to address corruption as a purely local problem, one of Nigerian norms and behaviors. Under this view, we (Americans) are disconnected from the problem. We are external actors coming in as saviors. In contrast, dependency theory pushes us to think about how we might be connected to the problem. What is the genesis of our rapacious thirst for oil, an addiction which drives us to intervene around the world and often support unsavory dictators?

In the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, a constellation of interests in the United States (our oil complex) emerged to engineer a petroleum-based form of development. We built spatially diffuse suburbs, fueled by federally backed housing loans for largely white middle class families. The government invested massively in a specific form of transportation infrastructure, the federal highway system, which fueled auto-based inter-urban travel and, because of ring-roads around cities, an increasingly diffuse urban form. The government and petroleum related interests

(namely auto companies) then largely dismantled public transportation in all but the largest American cities through buyouts and unfavorable subsidy structures. I am not an expert on the social pathologies that initially led us to turn to cheap oil, but it seems that a solid argument could be made for racism (combined with corporate power) as at least one casual factor (in the sense that it is a repelling force that works against people living and travelling together).

As such, and this is where I would like to end, the problem of racism in the US, and the challenges in contemporary Nigeria, may not be entirely disconnected from one another. Cross-cultural journeys not only help us to better understand problems in our own countries and others, but to explore potential connections between these issues. These journeys are a gift, a privilege that often changes us forever – we become hybrids in the best sense of the word. This hybridity breeds new insights which we not only have a responsibility to act upon, but to act upon in a nuanced and informed manner. And because of this - I have hope. Thank you.