

Learning to Be Black: Racial Enculturation and Fraternal Nervousness Between African Immigrants and African Americans

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Abstract. Although race discourse is rife in the United States, not as much attention has been paid to the meaningful distinctions in the racial experiences and perceptions of continental Africans who migrate to the United States. This paper presumes that continental Africans experience race differently from African-Americans, and that this experiential and notional difference complicates relations between these two groups. Upon arrival, African immigrants *learn* to live Black in a matured racial space – the United States – which does not often differentiate ethnic and national differences in racial experience. It is this *learning to live black* and *becoming Black* that I call racial enculturation. To elucidate this friction, the paper contrasts Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* with popular African American genres of narrating racial awareness to unearth the divergences in their accountings of racial encounters.

I posit a taxonomy of four enculturation anxieties that African immigrants to the US face: racial levelling, fraternal nervousness, racial etiquette, and political will. I propose these four nodes as generative lenses to understand how African immigrants encounter race beyond the predominant African American and white perspective. This paper will also show that the variance in the historical experiences of colonialism, slavery, and apartheid among different groups of Black people globally has material implications for how we represent and theorize race and racism, and the relational postures each group adopts toward each other.

Keywords: African immigrants, African Americans, race, enculturation, Black

“Our passion for categorization, life neatly fitted into pegs, has led to unforeseen, paradoxical distress; confusion, a breakdown of meaning. Those categories which are meant to define and control the world for us have boomeranged into chaos; in which limbo we swirl, clutching the straws of our definitions...we find ourselves bound, first without, then within, by the nature of our categorization.”

- James Baldwin

Introduction

In August 2015, I became one of over two million African immigrants living in the United States of America.¹ I knew that the land I was emigrating to was majority white, and that it had other people who looked like me, people whose bodies had been pillaged to build America. My knowledge of this was not sentimental; it was merely factual, and — save the similarity in pigmentation and my cursory knowledge of the slave trade — I felt little existential connection to them or their experience of being Black in America. Indeed, until I arrived in the US, I had little occasion to contemplate what it would mean to live in a Black body as I had not conceived myself as Black. According to Johny Pitts, “a black man is a *black* man, whereas a white man is simply seen as ‘a man.’”² In Ghana, where I was born, the opposite was true: a black man was simply a man. I had not been raised Black. I had not been taught Black history. Or Black culture. In Ghana, blackness was a moot concept since nearly everyone was Black (just as whiteness is moot without Black othering).³ The term and concept functioned occasionally as a descriptor for Africans in general, but had little sociological or existential recognition or perceptible consequence in my daily life.

It was in America that I first ticked immigration forms to *become* Black. I had to, as Baldwin has said, fit neatly into pegs meant to define and control my world.⁴ By ticking these forms, I had become a member of the comity of “Black People in America,” and had acquired with that denomination the assumptions ascribed to Black people, and the expectations concomitant with those assumptions. By my color alone, I was expected to know what it meant to be Black. I had entered a mature racial space with clearly demarcated rules of engagement, rites of passage, ways of being and mutual understandings among Black people, and between Black and white America. It was assumed that I knew the cues and taboos, how to talk about race, how to recognize racial prejudice, how to be offended by racism. It was further assumed that the skin tone and ethnicity I shared with African Americans and other Blacks, mostly of Caribbean origin, was sufficient evidence of racial solidarity: a shared race meant a shared history and a shared present. As Wachira notes, “black immigrants have been forced to contend with a socioeconomic system that sees a monolithic culture and

ethnicity within the US Black population.”⁵ I noticed that race discourse itself, not just racism, failed to account for ethnic, national, and continental distinctions in racial experience. My distinct ethnic, national, and continental identity (Ewe, Ghanaian, and African) had been subsumed into the grander, more potent American descriptor, race, and I had been brought under the umbrella of Blackness.

It is in this context that I come to this paper. This paper is about how the difference in race consciousness – based on different histories, contemporary socio-politics, and regimes of memory-work – between Black African immigrants and African Americans complicates the migrants’ racial solidarity with African Americans in the struggle for racial equity in the US. As my introductory autoethnographic reflection suggests, with a few exceptions, newly-arriving African immigrants do not “necessarily experience or respond to racism in the same way or share the same notions of identity or affiliation as African-Americans.”⁶ Lenoir and Kidane further observe that “African immigrants remain disconnected from civic engagement, and more importantly, remain divided from their black American counterparts on issues of racial solidarity.”⁷ Their understanding of Blackness, how they live (with) it, and their perceptions of America’s racial space are distinct from how African Americans experience race.

To explicate this condition, I propose a taxonomy of four enculturation anxieties which explain African migrants’ posture towards race and its social consequences. To do this, the paper will explore Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*, which might as well be classified as a “becoming black” narrative, a racial equivalent to a coming-of-age narrative. Adichie’s novel recounts the story of Ifemelu, a Nigerian citizen who emigrates to America and struggles to make sense of her newly-acquired Blackness. Of its many benefits, *Americanah* furnishes a narrative structure and content that is realist enough to afford material deductions that do not strain credulity. Consequently, the text is chosen as a quintessential representation of the broad strokes of the typical African immigrant contact with, and experience of race in America. The shock of racial encounters, and the process of making sense of them in the context of her temporary sojourn in the United States, contrasts usefully with the tropes of racial discourse in America. Although *Americanah* provides the most sustained engagement with the subject of racial becoming for African immigrants, other recent immigrant novels including Teju Cole’s *Open City*, Dinaw Mengestu’s *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*, Imbolo Mbue’s *Behold the Dreamers*, and NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names*, among several others, have broached the subject variously. Ultimately, this paper offers up the four enculturation anxieties – racial levelling, fraternal nervousness, racial etiquette, and political

will – as a set of generative themes by which to read the shock with which African immigrants encounter America’s mature and complex racial context, and how it informs their strategic relations with African Americans. As with *Americanah*, these four enculturation anxieties emerge and could be applied in part or whole across the other African diasporic novels mentioned. A nuanced engagement with the migrant perspective complexifies US race discourse currently dominated by the African American perspective and nudges an engagement with the temporal, regional, and continental fluctuations of race, racialization, and racism for a fuller account of transnational Blackness. Additionally, this account of transnational Blackness aims to collapse some of the silos in Black Studies that focus exclusively on African or African American subjects when meaningful bridges from contrasting experiences exist. Finally, for scholars of diaspora and migration, these themes could function as analytic paradigms for assessing enculturation, solidarity, and political engagement among assimilated and new diasporas.

While this paper’s main thrust is that for African immigrants, immigration to the US per se is the event that begins a processual experiential awareness of race and a relational conundrum with African Americans, I begin with a brief discussion of race in America and how race consciousness emerges for African Americans. That discussion is followed by a discussion of African migration to the US, a brief overview of *Americanah*, and finally, the four enculturation anxieties which emerge from the novel, and which I assert, could be applied wholesale or fragmentally, across a variety of recent African and other immigrant literature and lived experience.

The African American Experience of Race Consciousness

Written as an autobiographical letter to his son, Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *Between the World and Me* conveys the tenor of the historical, perceptual, and theoretical sentiments underlying African American experience of race in the US. This work of creative nonfiction chronicles the history of America’s racism, the arduous parental angst associated with socializing Black children into the meaning of Blackness in America, and the development of racial awareness in children. Like Adichie’s *Americanah*, Coates’s text is by no means singular in its exploration of the subject. From Douglass to Du Bois to Morrison, African American writers have dedicated much of their oeuvre to contemplating their race and its psychosocial consequences. Toni Morrison puts it thus: “these slaves, unlike many others in the world’s history, were visible to a fault. And they inherited, among other things, a long history of the meaning of color. It was not simply that this slave population had a distinctive color; it was that this color ‘meant’

something.”⁸ While Morrison demonstrates how the weighty meaning of skin color became the sole definitive category of African American existence, Frederick Douglass, a century before Morrison, inveighed the psychological toll of this designation’s manifestation through slavery: “I was born a slave - born a slave - and though the fact was incomprehensible to me, it conveyed to my mind a sense of my entire dependence on the will of somebody I had never seen...”⁹ Similarly, W.E.B. Du Bois recounts how he learned of his difference in childhood: “The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card, - refused it peremptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others...but shut out from their world by a vast veil.”¹⁰ Beyond this childhood initiation, Du Bois observes that his Black body has rarely escaped interrogation at every turn. In “Of His Spiritual Strivings,” Du Bois remarks that all his life, people have approached him with a curious glare which acts as a transmutation of the unasked question: “how does it feel to be a problem.”¹¹ Aside from affirming the obvious pervasiveness of racism across generations, I cite these texts as a resultant genre of living Black in America.

In this tradition, Coates traces his own life growing up in Baltimore, his fear of the streets, his tense relationship with white America, his subsequent “racial enlightenment” instigated by reading Black authors at Howard, and his current life as a writer of race. For Coates as for the writers above, African Americans grow up afraid of living in their bodies, fearful that their bodies can be destroyed without their knowledge. He cites the death of his friend Carmen Prince Jones at the hands of the police — a crime for which no one was indicted — connecting it to that of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Elmer Clay Newman, and Gary Hopkins, noting that “Prince was not killed by a single officer so much as he was murdered by his country and all the fears that have marked it from birth.”¹² Here, Coates expands culpability for these deaths to include the historical lineage and context that upholds it. Consequently, he writes, “black people love their children with a kind of obsession. You are all we have, and you have come to us endangered.”¹³ *Between the World and Me*, therefore, acts as a complex testament to Coates’s fear driving his need to educate his son, Samori, about the embodied risks of his race. Samori will, of course, grow up with this knowledge and fear, but also the knowledge of his father’s grievous frustration and helplessness. To Samori and Coates, it would be perplexing for any Black person to remain unperturbed by racial oppression, as James Baldwin eloquently put it, “to be black in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a state of rage almost all the time.”¹⁴

The experiences narrated above differ vastly from Ifemelu’s Nigerian up-

bringing. Indeed, the genre of educating one's children about race or writing about one's racial "coming of age," is almost nonexistent in contemporary African literature set in Africa. Nonetheless, the historical and experiential issues raised provide useful background for contrasting the African American experience with the African immigrant experience in *Americanah*. Independently, these texts deal with race and racism in America, but their accountings of racial encounters betray the yawning divide in how each group comes to, experiences, and lives with race, and how these disparate perceptual and experiential nodes coincide relationally. And, as the number of African immigrants grows within the US, closer scholarly attention needs to be paid to the nuances in historical experience and perspectives which inform political engagement.

African Immigrants in the US

It is into this potent racial space of Du Bois, Coates, and Morrison that African immigrants fall when they first arrive in America. After all, "in America, you don't get to decide what race you are. It is decided for you."¹⁵ According to an analysis of the US Census Bureau data by the Pew Research Center, there are currently 4.6 million Black immigrants living in the US, more than quadruple the number in 1980. This figure represents nearly ten percent of the nation's forty million Blacks. In Miami and New York, Black immigrants make up as much as thirty-four and twenty-eight percent respectively of the Black population. The greatest contribution to these numbers is Caribbeans from Jamaica, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic, and Africans from Ghana, Nigeria, and Kenya. By the mid-1960s, Africans accounted for only one percent of all immigrants in the US. Yet in 2013 and 2019, there were 1.4 and 2 million Africans respectively, living in the US. This exponential increase has been attributed to the relaxing of US immigration policies: the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 which allowed family reunification and migration of skilled labor; the Refugee Act of 1980 which granted asylum to conflict fleers; and the Immigration Act of 1990 which sought initially to increase European immigrants. Collectively, these laws facilitated mass migrations to the US.¹⁶ Notably, the greatest wave of Africa-born immigrants (over seventy percent) migrated to the US between the years 2000 and 2019, with the preceding years dominated by Black immigrants from the Caribbean, South and Central America, and Mexico. Despite their large numbers, African immigrants are only a meager fraction of the total Black population — "the Caribbean remains the most common region of birth for U.S. Black immigrants" — making it possible for their peculiar differences from African-Americans and other Black immigrants to be overlooked.¹⁷ Consequently, immigrants from Africa are swallowed into the sea of Blackness.

Yet, excepting race, these African immigrants are unlike other Blacks in many ways. As one might expect, African immigrants are not a homogenous entity. They emigrate from their home countries for a variety of reasons, including the escape from political instability, the search for educational and job opportunities, and what Adichie calls an escape from the “oppressive lethargy of choicelessness.”¹⁸ Common among the varied reasons is the voluntariness of their presence in the US. Aside asylum seekers who form a small fraction of African immigrants, nearly all others come freely, with a view to improving their lives on the promise of the American Dream, and African skilled workers in the US have earned the reputation of being the most educated immigrant population in America.¹⁹

Taxonomizing African Immigrants’ Enculturation Anxieties

Ifemelu, the protagonist in *Americanah* comes to America for exactly one of these reasons: to escape the incessant university strikes and continue her undergraduate studies in the US. She falls into the category of those upper middle-class Africans who come to America voluntarily, not out of duress, and whose lives in their countries of origin were not dominated by any kind of racial anxieties or economic lack. *Americanah* is a story of love and immigration, and it epitomizes the processes by which an African immigrant becomes Black in America, navigating what Wachira calls “the multiple identities of black immigrants”: ethnic, immigrant, and racial identities.²⁰ These three identities overlap, contradict, and converse with Ifemelu’s love life which we see through her relationships with Obinze, a Nigerian, Curt, a white American, and Blaine, an African American. (Because her relationship with Obinze precedes her immigration to the US, it does not factor as much in her racial knowledge as the subsequent two which take place in the US.) Through these relationships and her blog, we see the varied manifestations of race from the African immigrant perspective. Ifemelu’s relationship with Curt betrays white Americans’ ignorance of the diversity within Black communities and the necessity for nuanced treatment of each Black community based on how they come to race. Her relationship with Blaine, on the other hand, reveals the lethargy African immigrants often feel towards political movements aimed at highlighting racial discrimination. Through her blog, Ifemelu contemplates her racial coming-of-age, how she learns to be Black, how she learns to pretend to be Black, and the impacts these make on her experience of America.

Since its release to critical acclaim in 2013, *Americanah* has been the subject of much scholarly discussion. According to Shane McCoy, much of this literature has focused on the novel’s engagement with cosmopolitanism, Afropolitanism,

Afrocentrism, and Nigerian nationalism.²¹ Even so, several others have analyzed the novel's focus on racial solidarity, inter-Black diversity, and the complexities of American and transnational race discourse. For example, Shane McCoy's "outsider within" bifurcates African immigrants into old and new, associating *Americanah's* characters with the educated and apolitical new diaspora.²² Clara Bafaluy Avenoz reads the novel via Althusser's interpellation in which white and Black America's enunciation of the term "Black" and America's history of racism is what transforms African immigrants into Black subjects.²³ Niyi Akingbe and Emmanuel Adeniyi lament the failure of attempts at transculturalism and interracial harmony.²⁴ Although these texts admit the complexity of African immigrant encounter of America's racial landscape, there still remains room for a unified theory that extends the tensions in racial solidarity raised in the novel beyond the confines of its literary world.

I posit four enculturation anxieties which emerge as Ifemelu navigates America as a newly-Black migrant: racial levelling (we all look alike to white people); fraternal nervousness (what ought to be my relation to African Americans?); racial etiquette (what are the ways of talking about race, what can or cannot be said or done about race in the public sphere?); and finally, political interest/will (what can or must I do politically about race?). I argue that these four nodes provide vocabulary by which to understand not only the stance of the novel's African immigrants toward race, but also to enrich the wider national discourse beyond the African American perspective which has long (for good reasons) dominated how we talk about race in America. I envision these four enculturation anxieties as generative axes from which to read contemporary African migrant fiction and nonfiction that engage race, migration, or inter-Black relations. It goes without saying, as readers will discern, that some of these themes are not by themselves novel, especially in discussing the African American experience of race. For example, racial levelling which has historically manifested as racial profiling in police surveillance is well known in race discourse. Yet, its particular experience by African migrants and its impact on their solidarity with African Americans is less documented. Thus, it is best to veer the fulcrum of applicability of these enculturation anxieties from the predominant race discourse to African immigrants in order to fully comprehend their impact and value.

The first enculturation anxiety, racial levelling, manifests through a recognition that phenotype alone, race, is a leveler which groups and flattens all people of African descent, African Americans, and other Black immigrants under one denomination: Black. In one of her blog posts, Ifemelu observes that "in America, you don't get to decide what race you are. It is decided for you... If a random

black guy commits a crime, Barack Obama could be stopped and questioned for fitting the profile. And what would that profile be? ‘Black Man’²⁵ Under racial levelling, Barack Obama, a globally-famous upper middle-class man is interchangeable with any other Black man. One needn’t look further than Henry Louis Gates’s 2009 arrest if Ifemelu’s assertion stretches credulity.²⁶ In a subsequent blog post, Ifemelu writes: “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.”²⁷ For Ifemelu, this erasure of ethnic, national, and continental identity, becomes the first premise that drives African immigrants to seek differentiation from other Blacks. Her riposte is for African immigrants to “stop arguing,” signaling America’s indifference and capacity to subsume ethnic identity into racial monoliths. Elsewhere, when Ifemelu protests Auntie Uju’s idea to use another Nigerian immigrant’s Social Security card to seek employment, Auntie Uju retorts that all Black people look alike to white people anyway. Here, Auntie Uju verbalizes the widely known urban legend that some immigrants do in fact exploit this racial conflation as a survival tactic, even as they reject the more negative aspects, such as racial profiling.

For Ifemelu, and other African immigrants, racial levelling operates in two directions: the erasure of ethnic and other identities; and the acquisition of Blackness, a term which conveys centuries of American history and culture which is at once inaccessible, but applicable to African immigrants. Indeed, American society sometimes views African Americans as proxies of all Blacks.²⁸ And *Blackness* places the weight of four hundred years of slavery, segregation, Jim Crow, and all other weights that African Americans have had to carry for years, on the African immigrant.

The perception of being handed an undeserved weight becomes the premise from which the second enculturation anxiety emerges: fraternal nervousness. What is, or should be, the attitude of African immigrants to African Americans and, indeed, the wider Black community? Are they like us? Are we like them? Are these two groups the same people? Must race be the primary determinant of social relations? Or should their solidarity be premised exclusively on the commonness of their struggle, the struggle against racism, and for social equity? These questions lurk at several points in *Americanah*, and find expression through Ifemelu’s writing and interactions with several characters. In conversation with other Tanzanian, Ugandan, Kenyan, and Nigerian students, one of them cautions Ifemelu to “try and make friends with our African American brothers and sisters in the spirit of true Pan-Africanism. But make sure you remain friends with fellow Africans.”²⁹ The use of “brothers and sisters,” especially

in obeisance to “true Pan-Africanism,” betrays a nervous recognition of a historically necessary association that is as filial as it is political. This admonishment regarding relations with African Americans resurfaces in several other ways. For example, Jane, a Grenadian immigrant educates her daughter in a private school instead of in the suburbs, “otherwise she will start behaving like these black Americans.” When Ifemelu probes, she is told she will not understand.³⁰ In both instances, relations with African Americans is approached with caution and mystery. When Ifemelu informs her family in Nigeria of Blaine, the African American Yale professor she intends to marry, her father’s initial reaction is baffled, “an American Negro?,” followed by “but why a Negro? Is there a substantive scarcity of Nigerians there?”³¹ Calling Blaine a Negro suggests a curious distance between the groups and excludes Nigerians from the category, “Negro.” We are offered no future revelatory comments on these three instances beyond showing us the tense suspicion with which the African characters approach relationships with African Americans.

Here, I conjecture two reasons for this tense distance. First, because anti-Black racism involves the denigration of African Americans, African immigrants also imbibe these racist stereotypes, which they associate, not with racism, but with African American culture. In Jane’s example, removing her daughter from an African American school shields her daughter from that “culture.” For Jane, the problem is “these black Americans,” not their history, not America, not racism. Second, because their pre-migration lives were rarely, if ever, based on race relations, there is a reluctance, when in America to associate with African Americans on that basis alone.

The opposite seems to be the case for African Americans. In the US, race has been the premise for African American solidarity. In “Black Like Who,” Reuel Rogers explains that,

Group identification among African Americans – that is their sense of racial group attachment and awareness – has had more political significance and utility than comparable ethnic ties among whites or panethnic identities among Latinos and Asians. Indeed, the sense of racial group attachment is so pronounced among African Americans that many routinely subscribe to a *linked racial fate* outlook.³²

By this, Rogers opines that many African Americans tend to see a determinative link between their individual lives and that of other African Americans. Consequently, they are more likely to pursue racial unity than African immigrants who have, historically, never been united under *Blackness* alone. As Ifemelu’s account suggests, for African immigrants, there is not a tangible communal link

premised on racial identification, oppression, and or emancipative struggle. For several African immigrants, such communal links exist along ethnic and national lines.

Coupled with racial leveling, and an ambivalence about solidarity with African Americans, African immigrants soon find that they ought to negotiate racial etiquettes in American society. What are the ways of being Black, and how do Americans talk about race? – these are the prevailing questions in this arena. With the exception of countries like Zimbabwe and South Africa which still have large white populations and settler colonialism, much of racism on the African continent manifested through colonialism which yielded entirely different sociocultural results. Thus, most new African immigrants are oblivious to the racial innuendos, stereotypes, taboo words, race awareness, and expectations associated with being Black in America. Black face, fried chicken, and watermelon stereotypes as racist tropes simply do not translate to the uninitiated immigrant. When Ifemelu allowed an old white woman to touch her “beautiful Afro,” insisting that “How else will she know what hair like mine feels like? She probably doesn’t know any black people,” Blaine is infuriated! What Ifemelu finds normal, inoffensive, and attributes to white ignorance, Blaine interprets as a racist exoticization of Black hair, clearly with greater cognizance of the historical context which Ifemelu lacks. In response, Ifemelu muses that “there were things that existed for him that she could not penetrate.”³³ Such missteps which reveal Black immigrants’ ignorance of racial etiquette pervade the novel. Ifemelu notices, for example, that Kimberly calls all Black people beautiful, a phenomenon to which Ifemelu responds, naively, “not every black person is beautiful.” Again, Ifemelu reads this as unironic ignorance, and reacts to gently correct Kimberly’s perceived misperception.

This failure to situate “racial moments” within the broader history of race discourse and act appropriately becomes apparent again during an encounter with a cashier at a department store. There, Ifemelu and Ginika, her friend, realize that the white cashier cannot refer to her colleague as Black. Here, Ifemelu fails to grasp the limits of what can or cannot be said about race in the public sphere. Having arrived in America long before Ifemelu and thus possessing a better grasp of the landscape, Ginika quips, “because this is America... You’re supposed to pretend that you don’t notice certain things.”³⁴ Here, Ifemelu demonstrates her oblivion to habits of pretense that mask racial tension and misses socially-expected reactions in the form of pretense, outrage, and recognition of discrimination. What Ifemelu misses due to her recency in America, Ginika, another immigrant, notices, but not in the same way as Blaine in the previous example. Due to the historical knowledge of racism that Blaine, an Af-

rican American (and Assistant Professor of History at Yale) possesses, his reading of Ifemelu's encounters bears imprints of Coates's knowledge of American racial history in *Between the World and Me*, while Ginika interprets Ifemelu's reactions as mere naïveté of American culture which will pass with time. In other words, for Ginika, racial encounters are opportunities for pretenses whose mastery demonstrates cultural savvy, a stance that minimizes their gravity and erases their historical genealogy.

Due to this lack of recognition and knowledge of social etiquette with regard to race-laced encounters, recent African immigrants tend to be politically lethargic and unsure about what they are expected to do in championing the cause of Black people. This fourth node can be read under the rubric of political will or interest. This lack of political will is what ends the relationship between Blaine and Ifemelu. Ifemelu downplayed the value of the public protest Blaine had organized to exonerate Mr. White who had been racially profiled. Blaine's observation that "it's not just about writing a blog, you have to live like you believe it," demonstrates to Ifemelu that this accusation was "not merely about her laziness, her lack of zeal and conviction, but also about her Africanness; she was not sufficiently furious because she was African, not African American."³⁵ Of course, Blaine is cast as an extremely idealistic man, and we are expected to read this as an extremity, yet it provides useful material to contemplate what it means to perceive oneself as primarily African, to not consider one's Blackness as the sole definitive component of being, and to consequently not consider another Black person's problems as a shared problem. Additionally, it bears clarifying that Blaine's character and Ifemelu's reaction are by no means reflective of every African American's political activism or disinterest – that spectrum of political interest is wide enough and does accommodate both groups at each end. Even so, the focus on Ifemelu's lack of political interest rests on her reason for detachment, which is, as we have pointed out, connected to her lack of a linked fate outlook, which is the norm, not the exception, among African immigrants.

However, beyond the realm of representation within this novel, this weak political engagement is not in a vacuum. Considered in the context of the aforementioned enculturation anxieties – racial leveling, fraternal nervousness, racial etiquette, and political will – we discern a few other impulses that drive these relational postures. First, as I have pointed out earlier, the pre-immigration identities of African immigrants tend to lean towards ethnic or national allegiance than to a racial one. After decades of colonialism, several African countries fought for independence beginning in the early twentieth century and culminating in the mid to late twentieth century in nearly all countries gaining independence from European colonial rule. The independence projects across

the continent galvanized and deepened nationalism, not racial solidarity.³⁶ The converse happened in America: African Americans fought for manumission, emancipation, integration, and civil rights, processes that galvanized internal racial solidarity. For several new African immigrants to the US then, racial solidarity does not have a recognizable historical political outcome in their direct experience.

The second, and perhaps more important factor that undergirds the enculturation anxieties might be that voluntary immigrants tend to have a sojourner mentality. This sojourner mentality manifests itself in the immediacy of *home* in the African immigrant's imagination, the anticipated temporariness of sojourn in America, and their sometimes weak familial and generational linkages to America. In discussing nostalgia, Ato Quayson notes that "the place that one finds oneself in is constantly calling up evidence of some elsewhere, the place that was departed from, or, as often happens, a utopia erected in place of the location of departure."³⁷ Because of the immediacy of home in their recent past, it is discernible that recent immigrants are still anchored in life as previously lived in their homeland, complete with nostalgia, tangible memories of family members expecting their return, checking their wellbeing through frequent phone calls, etc. They may be in America, but not fully so. Their ships have not yet been burnt. They live in both worlds. And the ligatures that bind them to home are strong and firm, while those that bind them to America are still superficial. These nostalgic tendencies, and the concomitant feelings of recency reduce migrants' likelihood of fierce engagement in racial politics. As from Ifemelu's story, there is a reluctance to participate in American national life beyond what is necessary for subsistence. To accomplish this, they form ethnic and national enclaves, and confine themselves to carefully chosen aspects of the host society.

Furthermore, for voluntary immigrants seeking educational and professional opportunities, integration is utilitarian, intended to secure greater opportunities and remove barriers to success. Aunty Uju captures this sentiment best: "you are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do if you want to succeed."³⁸ For these immigrants, the pursuit of economic and educational ends for which reason they emigrated, becomes the primary motivation undergirding attempts at assimilation or integration. Consequently, race politics is viewed as a distraction from their more urgent migratory goals. Additionally, gratitude for the opportunity to live in, what for most of them is a more advanced country, erodes their perception of the gravity of racism. Relatedly, Obinze, Ifemelu's Nigerian lover, rightly observes that African immigrants have an "exaggerated gratitude that came (*sic*) with immigrant insecurity."³⁹ This is borne out by Obinze's failure to secure a US visa after four attempts, although his

good grades had secured him admission to American universities. For Obinze then, the strict immigration rules, tortuous visa processes, and fear of deportation for minor infractions conspire to make immigrants eager to not stir strife in their host country. Coupled with the strong pull of home, and the voluntary nature of their immigration, these immigrants do not readily feel they *own* a part of America. Collectively, these circumstances and perceptions ameliorate the otherwise caustic effects of harsh racial encounters and become bases for enduring actual or perceived racism, and for differentiating their response to racism from that of African Americans.

Conclusion

To whom then must African immigrants owe the greatest allegiance? Their racial allegiance is “impelled” by the Black struggle whose frontlines are occupied by African Americans. Their immigrant allegiance is owed to the American state whose “benevolence” has made their passage and sojourn possible, and whom they are not eager to offend. And finally, their ethnic or national allegiance is forged by an African country (or Africa, loosely construed), which is the land of their birth, and where their strongest familial bonds exist. As we learn from Ginika’s reaction to Ifemelu’s naive reading of social cues, tensions of allegiance resolve as acculturation deepens. Ginika’s long stay did not obliterate her distinct Nigerian identity. Instead, it educated her about the racial mores of social interaction, weakening the shock of racial encounters even if it did not “correct” her lethargy.

What should we make of how these different historical and experiential perspectives clash in the same racial space? How do we disentangle African immigrants from “the power of classifications that form the foundation of social representation and the experiences of social relationships?”⁴⁰ Is there a need for them to be disentangled at all? For African immigrants living in America, this is an ongoing question, an introspective search for reasons to distance or associate with the ramifications of accepting Blackness – not that they have a real choice – and what it means for their relationship with African Americans. How must an African immigrant doubtful of her *Blackness* but increasingly aware of the consequences respond? Alain Locke, in his *The New Negro*, written several decades ago, offers some useful insights:

Each group has come with its own separate motives and for its own special needs, but their greatest experience has been the finding of one another. Proscription and prejudice have thrown these dissimilar elements into a common area of contact and interaction. Within this area, race sympathy

and unity have determined a further fusing of sentiment and experience. So what began in terms of segregation becomes more and more, as its elements mix and react, the laboratory of a great race-welding. Hitherto, it must be admitted that American Negroes have been a race more in name than in fact, or to be exact, more in sentiment than in experience. *The chief bond between them has been a common condition rather than a common consciousness; a problem in common rather than a life in common.*⁴¹ (italics mine)

This quote was intended to inspire internal cohesion with the African American “nation,” yet, it may be a useful framework for dealing with enculturation anxieties experienced by African immigrants. Read with them and African Americans as audience, Locke’s words become a useful proposition because it makes no appeals to historical, cultural, or even ethnic bonds as justification for interracial solidarity. It begins from the place of acknowledging difference, not from an insistence on similarity. Difference established, Locke calls for an emphasis on the common condition – racism – experienced by both groups, even if one group’s consciousness of that fact is lacking. It is a call to transcend the disparate historical consciousness and unite for a cause whose victory benefits both groups.

Notes

1. Christine Tamir and Monica Anderson, “One-in-Ten Black People Living in the U.S. are Immigrants,” *Pew Research Center*, January 20, 2022.
2. Johnny Pitts, *Afropean: Notes from Black Europe* (London: Allen Lane, 2019), 45
3. Jemima Pierre’s *The Predicament of Blackness* discusses the hidden vestiges of racism in Ghana and Saidiya Hartman’s *Lose Your Mother* reinforces the lack of race consciousness and the erasure of slave history in Ghana.
4. James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 24.
5. Abeygael Wachira, “The Manifestation of Race in the Lives of Black African Immigrants in the United States,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Education* 1, no. 2 (2013): 31
6. Louis Chude-Sokei, “The Newly Black Americans: African Immigrants and Black America,” *Transition: An International Review* 113 (2013): 55
7. Gerald Lenoir and Nunu Kidane, “African Americans and Immigrants: Shall We Hang Together or Hang Separately?” *The Black Scholar* 37, no. 1 (2007): 50
8. Toni Morrison, ed., *James Baldwin: Collected Essays* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States Inc., 1998), 49

9. Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 39
10. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1994), 2
11. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1
12. Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 78
13. Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 82
14. James Baldwin in a 1961 radio interview
15. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 419.
16. Kelvin J.A. Thomas, "What Explains the Increasing Trend in African Emigration to the US?," *International Migration Review* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 6
17. Christine Tamir, "Key Findings about Black Immigrants in the US" *Pew Research Center*, January 27, 2022.
18. Adiche, *Americanah*, 341
19. According to US census data, forty-three percent of all African immigrants in the US have a bachelor's degree, a percentage higher than those for Asian and European immigrants, and both African American and white Americans.
20. Wachira, "The Manifestation of Race," 31
21. Shane A. McCoy, "The 'Outsider Within': Counter Narratives of the 'New' African Diaspora in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*," *Journal of the African Literature Association* 11, no. 3 (2017): 281
22. McCoy, "The 'Outsider Within'"
23. Clara Bafaluy Avenoz, "Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*: American Blackness and White Privilege Through the Lenses of the African Diasporic Experience," *Ph.D. Dissertation* (University of Barcelona, 2020).
24. Niyi Akingbe and Emmanuel Adeniyi, "'Reconfiguring Others': Negotiating Identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*," *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 9, no. 4 (2017).
25. Adichie, *Americanah*, 419
26. The Root Staff, "Lawyer's Statement on the Arrest of Henry Louis Gates Jr.," *The Root*, July 20, 2009. <https://www.theroot.com/lawyers-statement-on-the-arrest-of-henry-louis-gates-jr-1790869828>
27. Adichie, *Americanah*, 273
28. Yvette M. Alex-Assensoh, "African Immigrants and African-Americans: An Analysis of Voluntary African Immigration and the Evolution of the Black Ethnic Politics in America," *African and Asian Studies* 8, no. 1-2 (2009): 93
29. Adichie, *Americanah*, 172
30. Adichie, *Americanah*, 137

31. Adichie, *Americanah*, 389
32. Reuel R. Rogers, "Black Like Who? Afro-Caribbean Immigrants, African Americans, and the Politics of Group Identity," in *Islands in the City: West Indian Migration to New York*, ed. Nancy Foner (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001): 170
33. Adichie, *Americanah*, 388
34. Adichie, *Americanah*, 155
35. Adichie, *Americanah*, 427-8
36. This is so despite the strong ties between the Civil Rights Movements, the pan African movements, and independence projects across Africa during which several independence and civil rights advocates in Africa and America compared notes and shared ideas and strategies. For example, Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah, studied in the US and UK during which time his vision of a free Ghana and Africa calcified as he witnessed racial discrimination in the US. Stokely Carmichael, and W.E.B. Du Bois had active engagements across Africa in that era as well. Yet, the specific nature of these struggles and their concomitant residue differed on each continent.
37. Ato Quayson, "The Ethnography of Nostalgia," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 41, no. 2 (2005): 132
38. Adichie, *Americanah*, 146
39. Adichie, *Americanah*, 16
40. Jo Ellen Fair, "'Black-on-Black': Race, Space, and News of Africans and African Americans," *A Journal of Opinion* 22, no. 1 (1994): 36
41. Locke, ed., *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (New York: A. and C. Boni, 1925): 6-7

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