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Transculturalism, diaspora and otherness: the quest for a home in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's americana

Transculturalismo, diáspora y alteridad: la búsqueda de un hogar en Chimamanda Ngozi

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Abstract

This paper aims to re-evaluate the role of otherness, the true keystone of Americanah which invites to wonder if it might not be at the origin of certain limits that appear in transculturalism. The places most likely to welcome transculturalism in Western societies come across as culture places, where dominant norms are challenged to include otherness. This study reveals that transculturality facilitates African Diasporas circulation and delineates a field of identifications with hybrid status. Therefore, hybridity can generate discomfort and a loss of the feeling of being at home. Suffocation, confinement, the disturbingly familiar strangers are all reasons that tarnish transculturalism representations by underlining its limits, which seep into homes that lose ability to offer shelter. The function of home to provide protection is then deterritorialised in relationships or in professional spaces. The analysis suggests that transculturalism stumbling block is not so much otherness than othering, that is to say the imposition of another identity on someone based on appearance, ethnic, cultural background, or sex identity dimensions. Thus, from otherness to othering, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, as a transcultural Nigerian female writer, reveals that alienation corrodes transcultural characters and generates positive opening discussions and meetings around new postcolonial relations.

Keywords: otherness, alienation, African diásporas, home and identity, postcolonial and transculturalism.

Resumen

Este artículo pretende reevaluar el papel de la alteridad como piedra angular del americanismo, lo que invita a preguntarse si no estará en la raíz de algunas de las limitaciones que aparecen en

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el transculturalismo. Este estudio revela que el transculturalismo facilita el movimiento de las diásporas africanas y delimita un campo de identificaciones con estatus híbrido. En consecuencia, la hibridez puede generar incomodidad y pérdida del sentido del hogar. La asfixia, el confinamiento, los extraños molestos pero familiares son motivos que empañan las representaciones del transculturalismo al subrayar sus limitaciones, que se filtran en los hogares que pierden su capacidad de acogida. La función protectora del hogar se desterritorializa entonces en espacios relacionales o profesionales. El análisis sugiere que el escollo del transculturalismo no es tanto la alteridad como la otredad, es decir, la imposición de otra identidad a alguien en función de su apariencia, origen étnico o cultural o género. Así se concluye que, de la alteridad a la otredad, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, como escritora nigeriana transcultural, revela la alienación que corroe a los personajes transculturales y genera al mismo tiempo debates positivos y encuentros de apertura en torno a las nuevas relaciones poscoloniales.

Palabras clave: alteridad, alienación, diásporas africanas, hogar e identidad, poscolonial y transculturalismo.

Introduction

Americanah (2013) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie questions a homogeneous conception of society. Adichie takes a different look at the racial question because being black made no political sense to her before she emigrated to the United States to continue her studies. She has authored her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2013) which had a great commercial success. With *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) she won the Orange Prize for Fiction [now Women's Prize] and was adapted for the cinema. *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009) is a collection of short stories which gave million-view TED conferences, LLC[12].

A year before *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014), Adichie authored *Americanah* which recounts the journey of a young Nigerian woman who emigrates to the United States. It alludes to a country, though indirectly, through the suffix *-nah* which highlights the influence of America on the main character from Nigeria. Her most recent books are *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (2017), *Zikora* (2020). *Americanah* is Adichie's most transcultural novel due to crossovers and comparisons between Nigeria, the United States and Great Britain, as well as in-depth reflections on racial issues.

Transculturalism and the understanding of relationships as spaces of refuge make possible reterritorialisation in relationships, but these cannot always offer a reliable sanctuary. How does *Americanah* unfold transcultural otherness forms in the Western space? How does Adichie use her transcultural fiction to locate diasporans within *trans-spaces*? To what extent transculturality can be part of a decolonial praxis and generate a loss of the feeling of being at home? The analysis of transcultural characters' relation to space underlines little opportunities available to them: they are indeed either forced to resign themselves to a positioning at the margin, or pushed to the claim which sometimes degenerates into a hardening of identity conceptions, either forced to accept in-between discomfort and otherness constantly projected onto them, even in professional context.

[12] Technology, Entertainment, and Design, an American-Canadian media organisation, conceived and co-founded by Richard Saul Wurman and Harry Marks in February 1984, in 1984 in California.

For sake of clarity to explore Adichie's transcultural narrative, this study firstly examines transculturalism manifestations within African Diasporas. Encounter between political debates and transcultural writing, while like *Americanah* in this paper, seeks to enhance transculturality of spaces and quest for a home. To resonate in the world multiple and diverse politics of language, the reflection proposes to open up to new postcolonial relations through a new transcultural voice including Adichie's normalised change perceptions.

Transculturalism Manifestations within African Diasporas

From the very first pages of *Americanah*, the narrative voice comments on the tension between Ifemelu and Nigerian taxi drivers:

She hoped her driver would not be a Nigerian, because he, once he heard her accent, would either be aggressively eager to tell her that he had a master's degree, the taxi was a second job […], or he would drive in sullen silence, giving her change and ignoring her "thank you", all the time nursing humiliation, that this fellow Nigerian, a small girl at that […], was looking down on him. Nigerian taxi drivers in America were all convinced that they really were not taxi drivers (Adichie, 2013, p. 8).

It is significant that the narrative voice, through internal focus, reports this dissent so early in the story. On the one hand, taxi drivers are placed at the threshold of the story and not at the core of the novel: their presence is recognised although they are not part of the main narrative.

On the other hand, in addition to the social tension that opposes drivers to the privileged young woman, a sexist dimension is added.

But above all, Ifemelu freezes these characters in their role and in their identity as taxi drivers. They are refused any social mobility and even any identification relating to their common origins. These few lines thus illustrate the power of the forces which confine certain immigrant men to marginality positions and reproduce the colonial distribution of space between centre and margin.

Othering that pushes black women, in *Americanah*, to come together in hair salons is more subtle, but no less direct. In fact, most of Western hairstyle salons do not welcome black women because hairdressers do not know how to take care of their hair, which requires different care than white women. Ifemelu is denied access to a spa to have his eyebrows waxed because "they don't do curly" (Adichie, 2013: 292), and her furious white boyfriend [Curt] intervenes to take care of her. African women are therefore obliged to open their own salons, a specific step to reterritorialisation process.

In Western countries, African hair salons affect the environment by making visible the presence of transcultural populations and creating a territory for women from African Diasporas. Ifemelu enjoys having peaceful conversations, without being projected stereotypes onto her: "Ifemelu fanned herself with a magazine. "It's so hot," she said. At least, these women would not say to her "You're hot? But you're from Africa!" / "This heat wave is very bad. Sorry the air conditioner broke yesterday," Mariama said (Adichie, 2013, p. 11). The simplicity of the exchange and the natural response of Mariama contrast with the contrived comments Ifemelu is used to receiving, which suggests that in these *trans-spaces*, communication is easy with spontaneous understanding.

Results of colonial dichotomy, diasporic places allow their members to occupy part of Western space, that is to say, to reterritorialise *trans-spaces*. In an attempt to imagine a more inclusive cosmopolitanism, one that operates 'from below', a number of approaches have been formulated to place minorities and marginalised identities at the centre rather than at the borders of a cosmopolitan society. In these ways, cosmopolitanism is liable to offer a mode of managing cultural and political multiplicities.

In this analysis, I refer to community sites in order to investigate the usefulness of cosmopolitanism as a critical apparatus for understanding the complexities of transcultural interaction. As appropriate to my focus on cultural praxis, I deploy as a working definition Stuart Hall's "Political Belonging in a World of Multiple Identities". Hall suggests that people are no longer inspired by a single culture that is coherent, integrated and organic. Instead, the arrival of transnational migrants has enriched and altered cultural repertoires of many people. As he explains:

It is not that we are without culture but we are drawing on the traces and residues of many cultural systems, of many ethical systems – and that is precisely what cosmopolitanism means. It means the ability to stand outside of having one's life written and scripted by any one community, whether that is a faith or tradition or religion or culture – whatever it might be – and to draw selectively on a variety of discursive meanings (Hall, 2002, p. 26).

This widening of consciousness and confrontation with alterity can be found not only on the streets of cosmopolitan cities, but in the living rooms of more prosaic spaces. Cosmopolitanism suggests something that simultaneously: (a) transcends the seemingly exhausted nation-state model; (b) is able to mediate actions and ideals oriented both to the universal and the particular, the global and the local; (c) is culturally anti essentialist; and (d) is capable of representing variously complex repertoires of allegiance, identity and interest (Hall, 2002, p. 26).

In *Transnationalism* (2009), Steven Vertovec notes that research on transnationalism emerged as a reaction to the dominant concept of assimilationist model, suggesting that integration of foreign origin populations could take other forms than their own culture erasure. These words go in the direction of the transcultural project, which invites to a crossing and a mixture of cultures with each other, as the diasporic places highlight in *Americanah*.

Brought together by the multiple expressions of rejection sent back to them by society in which they live, they put into action another form of transculturalism which materialises first within African Diasporas and in these diasporic places. Hairdresser in *Americanah* is representative of this type of phenomenon. From the first pages of the novel, Adichie depicts the familiar and warm lively atmosphere that reigns:

They displayed bright signboards with names like Aisha and Fatima African Hair Braiding […]. Often, there was a baby tied to someone's back with a piece of cloth. Or a toddler asleep on a wrapper spread over a battered sofa. Sometimes, older children stopped by. Tea conversations were loud and swift, in French or Wolof or Malinke, and when they spoke English to customers, it was broken, curious, as though they had not quite eased into the language itself before taking on a slangy Americanism (Adichie, 2013, p. 9).

The presence of babies and children, the faded furniture and the multiplicity of spoken languages create a feeling of intimacy and familiarity even more so for American clients are excluded if they do not understand Wolof or French. While the lack of English language proficiency often

contributes to crowding out transcultural characters, in African hair salons, it is not English that is a marker of belonging but rather the knowledge of African cultures.

African Diasporas that evolve in these places come off as homogeneous but Adichie affirms their transcultural dimension through cultures variety represented in the hairdresser where Malians and Senegalese work, a sign of a cultural mix. Thus, barely installed Ifemelu, Aisha, the hairdresser, immediately asks her if she knows the actors and actresses of the Nigerian film which is broadcast. A short time later, while Ifemelu does not participate in the gossip of hairdressers, she knows she is accepted despite everything:

They looked at Ifemelu for her agreement, her approval. They expected it, in this shared space of their Africanness, but Ifemelu said nothing and turned a page of her novel. They would, she was sure, talk about her after she left. That Nigerian girl, she feels very important because of Princeton. Look at her food bar, she does not eat real food any more. They would laugh with derision, but only a mild derision, because she was still their African sister, even if she had briefly lost her way (Adichie, 2013, p. 103).

Ifemelu manifests a haughty attitude and stands out from certain signs she does not hesitate to show. The fact that she integrates herself into a higher social class resides in the novel Ifemelu reads, the cereal bars that serve her as a meal and her studies at Princeton. The hairdresser remains a space where characters' Africanness is a shared identity in the diasporic context. Adichie clarifies this observation in the excerpt where women share cultural relations, although their economic status is different and they are not from the same African country: Ifemelu is Nigerian and English-speaking while the hairdressers are Senegalese and French speakers (Adichie, 2013).

Avtar Brah explains that the concept of diaspora can be understood as a matrix of economic, political and cultural relations, from which arise the commonalities between members of different diaspora groups. He writes: "The concept of diaspora delineates a field of identifications where 'imagined communities' are forged within and out of a confluence of narratives from annals of collective memory and re-memory.

"It is important to stress that diaspora is a panic concept" (Brah, 1996, p. 193). Despite, therefore, notable differences between young women, their belonging to African Diasporas connects them to a relationship with intimate dimensions and makes the hairdressing salon a place where a sense of security dominates and where benevolent transcultural exchanges are made possible.

In addition, Brah claims that, "Border crossings do not occur only across the dominant/dominated dichotomy, but […], equally, there is traffic within cultural formations of the subordinated groups, and […] these journeys are not always mediated through the dominant culture(s)" (Brah, 1996, p. 206). In this respect, Adichie echoes African Diasporas' abroad experience. While staging Ifemelu, the author intends to depict the protagonist's Africanness.

That is, if Ifemelu is initially annoyed by her hairdresser whom she finds strange, she ends up feeling compassion for her, because of her personal situation. Moreover, the reader can realise that the only exchange through which a tension is actually happening is the one that takes place between Ifemelu and an American client who has come to have braids done, and who, talking about literature with Ifemelu, offers a stereotypical vision of transcultural characters within *trans-spaces*.

Woven into relationships within diaspora, transculturalism therefore manifests itself as a reterritorialisation of cultures in diasporic places and attests to the fact that these are not anchored in a single space, which would be country of origin. Culture as travel, as movement, such is the proposal of Adichie's novel, echoing James Clifford who, in "Travelling Cultures", defines it like "a site of travel" (Clifford, 1992, p. 110). Individuals carry culture inside of them, in their heart of hearts, and it is their reterritorialisation in diasporic spaces that initiates public space's transculturalism. While highlighting these processes, *Americanah* as a transcultural novel, echoes comments by Avtar Brah who, evoking cultural groups from Diasporas in United Kingdom, writes:

My argument is that they are not 'minority' identities, nor are they at the periphery of something that sees itself as located at the centre, although they may be represented as such. Rather, through processes of decentring, these new political and cultural formations continually challenge the minoritizing and peripheralising impulses of the cultures of dominance (Brah, 1996, p. 206).

Brah suggests that for African Diasporas who may feel they are losing their identity while migrating, returning home is not the solution because their identity, whatever it may have been, is altered by the foreigner's experience which is somehow "transculturalised". The transcultural dimension of the characters turns out to be a state of permanent alterity that manifests itself in the impossibility of returning "home" to a localised place. African descent from diaspora is sometimes willing to return to their country of origin.

However, returning home raises questions about the place of these Africans abroad as full citizens. From this perspective, Adichie seeks to posit the return of Africans from all over the world to Africa in a broader framework which is the struggle for the liberation of the continent from the colonial yoke. In the light of these returns to the countries, it appears transcultural condition's inescapable and inevitable characteristics. In 1994, Iain Chambers called upon to develop the meaning of the term "home" as mobile:

It means to conceive of dwelling as a mobile habitat, as a mode of inhabiting time and space not as though they were fixed and closed structures, but as providing the critical provocation of an opening whose questioning presence reverberates in the movement of the languages that constitutes our sense of identity, place and belonging. There is no one place, language or tradition that can claim this role (Chambers, 1994, p. 4).

The characters who have migrated are the most likely to understand that only one place is not enough to develop a belonging and identity feeling. Diverse and secular, African Diasporas form both an extension of the continent and a legacy of Africa to the rest of the world. The aesthetics of Diasporas could appear as a resolution of the tension between Africa invented by the Afrocentric imagination. In this vein, Ian Chambers expresses pessimism about of African Diasporas' returning home as they are constantly trapped by the West:

Post-colonialism is perhaps the sign of an increasing awareness that it is not feasible to subtract a culture, a history, a language, an identity, from the wider, transforming currents of the increasingly metropolitan world. It is impossible to 'go home' again (Chambers, 1994, p. 74).

Migration experience reveals the impossibility of conceiving time and space as "closed and fixed structures", since *Americanah*'s transcultural characters take a bit from their "home" to their country of destination and bring back a bit from the host country on their return, whether it be an American passport, a mode of writing, a way of behaving. Most of the time, characters who are

disoriented by a set of unfamiliar elements in their new environment. Sometimes Adichie depicts this "*new environment*" as a dreary, cold place, without light or social interactions; representations of the city can even become phantasmagoric in the eyes of the disturbingly familiar strangers.

Enhancing Transculturality of Spaces: A Quest for Home?

From open spaces and unbridgeable boarders' standpoint, transculturality can be defined as the ability to navigate from one culture to another thanks to a good knowledge of cultural and social codes, verbal language and non-verbal, signs of belonging, behaviour. If it was self-sufficient, this transcultural quality would make it possible to transcultural circles and to move from one to another without suffering from any form of othering.

My discussion therefore aims to analyse the ways one may feel at home otherwise than in the home's fixed and material place. The issue of setting in motion is often accompanied by a return to the country of origin, which is not the miracle solution it claims to be. Moreover, the frequency with which women leave family household in the *Americanah* invites the reader to consider the way they seek a home outside the home.

The narration's homogeneity, sliding from Ifemelu's internal focalisation to hairdressers' free indirect discourse, illustrates the continuity of their relationship. In this closed and secure place, far from white gaze and judgement, characters' Africanness takes on a palpable dimension, and their bond remains sororal despite social differences. In *Americanah*, the narrator accounts for the city hardly susceptible to be more hospitable when Ifemelu discovers Baltimore:

[S]he thought it forlorn and unlovable. The buildings were joined to one another in faded slumping rows, and on shabby corners, people were hunched in puffy jackets, black and bleak people waiting for buses, the air around them hazed in gloom (Adichie, 2013, p. 206).

The semantic field draws a desolate portrait of the city: "forlorn", "unlovable", "faded slumping rows", "shabby", "bleak", and again a sense of unease is liable to emerge from both buildings and individuals, as shown by the alliteration "black and bleak" whose sounds echo the name of the city, "Baltimore". These two examples show how the cities in which the transcultural characters move is inhospitable but warm.

Sometimes the uncannily familiar feeling caused by the coldness and grayness of urban landscape can be transformed into a real phantasmagoric vision where everyday life scenes are distorted and may be disturbing. Adichie thus describes the first time that Ifemelu sees the snow:

That night, it snowed, her first snow, and in the morning, she watched the world outside her window, the parked cars made lumpy, misshapen, by layered snow. She was bloodless, detached, floating in a world where darkness descended too soon and everyone walked around burdened by coats, and flattened by the absence of light. The days drained into one another, crisp air turning to freezing air, painful to inhale (Adichie, 2013, p. 155).

In the middle of a depressive episode, Ifemelu perceives the snow as an agonising burden. The intrusive presence of "snow" appears three times in the first sentence appear to be affecting Ifemelu's resentment in "bloodless", "detached", "floating", as if she herself had become as immaterial

and insignificant as a snowflake. These utterances offer an agonising and distressing vision that generates a disturbingly familiar impression. Ifemelu feels the same distress after her relationship breakup with Curt: "For weeks, Ifemelu stumbled around, trying to remember the person she was before Curt. […S] he no longer knew who she had been then, what she had enjoyed, disliked, wanted" (Adichie, 2013, p. 299).

In view of the foregoing, the reader notices that the total loss of identity during love relationship leads Ifemelu to seek a stable identity and a safe harbour or "home" elsewhere than in a concrete place because the private home has lost its quality of refuge and has become suffocating. Characters' displacements and setting in motion in *Americanah* lead to a re-examination of the concept of "home" as a fixed place. This home is therefore especially welcoming for the man who finds inside the housing a familiar atmosphere, a "taste" of his country of origin, which compensates for the marginalisation he experiences abroad.

Besides, considering home in motion and home as movement, otherness frequently takes precedence over openness qualities and mutual understanding that transculturalism is supposed to help develop. When confinement, claustrophobia and misunderstanding invade home, it can no longer be perceived and lived as such, as a *home*.

When racial tensions and otherness invite themselves into home, characters who suffer the most from it leave the place and look elsewhere for "home" they miss. As characters cope with discomfort in transcultural position within the host country, otherness sudden appearance is at the very core of home. Adichie gives the reader an account of strategies of return to the home country. However, this return is not always accompanied by a relief or a resolution of transculturality problems protagonists have trouble with.

Other types of difficulties, even disappointments, beset characters upon their return to the home country. This idea appears to be suggesting a step backwards, if geographically possible, does not make it possible to ignore the lived experience as transcultural characters. Cogently, Iain Chambers writes: "the promise of a homecoming – completing the story, domesticating the detour – becomes an impossibility" (Chambers, 1995, p. 5).

In *Americanah*, Adichie mentions a paradoxical disorientation and changes in self-perception. This disorientation relates to Ifemelu's return to Nigeria which is accompanied by an almost total loss of bearings, as evidenced in the below paragraph which opens the seventh and last part of the novel:

At first, Lagos assaulted her; the sun-dazed haste, the yellow busses full of squashed limbs, the sweating hawkers racing after cars, the advertisements on hulking billboards […] and the heaps of rubbish that rose on the roadsides like a taunt. Trade thrummed too defiantly. And the air was dense with exaggeration, conversations full of over-protests. One morning, a man's body lay on Awolowo Road. Another morning, The Island flooded and cars became gasping boats. […] And so, she had the dizzying sensation of falling, falling into the new person she had become, falling into the strange familiar. Had it always been like this or had it changed so much in her absence? […] She had grown up […] understanding the cryptic codes of conductors and the body language of street hawkers. Now she struggled to grasp the unspoken. When had shopkeepers become so rude? Had buildings in Lagos always had this patina of decay? […]

"Americanah" Raniyundo teased her often. "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, 2013, p. 385).

These descriptive paragraphs transcribe accumulation of all that assaulted Ifemelu in the first months of her arrival. The narrative voice moves from environment description to questions disoriented character is asking. To the city's aggressiveness is added Ifemelu's inability to understand communication codes she never had to learn, and her childhood friend's teasing. The following utterances "squashed limbs", "a man's body", "heaps of rubbish", "the sweating hawkers" produce the same effect as the snow and the rubbish that made the first agonising American cities where Ifemelu resided.

Pell-mell references to shops, advertisements, crowded buses, "full of over-protestation" conversations create an impression of suffocating and deafening chaos, and result in a vertigo sensation communicated by the repetition of the verb "falling" in "the dizzying sensation of falling […], falling […], falling".

Successive description of American cities, which transforms more common visions in tormented and terrifying scenes where a feeling of "unhomely", thus reflect the inner state of characters without geographical, cultural or emotional landmarks. These descriptions, which could symbolise disillusion, overturn Ifemelu in "the disturbingly familiar stranger", back home, her bearings are so jostled that the "unhomely" can be perceived as "the new person she had become".

Her friend's sarcasm ends up placing Ifemelu in some in-between uncomfortable state. While she consciously decided to lose her American accent, which disturbed her identity "[s]he had taken on, for too long, a pitch of voice and a way of being that was not hers" (Adichie, 2013: 175), and that she is no longer sure who she is after her return, her friend believes that she is not a "serious" Americana.

The thirteen years that Ifemelu spent in the United States have changed her so much that Lagos comes off as familiar but strange to her, and that she herself doubts her own identity. However, Ifemelu has not changed enough as her boyfriend Obinze expected, to be qualified as "serious Americanah", and hence one can understand a form of asserted, proud and hybrid identity which is not plagued by doubt as Ifemelu is. Before she left, Obinze was looking forward to seeing Ifemelu change as he intentionally laughed at her "next time we see you, you will be a serious Americanah" (Adichie, 2013: 100). Ifemelu and Obinze's romance offers another striking example of territorialisation in a relationship when they never really recover from their love breakup.

When Ifemelu, back in Nigeria, reconnects with Obinze, whom she had shut out of her life in the result of a paid sex relationship. This traumatic experience alienates her from her boyfriend Obinze, with whom she feels unable to share the shock, shame and horror from her paid sexual intercourse. When Ifemelu tells Obinze about this rape event she experienced, both find themselves in a silence that speaks volumes insofar as "He took her hand in his, both clasped on the table, and between them silence grew, an ancient silence that they both knew. She was inside this silence and she was safe (Adichie, 2013: 440).

When the other is courted not for their identity, in the case of Ifemelu and Obinze whose feelings survive a thirteen-year separation and silence, but for what it represents in terms of culture, social class and racial affiliation, relationship sincerity is questioned and otherness runs the risk of becoming alienation. Thus, *Americanah* does not question the possibility of establishing healthy relationships in a transcultural dimension but rather suggests transcultural characters must overcome otherness.

Transcultural characters can benefit from a freedom their dual identity gives them, but this freedom does not come without discomfort. If some manifest a more assumed transcultural identity, which may suggest a hope of seeing transculturalism effectively foster exchanges with others, most suffer from nagging feelings of uncertainty, or even incompleteness, put in light through writing and language use.

The Politics of Language in Postcolonial and Transcultural Voice

In *Americanah*, tension that arises around the issue of language use and parent's alienation feeling vis-a-vis the bilingual child attests that alienation persists long after colonisation and decolonisation. The emergence of otherness within homes does not only thwart relationships parents-children. Misunderstandings and quarrels also interfere in couples, especially when they are bi-racial. Adichie stages a couple that [can] separate owing to racial or linguistic diversity. From the outset, Ifemelu's aunt, a Nigerian refugee in the United States where she is raising her son, uses Igbo to threaten the latter. The narrator subtly puts:

The last time Ifemelu visited, Aunty Uju told him, 'I will send you back to Nigeria if you do that again!' speaking Igbo as she did to him only when she was angry, and Ifemelu worried that it would become for him the language of strife (Adichie, 2013, p. 171).

The use of Igbo in anger moments shows how Uju feels helpless, as if English lacks power to communicate threatens' seriousness. Just as in society in general, through this example of an immigrant and bilingual family, language issue expands to include an implicit and insidious power relationship.

In *Americanah*, a bi-racial couple, Ifemelu and Curt are corroded by racial tensions. Curt's inability to understand Ifemelu's loneliness and helplessness resides in the fact that: "There were, simply, times that he saw and times that *he was unable to see*. She knew that she should tell him those thoughts, that not telling him cast a shadow over them both. Still, she chose silence" (Adichie, 2013, p. 294, italics mine).

Ifemelu's relationship with Curt, who, by his whiteness and economic power, represents all that is the most privileged, is interspersed with minute tensions that end up keeping Ifemelu away. Even when she shows him American society's racist biases, Curt's response reveals how abstractive it all sounds to him: "Okay, babe, okay, I didn't mean for it to be such a big deal," he said (Adichie, 2013: 295). Winding up the discussion with as much indifference, Curt pushes Ifemelu to write to someone who can understand her, and brings to light his own compassion limits.

The racial question is not the sole problem Ifemelu encounters in her partnership life. When she starts dating Blaine, an African-American who teaches at Harvard University, the different ways they experience their skin colour also contribute to keep them away from each other. After a

demonstration in front of the university, to which Ifemelu did not want to participate, Blaine reproaches her the following:

You know, it's not just about writing a blog, you have to live like you believe it. […]' She recognized, in his tone, a subtle accusation, 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 (Adichie, 2013, p. 345).

For Blaine, very committed to racial equality struggle, Ifemelu writes her blog with too much nonchalance and not enough conviction. These deep disagreements and misunderstandings stem from the fact that, unlike Ifemelu's African-American male/female friends, "race was not embroidered in the fabric of her history" (Adichie, 2013: 337). As an African woman, Ifemelu does not experience racial question similarly with her African-American male and female friends. She does not see so many causes of revolts and anger in racial issue. Moreover, when Blaine expects from Ifemelu this level of commitment, she cannot but walk away from him.

Such a situation of misunderstanding, which *Americanah* reports on, can compromise cultural exchanges emergence, which appears to be modulating transcultural theory promise that celebrates the freedom to move between cultures. Postcolonial criticism, as Homi Bhabha explains, accounts for these principles of representation:

Postcolonial criticism bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the context for political and social authority within the modern world order. Postcolonial perspectives emerge from the colonial testimony of Third World countries and the discourses of 'minorities' within the geopolitical divisions of East and West, North and South. They intervene in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic 'normality' to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, races, communities, peoples. (Bhabha, 1994, p. 171)

Americanah is written decades after postcolonial studies' founding texts, but they nevertheless retain certain specificities, while going beyond the framework. In an article on *Africa and the Black Atlantic*, Yogita Goyal argues that *Americanah* can be read as an inverted postcolonial literary creation. Accordingly, he evokes that:

The novel may, in fact, be placed within a larger tradition of postcolonial writing – reversing the heart of darkness narrative, where rather than Europeans or Americans going to Africa to find themselves, an African character travels to the heart of the West, only to find darkness there (Goyal, 2014, p. XII).

From this perspective, postcolonial literature aims to give voice to the subordinates and to distinguish itself from the ancient imperial centres, especially through language, as explained Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin:

One of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language. The imperial education system installs a 'standard' version of the metropolitan language as the norm, and marginalizes all 'variants' as impurities. […] Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of 'truth',

'order', and 'reality' become established. Such power is rejected in the emergence of an effective post-colonial voice (Ashcroft *et al.*, 2002, p. 7).

If post-colonialism aims to undermine European culture domination, and is therefore part of a form of resistance to it, transcultural novels generally pursue this demystification endeavour by multiplying perspectives and placing otherness at the core of their writing. Unlike postcolonial writers, Adichie is not part of [the same] fight appropriation and/or language subversion. However, if English use is never questioned, the language can become a factor of instability. This language that Adichie's Nigerian characters have always used with insurance and whose certain elements are now redefined becomes a source of instability and perplexity.

This is for example the case at the beginning of chapter 14 of *Americanah*, when a young American, Cristina Tomas, during the welcome day for foreign students, speaks to Ifemelu with deliberate slowness in case she does not understand English. The chapter opens with these words: "And then there was Cristina Tomas (Adichie, 2013: 133), which announce the decisive content of the meeting. By assigning a first name and a surname to a passing character, Adichie underlines the long-term consequences of this moment for her protagonist. Shocked that Cristina Tomas assumed her English was mediocre, Ifemelu "shrinks":

Ifemelu shrank. In that strained, still second when her eyes met Cristina Tomas's before she took the forms, she shrank. She shrank like a dried leaf. She had spoken English all her life, led the debating society in secondary school, and always thought the American twang inchoate; she should not have cowered and shrunk, but she did. And in the following weeks, as autumn's coolness descended, she began to practice an American accent (Adichie, 2013, pp. 133-134).

The polyptoton of the verb "shrank" / "shrunk" illustrates just as much the consternation, the discomfort and bewilderment than Ifemelu's anger. The comparison to falling "dried leaf" and "autumn's coolness" image symbolise the fact that owing to this misunderstanding, something goes out of Ifemelu, undermining the high school student's confidence, formerly a talk-show host. Cristina Tomas plays a fundamental role because she is the first to project such otherness on Ifemelu that she transforms her speaking way, like Ginika before her. Ginika, Ifemelu's friend who arrives in the United States a few years before the latter, constitutes a striking example. During their homecoming, Ginika speaks Nigerian English which, she no doubt, rarely uses, and in this language use which, paradoxically, is likely to be unnatural, Ifemelu detects a lack of trust:

Ginika had lapsed into Nigerian English, a dated, overcooked version, eager to prove how unchanged she was. She had, with a strenuous loyalty, kept in touch through the years […]. And now, she was saying "shay you know" and Ifemelu did not have the heart to tell her that nobody said "shay" any more (Adichie, 2013, p. 123).

In Ginika's eagerness to show that she has not changed can be read her positioning uncertainty: after several years in the United States, she no longer knows the expressions to fashion in Nigeria, while refusing to admit that a long separation can take her away from her friends. Her Nigerian English, in a rather intense emotion moment, aims to point out her emotional closeness to her long-time girlfriend but has the opposite effect. Ifemelu has been on American soil for a few minutes when Ginika, by this clumsiness, shows her transcultural positioning complexity. Quickly forgetting his desire to show herself unchanged, Ginika does not take long to alert Ifemelu to semantic and cultural differences:

If you see how they laughed at me in high school when I said that somebody was boning for me. Because boning here means to have sex! […] And can you imagine 'half-caste' is a bad word here? […] So now I say biracial and I'm supposed to be offended when somebody says half caste (Adichie, 2013, pp. 123-124).

'You're thin with big breasts.'
'Please, I'm not thin. I'm slim.'
'Americans say 'thin.' Here 'thin' is a good word. […] [H]ere somebody tells you that you lost weight and you say thank you' (Adichie, 2013, p. 124).

Repeated quotation marks in the above excerpts, the anaphora of the adverb "here" and the fact that the conversation is constantly diverted by these differences in meaning underline the uncertainty that they suddenly cause. Uncertainty arouses temporal, geographical and cultural diversion in the characters due to transculturalism when they settle in *trans-spaces* and their identity is gradually divided between the home country and the host country.

Ginika hijacks the initial conversation by explaining that the word "thin" is positively connoted in the United States. The repeated presence of inverted commas in the excerpts above, the anaphora of the adverb "here" and the fact that the conversation is constantly diverted by these differences in meaning underline the uncertainty that they suddenly cause. This fix, however, only brings short-lived relief as it generates even more uncertainty: "It took an effort, the twisting of the lip, the curling of the tongue. If she were in a panic, or terrified, or jerked awake during a fire, she would not remember how to produce those American sounds (Adichie, 2013: 173).

To produce "those sounds", the demonstrative "those" signifying affective distance from this accent, Ifemelu must provide a technical effort, i.e., "the twisting of lip, the curling of tongue": in this formulation, the absence of definite article or possessive personal pronoun before "lip and "tongue" underlines the exercise's abstractive characteristics, as if her lips and tongue no longer belonged to her. All is not without effect on her personality. When Ifemelu resumes her Nigerian accent, she is delighted to find a fairer identity: "This was truly her" (Adichie, 2013: 175).

Thus, in order to compensate for suffering from othering owing to her national and racial belonging, Ifemelu works an accent which, if it allows her to pass for an American, undermines her identity and makes her oscillate between two personalities. English duplication engenders uncertainty which generates instability identity, prompted by the protagonist's transcultural position.

In a 2004 interview between Adichie and Dan Wickett, the journalist asks the writer about the insertion of passage in Igbo and Adichie answers: "I use Igbo words or phrases to remind the reader, from time to time, that the characters are not speaking English" (Adichie, 2020, p. 8). A foreign language use in a novel written in English amounts to carrying out a linguistic transfer, a *translation*, a cultural crossing, which reminds the reader of a linguistic otherness and can put him in the front of misunderstanding, otherness at its acme.

Adichie's writing style is impressive in this sense that she always facilitates *Americanah*'s reading by inserting translations or reformulations into the text, as in this extract where Ifemelu and Obinze, both teenagers, exchange proverbs as soon as "[He] switched to Igbo. '*Ama matu inu*. I even

know proverbs.' / 'Yes, the basic one everybody knows. A frog does not run in the afternoon for nothing" (Adichie, 2013, p. 61).

In this conversation, proverbs' meaning is always transmitted, either by a literal translation, or by characters' commentary. However, Adichie sprinkles dialogues with Igbo terms without taking the trouble to translate them, as in *Purple Hibiscus*: "Amaka, *o gini*? I do not like that tone!" Aunty Ifeoma said (Adichie, 2013, p. 122).

Igbo words like *'abi'*, *'kwa'*, *'kedu'*, "*sha*", "*nkem*", "*nno*" punctuate characters' exchanges and the reader should independently try to figure out what these mean on his/her own. Given that *Americanah* is mainly set in the United States, Igbo language is less present than in Adichie's first novels set in Nigeria. Through Adichie fiction, foreign words often refer to food. For example, in *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), Adichie purposely uses words such as: "*jollof rice*", "*arigbe*", "*garri*", "*chin-chin*" or "*okpa*" to describe meals.

Where Adichie chooses italics, she gives these words a typographic relief and thus doubly signalling their otherness. Although characters would try to recompose typical dishes in their host countries, they often lack ingredients which force them to settle for approximations with local products. Thus, they would prepare transcultural dishes at the same time Adichie puts forward "tensions between the global and the local".

In an article on transculturation phenomena in Adichie's fiction, Elena Rodríguez-Murphy suggests that "[t]he reader can appreciate a tension between the global and the local, a negotiation between global and local identities, in the use of Nigerian linguistic and cultural markers within the text" (Murphy, 2017, p. 99).

Still with regard to Adichie, Homi K. Bhabha establishes the observation next: although her books are written in English, Adichie manages to register 'cultural difference' (Bhabha, 1994, p. 60) in her texts through a specific language use. Therefore, it may be said that the stories are a result of a creative type of "cultural translation" through which "hybrid sites of meaning open up" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 163) and an extensive cultural background is skilfully conveyed (Murphy, 2017, p. 99).

Americanah does not only settle for immigrant populations' life depiction in Westerner countries, it also carries the "cultural background" into the text; foreign words use, especially when referring to items such as food, makes catch a glimpse of another contained culture, almost concealed by English but nevertheless detectable.

As Homi Bhabha writes in "Dissemination": "Designations of cultural difference interrelate forms of identity which, because of their continual involvement in other symbolic systems, are always 'incomplete' or open to cultural translations" (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 162-163). Adichie's transcultural writing does not present characters with "incomplete" identities, but rather in the making; likewise, writing itself is not so much "incomplete" as invested with a will and a "cultural translation" power from a symbolic system to another.

As I have shown, cultural translation is not always accompanied by a linguistic translation, which precisely allows a different symbolic and cultural system to breathe in the text, and otherness to be part of a transcultural system that continues to convey meaning. Cultural difference has an ideological decisive role. According to Homi K. Bhabha, "The aim of cultural difference is to rearticulate

the sum of knowledge from the perspective of the significant position of the minority that resists totalization – the repetition that will not return as the same" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 162).

The contamination – I dare not refer to "colonisation" – of English language by foreign words affirms a position from which characters see the world and transmit it. In *Americanah*, the terms Adichie does not translate but simply transposes them in the English text belong to affective domain, which is difficult, if not impossible, to find the exact equivalent in another language. Instead of proposing a translation which would come across as strange as foreign, Adichie leaves the terms in its original language, thus allowing otherness that contributes to novel's transcultural dimension.

Conclusion

To cap it off, this study has questioned the possibility of seeing the production of encounters between individuals who speak the same language but do not share the same culture, which can generate positive openings but can also generate distrust, even dissension. The first part of this study has attempted to clarify how transculturalism fits into various Western spaces, whether public or private, as extensive as countries or more restricted, such as homes. It has brought to light the fact that transculturalism depends on a social organisation and that it has not yet divested itself of a colonial dimension which limits exchanges and encounters with those who are visibly others.

Since otherness comes off as the reason why transculturalism is far from African Diasporas' lived reality within *trans-spaces*, this notion has formed the breadcrumb trail of the second part which has delved into modalities by which Adichie makes it visible in writing. This reflection has led the reader to analyse stylistic and literary processes that appear to be characterising transcultural writing, which would then be defined not only by reasons for crossing borders and the multiplicity of represented cultures, but also by an ethical dimension.

It finally emerges that, in the third part, *Americanah* as a transcultural novel finds itself at an intersection between fiction and politics that enters into a particular resonance with contemporary era and zeitgeist. Instead of responding to literary canons, as postcolonial works used to do, *Americanah* investigates [reworks] them while developing other perspectives and opens up the possibility to ascend to canonical works' rank. Even as Adichie's fiction underlines transculturalism limits in the Western spaces, the fact that it circulates in diasporic spaces allows the author to become rooted in these spaces and to give the novel a more transcultural dimension.

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