REVEALING YOUR DELUSIONS: PERSPECTIVES ON AMERICAN VALUES IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN FICTION

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been a growing popularization in fiction of African authors writing novels about immigrating to America. While immigrant fiction has certainly played a key role in the last century of American literature, the African perspective has not been largely advertised in this category. This paper thus examines contemporary African fiction to compare how African-born immigrants and Americans each view the effectiveness of US cultural values.

National values polls and scholarly studies of American cultural history reveal first how Americans perceive their national values. In addition, this thesis explores five African-authored novels as its literary framework: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*, Teju Cole’s *Open City*, NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names*, Dinaw Mengestu’s *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*, and Okey Ndibe’s *Foreign Gods, Inc.*. Looking for the common responses to American culture in these novels, despite the characters’ diverse backgrounds, this paper then compares the African experiences with American values to the American peoples’ self-perceived values.

What this comparison demonstrates is that firstly, Americans generally believe that their top values of freedom, equality, and opportunity are ripe in today’s society.
The majority still endorse the idea that the American dream of success is available to all, and that immigrants and minorities are treated fairly. The African narratives, however, reveal a different opinion. These African authors universally demonstrate an experience in the US rife with false promises of economic opportunity, social and cultural exclusion, racial oppression and disconnect, and ignorant ethnic stereotyping. In fact, most of the authors conclude their novels with some sort of rejection of American culture entirely, a pattern previously uncommon in American immigrant fiction.

Overall this thesis concludes that Americans, especially white and upper-class Americans, have a perception of their national values that is a far cry from how those values truly play out in daily life. Through the intimate lens of the fiction narrative, these African authors convey how inaccessible economic wealth and equality are for those considered outsiders in the US, especially minorities. Their stories are a call for Americans to reexamine the reality of those ideals that purportedly apply to all people within the nation’s borders, but in actuality only apply to some. Focusing on the daily cultural effects of these false promises, and less on the larger political scale, this thesis thus highlights the need for Americans to partake in honest self-reflection of how they practice their national values and to more earnestly engage with cultural outsiders to genuinely live up to those ideals of freedom, equality, and tolerance.
# CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER 1A: How Americans Perceive their National Values

CHAPTER 1B: Literary Analysis of Immigrant Fiction

CHAPTER 2: False Expectations
   - Pre-arrival Hopes
   - Post-arrival Shock and the Overwhelm of Capitalism
   - Pressure from Home

CHAPTER 3: Isolation Amidst the Crowd
   - The Wandering Monologue
   - Forced Assimilation
   - Constant Reminders of Otherness
   - Rejection of American Culture

CHAPTER 4: Racial and Cultural Disconnect
   - Awkward Interactions between Black Americans and Africans
   - Commiseration and Rejection from Fellow Immigrants
   - Different Histories, Shared Struggles

CHAPTER 5: Exoticism and Other American Misconceptions
   - Collecting another Culture
   - The Exotic Girlfriend
   - Africa, the Jungle Country (and Other Embarrassing Mistakes)
   - Ignorance or Refusal to Learn?

CONCLUSION

WORKS CITED
INTRODUCTION

Since its founding, the US has been a nation of immigrants. This identity has been reflected upon in literature, poetry, film, legislation, and more, increasingly in the 20th and 21st centuries. While noted immigrant authors from the last century have largely come from European, Asian, and Latin American nations, the last ten years have seen a shift in this emphasis. In recent years, larger numbers of African authors have received praise for their novels depicting the immigrant experience in America.¹ In addition, many of these contemporary African fictions also reflect a critical view of American cultural values, especially those values pertaining to diversity and opportunity. While American cultural studies and recent polls on US values reveal that Americans find liberty and equality, as well as diversity, to be central to American culture, stories from those frequently overlooked outsiders reveal a less optimistic outlook. By conveying stories of prejudice, economic exploitation, and overwhelming disappointment of their American dreams, these various African authors demonstrate how Americans perpetuate a set of ideals that are a far cry from the reality for disadvantaged minority communities in the US.

To explore this argument, this paper will use five recent African fiction novels as its framework. NoViolet Bulawayo’s We Need New Names tells the story of Darling, a young girl living in the shantytown of an unnamed nation resembling Zimbabwe. When Darling moves in with her aunt in Michigan in attempts to escape poverty,
however, she finds that the real America is not as welcoming or auspicious as she and
her friends imagined. Celebrated Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie reflects
on American race relations and social culture in *Americanah*, a novel about a young
Nigerian woman’s attempt to succeed and fit into the American intellectual world.
Providing another Nigerian perspective is the protagonist Julius in Teju Cole’s *Open
City*. Having already accrued some success as a doctor in New York City, Julius
wanders the streets of Manhattan reflecting on his past and present loneliness in the
US. Okey Ndibe’s *Foreign Gods, Inc.* follows Nigerian cab driver Ike as he journeys
from New York to his hometown Utonki for the purpose of stealing the local deity
statue and selling it to a Manhattan gallery. Finally, in *The Beautiful Things That
Heaven Bears* by Dinaw Mengestu, we meet Sepha, the veteran of these immigrant
characters, having fled civil war in Ethiopia for the US 17 years prior to the novel’s
start. Now running a bodega in a predominantly African American neighborhood of
Washington, DC, Sepha struggles to connect with his community while keeping his
store afloat.

Several studies on modern American values, as well as post-World War II
immigrant fiction comparative studies, will provide the American scholarly and
cultural framework for these novels. This paper will compare American perceptions of
US culture and values with the experience reflected in these various African novels to
reveal discrepancies between the two. The first chapter sets up modern US values as
determined by polling and research from the last few years, as well as by cultural
studies like Wilber C. Caldwell’s *American Narcissism and the Myth of National
Superiority* and David Cowart’s *Trailing Clouds: Immigrant Fiction in Contemporary
*America*. These studies also analyze trends in US immigrant fiction over the last 100 years, highlighted in chapter 1B. From there, the thesis turns its focus to the five novels and how their revelations on US culture compare to the nation’s perception of itself. Chapter 2 contrasts the incredibly heightened expectations of economic and social success that many of these characters have before coming to the US with the shock and hardship they face after their arrival. This common issue reflects the danger of American egoism in proclaiming the country’s wealth of opportunity when in fact the hardships many outsiders face overwhelm those professed opportunities. Chapter 3 addresses the common feelings of intense loneliness that each author conveys, despite American emphasis on welcoming newcomers into the “melting pot.” As a topic that can be especially relevant to many African immigrant authors, Chapter 4 analyzes the characters’ struggles with racial and cultural disconnect. Their different perspectives on race, as outsiders from largely black nations, highlight the starkness with which we divide people between races and the awkward interactions that can occur between black immigrants and black Americans because of this divide. To complete the analysis, Chapter 5 addresses America’s arrogance yet ignorance towards non-white, non-Western nations through the novels’ depictions of American exoticism and misconceptions about Africa. Overall these five authors make poignant commentary on the reality of diversity, equality, and opportunity in American life. When contrasted against Americans’ values, these novels reveal how much the US overestimates the prevalence of these values for minorities and the lower echelon in this nation.
CHAPTER 1A
HOW AMERICANS PERCEIVE THEIR NATIONAL VALUES

Since this thesis centers on the reality of the current state of American cultural values, it is first necessary to establish how Americans understand both their national values and how they play out in modern daily life. Based on the results of the 2012 American Values Survey, composed by The Atlantic and the Aspen Institute, Americans rank freedom and equality as their most significant values. To specify, participants voted “freedom of speech” and “freedom of religion” as the most significant factors contributing to the strength of American values, receiving 67% and 61% of the vote respectively. Tied for third place were “the free enterprise system” and “principles of equality” as the next most important factors that strengthen American values, receiving 50% each.¹ These results are not surprising when one considers the founding principles of the United States, principles that American cultural writer Wilber W. Caldwell summarizes as liberty, equality, and democracy (which in turn leads to individualism). Caldwell notes that these values are especially important in the US, as it is a nation that was not united by ethnos or religion, but instead was forged based on a common ideology encompassing these values.² American political scientist Aaron Wildavsky, however, reveals an underlying tension between the values of liberty and equality. Wildavsky argues that American freedom and equality do not


naturally coexist, as taking steps towards ensuring equality often means limiting freedoms, and vice versa. He does, however, contend that the US reconciles these differences fairly well to create a society that has well-balanced freedom and equality.\(^3\) The American Values Survey results seem to coincide with Wildavsky’s argument, since First Amendment freedoms and a free economy seem to outweigh principles of equality somewhat in the poll. These two ideals, therefore, reign in public opinion as the unique values in modern America that strengthen the US as a nation.

Alongside this emphasis on liberty and equality is the long-held faith in the American dream: the belief that through hard work and dedication, any person can accomplish their dreams of success in this nation. The American dream encompasses each of the values identified here. It proposes that Americans are free to pursue their own goals, all people have an equal opportunity to become successful, and individuals can determine their own destiny. Although 49% of participants in the Aspen Institute’s survey agreed that wealthy Americans are successful because they are born with socioeconomic advantages, 70% still endorsed the idea that “with hard work I can accomplish anything.”\(^4\) The Pew Research Center’s poll on American political typology reveals the same results, with 65% of participants agreeing that most Americans can get ahead if they are willing to work hard.\(^5\) This dream typically refers

\(^{3}\) Ibid., 58.

\(^{4}\) Penn Schoen Berland, *American Values Survey*, 76.

to climbing the socioeconomic ladder, or bettering oneself through a successful career.

The American dream, which most Americans surveyed believe in, is at its core a financially-motivated ideal. The US’s strong faith in these economic ideals demonstrates the larger emphasis on financial success that pervades American culture. In the Aspen Institute Survey, Americans ranked the economy and jobs as their top concern facing the nation today by a landslide of 66%, with the next issue of deficit spending receiving just 6% of the vote. As previously mentioned, participants also ranked the free enterprise system as the nation’s third most important strength in values. In the Public Religion Research Institute’s (PPRI) 2014 survey on American values, participants deemed the economy as one of the most significant issues in the US currently. Financial success, both individually and as a nation, is an incredibly important value for Americans today.

While this concern grows in large part from the recent financial crisis, the US holds a history of being a country heavily focused on material prosperity. Reaching back as far as the nation’s founding, the Puritan forefathers saw the abundance of land and resources in America as God-given, and tied material wealth to the ideological success of the new nation. Early Americans believed in their divine destiny to progress the nation in all ways possible, especially in wealth. These values continued in the Manifest Destiny, where claiming material wealth in land was God’s chosen mission

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7 Jones, Cox, and Navarro-Riverra, *Economic Insecurity*, 12.

for Americans, in the roaring 1920’s when abundant spending was a celebration of American culture, and in the later 20th century when consumerism protected an American way of life against Communist invasion. Americans are known for their constant push towards gaining more, put so poignantly by classic American author F. Scott Fitzgerald, “tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther…. And one fine morning – So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.”

Historically and currently, a constant push towards material wealth and progress thrives as a central value to Americans. It flourishes not only as a goal that benefits the economy but uphold the ideals of freedom and individualism in a capitalist nation, encouraging all citizens to strive for success.

Modern Americans further promote the US as an open and tolerant nation that welcomes outsiders and immigrants. The US has a rich history of immigration, often tied to the concept of the American dream that one can start from the bottom as a newcomer and work hard to gain material success. As Caldwell puts it, “America is defined, in large part, by her complex racial and cultural inheritance, embracing a common ideology in a common environment.”

The immigrant story is weaved into the American narrative so deeply that Professor Roger Daniels has identified the immigrant myths that parallel this nation’s development: Plymouth Rock, the Statue of Liberty, and the Melting Pot. These myths represent the stories over time of immigrants arriving in the US, including journeys for political and/or religious liberty,

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the search for economic opportunity, and a quick assimilation into the national
culture.¹¹ They perpetuate the argument that “America remains strong in its ability to
integrate newcomers and reinvent itself in ways that are recognizably American.”¹²
Polling from modern Americans reveals the same pride in cultural diversity. The
majority of participants in the Aspen Institute’s survey stated that they believe they are
more open to new ideas and tolerant of other people’s culture than their parents.¹³
Furthermore, almost half of the participants listed America’s melting pot identity as
one of its most significant strengths in national values.¹⁴ Only 29% agreed that the US
economic system is unfair to immigrants.¹⁵ Thus Americans view their nation as
accommodating to immigrants and open to people of different cultures. In a larger
cultural examination, immigrants have been essential to the development of the
American cultural identity and in fostering its message of prosperity and progress.
America is therefore presented as a diverse and tolerant nation that provides desired
opportunities for newcomers.

Based on these findings, Americans perceive themselves as an open nation that
values liberty, equality, material progress, and diversity. Both contemporary
Americans and US cultural history boast these ideals. However, when we break these

¹¹ Roger Daniels, “Immigration to the United States in the twentieth century” in The Cambridge
Companion to Modern American Culture, ed. Christopher Bigsby (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge
University Press, 2006), 74.

¹² Christopher Bigsby, “Introduction: What, then, is the American?” in Bigsby, 11.

¹³ Penn Schoen Berland, American Values Survey, 11.

¹⁴ Ibid., 20.

¹⁵ Ibid., 79.
results down by race, contradicting beliefs about US values emerge. The 2014 PPRI survey reveals that white Americans are 14% more likely than black Americans to say that the American dream still holds true. Notably, black Americans are the group most likely to say that the American dream never held true. Black, Hispanic, and Asian Americans are also much more likely than white Americans to argue that inequality is one of the major problems facing the nation today. The discrepancies seen here parallel opinions about equal treatment in the criminal justice system. Over 80% of black Americans agree that minorities receive different treatment in the criminal justice system than white Americans, while only 51% of white Americans agree with that statement. In the wake of events like the 2014 police shooting of unarmed black teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, the number of black and Hispanic Americans who find the criminal justice system racially unjust has increased, while the number of white Americans who agree is decreasing. According to the Pew Research Center, more Americans agree that the US has made all changes necessary to give black Americans equal rights than disagree, and 63% of those polled believe that it is the fault of black Americans themselves, not institutional racism, that prevent them

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17 Ibid.

from getting ahead.\textsuperscript{19} In fact, “a majority of white Americans believe that discrimination against whites has become as big of a problem as discrimination against minorities.”\textsuperscript{20} While the polls at large reveal a society that promotes freedom, equality, and diversity, this breakdown demonstrates a jarringly different view of reality from minority Americans. The victims of discrimination in US society are voicing their concerns, but it is the voice of white Americans that win out in promoting these values. The hypocritical nature of a nation that flaunts its diversity and equal opportunity while its minorities are decrying racial injustice has become increasingly problematic. This is just the first of several hypocrisies that the five African authors studied in this thesis reveal through fiction, showcasing the large number of Americans, especially those privileged, who are unaware of the vast difference between the nation’s boasted values and the reality of American life for those less privileged.

Tied to American issues with racial injustice is its history of cultural superiority. As previously mentioned, Americans generally believe they are more tolerant than their parents’ generations and that the US welcomes and provides opportunity for immigrants. At the same time, however, the Aspen Institute’s survey shows that the majority of Americans think the US should not concern itself with the values of other countries since the US has established its own.\textsuperscript{21} From another perspective, in a poll of students in American Politics classes across various Belgian


\textsuperscript{20} Piacenza, “Americans’ Racial Disconnect.”

\textsuperscript{21} Penn Schoen Berland, American Values Survey, 31.
and Canadian universities, international participants overwhelmingly voted that the main problem with the US is its arrogance yet ignorance toward the rest of the world. Superiority and ignorance are reflected in the nation’s cultural history as well. From colonial times, Puritans believed that it was their God-given destiny to found a new nation. This sense of being divinely selected carried over into American ideology, perpetuating a self-aggrandizing and defensive culture. Caldwell notes that the US is a country united by ideology, but the flip side of that uniting factor is that any outside ideology is immediately perceived as a threat against the US. The need to maintain the American way of life is so strong that “the United States often fails to ‘rise above the ideology’ and continues to ‘permit dogma to falsify reality, imprison experience, and narrow the spectrum of choice.’” In this ideology, which centers on democracy, capitalism, and freedom, the individual is paramount. As such, the focus on the self is intertwined with American ideology. Yet promoting US ideals globally, which includes highlighting democracy as the final stage in cultural development, has propelled US cultural ideology into the international spotlight for criticism. While Americans may not always see themselves that way, there certainly is an egoist stigma attached to the American identity in other nations. This blindness towards their own supremacy complex becomes problematic when comparing US opinions about the tolerance of their nation with the views of those outsiders, i.e. Africans in this case.

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24 Ibid., 50.
Americans claim to be open, yet feel no need to embrace or understand other cultures’ values. This is a blatant statement of national superiority: we welcome you as a foreigner into our diverse nation, but leave your cultural baggage at the door. National pride and fervor for the American way of life has allowed many Americans to extol the superiority of the US while ignoring its harsh realities and remaining largely ignorant to different cultural views.

Polling and cultural history on the issue of national values reveal a gap between how most US citizens perceive their cultural values and how those ideals are represented in the real world. Statuses of privilege, race, and economic opportunities create different realities within this country, and yet Americans promote themselves as a united nation of liberty and equality. While the numbers and facts listed here present the overall problem, it is the intimate details of reality-based fiction that better break down America’s misunderstanding of itself. Thus with numbers and facts as the backdrop, this thesis will focus now on the role of immigrant fiction in analyzing US culture and the African author’s perspective on the issue of faltering American values.
CHAPTER 1B
LITERARY ANALYSIS OF IMMIGRANT FICTION

Since the turn of the 20th century, American immigrant fiction has emerged as a powerhouse genre. As celebrated American author Toni Morrison notes, “American literature, especially in the 20th century, and notably in the last twenty years, has been shaped by its encounter with the immigrant.”1 While immigrants themselves have continued to reshape the American identity over its history, immigrant fiction holds a particular ability to analyze and critique US culture from the perspective of a simultaneous insider and outsider. As opposed to statistics and facts on the topic, immigrant fiction conveys the subjective experience of living in America that connects to the audience on a human level like no other form can.2 This is especially critical when analyzing the daily experiences and values of those within American culture. University of South Carolina English Professor David Cowart furthermore argues that focusing on immigrant fiction creates a more realistic picture of a rapidly changing America, especially one that is less Euro-centric.3 As such, immigrant fiction provides an excellent comparison tool to understand how American values, especially those pertaining to tolerance and diversity, play out in daily life. The immigrant’s reaction to America, especially on the intimate and emotional level in fiction, can reveal to those

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blinded by privilege the lack of opportunity and equality available throughout the US. For other minorities, hearing these same complaints from black immigrants further validates their proclamations of systemic and cultural prejudice in the US. This thesis therefore embraces African immigrant fiction as a particularly poignant reflection of the reality of American cultural values.

Though immigrant fiction has always provided a unique analysis of American culture, a shift in modern immigrant novels demonstrates an increased criticism of US society. In the history of this genre, the first peak in immigrant fiction popularity occurred in the early 20th century. After World War II, an increase in ethnic literature from refugees fleeing to the US sparked a second peak. With this influx of diverse perspectives, many post-WWII immigrant writers called for an inclusive “dynamic pluralism” in the US. Modern immigrant literature after 1970, however, tends to focus more on race and its limits in the US. With that, these modern novels also tend to critique the US and conclude that it lacks support for racially diverse immigrants. Cowart notices this same newer trend, noting that immediately after arriving in the US, writers from postcolonial nations reflect more positive feelings about the US. This outlook becomes more negative, however, as those postcolonial authors write about experiences in the US in contemporary times (within the last 20 years). Another new feature common to more recent post-colonial immigrant writers is an opposition

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4 Muller, *New Strangers in Paradise*, ix.

5 Mendoza and Shankar, *Crossing into America*, xx-xxii.

against forced assimilation. Indian-born American author Bharati Mukhjeree, a leading modern immigrant writer, questions in her 1989 novel *Jasmine* how we judge immigrants who rid themselves of old ways in attempts to become completely American. Among the pioneering authors to begin asking this question, Mukhjeree does not endorse assimilation a means for Americans to embrace immigrants.\(^7\)

Malaysian-born American author Shirley Geok-Lin Lim argues that it is instead the “self that escapes assimilation… [that] renews American culture, making it ready for the future.”\(^8\) The five novels in this thesis, to be addressed more specifically in Chapters 2-5, follow these shifts in immigrant fiction. Though Americans view their nation as an open and tolerant hub for immigrants, these fiction stories increasingly argue the opposite. Forced assimilation into American culture is occurring in ways that non-immigrant Americans are either unaware of or do not see as problematic. As such, the reality of American tolerance for immigrants is much worse than how the nation’s citizens assume it is. Immigrant fiction is an essential tool in aiding the US to become a nation that truly embraces and understands the diversity that it so heavily lauds as a cultural value.

While post-WWII and postcolonial immigrant fiction represent two shifts in the genre’s critique of the US, the contemporary fiction novels addressed in this thesis also represent a movement towards an increasingly critical reaction to US societal ills. As

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\(^8\) Cowart, *Trailing Clouds*, 11.
these five novels were all published within the last eight years, they represent a very current perspective on American culture. Focusing on literature after 1970, David Cowart lists ten traits common to the majority of US immigrant fiction. Among these are struggling in school, focusing on what makes the homeland unlivable, immigrants exploiting other immigrants, and characters pushing through prejudice and homesickness to become empowered by their new American identity.9 The contemporary African novels, however, do not fit these descriptions. In the novels where school is involved, the immigrant protagonists are typically quite successful in their studies but instead struggle with the social aspects of American life. Though critiques of the homeland occur in these novels, they emphasize criticisms of the US and its false impressions of Africa more heavily. In Adichie’s novel, the protagonist even moves back to Nigeria, completely opposing Cowart’s notion. Inter-immigrant exploitation is uncommon in these novels, but awkward or depressed interactions between fellow immigrants are much more frequent in the realm of their negative experiences. Finally, many of the characters in these novels actually dismiss or fall victim to their new American identity rather than embrace it.

Struggling with the English language is also a common source of pain in postcolonial immigrant fiction.10 The five protagonists here, however, all come from English-speaking nations and are native English speakers. They instead struggle with Americans accusing them of having poor English skills because of their accents and

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9 Ibid., 7-8.
10 Ibid., 9-11.
assuming that they do not know English well. This key difference highlights the additional problem of Americans holding largely uninformed stereotypes about the continent of Africa specifically. The particular perspective of these authors, both as contemporary writers and as Africans, thus represents a new trend in immigrant fiction. The range of voices is widening, and their reactions to US culture are becoming more critical. Through their close observations of the nuances of American people and culture, these writers play a significant role in the analysis of contemporary American values.

Although immigrant fiction has increasingly garnered appreciation as a literary genre with much cultural insight, there has been a lack of study on the African immigrant’s novel. Throughout the entire range of scholarly books and articles on immigrant fiction used for this thesis, not a single study included an African immigrant’s perspective on America. The black immigrant perspective in general was difficult to find. The four main immigrant fiction scholars here (Muller, Cowart, Mendoza, and Shankar) all use the same author to address the black perspective: Caribbean-American writer Jamaica Kincaid, whose 1990 novella *Lucy* depicts a young Antiguan girl’s experience moving to the US and working as an au pair for a wealthy white family.\(^\text{11}\) That these four successful scholars could only find one source of black immigrant literature between them demonstrates the lack of black, especially African, perspectives in the study of immigrant fiction. This thesis therefore examines five novels with authors and characters from diverse African backgrounds, ranging

\(^{11}\text{Ibid., 138-159.}\)
across various countries of origin, genders, socioeconomic statuses, and more. It is necessary to explore the African perspective of immigrating to the US, as stereotypes and inaccurate perceptions of Africa are rampant in the US, increasing the prejudice that these immigrants feel from Americans. Furthermore, as the polls demonstrate, race in in the US is one issue of which white Americans have a very different perception than other Americans. These writers, all black, provide an outside perspective on race and discrimination that is unique and significant to better understanding the reality of tolerance and diversity in the US.

Immigrant fiction is therefore an excellent source of analysis on American culture. As the genre has progressed over time to more openly assert critiques on the US, it reveals the schism between how Americans perceive their cultural values and how those values exist in daily life. It is especially imperative to study the perspective of Africans immigrating to the US in fiction, as they provide a unique insight into race and minority issues that scholars have largely ignored. These contemporary and diverse African authors also defy common traits of past immigrant fiction, and thus constitute both a new path in the genre and in the criticism of American values. These characters’ particular experiences, though different in the details of their backgrounds and stories, reveal the shared experience by many minorities in the US of being let down and dejected by their false impressions of an America full of tolerance and opportunity. The emotion in their stories conveys this gap in cultural values on a human level through a particularly poignant medium.
CHAPTER 2
FALSE EXPECTATIONS

False hopes of achieving the American dream begin for many immigrants before their physical journey to the US itself. Through cultural imperialism and global marketing, the US spreads the ideals of its economic prosperity and opportunity to other nations. Thus people across the globe, like Americans, are told that the US holds abundant wealth available for all from an early age. As such, the authors of these novels demonstrate how US cultural imperialism spreads the delusion of the American dream worldwide, perpetuating the denial of economic hardship that exists for the nation’s lower class. Their works of fiction address this by identifying the pre-arrival expectations of US wealth in their home nations, the post-arrival shock at the nation’s lack of opportunity despite its emphasis on economic success, and the difficulty of explaining these problems to families back home who expect immediate monetary success. Their observations highlight how unrealistic US expectations of financial opportunity are and how detrimental those promises are for immigrants and others who depend on the assurances of the American dream.

Pre-arrival Hopes

Though the US generally claims that it is not an imperialist nation, especially when compared to Great Britain, France, and other colonizing European nations, it spreads its influence through various invasive yet non-colonizing means. It is therefore able to spread its ideology and values across the globe, and promote itself as the nation of greatest opportunity. Caldwell argues that the US practices four types of imperialism today: cultural imperialism, economic imperialism, moral imperialism, and
imperialism of ideology.¹ For the purposes of this paper, we will focus on the influence of cultural imperialism and how it imbues prospective immigrants with the idea that America is a superior nation and that it will provide the solution to their economic problems. The characters in these novels each experience the cultural influence of the US before their migration, convincing them that the US is the height of civilization and opportunity. One major means of advertising US greatness is through television. For Ifemulu and Obinze in Americanah, their visions of the US come from shows like The Fresh Prince of Bel Air, The Cosby Show, and Angel Heart. Ifemulu even notes that “‘you look like a black American’ was [Obinze’s] ultimate compliment.”² In We Need New Names, Bulawayo gives a tragic example of cultural imperialism when the children decide that they will give 11-year-old Chipa an abortion. In an attempt to make themselves feel more legitimate and capable of doing the procedure, they rename themselves as the doctors in the American drama ER.³ Similarly, Ike in Foreign Gods, Inc. visits his friend Chief’s house to find a group of young Nigerians watching the 1991 NBA Championship game on TV. The boys are wearing American brands like Tommy Hilfiger and FUBU, enthralled with the athletes, and unaware that the game occurred over fifteen years ago. They are very impressed when Ike tells them that he lives in the US, and they ask him why he doesn’t join the NBA to makes millions for playing a game. Ike concludes, “It was not the grunts or hard fouls or the fluidity of

¹ Caldwell, American Narcissism, 5.
movement that astonished them. These fans in faraway Utonki seemed enthralled by the basketball players’ storied wealth.”

Through the cultural imperialism of television, foreigners are drawn into a world of heavily edited perfection, where America holds the ultimate standards for beauty, professional abilities, and easy monetary success. Though these characters come from different economic statuses and nations, the private moments in these fictions reveal how televised imperialism reigns strong in each of their daily lives. The US therefore perpetuates these false hopes of incredible opportunity and cultural superiority throughout the world, as evidenced by the shared experiences of these Africans.

For these characters in their home countries, the US is also a land of excess in its most fantastical form. From advertisements and myths, they believe that both resources and extravagancies will be available to them in America. Due to a history of cultural superiority, the US propagates this message both at home and abroad. Ifemulu’s friends tell her that in the US, “you know you’ll have any kind of dress you want.”

For her boyfriend Obinze, “America became a place where bottles and bottles of Fanta were to be had, without permission.” Though these examples of delusional optimism seem childish and harmless, the extent to which these characters are willing to go in order to access to this limitless world is extreme. Bulawayo notes the universal desperation to get to the land of opportunity and wealth: “Girls flat on their backs,

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5 Adichie, Americanah, 123.
6 Ibid., 288.
[passport officers] between their legs, America on their minds.” In similar
desperation, when Ike visits his mother’s church in Nigeria, he is greeted by “a lineup
of women driven to insane distraction by dreams of American matrimony and dollars”
and hoping to be his bride in America. The search for a passport, visa, and/or green
card is unrelenting for thousands desperate to reach the land of purported opportunity
and excess. Sepha, the protagonist in The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears, sums up
American influence when he is drawn in by a subway poster for a local community
college, featuring a diverse group of happy and educated young people: “The liberal
idea of America is at its best in advertising.” Because of cultural imperialism,
spreading the message through TV shows, advertisements, and the myth of the
American dream, many foreigners put total faith into their dreams of American
opportunity. The resulting desperation and extreme measures that they resort to hoist
up those unhealthy expectations of the US. Though Americans generally hold onto a
positive image of the US, with equality and opportunity for all, its advertisements of
that dream create unrealistic expectations of wealth. As evidenced by these novels, the
results of perpetuating this American dream are often unexpectedly devastating to
those who seek it.

In addition to harming immigrants and Americans themselves, US cultural
imperialism damages many peoples’ perceptions of their own countries as inferior.

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7 Bulawayo, We Need New Names, 242.
8 Ndibe, Foreign Gods, Inc., 146.
9 Dinaw Mengestu, The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears (New York: Riverhead Books,
2007), 98.
This notion hinders the ideals of multiculturalism and acceptance from blossoming both in the US and globally. When Ifemulu’s best friend Ginika finds out that her family is moving to the US, she expresses sadness over leaving her friends. The Nigerian teenagers, however, revel in the excitement of America. They argue over which passport is best to have, the debate hinging on the UK vs. the US, concluding that American passports are the greatest.\(^{10}\) Darling and her friends express a similar competitive desire to join the US when they play the Country Game, each child acting as a chosen nation. Darling notes, “Everybody wants to be certain countries, like everybody wants to be the USA…. Who doesn’t know that the USA is the big baboon of the world? I feel like it is my country now.”\(^{11}\) Darling already begins to leave behind her current nation for the US in anticipation of her approaching move. In her shantytown, she much prefers her association with a “country-country” like the US over those lesser nations that no child wants to be, like Afghanistan, Sudan, and even her own Zimbabwe.\(^{12}\) The desire to abandon her home culture will come back to haunt Darling after she becomes overwhelmed with loneliness in the US, to be explored in Chapter 3. The concept of American cultural superiority has permeated the local cultures in these various African nations. Endorsing America as the penultimate nation both impedes the progress of smaller nations and preserves the delusion that the key to success lies in US ideals and culture. For the US itself, these beliefs also prevent the

\(^{10}\) Adichie, *Americanah*, 79.

\(^{11}\) Bulawayo, *We Need New Names*, 51.

\(^{12}\) Ibid. Note that although Bulawayo never reveals the name of Darling’s home nation, it’s political climate and general description greatly resemble Bulawayo’s home nation of Zimbabwe.
appreciation of different ideologies from blossoming within a nation that is supposedly
tolerant. The American superiority complex has thus developed into a multinational
issue, harming both those within the nation and eyeing it from afar.

American cultural imperialism and superiority thus infiltrated most of these
characters’ cultures before their arrival in the US. As such, their expectations for
American opportunity, tolerance, and material excess were set higher than the reality of
life in the US for the vast majority of immigrants. The delusion of the American dream
has caught fire across the globe. These high standards of American superiority
furthermore constrict opportunities for multiculturalism to grow in the US,
demonstrating the hypocritical nature of America’s purported tolerance and diversity.
The tragic consequences of these inflated advertisements, however, are demonstrated
more clearly in these immigrants’ devastating confrontations with economic hardship
after they arrive in the US.

*Post-arrival Shock and the Overwhelm of Capitalism*

The characters’ dreams of wealth in America are met with the country’s harsh
reality for minorities and immigrants. For Ifemulu, Darling, and Ike it manifests itself
in the fear and difficulty of working without the correct visa documents. For Sepha it is
in his perpetual attempts to avoid bankruptcy and keep his corner store open. For Julius
in *Open City*, it centers on his observations about America’s eternal push for progress.
The authors make an effort to demonstrate the immediate disappointment that many
immigrants experience upon arriving to the US and realizing their dreams are hopeless.
Still, however, because of the overwhelming influence of capitalism in America, many
immigrants buy into the constant push for upward progress, always reaching for more.
For most, this only leads to further disappointment in that American dream. These authors also showcase how capitalism and value seep into all factors of American life, especially interpersonal relationships as an immigrant. As a culmination, this section also explores how the constant struggle for material progress in the US blinds many Americans to the reality of economic disparity and inequality in the nation. Despite its claims of wealth and opportunity, the American capitalist system consumes the lives of many people in the US and becomes the revolving wheel of American progress. This overwhelming capitalism prevents many immigrants and minority or middle-to-lower class Americans from gaining wealth by suffocating their lives with the constant push for more. Reading their struggles in the fiction narrative highlights the psychological and emotional detriment of this suffocation in a way that other mediums cannot. The dreams of wealth that these characters had in their home countries are a far cry from what they come to experience, showcasing again America’s blindness to the reality of its own purported ideals.

The immediate disappointment of a lackluster America is palpable in several of these characters’ stories, forcing the reader to acknowledge the nation’s unfulfilled promises from the start. For Ifemulu, this sad realization occurs on the ride home from the airport in New York with her Aunty Uju. Ifemulu is disappointed by the sweltering heat, Aunty Uju’s rusty Toyota hatchback, and the bland buildings and billboards. “In the landscape of her imagination, the mundane things in America were covered in a high-shine gloss.”13 Upon arriving in Aunty Uju’s neighborhood, she also thinks to

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13 Adichie, Americanah, 127.
herself, “The street was poorly lit, bordered not by leafy trees but by closely parked cars, nothing like the pretty street on The Cosby Show.”¹⁴ Though these observations seem small, they are just the beginning in a series of larger disappointments for Ifemulu, who is forced into various low-paying and demeaning jobs because of her immigrant status. The gloss of the America that she saw on television shows and advertisements does not exist in Ifemulu’s America, coming into a middle-class immigrant family. Bulawayo also depicts this immediate sense of disappointment in one of the first-person plural chapters she writes from the universal perspective of immigrants in America, “How We Lived.” “When we got to America, we took our dreams, looked at them tenderly as if they were newly born children, and put them away; we would not be pursuing them.”¹⁵ Here Bulawayo presents the greater tragedy of immigrating to the US, on a larger scale than Adichie’s small example. Comparing these dreams to a newborn child that one gives away makes her observations all the more tragic. It does not take long for many immigrants in the US to realize that their previous hopes of achieving great success in the US were gravely overestimated. While the US claims to be the land where anyone can achieve wealth and success, the commonalities of immediate disappointment and stifling of American dreams reveal another perspective from immigrants. Conveying this realization through fiction allows for American readers to emotionally connect to the tragic nature of such

¹⁴ Ibid., 130.

¹⁵ Bulawayo, We Need New Names, 243.
disappointments, thereby encouraging a more honest analysis of promises of success in the US.

These authors use another means to convey a sense of immediate disappointment through their common depictions of immigrants who became taxi drivers despite their high-level job and education credentials. In the first few pages of Foreign Gods, Inc., Ndibe notes that Ike had “been working as a driver for thirteen years, ever since graduating from Amherst College, cum laude, in economics.” The frustration at his lack of opportunity despite his excellent American education is palpable. Adichie conveys a similar sense of anger in the very beginning of the novel when describing Ifemulu as she hails a cab on her way home from the airport. Ifemulu hopes not to get a Nigerian driver, who would either be angry at her superiority as the customer over him or brag about his former successes. “Nigerian taxi drivers in America were all convinced that they really were not taxi drivers,” she writes, due to the more esteemed jobs or societal positions they held in their home country. Mengestu also notes this trend of disheartened taxi drivers by pointing out the sad irony that his uncle, an important politician in Ethiopia who always had a driver, was now driving customers for a living in America. That this story of immigrants driving taxis despite their professional and higher education credentials is so common provides evidence enough of the frustrating reality of the lack of opportunity for immigrants in


17 Adichie, Americanah, 10.

18 Mengestu, Beautiful Things, 120.
America. This example is so common amongst immigrants that it almost makes the begrudged foreign taxi driver an archetype in contemporary immigrant fiction, demonstrating how significant these fiction stories are to updating the tropes of modern American culture. However, that most of the authors put these well-known examples in the early pages of their novels demonstrates an attempt to convey an immediate disappointment to the reader. These writers, all immigrants themselves, want to make it clear to readers that disappointment in the American dream begins at the upstart of their American experience, and carries through to the end. Not only is the frustrated taxi driver a common facet of the immigrant story, but the immediate letdown of American promises is as well.

Despite this initial shock of the economic limitations of immigrant life in the US, these characters still buy into the idea that they have a chance to indulge in American excess and obtain a life of Americanized wealth. Like many Americans, they become caught in endless efforts to obtain success by US standards, focusing on capitalist values. In her “How They Lived” chapter, Bulawayo describes immigrant’s desperate hunger to enjoy American standards of excess:

At McDonalds, we devoured Big Macs and wolfed down fries and guzzled supersize Cokes. At Burger King we worshipped Whoppers. At KFC we mauled bucket chicken. We went to Chinese buffets and ate all we could inhale – fried rice, chicken, beef, shrimp, and as for the things whose names we could not read, we simply pointed and said, We want that…. If only our country could see us in America, see us eat like kings in a land that was not ours.\(^{19}\)

These immigrants are proud of their overindulgence in American life. For them, endorsing US excess is one more step towards gaining the American standard of

\(^{19}\) Bulawayo, *We Need New Names*, 241.
success in owning and having plenty. The sad irony, however, is that their overindulgence occurs in the cheapest and arguably least healthy of American enterprises: the fast food corporation. These brands (McDonalds, KFC, Burger King) represent American overindulgence at its worst, yet participating in their excesses is a sign of American success for immigrants. Thus immigrants, regardless of early warning signs against it, fall into the unhealthy trap of striving for American excess. This struggle, however, frequently leads to the perpetual disappointment at the lack of opportunities for true capitalist success in the US.

Many immigrants, like Americans, continue to endorse the falsehood of the American dream even during moments of intense prejudice and poverty. Perhaps the most desperate case of desiring American success occurs in Sepha’s story. Despite the constant threat of bankruptcy and the prejudice that he and his friends experience, Sepha refuses to critically analyze his American dream. His entire opinion of America depends on the success of his store that day. On bad days he is angry at it, but on successful days “America [is] a beautiful place once again.”20 When he and his fellow African immigrant friend Kenneth visit a dealership so Kenneth can buy a car that solidifies his position in middle-class America, the dealers ignore them for an extended period of time. These two black immigrants do not fit the dealer’s typical description of serious car customers. Frustrated at their lack of help, the two men return to their homes. However, when Kenneth shows up the next day with the keys to his just-purchased used Saab, his elation at this sign of American success has seemingly

blocked out his experience of prejudice.\textsuperscript{21} Kenneth and Sepha keep struggling to force themselves into a standard of success that continues to reject them. Nigerian American journalist Dayo Olopade notes that “their marginal social position implies injustices, which – rather traditionally – compel the friends to compress their bodies and selves into a paradigm that has no use for their efforts.”\textsuperscript{22} In a more physical example, Ike maintains an intense desperation to obtain the success that he sees in the wealthy customers of deity statue curator Mark Gruels’ store, Foreign Gods, Inc. After stealing Ngene, the god of war, from his hometown in Nigeria and bringing it back to the US, Ike is overcome with an intense illness. Whether it is Ngene’s legendary curse or the culmination of Ike’s stressful journey is unclear, but he finds himself in an intense fever, vomiting on the floor and seeing visions of phantoms in his rundown apartment. Despite this, his fantasies of financial success and impressing Gruels push him to ignore his extreme symptoms. He dreams of “the welcoming waft of crisp dollar notes,” his American ex-girlfriend kneeling before him in desperation to have him back, and paying off his overdue bills with plenty of cash leftover.\textsuperscript{23} “The vision took on a palpable force, and that force melted his fear and sluiced away its sediments.”\textsuperscript{24} Dreams of financial success and the extreme measures to which these characters go in hopes of obtaining them prove fruitless despite their intense struggles. These authors

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 12-13.

\textsuperscript{22} Dayo Olopade, “Go West, Young Men: Conspicuous Consumption in Dinaw Mengestu’s The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears, as prefigured by V.S. Naipaul’s A Bend in the River,” \textit{Transition}, no. 100 (2009): 146.

\textsuperscript{23} Ndibe, \textit{Foreign Gods, Inc.}, 270.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
demonstrate how attempts to fit American standards of success cause immigrants to strip themselves of both dignity and health. Experiencing this desperation through an immigrant’s eyes allows the reader to sympathize with the subjective emotional and psychological trauma of perpetually broken promises of wealth. America becomes an all-encompassing symbol for economic success, but one that is never realistically obtainable. That these false hopes continue deep into the lives of immigrants in the US demonstrates the unrelenting power of the American dream, a concept which is a truly unhealthy delusion.

In the US, capitalism takes on such a power that it not only consumes many immigrants’ financial worries, but also shapes their relationships with others in America. Living in the gentrifying neighborhood of Logan Circle in Washington, DC, Sepha forms a relationship with a rich white woman who is new to the neighborhood, Judith. That relationship begins to unravel, however, in an intimately devastating moment several days before Christmas. Sepha comments to Judith that he prefers simple, cheap gifts. “‘That’s too bad,’ Judith said. ‘It looks like you’ve gone and picked the wrong family.’… Judith, without knowing it, had hit that central nerve whose existence I was reluctant to admit, but that when tapped, sent a sudden shock of shame and humiliation beneath which everything else had crumbled.”25 For Sepha, Judith represents a higher value that he can never achieve, thereby preventing him from maintaining a fulfilled relationship with this white American woman. Ike demonstrates a similar pattern of basing relationships around American capitalist

values. “Often, when he met a woman, he calibrated his interest based on the likelihood that she would consent to marry him.”26 The marriage would grant him a green card and the chance to have a corporate job. Due to the overwhelming American mentality of capitalism, love and marriage in the US are thus reduced to their market value.

Likewise, Ifemulu’s relationship with Curt, a wealthy white American, determines her opportunity for success in the US. It is through her relationship with Curt, which she always describes with an enjoyment that is simple and easy rather than passionate and true, that she obtains her first full-time office job. On that note, Professor Katherine Hallemeier writes, “…in the US[,] economic opportunity and political security alike require the love of the relatively powerful, as opposed to simply their payment or patronage.”27 Due to the overwhelming influence of capitalist forces in the US, personal relations become matters of exchanging value. Dr. David Harvey notes that for the economically disadvantaged, “we move from a situation in which individuals can express their individuality and relate in human terms to one another to one in which individuals have no choice but to conform and in which social relations between people become replaced by market relations between things.”28 Though this is true for all Americans, US capitalism’s power over human relationships is especially prevalent for immigrants who rely on these resources to maintain legal status in the


US. These fictional encounters unveil particularly poignant examples of how an emphasis on material success can corrupt even our most intimate human moments. The struggle to assimilate to American standards of success therefore prevent Americans from appreciating the humanity and multiculturalism that are intrinsic in the nation’s supposed values of diversity, liberty, and equality.

America’s vested interest in constantly furthering economic progress furthermore blinds it from seeing problems in the present, as demonstrated by the quiet observations of these immigrants. While wandering the streets of New York, Julius of *Open City* comments on the history laying beneath the city that most have forgotten. Upon reaching the site of the fallen World Trade Center, which at that point was not yet rebuilt as the Freedom Tower, he reflects on its environment and former meanings. Julius notes the surrounding restaurants, neon lights, and the enormous glass building of the World Financial Center. Looking out from a nearby overpass, he thinks, “The commuters with me marched along, shoulders up, heads low, all in black and gray. I felt conspicuous, the only person among the crowd who stopped to look out from the overpass at the site. Everyone else went straight ahead, and nothing separated them, nothing separated us, from the people who had worked directly across the street on the day of disaster.”29 Julius continues to comment that even before this tragic erasure of sites, the World Trade Center was built overtop the local street markets in the 1960s, and those streets were developed overtop the Washington Market and Christian Syrian

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neighborhood that existed there in the late 19th century.\textsuperscript{30} His observations remind the reader that Americans continue to progress forward, like the line of passersby with their heads down, ignoring the current scene. Their movement is representative of the ever-present financial manifest destiny in the US, constantly pushing for greater profit while ignoring those like Julius and his fellow immigrants who suffer at the expense of that progress.

Mengestu conveys the same frustration through Sepha’s admiration of the DC statues and monuments. Sepha frequently comments on the beauty of the monuments that are visible from his neighborhood: the White House, the Washington Monument, etc. He especially admires the statue of General John Logan at the center of Logan Circle. Sepha considers this same historically black neighborhood, however, as part of a “fragmented city” that is struggling to maintain its local culture during gentrification. Sepha’s comments “[point] at the inconsistencies that weaken a political system in which equality is more a concept, a construct, than a social reality.”\textsuperscript{31} For Sepha, who has bought into the American dream, the statues and monuments are those constructs, symbols of American greatness that he constantly strives towards. However, Sepha is so focused on the strength of these statues that he is largely blind to the prejudices that prevent many of his African American neighbors, and Sepha himself, from escaping poverty. In a society that constantly looks towards its future progress and idealized

\[\text{\textsuperscript{30}}\text{Ibid., 58-59.}\]

values, those who struggle in the present are left behind. Mengestu’s poetic metaphor enables readers to view this societal issue on an individual level, showing again the magnetic power of fiction to humanize problems of culture. Readers can thus better relate to how American consumer society encourages its members to wear blinders to contemporary problems of inequality, hindering the chance to truly tackle these issues and create the equal opportunity that its values wholeheartedly promote.

The immigrant authors here acutely demonstrate the social and financial devastation in the lack of economic opportunities for immigrants in the US, as well as the overwhelming power that capitalism has over all of American society. From the details of an American scenery that is duller than those advertised on television, to the exploitation of personal relationships for capitalist gain, these problems are prevalent throughout these varied African immigrant stories. Rather than being liberated by economic opportunities in the US, immigrants are often caught in “a cycle of dangerous unwanted jobs and the constant fear of deportation.”\(^{32}\) Immigrating to the US is therefore not a liberation, but instead a form of entrapment in the American capitalist system.

*Pressure from Home*

While many of the immigrants in these stories are quick to recognize the falsehood of the American dream, their families back home maintain the assumptions of guaranteed prosperity in the US. The strained relationship between these characters and their families at home demonstrates how the delusion of the American dream is

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perpetuated to avoid disappointment. Many of the protagonists lie to their families at home about their financial wellbeing in order to avoid upsetting parents that worked so hard to send them to the US. This, however, only preserves the mirage of economic opportunity in America. Furthermore, many of the main characters feel shame and anger at their failure to achieve the success they were promised, an unhealthy and undeserved side effect of the lies they bought into. In addition, since their families maintain the assumption that America is a land with money readily available, several of the families in these novels ask for increasing amounts to be sent back home. Their increased demands prevent immigrants in the US from accruing the wealth they were expected to. Though these stories are not universal to all immigrants, the general issue of pressure from families at home to succeed illustrates how the promise of success in America corrupts these familial relationships and forces unattainable goals on lower and middle class people in the US.

The vision of success in America is strong throughout the world, a goal that can be attained through migration and hard work. However, when many of the immigrants in these stories discover that this dream is false and much more than hard work is necessary to achieve success in the US, they feel the pressure to lie to their families at home about their financial wellbeing. For Ifemulu, this comes up frequently in phone calls with her parents. When her college graduation is approaching, her father asks about the job she will take when she finishes school. She informs her father that all students are assigned a career counselor. He responds, “America is an organized place,
and job opportunities are rife there.”

Ifemulu, maintaining the façade, answers, “‘Yes. They have placed many students in good jobs.’… It was untrue, but it was what her father wanted to hear.” Sepha sends the same lies home to his family when they ask about how his store is doing. “I tell them only that I own my own business, and that business is okay. Never good. Never bad.” In reality, Sepha has not paid his store’s rent or utility bills in several months and is on the verge of eviction. These characters convey the intense pressure to achieve success in America, the country that promised wealth and opportunity for them but gravely exaggerated those opportunities. In her universal chapter “How They Lived,” Bulawayo showcases how the lies also affect immigrants’ relationships with Americans around them. She describes sending MoneyGrams back home regularly. “We got messages that said Hunger, that said Help, that said Kunzima, and we sent money. When we were asked, You guys work so hard, why do y’all work so hard? we smiled.” The demand to become successful in the US and send money home forces them into a world that many Americans cannot understand. The immigrants that Bulawayo is speaking for do not admit the full truth to Americans about the extreme difficulties of finding work in the US and sending money home. The intense pressure of expected success that many immigrants undergo pushes them to lie to the people close to them, perpetuating the false expectations of the American dream even further. Yet again, America’s delusion of wealth corrupts

33 Adichie, Americanah, 248.

34 Ibid.

35 Mengestu, Beautiful Things, 41.

36 Bulawayo, We Need New Names, 246.
personal relationships and continues the cycle of advertising American opportunity and superiority. The fiction narrative, however, provides foreign authors with a safe space to illustrate how much immigrants also lie about American prosperity while still conveying empathy and understanding for those caught in the cycle of the American dream.

Also common amongst many of these immigrant stories is the shame and anger they feel towards families who do not understand the struggle of working in America. With expectations set so high for them by the myth of American prosperity, they are overwhelmed both by letting down families at home and discovering that they are not likely to achieve this idealized success. Ifemulu feels intense shame about the extreme measures she is forced to take in order to survive in America. She does not tell her friends and family back home that she accepts money in exchange for sexual favors out of financial desperation, and even stops communicating with them for months after the incident. She also does not tell them that she is hired for her first corporate job through her relationship with Curt, out of embarrassment that she was unable to accomplish her goals without the help of a white man. Her shame, however, is accompanied by anger at Nigerian expectations of America that she hears when she returns to her home country. Upon her return from visiting her nephew Dike in Massachusetts after his attempted suicide, Ifemulu becomes enraged at her friend Ranyinudo’s bewilderment. Ranyinudo questions, “I don’t understand how a fine boy like Dike would want to kill himself. A boy living with everything in America. How can?”

Ifemulu is infuriated in

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response, yelling at her friend that these struggles occur everywhere. She is exhausted of the perception that the US is a land of happiness and wealth for all, yet cannot accurately convey the difficulties of US life to people at home. With fictional characters, though, immigrant writers can safely express this anger through the veil of the novel.

Ike too feels shame and anger at the persistent complaints and pressures from his family in Nigeria. His mother relentlessly complains to Ike about the lack of funds he is sending home, and the townspeople’s gossip about her. “Her son is in America, they say, yet she’s left to chew sand for food.”38 Despite the fact that Sepha left Ethiopia fleeing a bloody revolution, rather than seeking economic opportunity in the US, his feelings of shame are still strong. Reflecting on when he will send money home next, Sepha thinks to himself, “I do it because I am in America, and because sending money home is supposed to be the consolation prize for not being home.”39 Regardless of his tiresome efforts to achieve success, Sepha still feels the shame of not taking better care of his family while he is in the economic promise land of America. These common feelings of shame and anger are the result of America’s false promises. Rather than the immigrant who works hard to achieve a happy, middle-class American life, we see many more stories of immigrants’ anguish and disappointment despite hard work. The exclusive perspective of fiction highlights the individual’s emotional distress from economic falsehoods and the ensuing breakdown of family relationships.

39 Mengestu, Beautiful Things, 41.
These characters go to extreme measures to live up to the expectations of their families and the American dream, but are bogged down by the realities of economic inequality in the US.

Since the delusion of American prosperity is perpetuated so strongly abroad, these characters also suffer at the hands of people at home who assume that sending more money is a simple request. These unrealistic expectations only add to the economic hardship and frustration of being an immigrant in the US. In *Foreign Gods, Inc.*, Ike’s mother’s pastor is especially guilty taking advantage of Ike because of these assumptions. In a letter from his sister, Ike reads, “God told Pastor Uka that you must send 1,000 dollars immediately. The money is to help the pastor destroy Ngene.”[^40] The corrupt Pastor Uka continues his bargaining when Ike arrives in Nigeria. He casually asks Ike to give $50,000 to the church. “You can’t tell me you don’t have fifty thousand dollars,” Uka exclaims.[^41] When Ike rightfully calls the pastor insane for assuming he has this type of wealth, Uka calmly suggests that Ike simply take out a loan. Ike is a taxi driver in a small New York apartment, yet his family and friends at home assume that he has bundles of money at his fingertips. It is inconceivable that obtaining money in America would be so difficult. Sepha conveys these assumptions from people at home as well. While reflecting on his time living with his uncle, he notes that they would send half of their earnings back to Ethiopia. His family expected this, because “to my mother in Ethiopia, I was the penultimate accomplishment of a


[^41]: Ibid., 166.
long-awaited dream.” The assumptions of American prosperity from their families back home create another financial and emotional drain on these characters. This occurs both at the hands of well-meaning families in need and imposters like Pastor Uka taking advantage of immigrants in the US. While it is the goal of many immigrants to help support their families, the fact that American advertising and cultural imperialism promote such an idealized version of American opportunities inflates those expectations. Thus many immigrants like these are caught trying to meet the grandiose expectations of both the American standards of success and their families’ dreams of prosperity.

**Conclusion**

Undue pressures from abroad therefore further contribute to the cycle of overwhelming capitalism that entraps many immigrants. They are lured in by false promises of American opulence, shocked when they arrive to discover the lack of economic opportunity, and unable to communicate this struggle to their expectant families back home. By continuing to promote the delusion of the American dream and refusing to acknowledge its economic inequalities, the US aids in this process of entrapment. Fueled by cultural imperialism and superiority, the promotion of America as a financial wonderland where all have a chance at success blinds both Americans and outsiders to the reality of these disparaging struggles. These novelists instead reveal how deceiving and devastating the nation’s delusions of readily available wealth

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42 Mengestu, *Beautiful Things*, 98.
can truly be for the personal lives of those struggling to achieve that success in America.
CHAPTER 3
ISOLATION AMIDST THE CROWD

If shock and disappointment describe many immigrants’ feelings soon after arriving in the US, then loneliness is the struggle that follows. Though most of the characters in these novels live in popular cities and have at least some network of friends, they experience a universal sense of isolation. The authors convey this stylistically through exploratory monologue and stream-of-consciousness writing. With the novel as an excellent resource to explore internal dialogue, readers can better understand the thoughts of these individual who are alone and in search of a connection. The stories also highlight how attempts at assimilation cause identity confusion for many immigrants, an experience that only worsens their loneliness. Despite these efforts to blend into American culture, most characters are frustrated to find that Americans consistently identify them by their foreigner status. The US is thus not as welcoming a melting pot as it claims. In fact, most of the characters conclude their stories by rejecting America because of these problems integrating into the culture. This trend in condemning the US as a final statement is a significant recent development in immigrant fiction. It highlights the hypocrisy of the nation’s idealistic claims of tolerance and opportunity, and the unacknowledged opinions of many immigrants that it is not in fact the superior country. The isolation that is so common throughout these stories thus reveals the exclusive nature of American culture.

The Wandering Monologue

Common to most of the novels is the wandering monologue, the perspective of a narrator who is alone and searching for some form of connection to their
environment. The authors use this internally reflective voice to demonstrate the character’s frequent solitude. Their search demonstrates the harsh loneliness and desire for community that many immigrants experience. Another signifier of this solitude is the stream-of-consciousness writing style that several of the authors utilize. This diary-like voice highlights the introverted observation that can dominate the life of immigrants and puts the reader in the immigrant’s position of feeling disconnected from the culture in which they are living. Finally, outright statements of desperate loneliness provide the most obvious indication that immigrant life in America is filled with isolation. The authors therefore reveal how unwelcoming the US truly is through these stylistic choices.

By writing from the perspective of a lone wanderer, the authors convey the solitary life of an immigrant in the US. The character who perhaps best fits that perspective is Teju Cole’s Julius. *Open City* maintains a “free-flowing form with no plot, narrated by a scholarly solitary walker.” Julius even resembles a subdued version of one of American literature’s most famous lone wanderers, Holden Caulfield. The majority of *Open City* consists of Julius reflecting on his place in history as he walks along the streets of New York City. Entering the subway, he notes, “Generations rushed through the eye of the needle, and I, one of the still legible crowd, entered the subway.” Thoughts like these dominate Julius’s narration. He frequently weighs the

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layers of history existing in New York against his tiny insignificance. The novel almost becomes a diary filled with intense personal reflection.³ This narrative in fiction allows the reader to gain a form of empathy for Julius, and relate to his daily emotional problems in ways that factual-based evidence cannot. Julius interacts with people in America, but does not form many real connections. He spouts an incredible knowledge of American history, but cannot fit himself into it. His solitary wandering reinforces how alone many immigrants feel in the US, even in the popular immigrant hub of New York, despite the perception of America as a welcoming melting pot of cultures.

Like Julius, Sepha is a character who spends most of his story in quiet observation of the world around him. A fellow solitary wanderer, Sepha’s loneliness is obvious in his frequent searches to obtain the lifestyle of Americans around him. He takes nightly walks around the city alone, peering into expensive houses to get a glimpse at their upper class life. He refers to this practice as “window shopping.”⁴ In one instance, Sepha follows an older tourist couple out of his store, onto the G2 bus, all the way to Dupont Circle where he exits behind them. He even waves goodbye to the couple, despite the fact that they are unaware of his presence the entire time.⁵ Sepha’s explorations show both his loneliness and desire to reach out and join the world he is observing. The “themes of exile and wandering” that pervade Mengestu’s novel are

³ Wood, “Enigmas.”
⁴ Mengestu, Beautiful Things, 53.
⁵ Ibid., 74-78.
situated in a long history of wandering American protagonists. His contemporary African perspective, however, reveals how currently the American values of inclusiveness and multiculturalism are unreachable for immigrants. Despite the fact that he has lived in this county for seventeen years already, he continues to search for his place in it. These authors modernize the American archetype of the wandering narrator to demonstrate the common pattern of loneliness for many immigrants in America. While the US may tolerate their presence, it certainly does not create the welcoming environment that most Americans assume it does.

The stream-of-consciousness flow in most of these novels further contributes to their intimate portrayals of loneliness in America. Without the bounds of correct grammar and punctuation, the reader becomes immersed in the narrator’s thoughts as they occur, again creating a diary-like experience. This pattern also creates a sense of urgency and desperation in the narrator’s attempts to connect with the world around them as they observe American culture. In the few occasions when Julius speaks to another character, Cole does not use quotations or grammatical indicators of any kind to signify dialogue. When Julius has a conversation with the woman sitting next to him on an airplane, Cole writes, “Then I asked what she did. I’m a surgeon, she said, retired now, but I did gastrointestinal surgery in Philadelphia for the last forty-five years. I told her about my residency and she mentioned the name of a psychiatrist. Well, he used to be there, maybe he’s gone now.” In Julius’ inner monologue, Cole also uses

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7 Cole, Open City, 88.
run-on sentences to push the story forward. Bulawayo incorporates similar practices in *We Need New Names*. She does not use any grammatical indicators for dialogue, and her monologues, both those that belong to Darling’s inner thoughts and those that represent the universal immigrant experience, use long stream-of-consciousness passages. On the lack of punctuation, James Wood notes, “What moves the prose forward is the prose – the desire to write, to defeat solitude by writing.”\(^8\) With the intimately revealing resource of the fiction narrative, the authors can fill the novels with monologue that accelerates forward in an effort to convey the desperate solitude of these immigrants’ lives in the US. Thus again American perceptions of the US as a welcoming land for immigrants are a far cry from the solitude that many of them endure.

Aside from these stylistic implications, outright declarations of loneliness fill these immigrants’ stories. Even amidst acquaintances, the characters are distracted by their lack of connection to the American people and culture around them. While having a picnic lunch with friends in Central Park, Julius thinks to himself, “Sometimes it is hard to shake the feeling that, all jokes aside, there really is an epidemic of sorrow sweeping our world, the full brunt of which is being borne, for now, by only a luckless few.”\(^9\) Julius, as a solitary wanderer, is one of these luckless few. Sepha also has a moment of realizing his extreme loneliness while working at his store on a slow day. “Left alone behind the counter, I was hit with the sudden terrible and frightening

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\(^8\) Wood, “Enigmas.”

realization that everything I had cared for and loved was either lost or living on without me seven thousand miles away, and that what I had here was not a life, but a poorly constructed substitution made up of one uncle, two friends, a grim store, and a cheap apartment.”

Adichie likewise conveys this loneliness in Ifemulu’s life in Philadelphia. Ifemulu is constantly struggling to overcome cultural boundaries and connect with Americans, but is frequently left lonely. When she moves in with three white American girls in a Philadelphia apartment, those feelings are only amplified. After attempts at forming a friendship prove futile, the roommates largely ignore her presence. At Ifemulu’s lowest point, after she is so desperate to earn money that she allows a man to pay for her sexual favors, she retreats to her room for weeks. The only point at which the roommates check on her is to demand the rent check. Though this is Ifemulu’s most isolated point, Jennifer Reese notes that “just about every page [is] tinged with loneliness.”

Though these examples do not always reference the US specifically, they set the common tone of isolation even when surrounded by people. These characters are enduring through solitude even when from the outside it looks as though they are surrounded by opportunities for connection and friendship. Only through narrative writing can readers access these intimate moments of terrifying realization. This illusion is reflective of the perception that life in America is

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10 Mengestu, Beautiful Things, 40.

welcoming and tolerant, when in fact it is often not. Pointing out this loneliness directly allows the authors to lift the veil somewhat on these false American ideals.

**Forced Assimilation**

Where these stylistic choices reveal immigrants’ loneliness, the authors also demonstrate how US culture pressure immigrants into assimilating into American standards of normality. In experiencing this, immigrants lose great parts of their subjective identity. Although these immigrants all come from English-speaking backgrounds, their common stories of struggling to communicate reveal the heartbreaking reconstruction of their selves to fit American criteria. Practices like these, as well as changing hairstyles, appearance, and general approaches to social situations create a conflict of double-consciousness for many immigrants as they force themselves into new identities. The practice of removing one’s subjectivity in order to adjust to cultural ideals is thus conveyed as a destructive process occurring in America. The overall result is detachment and isolation from both the immigrant’s home culture and their new home, not belonging completely in either world. Their struggles to change also contradict the American ideals of tolerance and individuality that the US is so quick to claim. These common stories of forced assimilation therefore highlight the hypocrisy of the strict standards of joining American culture.

One of the most common examples of forced assimilation amongst these African novels is characters changing their speech and accents in order to communicate in a strictly American style. What is unique to these stories, as compared to many other immigrant novels, is that the protagonists are all native English speakers. Still they force their English into new accents and tones to please American standards. In
Ifemulu’s early years in the US, she notices this practice with her Aunty Uju. “‘Dike, put it back,’ Aunty Uju said, with the nasal, sliding accent she put on when she spoke to white Americans, in the presence of white Americans, in the hearing of white Americans. *Pooh-reet-back.* And with the accent emerged a new persona, apologetic and self-abasing.”

Darling notices a similar struggle when her Aunt Fostalina tries to order Victoria’s Secret lingerie over the phone. After Aunt Fostalina goes back and forth several times with the phone representative who does not understand her accent, the representative suggests that she order online instead. In a heated response, Aunt Fostalina cries, “‘I am not ordering online. I am speaking English, so as far as I’m concer-’ ‘Maybe you can spell it?’” asks the representative. After an intense and debasing struggle to order the angel lingerie, the representative finally understands and exclaims, “Oh! You mean enjel!”

Forcing these characters to change the accent of their native language does not occur just as a means of communicating better, but also as a form of demeaning outsiders. For Aunty Uju, the new accent represents being forced to assimilate into a lower class of society as an immigrant and a black woman living in America. For Aunt Fostalina, the struggle to have her English understood showcases how immigrant standards of normality are rejected in the US. Aunt Fostalina is speaking English, but not the right kind of English, which she is frequently reminded of. Strict American cultural standards of language and communication also

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12 Adichie, *Americanah*, 133.

13 Bulawayo, *We Need New Names*, 198.

14 Ibid., 199.
imply societal status for these immigrants, and thus demean their sense of confidence and acceptance in the US.

While at first the protagonists observe others struggling to maintain both identity and voice in America, they soon confront these issues head on. For these characters, being forced to make the decision to change their accent is a struggle of losing identity for the sake of assimilation. When Ifemulu registers as a new student at her American university, the woman signing her in notes that although Ifemulu claims to speak English, she doubts how well she understands the language. After this patronizing incident, Adichie notes, “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. An in the following weeks, as autumn’s coolness descended, she began to practice an American accent.”

For Ifemulu, societal pressures force her to adopt a new accent that sheds her former sophisticated-sounding self. This degradation is intensified considering the woman’s assumption that Africans are not English speakers, when in fact many, including Nigerians, are. Fellow immigrants also reveal stories of a physical threat against foreign accents. While Ifemulu is getting her hair braided at an African-owned salon, Halima, one of the hairdressers, describes the struggles her son experienced in the US: “When I come here with my son, they beat him in school because of African accent…. Now accent go and no problems.” Halima adds a sad irony to the story, however, as

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16 Ibid., 230.
she tells it in the midst of admiring a South African customer for her flawless American accent. Despite the fact that it is the cruelty of American society that forces these immigrants into changing their voices, many of them still greatly admire those who successfully achieve this forced American attribute. Adichie presents the change as a disheartening process of surrendering oneself to prejudiced forces. She successfully highlights the US’s lack of tolerance and overwhelming societal pressures to conform to American standards of normality. These problems permeate both native-born American and immigrant cultures in the US, perpetuating the need for outsiders to strip their individualism in attempt to integrate into American culture.

Aside from the accent, most of the protagonists have various parts of their identity stripped away in order to accommodate American cultural standards. Ike and Darling experience this loss through the transferal of names. While driving his taxi, Ike picks up an American businessman. When the passenger asks about his name, Ike responds, “‘I-K-E. Ee-kay.’ ‘That’s Ike,’ the passenger said in an excited tone…. ‘But my name means strength,’ Ike said. ‘Ee-kay, not Eekay. It’s short for Ikechuwa – God’s strength.’ ‘Ike’s a proud American name too.’… He strode away in a brisk gait, leaving Ike with two $50 bills – and a venerable American name.”¹⁷ Ike is supposed to be proud and grateful that he now has a new American identity, as if his former African self was inferior. Bulawayo addresses name changing from a perspective of fear: “When they debated what to do with illegals, we stopped breathing, stopped laughing, stopped everything, and listened…. [B]ecause we were illegal and afraid to

be discovered we mostly kept to ourselves…. [W]e hid our real names, gave false ones when asked.”

In America, new names are forced upon these characters for a multitude of reasons, including cultural superiority in Ike’s case or fear of deportation in Darling’s. On the changing of names in *We Need New Names*, Polo Belina Moji writes, “That identities can be stolen, traded, suspended and even erased through the name… illustrates the property-like potential in names to transact social value.”

These characters accept losing central parts of their identity to appease the Americans around them and protect themselves against those same Americans. Since this process of change occurs mostly secretly, the narrative is a necessary tool to unveil this fear and assimilation. Joining American culture implies the need to conform to its norms, regardless of its proclamations of diversity and individuality.

Ifemulu likewise conveys this loss of individuality when she confronts the rules of hairstyles in the professional world. In *Americanah*, Adichie uses hair as a central symbol for identity. The book opens on Ifemulu traveling far from Princeton to visit the black hair salon outside of town. Adichie weaves the hair salon scene in and out of the story to convey the complexities of ethno-racial relations in America as well as Africa. However, when Aunty Uju insists that she will take out her braids and relax her hair for a job interview at a doctor’s office, Ifemulu questions, “So there are no doctors with braided hair in America?”

At this point Ifemulu is still new to the US, and does

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18 Bulawayo, *We Need New Names*, 244.


20 Adichie, *Americanah*, 146.
not completely understand the unwritten rules of adjusting oneself to appease white Americans. Later on, however, Ifemulu is talking with her African American colleague, Ruth, before a job interview. Ruth advises her, “‘Lose the braids and straighten your hair. Nobody says this kind of stuff but it matters. We want you to get that job.’ Aunty Uju said something similar in the past, and she had laughed then. Now, she knew enough not to laugh.”

Yet again Adichie pinpoints the moment when Ifemulu realizes the need to change another part of her identity in order to meet American standards. She can relate to this exclusion both as an immigrant and as a black woman in American culture. These changes are forced not only in social settings but in the professional world. Moving to the US and being forced into new forms of being destroys these character’s subjectivity. Thus American, largely white American, cultural pressures overwhelm immigrants into losing central elements of their identity, directly contradicting claims of diversity and tolerance.

Trying to assimilate into American cultural expectations while maintaining some sense of self creates an unstable dual personality in many of these characters. Adichie highlights Ifemulu’s first recognition of her new self after she has been dating a white American boy, Curt. “It was with Curt that she had first looked in the mirror and, with a flush of accomplishment seen someone else.”

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21 Ibid., 250.

22 Note: This issue reflects both cultural and racial prejudice, thought the latter will be analyzed further in Chapter 4.

23 Moji, “New Names,” 188.

24 Adichie, Americanah, 235.
first, Ifemulu soon realizes that this new persona is a false one, caught up in the blissfully ignorant life of a white American man. Acknowledging the fragility of this new identity leads to both the downfall of their relationship and Ifemulu returning to her true self again as someone who is acutely aware of American inequalities. In a more mundane fashion, Sepha’s uncle confronts this duality daily. Reflecting on his uncle’s work driving a taxi in Washington, DC, Sepha notes, “My uncle turned himself off every morning the moment he left the apartment for work. He didn’t turn himself back on until ten or twelve hours later when he returned home. ‘Nothing’ was the right word for the way he lived.” These characters make the decision to create multiple identities in order to integrate into American culture. Stripping their subjectivity and creating new personas to fit the American tribal categories creates a DuBoisian double consciousness struggle for immigrants in the US, especially black immigrants. These characters maintain both their original self as an African along with the self that the US expects them to be. This is a psychological struggle for immigrants largely because of American preconceived notions about immigrants and the cultural forces that pressure them to assimilate into particular roles in the US. Whether it is the exotic girlfriend (Ifemulu), the frustrated taxi driver (Sepha’s uncle, Ike), or the numerous other tropes the authors identify, the US continues to strip immigrants of their individuality in favor of upholding the status quo, leading only to psychological detriment.

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Immigrants feeling intense pressure to deconstruct their identity is unfortunately common in America. Reading their stories in novel form intimately highlights the emotional and psychological damage that these standards of assimilation cause. Characters are pushed to dramatically change both physical and psychological aspects of themselves in the hopes of being welcomed into American culture. That American culture forces these norms of assimilation onto immigrants when it is supposed to be a melting pot of cultures is a great hypocrisy. What is worse, however, is that despite these changes, immigrants are still pigeonholed as outsiders in the country they so desperately try to join.

*Constant Reminders of Otherness*

Even through numerous attempts to assimilate into American culture, immigrants are constantly reminded of their otherness in the US. For these African immigrants, this comes across physically through advertisements for American standards of beauty that are far different from their appearance, as well as direct ridiculing from Americans. Socially, Americans ostracize immigrants by creating societal boundaries and stigmas against them, reinforcing their cultural differences, and giving shallow signs of welcoming that do not foster true relationships. As immigrants, their exclusion is further aggravated by people in their home countries labeling them as outsiders after leaving for the US. Immigrants therefore experience rejection from all sides, unable to connect with both their home country and their new one. Though they come to the US expecting to successfully delve into a new community, they instead find that the US is constantly labeling them as outsiders by overemphasizing their differences. These practices may seem subtle to the average American committing
them, but when read from the immigrant perspective they unveil the cultural environment of exclusivity for foreigners in the US. That these immigrants receive this treatment from both Americans and their native people leads to increased feelings of loneliness for them in the US.

For the female characters in these novels, American standards of beauty are a particularly harsh reminder of their foreignness and reinforce feelings of inadequacy as black non-Americans. Beauty advertisements and products, which largely portray and target white women, are a daily reminder of their otherness. Ifemulu’s Aunty Uju expresses mild annoyance at this problem during her early days in the US: “This place is so white,’ she said. ‘Do you know I went to the drugstore to quickly buy lipstick, and all the shades were too pale! But they can’t carry what they can’t sell!”27 Though their frustration is mild at first, it grows into a defining dilemma for these women of color while in America. When Ifemulu’s boyfriend Curt suggests that Essence magazine is racially skewed for being devoted exclusively to black women, she is forced to teach him a lesson on the true racial skewing in America. Ifemulu brings Curt to the bookstore where they collect numerous fashion magazines and count the number of black women featured in advertisements, totaling four. Of the beauty products advertised, there is no foundation dark enough for her skin, no hair product for hair as curly as hers, etc. 28 Ifemulu’s argument reflects trends of white-washing and excluding models of color that are so prevalent in the modern fashion industry. As recently as the

27 Adichie, Americanah, 212.

28 Ibid., 364-366.
spring/summer 2015 fashion campaign season, white men and women accounted for an average of 85% of the models for major brands.\(^{29}\) Despite growing up in American culture, Curt as a white American man is blind to the racial exclusivity of American beauty standards. Instead, the pressure is on Ifemulu, as someone who is ostracized in that world, to instruct Curt on the problems that pervade his society. These constant reminders of difference in terms of physical beauty produce a sense of inadequacy and loneliness in these immigrants.\(^{30}\) Like Curt, most Americans are unaware of how unwelcoming the US is for those that do not fit its norms. As such, the nation perpetually denies this problem and continues to ostracize outsiders, even in the most basic form of physical othering.

Other characters also feel ridiculed for their physical differences, but from direct interactions with Americans. Their experiences highlight not only their implicit exclusion from beauty but also the open criticism of their bodies. As a young child new to school in America, Darling notes, “Kids teased me about my name, my accent, the way I talked or said things, the way I dressed, the way I laughed…. Those crazy kids teased me about everything, even the things I couldn’t change, and it kept going and going so that in the end I just felt wrong in my skin, in my body, in my clothes, in my


\(^{30}\) Note: This problem affects not just immigrants but also many people of color in America as well. The relationship between black Americans and African immigrants will be examined further in Chapter 4.
language, in my head, everything.”\textsuperscript{31} Regardless of her attempts to change parts of her identity in order to assimilate, American students still ridicule Darling for her physical otherness. Like Ifemulu this includes her hair, another example of this physical attribute representing a central part of identity for African immigrants. Even from a young age, immigrants are imbued with the notion that their physical otherness is inferior to American norms of beauty. Darling’s Aunt Fostalina is forced to face this realization during her embarrassing phone conversation with the Victoria’s Secret representative, outlined earlier in this chapter. While Aunt Fostalina is struggling to purchase this lingerie, a beauty product meant to accentuate her body, Darling notices that “she has scribbled the word \textit{angel} all over the magazine, and the naked woman with the bra and underwear is all clothed in black ink, the letters like tiny angry insects.”\textsuperscript{32} Blacking out the model’s body is a symbolic reminder of how Aunt Fostalina is prevented from obtaining American beauty standards. Aunt Fostalina may have achieved a modicum of success, engaging in the “satirized American dream” by ordering fine lingerie from a catalog, but she is still forever ostracized “by being labeled as a ‘foreigner.’”\textsuperscript{33} The fact that she cannot order the lingerie because of her accent, despite being a native English speaker, only highlights that her foreignness is the large reason she is excluded. American people persistently remind these characters

\textsuperscript{31} Bulawayo, \textit{We Need New Names}, 167.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 197.

\textsuperscript{33} Moji, “New Names,” 187.
of their physical differences, thereby preventing their beauty from being recognized and isolating them as others in US society.

In addition to reminders of their physical otherness, immigrants are also frequently confronted by accusations of their otherness socially. These social reminders often prevent them from engaging with Americans below a surface level, and on a larger scale demonstrate how American culture does not integrate outsiders as well as it proclaims to. In Ike’s American life, that social struggle centers on Americans constantly commenting on his accent, an indicator of otherness that frequents each character’s story. When trying to identify himself to the Foreign Gods, Inc. store clerk after a past visit, the clerk exclaims, “I recognized that accent!” Ike stiffened at the word ‘accent,’ and his eyes blazed. Oblivious, she continued.”34 While discussing that same store with his taxi passenger, the passenger has trouble understanding Ike: “‘Foreign, did you say? Foreign what? It’s hard to understand your accent.’ Ike brushed off the hurt.”35 Even through the end of the novel, comments on Ike’s accent continue to haunt him. As he is about to sell the Ngene statue and reach the pinnacle of American financial success, store-owner Mark Gruels notes, “You were here about two weeks ago. I can’t forget that accent buddy.”36 Ike does not attempt to change his accent like other characters, but it becomes his most infuriating demarcation of otherness throughout the book. He is forced to endure these comments silently, as

35 Ibid., 19.
36 Ibid., 330.
the expectation for foreigners in the US is to learn the “correct” form of English, as if their African English is unacceptable. Narrative novels, however, allow immigrant voices to express those silent hardships to a larger audience with the protection of fictitious character identities. They can more overtly reveal how Americans focus on the qualities of difference rather than similarity in order to create invisible boundaries between immigrants and themselves. Americans highlight these differences in such a way that trivializes and objectifies immigrants, rather than appreciating those qualities as diverse cultural attributes.

Many of the social indicators of otherness are also subtle reminders of the lack of access that immigrants have to resources that are more common to Americans, reinforcing the false promises of the American dream. Darling faces this harsh reminder while working as a housekeeper for a wealthy, white American family. She notices the daughter, Kate, wearing a Cornell t-shirt just like the one her childhood friend Bastard wore in Zimbabwe.

Her hair is wet and she is wearing Bastard’s Cornell shirt. You go to Cornell? I say. When I was thinking of applying to college, I was going to apply to Cornell because I felt like I already knew the place, like we had a connection, but then later I saw the tuition and almost died; if you are an international student like me, it is very hard to get scholarships. But still I am excited by the shirt, and I’m hoping Bastard will appear out of the air, that the whole gang will just appear. I start thinking of the things we would do in this neighborhood whose name I keep forgetting. I open my mouth, maybe to tell Kate about Bastard and the others and Paradise, but then I close it; there is nothing to say.

37 Note: One wonders if these experiences occur as frequently with other native English-speaking immigrants, British or Australian, for example.

38 Bulawayo, *We Need New Names*, 269.
The Cornell t-shirt is a reminder to Darling both of what she has lost from her past as well as the dreams she cannot obtain for her future. She sees the shirt through the lens of inequality, a reinforcement of what she will never have. That Kate, a wealthy American teenager who is ignorant to both these struggles and her own privilege, now wears that shirt casually is a frustrating reminder to Darling of their differences. Darling creates an entire dialogue in her head to speak with Kate about, but soon realizes that her experiences are far from anything Kate could understand as a privileged American. Kate’s attitude towards Darling, cold and distant, fortifies those boundaries. Bulawayo’s passage therefore highlights how Darlings is excluded both from social engagement with this American teenager and the American dream of success. Even this small encounter, centered on a t-shirt, conveys the multitude of ways that immigrants confront signs of their outsider status in daily American life.

These methods of ostracizing range from subtle hints at cultural differences to heated targeting of immigrant groups in public. While the examples previously examined mostly focus on smaller incidents, Teju Cole synthesizes their ulterior message towards immigrants. After listening to his Arab friend Farouq’s struggles interacting with Americans and engaging in Western society, a troubled Julius ponders the greater cultural message behind these moments of othering. He reflects on the suspicious looks that Western passengers give Farouq when he boards trains, noting, “I had been wrong, I decided. What Farouq got on the trams wasn’t a quick suspicious glance. It was a simmering, barely contained fear. The classic anti-immigrant view,

which saw them as enemies competing for resources.”\(^{40}\) Though they are in Belgium discussing these issues, they apply the problem to both the Western world at large and the US specifically. On the US, Farouq complains about the false sense of warmness that many Americans give upon first meeting them. While working as a janitor at an American school, Farouq struck up a conversation with a professor about theoretical physics. “The principal was completely responsive to this conversation, and in this generous American way, he said, Come to my office sometime and we’ll talk more…. But, Farouq said, continuing his story, when I saw him next, he not only refused to speak to me but actually pretended he had never seen me before.”\(^{41}\) Having experienced similar false invitations, Julius describes American friendliness as “an arm around the shoulder, a disarming gesture, a promise of complicity” that ultimately proves to be insincere.\(^{42}\) These two immigrants, one Moroccan and one Nigerian, experience not just a small reminder of their otherness, but blatant targeting from Americans in many public scenarios. Julius reveals the larger xenophobic forces at play in American culture that push immigrants to the fringes of society. By creating an environment of hostility or, at best, a shallow friendliness, the US socially shuts out the immigrants that it claims to so openly welcome.

These social boundaries apply even to immigrants who have been in the US for many years, inhibiting the growth of a truly diverse American culture. For a seventeen-

\(^{40}\) Cole, *Open City*, 106.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 112-113.

\(^{42}\) Ibid., 112.
year immigrant like Sepha, the rules of social engagement for immigrants are already clear. After befriending Judith, a wealthy white woman new to the neighborhood, he braces himself for a failed attempt at love. Before their romantic relationship has even started, Sepha notes, “I thought about how years from now I would remember this with a crushing, heartbreaking nostalgia, because of course I knew even then that I would eventually find myself standing here alone.” He engages with Judith knowing that their relationship is doomed because of their vast differences by American societal standards, especially while living in a tumultuous gentrifying neighborhood. As the most well-worn immigrant in any of the books, Sepha is preemptively aware that his otherness will block him from engaging with Americans. When protests erupt down the street because a black family is being evicted from their home, a controversial issue in his gentrifying neighborhood, Sepha is concerned but observes from a distance: “I stepped outside of my store once to see what was happening, but I knew my place. It was behind the counter, not in the middle of a dispute in which I had no part to play.” Sepha’s friends and neighbors are involved, and the ongoing gentrification is a direct threat to him, yet he has experienced enough cultural pressure to know that he is an outsider. His role as an immigrant is not to engage, but to continue working quietly in the background. Mengestu’s character is significant because while we see the other characters experience the shock of being immediately othered, Sepha is well-versed in it. Reading from his internal monologue, the audience understands how he has

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44 Ibid., 192.
hardened to the unwritten rules that ostracize him as an immigrant from certain forms of social and community engagement. Thus while the US may accept these characters into the nation, powerful cultural behaviors prevent them from fully engaging with the American society and people.

While physical and social othering prevent many immigrants from feeling at home in the US, they are also confronted with rejection from people in their home countries who see them as American others after migrating. Though this problem is not caused by American culture directly, it is a common problem that Americans fail to consider in their interactions with immigrants in the US. While Darling is speaking with her childhood friend Chipo back home about problems in their home country, Chipo responds coldly: “Darling my dear, you left the house burning and you have the guts to tell me, in that stupid accent you were not even born with, that doesn’t even suit you, that this is your country?”\textsuperscript{45} Darling is inundated with loneliness and guilt as she is reminded that not only did she leave behind her friends and family, but also that her friends are unaware of how unfulfilling her life in America is. Ifemulu likewise faces the same struggle when talking to friends and family in Nigeria, who refer to her and others who move to the US as Americanahs. Ifemulu feels disconnected from her home culture but at the same time does not feel at home in the US either. Sepha actually feels this guilt from Americans who ask him about the state of his home country. While in the US, images of starving children amidst a bloody civil war in Ethiopia cover the news. “When pressed for a response, all I could do was shake my head and agree that

\textsuperscript{45} Bulawayo, \textit{We Need New Names}, 288.
yes, what was happening in Ethiopia was indeed a tragedy. But what did I know about any of this? I was a student, studying engineering. All I wanted was to tuck my books under my arm and stroll across the campus lawn with that permanent grin stretched across my face.”

Sepha frequently feels guilty for leaving his family with his nation in turmoil, but when Americans bring it up to him he is further reminded of how disconnected he is from that world. He pushes forward, maintaining a smile in order to avoid feeling the guilt and heartbreak of losing his home. Each of these characters faces twice the pressure of exclusion, as they are ostracized from both the US and their home nations. This issue is key for Americans to understand, as a frequent ultimatum for immigrants is to either assimilate or return to one’s home country. Both those options are incredibly difficult for foreigners in the US, as they are isolated from both sides. With this considered, the US can be an even harsher environment of loneliness and rejection for many that attempt to join it.

By constantly feeling isolated in the US, the life of an immigrant in America becomes a psychological struggle of loneliness and guilt. Reminders of their displacement from both Americans and people back home, though mostly from Americans, prevent immigrants from fully integrating into US society, thereby also impeding the growth of multiculturalism in the US. This isolationism comes in the form of physical othering, social exclusion, and reinforcing a generally anti-immigrant cultural mindset. On her personal experience immigrating to the US, Bulawayo comments, “I went to America at the age of eighteen… you get there and America

46 Mengestu, Beautiful Things, 98.
makes you realize that you are not really one of us."\textsuperscript{47} It is because of this constant othering that many of the characters conclude by universally denouncing an exclusive and rigid American culture.

\textit{Rejection of American Culture}

One unique trend in these novels is their rejection of American culture in response to this forced assimilation and ostracizing. As mentioned in Chapter 1B, most immigrant novels end with the protagonists embracing their new land and American identity. These contemporary African characters, however, either choose to defy the rules of cultural assimilation or condemn America’s treatment of immigrants as an unfit life. Their new trend proves that the state of immigrant isolation in the US is extreme and turns away many from joining American society.

After experiencing such intense pressure to assimilate, many characters react by rejecting conformity in favor of embracing differences. Ifemulu defies American cultural standards by returning to her original Nigerian accent, stripping away the fake American voice she began using after her college registration. When a telemarketer compliments her on sounding American, Ifemulu realizes that she has taken too much pride in her American accent. “Why was it a compliment, an accomplishment, to sound American? ... And so she finished eating her eggs and resolved to stop faking the American accent.”\textsuperscript{48} She maintains this attitude, accentuating her Nigerian English voice, for the remainder of her years in the US. Julius too questions assimilation into

\textsuperscript{47} Moji, “New Names,” 187.

\textsuperscript{48} Adichie, \textit{Americanah}, 216.
American values and culture: “It is impossible, and it is arrogant, to think that the present reality of Western cultures is the culminating point of human history. The principal had been talking in all these terms – melting pot, salad bowl, multiculturalism – but I reject all those terms. I believe foremost in differences.” Like Ifemulu, Julius rejects conformity for variety. They voice their discontent with US culture and ultimately reject its major unwritten requirements for immigrants: adjust your accent and be grateful to live in such a bountiful nation. Unlike the Americans they encounter who highlight differences to reinforce cultural boundaries, Ifemulu and Julius call for unity in appreciating diversity. In fact their arguments show great potential benefits for both immigrants and Americans in the US. Studies performed by professors at the University of Texas and Columbia University indicate that diversity in the classroom and workplace improves critical thinking and error detection in task-based activities. 

Aside from rectifying false American claims of tolerance, embracing these differences could arguably improve education and job performance in the US as well. Their approaches demonstrate how immigrants identify and counteract American isolationist practices. They push American readers to reconsider the pressure to assimilate, and to better understand the true value of difference that immigrants bring to the US.

When attempts at actively resisting American cultural standards prove fruitless, these characters conclude that immigrant life in the US is an unsuitable existence. In


Sepha’s final thoughts before the novel ends, he reflects on advice from his father. “I would like to add my own saying to the list now, Father: a man stuck between two worlds lives and dies alone. I have dangled and been suspended long enough.” Sepha is done straddling two identities, be they Ethiopian and American, idealizing American wealth and confronting his poverty, loving and hating his store, etc. He refuses to be forced into rigid American categories of being any longer. Adichie writes a more concrete final reaction against American cultural boundaries. After feeling alone for long enough, Ifemulu chooses ultimately to move back to Nigeria rather than stay in the supposed land of opportunity in the US. Cole takes the poetic route in his final declaration on the unsuitable lives of immigrants in America. In the novel’s final pages, Julius visits the Statue of Liberty, noting its importance as a historic American symbol of both freedom and the immigrant narrative. He also recalls the structure’s more practical use as a lighthouse in the 19th and 20th centuries. Though it guided ships to safety, a record number of birds died from confusion when flying past the flame. The US government sold the bird carcasses to milliners and shop owners in New York, and donated them to museums for scientific research as well. Julius notes, “The birds, many of which were clever enough to dodge the cluster of skyscrapers in the city, somehow lost their bearings when faced with a single monumental flame.”

Julius’ final story is an analogy for the extreme difficulty of maneuvering US culture as an outsider. Like the birds, immigrants can handle surviving daily life in the city. They

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51 Mengestu, *Beautiful Things*, 228.

52 Cole, *Open City*, 258.
struggle immensely, however, and fail in large numbers at adjusting to the monolithic force of an overwhelming and exclusive American culture. When they do, the US exploits these immigrants for their own benefit. Julius therefore concludes, like Sepha and Ifemulu, that immigrants have never been and may never be truly welcome in the US. That this conclusion is becoming more common in the world of immigrant fiction represents a global shift towards criticizing the hypocritical nature of American culture. The US does not live up to its claims of embracing diversity, but instead ostracizes immigrants to such a degree that they are outwardly rejecting it as an intolerant and prohibitive nation.

Conclusion

American isolationist behaviors reveal a nation that purports diversity to in reality be a culturally segregated country where immigrants are both stripped of their cultural identity and lead largely solitary lives. These authors sharply convey this dilemma by writing from the lonely wanderer perspective, depicting their characters’ struggles with forced assimilation, and revealing the many forms of cultural othering that immigrants face. Audiences gain significant insight by reading from the perspective of the immigrant character, as it enables an empathetic bond to develop between reader and character. Their emotional struggles, therefore, create a compelling argument for the rejection of American cultural hypocrisy, and even Western values at large. Cultural practices that ostracize immigrants prove incredibly harmful for modern US society. As a nation built on the immigrant success story, resisting the integration of foreign cultures into the US hinders the nation’s opportunities to fulfill its promises of tolerance and equality. It is through revealing personal accounts that these authors
convey the tragic impact of a deceptively prejudiced American culture on both these individuals and the nation at large.
CHAPTER 4  
RACIAL AND CULTURAL DISCONNECT

While isolation describes much of these characters’ interactions with Americans, there also exists a significant microcosm of their relationships with both African Americans and other immigrants. As African immigrants, the characters here bring with them a different interpretation of race in society. Primarily this chapter addresses how their interactions with black Americans reveal a portion of the deep complexities of racial issues in America. These authors characterize many of the interactions between African immigrants and African Americans as strained and awkward, a result of their different racial cultures and histories. Their differences highlight the diversity of black identity in America, as well as the controversy over what role race plays in a person’s identity. Next this section analyzes how African immigrants experience both commiseration and rejection from fellow immigrants, leaving them again isolated in the US. Once the complexities of these various relationships are exposed, it is then important to recognize that despite their different cultural contexts, there are still universal struggles that plague the lives of black people in America, regardless of nationality. Overall the intricacies of these relationships between various people of color in America underscore how much of a central and homogenizing descriptor race can be in the US. American culture resists complexities to the black identity, either by ignoring race completely or focusing instead on it as the first and most overwhelming part of an individual’s identity. Resisting these complexities dehumanizes people of color and allows Americans to ignore the major issues of racism in contemporary times. It also creates an identity crisis for black
people in America who struggle to balance their individualism with the institutional forces of racism that deny those personal rights. By highlighting the intricacies of race relations in the US, these authors convey the need for Americans to confront their systemic race problems and acknowledge diversity within the black community.

Awkward Interactions between Black Americans and Africans

Throughout the novels here, African characters maintain an array of different relationships with African Americans. Though they share the same race in a country with heated race relations, their connections throughout daily life are often strained and awkward. The intimate moments of their interactions reveal how cultural history has shaped different views on race between black Africans and Americans. It is significant to note the role of fiction in lifting the veil on these average yet personal moments for a wider audience to see. While African Americans’ attempts to bond over the homeland of Africa leave these characters feeling uncomfortable, the African protagonists also have difficulties connecting with African Americans as part of the black community. Many of these African characters also identify acts of racism in America differently than their black American acquaintances, leading to heated disputes between them. These missed connections and disagreements, however, reveal the complexity of black identities in the US. Using personal moments between black people, these authors also unveil the issues of race that white America is less aware of. By doing so they both prevent audiences from ignoring the issues of race in America but also humanize the black community as a diverse and ideologically complex cultural group.

Just as many Africans idolize America while in their home countries, there is a pattern of African Americans idolizing their connection with the “Motherland” of
Africa in attempts to bond with African immigrants. Their efforts, however, come off as awkward and hollow to the characters here, who do not feel the same connection.

While visiting the post office, Julius encounters an African American postal worker who greets him and notices his Nigerian accent. The man begins reciting poetry about being expelled from “the Motherland.” He interjects phrases of approval, referring to Julius as “Brother Julius,” exclaiming, “You feel me?” or “You know it,” and even proclaiming “I am raising my daughters as Africans.”

In response, Julius listens quietly in discomfort: “I made a mental note to avoid that particular post office in the future.” Adichie also writes about these attempted cultural connections with a slight sense of ridicule. After beginning her college classes at a US university, Ifemulu befriends a Kenyan student, Wambui. Wambui explains the club politics for black students on campus to Ifemulu. “Please note that in general, African Americans go to the Black Student Union and Africans go to the African Students Association…. The African Americans who come to our meetings are the ones who write poetry about mother Africa and think every African is a Nubian queen.”

Though the connection to their ancestral land is so important to some black Americans, these Africans do not feel any reciprocal connection. For the protagonists coming from Africa, race is not as central to their identity as it can be in America. Ifemulu notes, “I came from a country where race was not an issue; I did not think of myself as black and I only became black

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1 Cole, Open City, 186-187.
2 Ibid., 188.
3 Adichie, Americanah, 172-173.
The different relationships they feel between race and identity prevent many African Americans from fully connecting with black Africans. The authors’ descriptions of attempts at forcing those connections demonstrate how Americans emphasize race as a defining factor of persona to an extreme degree. They also expose many African Americans’ desires to belong in Africa since racial injustices prevent them from feeling accepted in the US. Using fiction as their vehicle, the authors’ stories of intimate encounters like these highlight the details of how race in America is a monolithic force, yet one that has not been unpacked enough for the public at large to honestly confront.

This is not to say that the African protagonists have no sympathy or desire to bond with black Americans. Their sympathy, however, does not fully bridge the gap of different cultural understandings of race. Looking out over Ellis Island, Julius revisits an earlier encounter with a black taxi driver unsuccessfully trying to spark conversation with him. “Ellis Island was a symbol mostly for European refugees. Blacks, ‘we blacks,’ had known rougher ports of entry: This, I could admit to myself now that my mood was less impatient, was what the cab driver had meant. This was the acknowledgement he wanted, in his brusque fashion, from every ‘brother’ he met.”5 Though Julius understands the mode of connection and sympathizes with the cab driver, he still seems somewhat uncomfortable using terms like “we blacks” and

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4 Ibid., 292.
5 Cole, *Open City*, 55.
“brother” to connect them. As a Nigerian, he does not automatically acknowledge blackness as a major factor of his identity, and thus struggles to bond with African Americans over it. The sad irony of this struggle, however, comes later when Julius passes the same two African American men walking down the street twice. “There had earlier been, it occurred to me, only the most tenuous of connections between us, looks on a street corner by strangers, a gesture of mutual respect based on us being young, black, male; based, in other words on our being ‘brothers’. … It was a little way of saying, I know something of what life is like for you out here.” Immediately after this small sign of connection, the two men proceed to mug Julius, sending him to the hospital. Sepha too acknowledges the struggles of his African American neighbors who are fighting the forces of gentrification that are eradicating their people and culture. Yet he feels it is not his place to join community meetings or protests, as he is a black African and not American. Still though, their sympathy cannot always overcome cultural differences. Julius does not feel automatic connections with other black people in America, for though he acknowledges America’s racist history he knows that his family is not among those that entered through “rougher ports.” Unlike the postal worker he met, he feels no automatic bond from race. The same disconnection applies for Sepha’s reasoning behind not joining his neighbors’ protests. Their awkward interactions with black Americans serve as a reminder to the readers of

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7 Cole, *Open City*, 212.

the complexity of black identities in the US, while still acknowledging some of their universal struggles.

Another major obstacle that complicates the relationship between African Americans and African immigrants in the US is their different interpretation of American racism. Accustomed to various cultural histories of racism, the Africans in these novels do not recognize certain incidents as occurring out of prejudice that black Americans identify as emerging from an inherently racist US culture. For Ifemulu this tension materializes most obviously in her romantic relationships. While holding a fellowship at Princeton, she dates Blaine, an African American professor with a proclivity for social justice activism. Though most of their relationship consists of agreeing on these issues of racial justice for black and other minority communities in the US, disagreements on their approaches to smaller issues tear them apart. At the grocery store one afternoon, a white woman asks Ifemulu, “Your hair is so beautiful, can I touch it?” Ifemulu gives the woman permission and is not bothered by the encounter. Blaine, however, is enraged that Ifemulu would allow the woman to treat her like a black experiment. “He expected her to feel what she did not know how to feel.” Later on when Ifemulu skips a protest against the campus police’s racial profiling, Blaine becomes furious at her again. “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

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10 Ibid.
African American.”

What Blaine as an African American man finds to be a totally reprehensible microagression rooted in racism, Ifemulu does not see as a huge problem. As Katherine Hallemeier notes, these disagreements between Blaine and Ifemulu “suggest the stifling effects of American certitudes that are experienced and understood as private, despite having been profoundly shaped by a long shared history of white supremacy.” The overwhelming power of racial oppression in the US invades even the most intimate of relationships. Though they share a global history of oppression as members of the black race, Blaine’s experience struggling against it as a minority in the US makes him hyper aware of these microaggressions in a country where race is such a defining factor of identity. Adichie thus successfully uses the fiction narrative to showcase the devastating power of uniquely American cultural inequality to individuals’ daily moments, an especially significant point for American readers blind to such inequalities.

In their interactions with African Americans, these African protagonists also demonstrate the occasional condescension towards African American culture, similar to how many white Americans ridicule that culture. A common example of this cultural disconnect occurs around the different vernacular of black American and African English-speakers. Ike faces this issue when he first meets his soon-to-be girlfriend Bernita, an African American woman from Queens. Ike informs her that he is from Nigeria, to which Bernita questions, “So you’s a king or what?” He wanted to

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11 Ibid., 428.

say, *No, a plebeian, a cipher, and a certified member of the lumpen proletariat*, just to fashion a language that would deter her.”\(^{13}\) Though Bernita addresses Ike with some ignorance about his culture, his condescending response mocks her casual, African American vernacular. Darling addresses her young African American friend, Kristal, with the same mockery. Arguing about their different versions of English, Kristal claims that Darling cannot sing in English, largely because of her Nigerian accent. Darling responds, “And what is *naamean? Naamsayin? I’m finna go?* All that nonsense you speak. Is it hard for you to just say *I beg your pardon*?”\(^{14}\) After a tense silence, Kristal turns to Darling, “First of all, it’s called Ebonics and it be a language system, but it be our own, naamean, ‘coz we ain’t trynna front…. I beg your pardon, my ass, trynna sound like stupid white folk.”\(^{15}\) Again, both of these confrontations originate with the Americans lightly mocking the Africans for their voices. Still, the protagonists’ disdainful responses expose how little they know about black American culture. As Kristal notes, their vernacular developed in a strictly African American context as an independent declaration of culture.\(^{16}\) Coming from Nigerian culture, Ike and Darling do not fully appreciate the growth of a uniquely African American vernacular aside from mainstream white culture in the US. Like much of white America, they ridicule it as low-class and inferior to their version of the language.

\(^{13}\) Ndibe, *Foreign Gods, Inc.*, 28.

\(^{14}\) Bulawayo, *We Need New Names*, 223.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 224.

Through these conflicts, the relationships between black Americans and Africans highlight the cultural mockery that many African Americans face. Their stories also relay how immigrants can feel out of place even in black communities, while still reminding readers of the cultural condescension that African Americans endure in the US today.

Of all the authors examined here, Adichie discusses the issues of race in America most frequently and candidly. She poignantly observes how Americans avoid confronting race directly through Ifemulu’s interactions with both black and white Americans. Shopping with Ginika, a fellow African immigrant, she tries to identify to the cashier which sales assistant had helped her, one of whom is white and one of whom is black. After asking vague questions about their hair color and height, the cashier ignores the issue and tells Ifemulu she will figure it out later. Leaving the store, Ifemulu exclaims, “I was waiting for her to ask ‘Was it the one with two eyes or the one with two legs?’ Why didn’t she just ask, ‘Was it the black girl or the white girl?’ Ginika laughed. ‘Because this is America. You’re supposed to pretend that you don’t notice certain things.’”

Ifemulu also refuses to believe that in relationships, race does not matter. In an interracial relationship, she notes, “the minute you step outside, race matters. But we don’t talk about it, we don’t even tell our white partners the small things that piss us off and the things we wish they understood better, because we’re worried they will say we’re overreacting, or we’re being too sensitive.”

17 Adichie, Americanah, 155.

18 Ibid., 359.
highlights how Americans either pretend that racism no longer exists or ignore the topic of race completely in order to avoid confronting the issue. Ifemulu somewhat sarcastically proposes a solution to the problem: “In America, racism exists but racists are all gone…. Maybe it’s time to scrap the word ‘racist.’ Find something new. Like Racial Disorder Syndrome. And we could have different categories of sufferers of this syndrome: mild, medium, and acute.”

Adichie creates a poignant protagonist voice in Ifemulu as a “non-American black” woman, acting both as an insider in the world of racism but an outsider as someone not raised in American culture. She feels the pain of this problem but can ridicule it from a safe distance. She also has seen enough of American culture to know that it is afraid of facing its own demons of racism. Her suggestions reflect upon the feelings of contemporary white Americans, most of whom agree that the US has made all changes necessary to give equal rights to African Americans and are much less likely than minorities to agree that inequality is one of the major problems in modern US society.

Through a dark sarcasm and a unique protagonist perspective, Adichie criticizes the dangerously harmful nature of ignoring the overwhelming issues of American racism. Her underhanded comments confront both white American cowardice and maintenance of the US racial power structure’s status quo.

Race does not seem to be an automatic unifying factor for the African and African American characters in these novels. Though this leaves the protagonists

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19 Ibid., 390.

20 See page 9 for details.
feeling detached from the US, the authors still manage to denote several significant
cultural observations on race in the US through this disconnection. By portraying a
vast array of opinions and characters within America’s black community, they
complicate and humanize the representations of black identity in the US. At the same
time they reveal how much Americans emphasize race as an overpowering and central
factor of identity, in such a way that counteracts its own individualist values. However,
the cultural misunderstandings that these African protagonists commit with black
Americans also reinforce how disregarded and ridiculed much of African American
culture is in the US. The racial issues that the authors here begin to unpack are densely
complex, but benefit from the spotlight of fictional scenes. That they approach them
from an African viewpoint and can unfold these matters with such poignancy serves as
a reminder of the essentialness of outside perspectives.

Commiseration and Rejection from Fellow Immigrants

A common pattern amongst these immigrant stories is the characters’
friendships with other immigrants being sources of both pain and comfort. When
forming relationships with Americans, black or white, proves difficult, a fellow
immigrant can make an easier transition into this new country. However, at the same
time, it can force these characters into a niche as an outsider that makes it even more
difficult for them to connect with American culture. In the stories here, this struggle
can be seen by comparing the divergent pathways of characters like Julius and Sepha,
who avoid pockets of their home countries in America, against Darling and Ifemulu,
who embrace those communities. While forming connections to their homes can make
a lonely life in American more comforting, this frequently forces the characters to be
representatives for their home country and lose their individuality. This further prevents them from integrating into their American life, as it turns these immigrants into cut-out icons of their nationality rather than real people. Lastly, one commonality amongst these stories is their encouragement towards finding friends amongst all immigrants, not just Africans, rather than Americans who cannot relate to their struggle. Their practices highlight the exclusivity of American culture and provide the truest example of embracing diversity these characters have witnessed in the US yet. Still, despite attempts to connect with other immigrants or recreate home, the existence of many immigrants in the US is one of displacement and loneliness. What their efforts at connecting with international immigrants do provide, however, is an example to American readers of how to appreciate and embrace diversity not just in ideology but in practice.

While some of these characters embrace pockets of their home culture in America through connections to other Africans, others reject those immigrant relationships as forced. Ifemulu and Darling find these communities of fellow Africans mostly to be a temporary comfort, a reminder of when they belonged somewhere. For Ifemulu this sensation occurs when she first joins the African Students Association (ASA). “Their different accents formed meshes of solacing sounds…. They themselves mocked Africa, trading stories of absurdity, of stupidity, and they felt safe to mock, because it was a mockery born of longing and of the heartbroken desire to see a place made whole again. Here, Ifemulu felt a gentle swaying sense of renewal. Here, she did
not have to explain herself.”

Darling shares this sense of excitement when her Aunt Fostalina’s friends come over, friends that she is told to call aunts and uncles. She ponders, “I think the reason they are my relatives now is they are from my country too – it’s like the country has become a real family since we are in America – which is not our country.”

The group gathers to eat traditional food and listen to various types of African music, but Darling is most intrigued by their dancing: “They get up, clutch their stomachs and hearts like women in pain, raise their arms in prayer, crouch low as if they are burying themselves. They rise again, abruptly, stand on their toes and stretch their hands like planes headed for faraway lands.”

These protagonists’ experiences with other African immigrants share two significant commonalities. Firstly, it is important to note that this pan-continental sense of unity is uniquely African. No other continent professes the type of cross cultural connection, with groups like the Organisation of African Unity, as Africa’s pan-Africanism.

Thus relationships between Africans of different nations, though their specific cultures may differ, hold a special connection to home for all of these diverse African immigrants. Darling references her “relatives” as being specifically from her country, yet Bulawayo never actually names the nation. She is representing some sense of that pan-Africanism in her vague anonymity. Secondly, both of these girls’ relationships that connect them to

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22 Bulawayo, *We Need New Names*, 163.

23 Ibid., 164.

home are tinged with sadness. Ifemulu’s “heartbroken desire” to feel whole again paints her excitement with a lurking melancholy of feeling out of place in America. Darling’s relative’s dance exudes both a sense of pain and longing for that “faraway land” of home. Because these authors chose the vehicle of fiction and write with such poetic sensitivity, readers can connect emotionally with the immigrant character’s sense of longing. While their relationships with fellow African immigrants at first seem to offer comfort, they are ultimately tinged with the sad reminder that they are isolated in the harsh land of America.

Other characters reject the notion of joining communities made up completely of African immigrants and instead attempt to more fully integrate themselves into American culture. Unfortunately for them, though, this often leaves immigrants caught between two worlds, unable to fully fit in anywhere. Sepha and Julius provide prime examples of these dilemmas. The apartment complex where Sepha’s uncle lives, also where Sepha first lived in the US, is occupied mostly by Ethiopians who maintain their culture within the building walls. “Living here is as close to living back home as one can get, which is precisely why I moved out after two years and precisely why my uncle has never left.”25 Visiting his uncle years after moving out, Sepha steps off the elevator at the wrong floor. “When I got off the elevator, I was met by a row of open apartment doors, each one guarded by a young woman who stepped into the doorway and stared at me with more apprehension and fear than I’ve ever been greeted by. I turned back to the elevator immediately, feeling as if I had intruded onto something

sacred, something that I had no right to witness or speak of again.”

Julius too does not feel the need to connect with fellow African immigrants. At one point, Julius hails and enters a cab flustered, angry, and silent during a rainstorm. During the ride, the driver says to him, “You know, the way you came into my car without saying hello, that was bad. Hey, I’m African just like you, why you do this?”

Julius maintains his frustration throughout the ride. “I wasn’t sorry at all. I was in no mood for people who tried to lay claims on me.”

In their attempts to branch out from the pockets of their home cultures in America, both characters receive a push back from fellow African immigrants. Meanwhile, they also receive pushback from Americans in their pursuits towards the American dream and joining US culture. As described in Chapter 3, the characters then end up stuck between two worlds. Thus whether these immigrants accept their local African communities as a form of self-comfort or avoid them to pursue their integration into America, they are left feeling lonely and distant. The exclusivity of American culture and difficult choices these immigrants are forced to make as outsiders in the US only exacerbate their disconnection from the outside world.

Within inter-immigrant relationships, many individuals are also forced into the position of representing their entire nation as an immigrant in a different land. In this, many immigrants lose their individuality in favor of an expected portrayal of their

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26 Ibid.


28 Ibid.

29 See page 67.
home. Adichie conveys this experience most in Ifemulu’s visit to the African hair salon. Aisha, a young Senegalese woman, works on Ifemulu’s hair while a Nigerian movie plays on the salon’s television. “‘You know her?’ Aisha asked, glancing at the television screen…. ‘No,’ Ifemulu said. ‘But you’re Nigerian.’ ‘Yes, but I don’t know her.’” Searching for connections to the familiarity of their home continent, the African hairdressers force stereotypes and a group mentality upon Ifemulu. Discussing how young a recent customer with children was, they expect Ifemulu to share their opinion. “They looked at Ifemulu for her agreement, her approval. They expected it, in their shared space of their Africanness, but Ifemulu said nothing and turned the 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…. 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.”

Julius commits the same stereotyping as the hairdressers when he encounters a group of fellow African immigrants at a night club. A friend tells him that the club-goers are all Rwandan, and Julius is shocked. “The realization that I had been with fifty or sixty Rwandans changed the tenor of the evening for me. It was as though the space had suddenly become heavy with all the stories these people were carrying. What losses, I wondered, lay behind their laughter and flirting? Most of those there would have been teenagers during the genocide. Who, among the present, I asked

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30 Adichie, *Americanah*, 16.
31 Ibid., 126.
myself, had killed, or had witnessed killing?" While his perceptions are more well-informed than those that many Americans have of Africans, to be explored more deeply in Chapter 5, he still automatically associates these Rwandans with genocide and tragedy. Common situations like these prevent the truly diverse array of African identities from revealing themselves in a country where perceptions of Africans are based largely on stereotypes. Because many of these immigrants feel the pressure of being a representative of their African nation in a land where Africans are not as common, they often either indulge in those stereotypes themselves or press them upon other immigrants. The African immigrant’s fiction narrative reveals the subtext of identity loss and social pressure in these seemingly average scenarios. Immigrants like Ifemulu, however, who are able to resist that pressure continue to complicate the notion of African identity in the US and encourage those around her to accept both their Africanness and their individuality as two complimentary elements of identity.

One interesting trend in these African immigrants’ interactions with other immigrants is their emphasis on making friends with internationals over Americans. This pattern demonstrates both the how the nature of American culture is particularly exclusive and how immigrants actually portray a better example of true diversity and acceptance. Ifemulu’s first friend in the US is her neighbor Jane, a woman from Grenada. Jane comforts Ifemulu when she feels overwhelmed or lonely, and gives her advice on getting by in America. New to the African Students Association, Ifemulu

32 Cole, Open City, 139.
33 Adichie, Americanah, 137.
receives a large portion of advice from her Kenyan friend, Wambui. Wambui tells her, “You will also find that you might make friends more easily with internationals, Koreans, Indians, Brazilians, whatever, than with Americans both black and white. Many of the internationals understand the trauma of trying to get an American visa and that is a good place to start a friendship.” Americans, however, are largely ignorant to how difficult it is just to arrive in the US as a foreigner. Bulawayo reflects the same sentiment in one of the universal immigrant perspective chapters of *We Need New Names*:

The others spoke languages we did not know, worshipped different gods, ate what we would not dare touch. But like us, they had left their homelands behind. They flipped open their wallets to show us faded photographs of mothers whose faces bore the same creases of worry as our very own mothers, siblings bleak-eyed with dreams unfulfilled like those of our own, fathers forlorn and defeated like ours. We had never seen their countries but we knew about everything in those pictures; we were not altogether strangers.

The struggle of coming to America supersedes cultural boundaries for these immigrants. As the ultimate lone wanderer of the group, it is interesting that Julius’ most significant friend in *Open City* is Farouq, a Moroccan café owner. Though Farouq is from a North African nation, he identifies more closely with Arab culture and ethnicity. The two bond over feeling ostracized and undermined in the Western world and prejudice politics that dominate America. This emphasis on intercultural bonds within immigrant life provides a much better example of the American ideals of

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34 Ibid., 173.

35 Bulawayo, *We Need New Names*, 245.

diversity than any interactions these characters have with Americans. These international relationships are so common and positive that they become almost a rule of thumb, as Wambui notes. Their relationships with a wide array of internationals also reveal the numerous issues of being an outsider in the US that Americans are ignorant to, including both the difficulties of getting travel documents and feeling excluded from the culture. Their friendships that embrace cultural difference with understanding, rather than by overemphasizing abnormalities, provide a shining example of tolerance to the empty claims of American diversity.

Relationships between immigrants in these novels turn into largely bittersweet reminders both of home and solitude in the US. Whether the characters here choose to embrace the pockets of their home communities in the US or forego them for American communities, they are still left feeling isolated in this new nation. At a further cost to their identity, many of these characters also feel the pressure from fellow African immigrants to act as the representation of their home country, stripping them of their individuality. Where they find a source of solace, however, is in relationships with other internationals, those who may come from completely different cultures but understand the immigrant struggle in the US. To American readers, the insights of these novels demonstrate how difficult it is for immigrants to form those connections with Americans, who are largely ignorant to that struggle and less adept at accepting diverse cultures. Overall their inter-immigrant relationships highlight both the difficulties of maintaining one’s identity as an outsider in the US, and the overwhelming isolation that immigrants as a whole feel in America.
Different Histories, Shared Struggles

Despite the differences that black immigrants may have between each other and African Americans, they do share some unified understanding of living under racism in America. The authors highlight this common ground through the characters’ encounters with several forces of an oppressive American system. Economically, several of the characters share an understanding with African Americans on just how much the white-controlled capitalist economy in the US prevents them from achieving the American dream. These African characters also learn to share the same fear of the justice system, especially the police, as black Americans. Most frequently though, they share the common struggle against daily racisms, or the constant societal confrontations against these characters’ black identities. Overall black immigrants share with African Americans the struggle to balance their individuality, a value the US lauds, against their cultural identity and the oppressive forces that constantly inhibit their upward mobility. The intimate moments created in fiction unveil the intricacies of these layered race relations. Though their understanding of each other’s cultural history may cause rifts, black immigrants and black Americans relate on being racially oppressed in the US, a problem largely ignored by American society.

Part of the shared experience of black Americans and immigrants is their struggle to overcome structural inequalities in the US capitalist system. Sepha’s story is driven largely by his desire to achieve success with his bodega, a desire only rivaled by his love for Judith. Yet when an arsonist burns down Judith’s home, forcing her to move away, Sepha oddly commiserates with the man guilty. The arsonist, Franklin Henry Thomas, is an African American man that Sepha had seen selling various goods
locally. After Thomas and his family had been priced out of their home due to gentrification, he burned down Judith’s house and later attempted to squat there. Reading about his story in the newspaper, Sepha becomes almost empathetic to Thomas. “I was surprised when I first saw the picture, how closely he and I resembled each other…. The name was so decidedly American, so quintessentially colonial in its rhythm and grandeur. I began to think of Franklin Henry Thomas as my coconspirator in life. I even thought briefly of visiting him in jail so I could tell him that I alone understood why he did what he did.”

Despite the fact that Thomas burned down the house of the woman that Sepha loved, Sepha still feels a strong connection and understanding towards him. He can relate to feeling so taken advantage of by capitalism as a black man in America that extreme measures like arson seem like a logical response. Through his internal monologue, readers understand how he bonds with Thomas over the frustration of a corrupt and racist economic system that keeps people of color from achieving the American dream, including owning a beautiful home like Judith’s. His sentiments are reflected in the national surveys reviewed earlier in this essay that show African Americans to be much less likely than white Americans to believe that the American dream is still possible. Their mutual understandings of systemic inequalities overcome both cultural and personal differences for these fellow black men living in the US.

37 Mengestu, Beautiful Things, 225.

38 See pages 9-10.
Ifemulu also becomes keenly aware of these structural economic inequalities after living in the US for thirteen years. On her way to visit this particular African hair salon for the first time, Adichie writes, “It would look, she was sure, like all the other African hair braiding salons she had known: they were in the part of the city that had graffiti, dank buildings, and no white people.” Ifemulu becomes so accustomed to black neighborhoods being associated with poverty and largely avoided by white Americans. Both Sepha and Ifemulu recognize the economic issues of the black community in the US as structural inequalities built into American capitalism that limit black people from creating their own wealth. They also both recognize it as an issue that white America does not confront, as Judith leaves Logan Circle and white customers avoid the hair salon’s black neighborhood. Like many African Americans, these immigrants must fight for economic success when those in power ignore the structural inequalities and instead emphasize the work of the individual. As Hallemeier notes, “Capitalism’s entwinement with white supremacy delimits citizens’ capacity to apprehend how their seemingly personal beliefs are structured by specific and contingent political conditions. The personal freedom intrinsic to the ‘American dream’ is limited by ongoing histories of racism.” Where African Americans and black immigrants come together in these novels is their mutual understanding of how white supremacy and capitalism stifle their chances for economic success while denying that these inequalities exist at the structural level.


Fear of the justice system, especially interacting with law enforcement, is another factor of American life that black immigrants and black Americans connect on in these novels. Driving to a wedding, Darling’s Uncle Kojo, also an African immigrant, sees a police car riding behind them. “The police? Is it actually the police? Uncle Kojo says, his voice so high and panicky you wouldn’t think it was Uncle Kojo speaking but a terrified young boy. The way he says the world police, as if they were witches, monsters.” As a seasoned black immigrant in the US, Uncle Kojo has a double fear of the American police: both as an immigrant afraid of deportation and as a black man afraid of being profiled and mistreated. Likewise, Ifemulu endorses her boyfriend Blaine’s explanation of black fear of police as well. In her blog post, “What Academics Mean by White Privilege or Yes It Sucks to Be Poor and White but Try Being Poor and Non-White,” she discusses an interaction between Blaine and one of his white, Appalachian students. The student argues that he does not have white privilege because his family is on welfare. When Blaine, known as Professor Hunk in Ifemulu’s blog, responds that his situation would be worse if the student were black, the student exclaims:

Why must we always talk about race anyway? Can’t we just be human beings? And Professor Hunk replied – that is exactly what white privilege is, that you can say that. Race doesn’t really exist for you because it has never been a barrier. Black folks don’t have that choice. The black guy on the street in New York doesn’t want to think about race, until he tries to hail a cab, and he doesn’t want to think about race when he’s driving his Mercedes under the speed limit, until a cop pulls him over. So Appalachian hick guy doesn’t have class privilege, but he sure as hell has race privilege.42

41 Bulawayo, *We Need New Names*, 170.

Part of white privilege, as Ifemulu mentions, is not being afraid of racial profiling or worse by the police. The sentiments expressed by Uncle Kojo, Blaine, and Ifemulu reflect the opinions of many African Americans today, especially in the wake of protests against police shootings of unarmed black individuals across the country.\textsuperscript{43} Just as with their economic limitations, black Americans and immigrants bond over the denial of their individual rights due to overwhelming systemic racism in law enforcement. Meanwhile many white Americans, like Blaine’s student, are so distracted by the belief in total individualism that they are often blind to those structural inequalities.\textsuperscript{44} This problem is so common that immigrants and African Americans, who in these novels do not connect over culture or history, can easily relate on police injustice. Fiction in this case becomes a safety net through which black voices can express that fear through the persona of a surrogate character. Removing a real-life identity from these statements of fear and persecution can also allow for the reader to form a more universal understanding of this sentiment. The authors here thus reveal the extent to which prejudice in the American justice system permeates the lives of black people in the US, and also encourage white Americans to acknowledge that fact.

There also exists a mutual frustration between black Americans and immigrants about racial stereotyping against their daily behaviors. In one of her earlier blog posts, “To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: In American, You Are Black, Baby,” Ifemulu

\textsuperscript{43} See page 9.

\textsuperscript{44} Hallemeier, “Country of People Who Gave,” 242.
vents some of her frustration about the limitations that racial stereotyping puts on her as a black woman in the US. “Dear Non-American Black,” she writes, “When you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop saying I’m Jamaican or I’m Ghanaian. America doesn’t care…. If you are a woman, please do not speak your mind as you are used to doing in your country. Because in America, strong-minded black women are SCARY. And if you’re a man, be hyper-mellow, never get too excited, or somebody will worry that you’re about to pull a gun.”

Julius commiserates with this frustration while discussing the stereotyped portrayals of black Americans abroad with Farouq. As a comparison, Julius tells Farouq and his friend Khalil that the black Americans shown on MTV are just as stereotyped as images of Muslim women completely covered and Muslim men with huge beards spouting extremist Islam shown in the US. “[Black Americans] are victims of the same portrayals as we are, Farouq said. Khalil agreed with him. The same portrayal, I said, but that’s how power is, the one who has the power controls the portrayal.”

Both Ifemu and Julius tap into the ways in which institutional racism at the social level supersedes the ideals of individualism for black people in America. Adichie herself describes blackness as “the identity I was assigned in America.”

Coming from largely black nations, these African immigrants are sensitive to being pigeonholed in the

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45 Adichie, Americanah, 273-274.

46 Cole, Open City, 119.

stereotyped concept of blackness in America, a problem that African Americans face as well. Julius even identifies white Western powers as those in charge of the false portrayals. Though the significance that black Americans and immigrants place on race as a part of their identity may differ, their resentment towards white Americans forcing them into rigid standards of blackness is something they share.

Adichie tries to diversify this image of black people at the most basic level in her writing by using more vibrant descriptors to convey skin color: “sable,” “gingerbread,” or with “an undertone of blueberries” rather than simply black.48 She thus exploits the subtle tools available to fiction writers to expand the reader’s notion of blackness. Corinne Duboin associates the growth of African fiction about the US with expanding American concepts of black identity. She writes, “The presence of African newcomers forging their own paths towards ‘new ethnicities,’ new identities negotiated across national, racial and cultural lines, complexifies the concept of black or African diaspora in America.”49 The complaints and stories of these African authors reveal the complexities of black identity that often go unacknowledged in the US. This diversification, however, is rooted in the problem of racial stereotyping that African Americans have been condemning for years, and that Africans in the US are likewise denouncing in contemporary fiction.


Once again as the writer who confronts issues of race in the US most directly, Adichie best highlights how Americans censor or ignore racism in favor of maintaining a positive image of themselves. White American society’s refusal to acknowledge their own involvement, both historically and contemporarily, in the oppression of black people in the US is another issue that both African Americans and black immigrants connect over. Writing to fellow non-American black people living in the US, Ifemulu sarcastically advises them on how to react to racism. “Don’t complain. Be forgiving. If possible, make it funny. Most of all, do not be angry. Black people are not supposed to be angry about racism. Otherwise you get no sympathy. This applies only for white liberals, by the way. Don’t even bother telling a white conservative about anything racist that happened to you. Because the conservative will tell you that YOU are the real racist and your mouth will hang open in confusion.”

Her comments on white conservatives are reflected in the PPRI study showing an increasing number of white Americans who believe racism against white Americans is a greater problem in the US today than racism against black people. While some white liberals may acknowledge racist acts, they expect a calm and understanding reaction from the victim. In this, they are stifling the anger that many black people in America feel towards a nation that is systemically racist. Either way, her sarcastic tone highlights how ridiculous the white American pushback against claims of racism and control over what qualifies as racist

50 Adichie, Americanah, 275.

51 See pages 9-10.
truly is. Reading from the black voice also conveys the overwhelming frustration that white Americans make these claims despite being the perpetrators of those actions.

Ifemulu continues to encounter this issue when her blog becomes successful and she is invited to lead talks on diversity at several US companies. The first time she delivers her presentation, “How to Talk About Race with Colleagues of Other Races,” she receives a flat response from the entirely white audience. After reading angry reviews about the presentation, Ifemulu has a realization: “The point of diversity workshops, or multicultural talks, was not to inspire any real change but to leave people feeling good about themselves.”

She adjusts her presentation to reflect the desires of largely white audiences, but keeps her true opinions in her blog. “During her talks, she said: ‘America has made great progress for which we should be very proud!’ In her blog, she wrote: ‘Racism should never have happened and so you don’t get a cookie for reducing it.’” Adichie is highlighting both white America’s refusal to acknowledge their ongoing role in modern racism and their expectations for black Americans to constantly express gratefulness for any minor improvement. Despite the fact that Ifemulu is an outsider, she still is angered by white America’s lack of acknowledgement towards racism against the black population, American or otherwise. In her personal life, Adichie is outraged by how much Americans ignore issues of race today. Speaking with journalist John Williams, she notes, “There is an intense ideological war in the US, but you would hardly know that from American literature….

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52 Adichie, Americanah, 377.
53 Ibid., 378.
I could have done ‘Americanah’ differently, in a way that was safer. I know the tropes, I know how race is supposed to be dealt with in fiction (you can do a ‘novel of ideas’ about baseball, but not about race, because it becomes ‘hectoring’).” Instead, she decides to confront race head-on in her literature, revealing the hypocrisies of America’s claims to diversity and equality. While their understandings of each other’s cultural history may cause tension, black immigrants and black Americans can unite under their anger towards white America’s censoring of racism in the US. This cultural tendency to hide behind ideals prevents the daily issues of racism from being truly addressed.

Where African Americans and black immigrants often reach a communal understanding is in their shared experiences of racism in the US. The stories here convey how both black immigrants and black Americans can relate to being excluded from the American dream because of their race. They likewise share a fear of being discriminated against within the justice system, especially by police. In their daily lives, they experience both stereotyping and resistance from white America to acknowledge incidents of racism. Unaccustomed to having blackness be their primary identifier, these African characters’ shocked responses to American racism show the unique qualities of the US’s prejudices rooted in race. That black immigrants and Americans do not share a cultural connection but do connect in these negative experiences shows both the overwhelming systemic racism that permeates the US and the diversity of black identity in the US that is often underrepresented. The personal

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54 Williams, “Life Across Borders.”
relations that these authors develop through fiction reveal how Americans frequently put the ideals and image of equality before the daily practice of it.

**Conclusion**

The interactions between the African immigrants and other black or international residents of the US in these stories provide an insightful breakdown of race relations in modern America. While in the US race is interpreted as a central factor of identity, the African immigrants here come from countries where black is the norm and thus not a key differentiating factor. As such, African immigrants and African Americans often feel a cultural disconnect over racial identity that can inhibit them from forming deep bonds. For African Americans, race is a defining factor because it has kept them oppressed and othered in their own nation for centuries. With this cultural disconnect in mind, these characters can also have trouble maintaining relationships with fellow African immigrants as they are forced into rigid definitions of Africanness while in the US. Though this isolation and disconnect prove how the harsh landscape of America is for outsiders, there are some positive effects of these relationships. Throughout the novels, African immigrants’ encouragement towards international friendships provides a true example of tolerance and diversity for the US to follow. Furthermore, black immigrants and Americans, though disconnected culturally, often find common ground in their acknowledgement of and resistance against systemic racism in the US. Unveiling the intricacies of these intercultural relationships through the black narrative directly exemplifies on a human level how complex the black community in the US truly is, despite the stereotypes displayed in media which characters complain about. They also remind readers of the
overwhelming grip that systemic racism still has on the US today, despite attempts by many in power to ignore the issue. Ultimately these authors’ outlooks on relationships between black immigrants and African Americans, as well as international immigrants, represent the struggle to balance individualism against the greater history and culture of racism in the US. Their revelations are a call to both humanize America’s black community and confront the system of oppression that has for so long been ignored.
CHAPTER 5

EXOTICISM AND OTHER AMERICAN MISCONCEPTIONS

As American claims of tolerance towards other cultures have proven inadequate, their attempts at connecting with African culture prove largely ignorant and condescending. This chapter will analyze how American misconceptions and stereotypes about Africa are rooted in a sense of cultural superiority and ownership. Through both the marketing of African goods for their exotic value and the constant reinforcement of African nations as receivers of American benevolence, the authors highlight the pattern of Americans collecting their culture. In that same sense, many relationships between Americans and Africans in the novels reflect the trend of exoticism, where African characters are only valued for their foreign oddity. This exoticism emerges from American attempts to claim diversity when in fact their sentiments emerge from the desire to possess that culture. Where this sense of cultural superiority becomes truly baffling is in the many embarrassing misconceptions that Americans spout about Africa. Reading from the African perspective, those stereotypes reinforce both how ignorant the US is about Africa and how false their claims to cultural superiority are. This chapter concludes by examining the complexities of these misconceptions, whether they are rooted in ignorance or a hard-nosed refusal to learn. While these same issues of cultural superiority could be analyzed from an international politics perspective, the intimate view of these African-authored novels provides insight into the average person’s cultural perspective, one that is less commonly examined. Furthermore, as Americans rarely hear from the African perspective, there is a great benefit to reading the repudiation of cultural
inferiority and stereotypes from this viewpoint. Their criticisms strip off any sense of ownership as ridiculous and ignorant, which both empowers African voices and dispels the hypocritical claims of tolerance and equality in America.

Collecting another Culture

Americans use their position as a financially powerful nation to collect parts of foreign culture. This process occurs physically in Foreign Gods, Inc., as the store itself controls the value of both individual artifacts and, in the world of the wealthy, the cultures to which those items belong. This type of cultural ownership can also be seen in the relationship between the US as the giver of both aid and opportunity and African nations as the receivers. In these relations, the US controls both the material aid and the public portrayal of other cultures. Analyzing these relationships of power from the African perspective unveils the degree to which Americans automatically assume the right to overpower and dictate another culture. While these power structures are commonly examined at the national and political level, the authors here demonstrate how they affect daily interactions. Though the US claims to be an anti-imperialist power, this sense of cultural superiority reinforces their assumed right to collect and control other cultures.

Okey Ndibe uses the financial industry of foreign deity statues, as well as Ike’s entire journey to steal the Ngene statue, to address the problem of America collecting cultures. The Foreign Gods, Inc. store acts as a metaphor for the American economic superiority complex. With this, Ndibe reveals how the US uses economic power to control the cultural value of different nations in the Western perspective. When Ike first learns about the market for foreign deities, “the sport struck him as the height of
arrogance. If you had loads of cash, you could purchase deities torn away from their shrines in remote corners of the world….When Ike read in the magazine that anybody who acquired the deity was known as the god’s ‘parent,’ he paused and suppressed a rueful laugh.”¹ At first, Ike recognizes the ridiculousness of this practice, as well as the American buyers’ pretentious assumptions of ownership in deeming themselves parents of these cultures to which they have no real connection. The practice itself represents the height of exoticism, showcasing a piece of foreign culture as a sign of worldliness and taste as opposed to a true appreciation of different cultures as fluid and contemporary peoples. However, succumbing to the false hopes of the American dream, Ike becomes entranced by the potential financial payoff of the business.

“[Storeowner] Mark Gruels had argued that, in a postmodern world, a god that didn’t travel was dead…. It had fallen on [Ike] to show the world to Ngene, stuck too long in Utonki, and Ngene to the world.”² Gruels and his store, like many American global capitalist ventures, promote empty promises of success and exploit exoticism for financial profit. As such they perpetuate images of African cultures as ancient and primitive in their unusual deity figures. Because Americans in economic power control these messages, the portrayal of African cultures globally becomes one of a homogenous group of people stuck in the past.

The downfall of Ike’s journey comes when he realizes how economically powerful Americans care not for the importance of his culture, but for the financial

² Ibid., 171.
value they assess it as holding. When he returns to Foreign Gods, Inc. with the statue of Ngene, Gruels offers him a small price compared to the hundreds of thousands Ike estimated it would earn him. Gruels explains, “Frankly, I’m not looking to add to my African inventory. Not at this time. African gods are no longer profitable…. [They] are no longer in vogue, that’s why. Three, four years ago, they were all the rage.”

Devastated and now facing financial ruin, Ike accepts the measly offer. Later, in a state of desperation, he tries to buy it back, only to be told that Ngene was sold to a Japanese buyer for a much higher profit. Gruels tells Ike, “Its new home is somewhere in Japan. You should be proud that a deity that once lived in your village has traveled to Asia.”

While Ike’s journey and decision to steal a central figure from Utonki has been an agonizing feat that pushed him to tear apart his hometown, the statue is only important to Gruels in relation to its Western value. His condescending tone when speaking to Ike reflects his sense of ownership over Ike and Ngene as pieces of the culture Gruels collects. Here Ndibe uses Gruels’ attitude to reflect the epidemic of cultural superiority and false sense of ownership that are common across American culture. He further demonstrates how this relationship takes advantage of the less powerful, giving them false hopes of economic success while stripping them of control over how their culture is portrayed. By using Ike’s individual struggle as a metaphor for this global issue, Ndibe personalizes the dilemma of American cultural ownership for readers. Ike’s

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3 Ibid., 320-322.

4 Ibid., 332.
journey overall highlights the ways in which American culture falsely yet successfully claims ownership over foreign cultures to exploit them for American benefit.

In various facets of cultural interaction, the US commonly portrays itself in the role of the giver. Writing from the opposite perspective, however, these authors reveal how Americans exploit that role to control the portrayal of themselves as saviors and Africans as simple, impoverished, and grateful to the US. Wealthy, white Americans constantly tell Ifemulu about their connections to various charitable organizations throughout Africa, ignoring the fact that as a Nigerian Ifemulu probably has little connection with these different African nations. At a wedding, a white woman tells Ifemulu that she runs a charity in Ghana. “Ifemulu wanted, suddenly and desperately, to be from the country of people who gave and not those who received, to be one of those who had and could therefore bask in the grace of having given, to be among those who could afford copious pity and empathy.”5 Darling too resents being portrayed constantly as the inferior receiver of charity. While still living in her hometown, an NGO visits regularly to give gifts to the children. One of the NGO workers starts photographing Darling and her friends before distributing the items. “They don’t care that we are embarrassed by our dirt and torn clothing, that we would prefer they didn’t do it; they just take the pictures anyway, take and take. We don’t complain because after the picture-taking comes the giving of gifts.”6 In both examples, the African protagonists express feelings of insult and exploitation. The US

5 Adichie, Americanah, 209.

6 Bulawayo, We Need New Names, 54.
government and media display Africa as perpetually “awaiting the benevolent actions of the western subject,” and rarely from the point of view of the African. Reading these encounters from the African perspective reveals how one-sided this portrayal is, and how it discounts great cultural contributions of African nations to focus instead on the US as the great savior of the world. Their stories are prime examples of Wilber Caldwell’s argument that the ways in which nations aid third world countries only to exploit them is a form of imperialism. By controlling how these cultures are portrayed in the Western world, the US also capitalizes on their role as the giver to maintain a powerful image throughout the world. These stereotyped representations ultimately arise from an American sense of ownership over financially weaker and/or non-Western nations, and greatly hinder any chance for honest cross-cultural engagement.

Teju Cole also criticizes the American sense of cultural ownership, but in the world of entertainment and the arts. Heading to the movie theater, Julius comments on how films typically follow “the convention of the good white man in Africa. Africa was always waiting, a substrate for the white man’s will, a backdrop for his activities.” Constantly seeing his people as the receivers of good will from Americans is frustrating for many immigrants like Julius, a self-made man who earned his way to the US. In fact, most African immigrants today “are college-educated, belong to the middle class and have chosen to leave Africa (or Europe for some) to seek social and

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8 Caldwell, American Narcissism, 6.
9 Cole, Open City, 29.
professional development.” While there certainly are Africans who benefit materially from foreign aid, such as Darling, that these become the main images of Africa and promote the US as the white savior endorses a monolithic and stereotyped version of the continent. Julius’ friend Farouq reflects that same experience in his efforts to become an author. “Which Western publisher,” he questions, “Wants a Moroccan or Indian writer who isn’t into oriental fantasy, or who doesn’t satisfy the longing for fantasy? That’s what Morocco and India are there for, after all, to be oriental.” Again these characters point out how American media exploits third world cultures for their benefit, dictating the portrayal of those cultures. From the American viewpoint, Africa is only significant in how Americans choose to interact with it. This typically means that in the Western world, third world cultures are only seen as stagnant and impoverished areas in need of saving, or as an exoticized version of themselves for the American fantasy. That readers here interpret these problems through an African perspective further authenticates the argument. By controlling the representations of these foreign voices, Americans claim their ownership over these cultures and stifle a diverse array of foreign perspectives from conveying an honest depiction of themselves. These practices again highlight the hypocrisy of the US claiming to be tolerant while silencing the voices of those who do not fit American concepts of stereotyped foreignness.


11 Cole, Open City, 104.
The Exotic Girlfriend

In a pattern similar to collecting other cultures, the authors commonly write about Americans exoticizing their African protagonists. White significant others or acquaintances romanticize these African characters as excitingly different because of their foreignness. This becomes problematic, though, as it reinforces both dehumanizing and othering practices against black people, reminiscent of the colonial era. Adichie uses Curt, Ifemulu’s white American boyfriend, to depict how exoticizing translates to his sense of ownership over Ifemulu as a black African woman. For other characters, Americans use differences in their physical appearance or accent to cast them as unusual and other them rather than relate to them on a human level. This exoticism, especially common in romantic relationships, serves as yet another example of the American sense of ownership over African peoples, a trend that harkens back to both cultural superiority and the practice of slave ownership. While the US claims to be a nation that embraces diversity and equality, the daily practice of exoticism demonstrates otherwise.

Adichie uses Curt’s attitude towards Ifemulu in Americanah as the penultimate example of exoticism and white ownership in romantic relationships. Immediately after sharing their first kiss, Curt says to Ifemulu, “‘We have to tell Kimberly.’ ‘Tell Kimberly what?’” Ifemulu responds. “‘That we’re dating.’ ‘We are?’ He laughed and she laughed too, although she had not been joking…. Perhaps they were indeed dating after one kiss since he was so sure that they were.”12 Though Curt comes across as

12 Adichie, Americanah, 238.
lighthearted, he assumes control as the white American male in the relationship and makes this decision without consulting Ifemulu. Throughout their relationship, he excessively compliments her physical beauty, often noting her curvaceousness typically associated with black bodies. “He told her he had never been so attracted to a woman before, had never seen a body so beautiful, her perfect breasts, her perfect butt. It amused her, that he considered a perfect butt what Obinze called a flat ass, and she thought her breasts were ordinary big breasts, already with a downward slope.”13 Curt searches for the stereotypes of black beauty rather than appreciating Ifemulu as her actual self. “He was an adventurer who would bring back exotic species – he had dated a Japanese girl, a Venezuelan girl – but would, with time, settle down properly.”14 His behavior repeatedly signifies appreciating Ifemulu for her exotic value, as if she were a material good that he acquired. Furthermore, the ways in which Curt views Ifemulu’s exotic sexuality harkens back to colonial portrayals of Africans through illustration and photography, which emphasized what white viewers interpreted as a bestial sexuality.15 In the intimate relationships between Americans and Africans, ingrained white supremacy via exoticism often prevents an equal and honest relationship from forming. It is this sense of control and lack of understanding that eventually cause Ifemulu to break up with Curt. In a society where denial of individual racist acts is so prevalent,

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13 Ibid., 241.

14 Adichie, Americanah, 244.

fiction becomes an imperative tool to spotlight the common scenarios of racism and exoticism that white Americans can otherwise ignore.

Ike, on the other hand, exploits American trends toward exoticism when he can, though that exploitation eventually ostracizes him in US society. While attending a US university, he emphasizes his accent to impress women. One of his college relationships starts when an American girl follows him after class. "I want you to know that I really, really, really love your accent," she said, keeping pace with his stride."\(^\text{16}\) Years later, however, that accent becomes the bane of his US existence, acting as a stigma against both socialization and job opportunities. Ike’s exoticness is a quality that Americans use to other him for their benefit. Though he can use it to his advantage at times, this otherness is overall a detrimental issue for Ike as an immigrant trying to integrate into American society. Quite the solitary man, Julius experiences this exoticizing even from white American strangers. One evening he attends the orchestra in New York to see a performance of music by his favorite composer, Gustav Mahler.

It never ceases to surprise me how easy it is to leave the hybridity of the city, and enter into all-white spaces, the homogeneity of which, as far as I can tell, causes no discomfort to the whites in them. The only thing odd to some of them, is seeing me, young and black, in my seat or at the concession stand. At times, standing in the line for the bathroom during intermission, I get looks that make me feel like Ota Benga, the Mbuti man who was put on display in the Monkey House at the Bronx Zoo in 1906.\(^\text{17}\)

\(^{16}\) Ndibe, *Foreign Gods, Inc.*, 33.

\(^{17}\) Cole, *Open City*, 252.
Like Ike, Julius feels ostracized because of his blackness and Africanness. However, that exoticism also has a dehumanizing effect on him. Drawing on a historical example of exoticism, Julius conveys the continued history of white America’s fascination with Africans to the extent of treating them like zoo animals. Again this trend in exoticism, still highly relevant today, reinforces white American cultural superiority as a form of ownership over African people and brutalizes them for these cultural differences.

*Africa, the Jungle Country (and Other Embarrassing Mistakes)*

Part of the reason exoticism can still reign freely in the US is that misconceptions about Africa are overwhelmingly common. Numerous American characters in these stories spout ignorant comments about Africa that, when read from the African perspective especially, are revealed for their ridiculousness and abusiveness. These stereotyped misconceptions come across in two forms throughout the novels. On one hand, there is the American trend to lump these diverse African peoples from various countries and cultures into one homogenous identity. In this, Americans deny the character’s individuality and convey Africa as a controllable concept. On the other hand, there is also a pattern of Americans directly insulting these African characters via the stereotypes they believe about a vague African culture. Both patterns are rooted not just in a sense of American cultural superiority over African cultures, but also in a desire to keep the idea of Africans manageable. As explored in Chapter 4, white Americans are not used to seeing diverse black identities, and thus resist these complexities. By exposing these issues as successful African authors in the US, however, these writers are taking the first step in combatting American ignorance.
Throughout these novels, American characters repeatedly homogenize these protagonists to fit their stereotyped concept of Africanness, rather than respecting the diversity of African culture. One common method of this homogenization is treating Africa like one large country rather than a continent with many internal cultures. Darling notes her frustration with this pattern while working at the grocery store one day, when she is scared by a cockroach. Her manager, Jim, is surprised, and asks her, “You don’t have cockroaches in Africa? Jim does this thing that gets on my nerves: he always speaks as if Africa is just one country, even though I’ve told him that it is a continent with fifty-some countries, that other than my own country, I haven’t really been to the rest of it to say what it is.” Jim adds, “You’re just acting up, I know you’ve seen all sorts of crazy shit over there, he says, speaking over his shoulder.”

Ifemulu’s hairdressers also express this resentment against the American ignorance and standardizing of Africans. “‘Why do you say [you’re from] Africa instead of just saying the country you mean?’ Ifemulu asked. Aisha clucked. ‘You don’t know America. You say Senegal and American people, they say, Where is that? My friend from Burkina Faso they ask her, your country in Latin America?’”

18 African cultures are underrepresented in the US and perceived only as a stereotype. This applies even to how Americans see individual African people, as Ifemulu’s aunt notes. “‘All of us look alike to white people,’ Aunty Uju said…. ‘I’m not joking. Amara’s cousin came last year and she doesn’t have papers yet so she has been working with Amara’s ID. You

18 Bulawayo, We Need New Names, 255.
19 Adichie, Americanah, 18.
remember Amara? Her cousin is very fair and slim. They do not look alike at all.
Nobody noticed."

Americans choose to view Africa as a vague, ahistorical region with one blanket definition, rather than acknowledging African individuals. In his 1975 lecture-turned-essay, “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s ‘Heart of Darkness,’” famous Nigerian author Chinua Achebe analyzes how Westerners envision “Africa as a setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor…. Can nobody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty [Western] mind?” Painting Africa as one ambiguous region is incredibly damaging to American’s ability to engage on a human level with Africans. This homogenization furthermore reinforces cultural conceit within the US and the psychology of ownership over non-white, non-Western regions.

In other forms of stereotyping, the characters in these novels are frequently insulted by Americans who presume them simple and brutish. By ridiculing Africans based on these ignorant misconceptions, Americans assert their power over immigrant Africans. Mengestu starts his novel with an example of harsh degradation from Sepha’s first American boss at a DC hotel. Reflecting on his time there, Sepha notes, “I was skinnier than I am now, and as our manager said, I didn’t need a nickname to remind him I was Ethiopian.” His manager uses the stereotype of a starving Ethiopian to demean and ostracize Sepha as his inferior. Later on in the novel, Sepha

\[20\] Ibid., 148.


\[22\] Mengestu, Beautiful Things, 1.
describes applying for the valet position, visiting the manager’s office with his uncle. “The manager, a solid, squat bald man whom I had been told to refer to only as ‘sir,’ didn’t believe I could speak English. He pointed to my skinny arms and asked my uncle if I had any problems lifting heavy objects… [and] if I could be trusted not to steal from the hotel or clients.” Afterwards, the manager “squeezed my right bicep for good measure, and then held out his hand for me to shake. I remember wishing I had the courage and strength to crush every bone in his hand.”

The manager assigns Sepha with being dense and untrustworthy simply based on his Africanness. Furthermore his methods of measuring Sepha’s strength are reminiscent of a slave purchase rather than a job interview. Sepha’s anger at these insults blatantly rooted in stereotypes and cultural superiority reflects many immigrants’ experiences with cultural egoism in the US. Ike sees it in a letter he finds from his American girlfriend’s father to her. “The message was blunt. Penny needed to know, Dr. Earl Rose wrote, that he and his wife were terrified of one day learning that their only child ‘had run off with an African to some remote African village.’”

Each of these insults is based solely on American perspectives of Africanness, stereotypes of thievery, simplicity, and brutishness. In recent years, the rise of Afropolitans acts both as a battle force to eliminate those misconceptions and proof that these insults are unfounded. Though the group definition is contended, prominent Afropolitan blogger Minna Salami defines Afropolitans as “a group of people who are either of African origin or influenced by

23 Ibid., 25.

African culture, who are emerging internationally using African cultures in creative ways to change perceptions about Africa.”

The Afropolitan movement, which maintains an especially powerful online presence, promotes a more globally-minded portrayal of Africans from their people’s perspective. Though the African intellectual community debates the efficacy of Afropolitanism, citing its restrictions to upper-class Africans and adherence to Western definitions of culture as pitfalls, the presence of these contending African voices on identity should be enlightening to a large part of the US. When Americans instead rely on their stereotypes of Africans, they do not truly interact with the individual. As such, they can maintain both their misconceptions of Africa as well as their dominance over these immigrants in a way that grossly resembles the colonial era. The fiction narrative enables an empathetic bond between the reader and the character enduring these stereotypes, creating a pathway to cultural equality. It is thus imperative to spread awareness of the diversity of African personas to humanize Africans and eliminate insulting misconceptions of them in the US.

The insults spewed by Americans in these novels also depict African cultures as overwhelmingly backwards and impoverished, endorsing age-old stereotypes. When Sepha’s older African American neighbor, Mrs. Davis, complains about the new white resident Judith moving in, Sepha offers a passing response. “It’s a free country, Mrs. Davis. People can live where they want.” Heated, Mrs. Davis refutes, “What do you


know about free countries? You didn’t even know what that was till you came here last week, and now you’re telling me people can live where they like. This isn’t like living in a hut, you know. People around here can’t just put their houses on their backs and move on.”

Granted, gentrification is a sensitive subject for Sepha’s African American neighbors, but Mrs. Davis’ response indulges in the misconception that Africans entering the US come from poor, isolated, rural communities. Equally ignorant, Ifemulu’s American roommate Elena questions the reason behind Ifemulu saying that she does not like dogs. “‘Is that like a cultural thing?... I mean like how in China they eat cat meat and dog meat.’ ‘My boyfriend back home loves dogs. I just don’t,’” responds Ifemulu. “‘Oh,’ Elena said, and looked at her, brows furrowed, as Jackie and Allison had earlier looked at her when she said she had never gone bowling, as though wondering how she could have turned out a normal being without ever having gone bowling.”

Her roommate’s perception of her as an African is one of what these American girls would consider a generally isolated and primitive way of life. The condescension in both Mrs. Davis’ and Elena’s comments is palpable. While their insults reflect inaccurate beliefs about African culture, they also demonstrate a lack of awareness of modern African immigrants. As previously mentioned, most African immigrants today come from middle-class homes, have a college education, and willfully migrate to the US in order to progress their social status or career.

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27 Mengestu, Beautiful Things, 23.

28 Adichie, Americanah, 156.

this description is completely accurate for Ifemulu, Sepha was forced to flee Ethiopia to escape a violent political revolution. Still, his Ethiopian home was located in middle-class suburb, not the hut that Mrs. Davis associates him with. In fact, three of the five African protagonists here represent the more common modern African immigrant, while Sepha provides the perspective of being forced out of his home country and Darling the perspective of coming from an impoverished, rural town. Though Americans like Mrs. Davis and Elena only conceive of Africans as emerging from isolated, poverty-stricken communities, the varied backgrounds of African voices here demonstrate both how this characterization of African immigrants is largely inaccurate and how wide the range of African backgrounds are. Illuminating their diversity continues to expand the American concept of Africanness to include a diverse array of identities, diminishing the power of US cultural superiority.

Combatting this cultural superiority, Adichie flips the power structure of Americans over Africans by showing African characters ridiculing Americans for their ignorant comments. While participating in the ASA, Ifemulu and her fellow African students bond over their frustration with US ignorance. “They mimicked what Americans told them: You speak such good English. How bad is AIDS in your country? It’s so sad that people live on less than a dollar a day in Africa.”30 Ginika practices this same brand of sarcasm with Ifemulu to commiserate over their anger at American stereotypes. Ifemulu, who does not have her immigration papers but needs money, is worried about using a fake identity with the name Ngozi to apply for jobs. To reassure

30 Adichie, Americanah, 170.
her after an interview, Ginika tells her, “You could have just said Ngozi is your tribal name and Ifemulu is your jungle name and throw in one more as your spiritual name. They’ll believe all kinds of shit about Africa.” Humor is a powerful tool for these African authors to subvert the American cultural hierarchy. Hallemeier argues that reflecting on these American stereotypes of Africa with sarcasm puts Nigerians in the role of the giver or sympathizer towards Americans. Using this tactic, Adichie both ridicules the unfounded cultural superiority in American culture and negates its supposed dominance. From there, she is able to empower African voices in the US to reveal a diversity of African identities and combat these egregious fallacies.

*Ignorance or Refusal to Learn?*

After encountering an onslaught of American misconceptions about Africa, these stories beg the question of whether the stereotypes here are rooted in ignorance or stubbornness against accepting modern Africans. Achebe ponders this same question in his 1975 essay: “Ignorance might be a more likely reason; but here again I believe that something more willful than a mere lack of information was at work…. Quite simply it is the desire – one might indeed say the need – in Western psychology to set up Africa as a foil to Europe, as a place once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe’s own state of spiritual grace will be manifest.” This final section will examine Achebe’s argument through the contemporary lens of these

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31 Ibid., 168.


novels. It also takes into account the perspective of the US, as opposed to Europe, against Africa. Whereas Achebe associates the white Western arts and education with much of this African stereotyping, in the modern information age the American media has played an increasingly large role in perpetuating these harmful images of African people. Furthermore, with greater access to information and a slight increase in awareness of stereotyping since Achebe’s 1975 essay, many modern white Americans attempt to overcompensate for these misconceptions. In doing so, however, they perpetuate the white savior model and cultural power structure of giver and receiver, preventing any genuine cross-cultural connection from occurring. Thus while Achebe’s argument about an ingrained Western psychology that willfully perpetuates African stereotypes is still relevant, greater access to information through media and technology have only modernized those methods of maintaining cultural superiority.

Following his legacy, these authors also recognize that the novel can best track how Americans continuously update techniques of enforcing superiority in daily life. That the US continues to reshape their prejudice mentality despite more access to African perspectives demonstrates how this ignorance is culturally intentional to maintain the American power structure.

Though Achebe attributes arts and education in white Western nations with the ignorant views of Africa in the US, the advent of the 24-hour news cycle and the information age since that time have increased the media’s role in this issue. He decries how despite the fact that Joseph Conrad’s *The Heart of Darkness* is one of the most racist depictions of Africa in modern literature, it is “today the most commonly prescribed novel in twentieth-century literature courses in English Departments of
American universities.”34 While that problem certainly persists in the 21st century, the characters here repeatedly encounter Americans who associate Africa generally with news stories of violence, poverty, and disease. One of Bulawayo’s universal chapters reflects on the responses African immigrants when Americans ask them where they are from.

What part of Africa? We smiled. Is it the part where vultures wait for famished children to die? We smiled. Where the life expectancy is thirty-five years? We smiled. Is it where dissidents shove AK-47s between women’s legs? We smiled. Where people run around naked? We smiled. That part where they massacre each other? We smiled. Is it where the old president rigged the election and people were tortured and killed and a whole bunch of them put in prison and all, there where they are dying of cholera – oh my God, yes, we’ve seen your country; it’s been on the news.35

This perspective highlights how Americans form their vision of Africans based largely on negative news stories like these. As a more personal example, Darling meets an American white woman in a bathroom who overemphasizes Africa for its vague news stories of instability. In reference to recent news stories on CNN, “Africa is beautiful, she says, going on with her favorite word. But isn’t it terrible what’s happening in the Congo? Just awful.” Darling is frantically confused about how to respond. “My brain is scattering and jumping fences now, trying to remember what exactly is happening in the Congo because I think I am confusing it with another place, but what I can see in the woman’s eyes is that it’s serious and important and I’m supposed to know it, so in

34 Ibid., 11.
35 Bulawayo, We Need New Names, 240.
the end I say, Yes, it is terrible, what is happening in the Congo."

36 Since the creation of the first 24-hour news channel, CNN, in 1980, and the growth of Twitter as a source of immediate news outlets, the onslaught of news information shown to readers has increased dramatically.37 One of Darling’s employers is even inspired by the viral Kony video on YouTube, which called for an end to Joseph Kony’s use of child soldiers in Uganda, to treat her nicer than normal (this despite the fact that Darling has no connection to Uganda or the children affected).38 Though the media’s technology has updated, unfortunately their images of Africa remain stuck in stereotypes of poverty and violence. Major American media outlets choose to emphasize these negative images over the complex array of developments throughout Africa, which only aids American individuals’ tendency to associate African people with those stereotypes. Thus these novels demonstrate the increasingly influential role of ever-present media in the contemporary American stereotypes of Africans, and how harmful this effect is to Africans grappling with immigration in the US.

With this increase in available information about African politics and culture also comes greater opportunity for Americans to access African voices. However, as numerous examples in these novels show, Americans use this new information to showcase their knowledge and humanitarian efforts rather than to create better cross-cultural understanding. This pattern developed in literature after Achebe’s essay was

36 Ibid., 177.
38 Bulawayo, We Need New Names, 271.
published, but reflects how the white Western attitudes he refers to have adapted in contemporary America. Ifemulu encounters this modern trope when she visits Curt’s Aunt Claire, a wealthy white woman living in Vermont. “Claire talked, throughout the visit, about her Kenyan safari, about Mandela’s grace, about her adoration for Harry Belafonte, and Ifemulu worried that she would lapse into Ebonics or Swahili. As they left her rambling house, Ifemulu said, ‘I bet she’s an interesting woman if she’d just be herself. I don’t need her to overassure me that she likes black people.’”

Though Claire is attempting to befriend Ifemulu, she constantly brings up her affinity for black culture as if this alone will connect her with Ifemulu. She typecasts Ifemulu as her vague concept of a black African rather than attempting to connect with her individually. Perhaps this overemphasis is rooted in some sense of white guilt, the sense of guilt that some white people feel for the racist treatment of minorities. Even so, reading from Ifemulu’s perspective demonstrates to the reader how this behavior still puts the spotlight on the white perspective rather than the black reality.

The woman that Darling encounters in the bathroom is also guilty of this behavior. She glowingly tells Darling that her niece is “going to Rwanda to help. She’s in Peace Corps, you know, they are doing great things for Africa, just great, she says. I nod, even though I don’t really know what the woman is talking about….And last summer,” the woman continues, “She went to Khayelitsha in South Africa to teach at

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39 Adichie, We Need New Names, 363.

an orphanage, and let me tell you, we all donated – clothes and pens and medicines and crayons and candy for these poor African children. Then she puts her hand over her heart and closes her eyes briefly, like maybe she’s listening to the throb of her kindness. 41 This woman too reflects the modern archetype of white Americans overemphasizing their appreciation and humanitarian efforts for Africa as a means to prove their worldliness and political awareness. The problem, however, is that they are still pigeonholing the concept of Africa based on American definitions. Furthermore, this behavior perpetuates the white savior complex, and the idea that Africa exists purely for white Americans to either rescue or express their trendy cosmopolitanism. As Achebe noted in his 1975 piece, “the West seems to suffer deep anxieties about the precariousness of its civilization and to have a need for constant reassurance by comparison with Africa.” 42 With the ever-changing face of race issues in America, these contemporary fiction novels reveal a snapshot of the current racist tropes. In the case of the contemporary American who overemphasizes their connection with Africa, this constant comparison only ends up preventing a genuine cross-cultural interaction from occurring. These deliberate attempts at flaunting the American understanding of African culture maintain the cultural hierarchy and stereotypes of Africans in place.

In Americanah, Adichie contrasts the characters of Kimberly and Laura to portray how white Americans can either enlighten their stereotyped view of Africa or entrench their egos in those stereotypes to maintain cultural superiority. Ifemulu

41 Bulawayo, We Need New Names, 178.

nannies for Kimberly and Laura, two privileged white American sisters living in suburbia. Kimberly has a habit of overusing the word “beautiful” around Ifemulu. In fact, Ifemulu notices, “the women she referred to would turn out to be quite ordinary-looking, but always black.” At one point, scrutinizing a magazine ad featuring a black woman, Kimberly asks Ifemulu, “Isn’t she just stunning?” ‘No, she isn’t.’ Ifemulu paused. ‘You know, you can just say ‘black.’ Not every black person is beautiful.’ Kimberly was taken aback, something wordless spread on her face and then she smiled, and Ifemulu would think of it as the moment they became, truly, friends.³⁴³⁴ Kimberly’s initial attempts to connect with Ifemulu over her appreciation of blackness are shallow, but by accepting Ifemulu’s criticism the two of them can form a more genuine relationship.

In a similar pattern, Laura overemphasizes stories about Africa to prove her understanding to Ifemulu. “She did not understand why Laura looked up so much information about Nigeria, asking her about 419 scams, telling her how much money Nigerians in America sent back home every year. It was an aggressive, unaffectionate interest.”³⁵ Ifemulu sees through Laura’s efforts, revealing their condescending and disingenuous nature. Later, when Laura discusses her affection for a former African classmate who “didn’t have all those issues” that another African American classmate had, Ifemulu questions her response. “‘Maybe when the African American’s father was

⁴³ Adichie, Americanah, 180.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 181.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 201.
not allowed to vote because he was black, the Ugandan’s father was running for parliament or studying at Oxford…. I just think it’s a simplistic comparison to make. You need to understand a bit more history,’ Ifemulu said.” In response to Ifemulu’s counterpoint, “Laura’s lips sagged. She staggered, collected herself. ‘Well, I’ll get my daughter and then go find some history books from the library, if I can figure out what they look like!’ Laura said, and marched out.”46 Unlike Kimberly, Laura chooses to personalize Ifemulu’s comments and disregard the only black opinion on this topic of blackness that she hears. She prioritizes maintaining her cultural ego over truly analyzing the issue from an African perspective. For readers that in daily life might react like Laura, viewing the scenario from above allows them to remove ego from the interaction and critically analyze the role that their own cultural superiority plays in interracial or intercultural engagements. For readers who better relate to Ifemulu, it reaffirms their feelings of being disregarded by white American opinion. Kimberly provides an example that allows for cross-cultural connection by embracing Ifemulu’s honesty, though it dispels her preconceived notions of blackness. Their contrasting reactions further demonstrate how deliberate the behavior of cultural superiority and stereotyping is in the US. Achebe himself contends that “although I have used the word willful a few times here to characterize the West’s view of Africa, it may well be that what is happening at this stage is more akin to reflex action than calculated malice.”47

The comparison between Kimberly and Laura’s reactions to Ifemulu’s criticisms,

46 Ibid., 208.

however, convey a much more intentional response than a total reflex. It is thus not innocent ignorance, but cultural egoism that drives American denials of African realities in favor of white Western-created stereotypes.

**Conclusion**

The many stereotypes and misconceptions that Americans have about Africans are rooted in cultural superiority and a colonial-esque sense of ownership. The authors prove this through their numerous stories of Americans collecting African culture as if it is a material good, exoticizing Africans for their personal desires, and homogenizing Africa to make it a simpler and more controllable concept. Still though, the question remained of whether this arrogant behavior demonstrated ignorance or a stubbornness against releasing power. With Achebe’s “An Image of Africa” as a reference point, the final section showcases how contemporary Americans actively resist depictions of Africa from an honest, African viewpoint. Reading about these incidents from the African perspective in fiction reveals how these larger cultural issues carry out in daily life. This willful perpetuation of stereotypes inhibits opportunities for cross-cultural collaboration, oppresses the black race globally, and demonstrates again how Americans claim but do not practice the ideals of tolerance, diversity, and equality.
While discrimination against minorities in the US has been a longstanding problem, the rise in African-authored immigrant fiction in the 21st century and the authors’ harsh criticisms of national values indicates a shift in global attitudes toward this country. Generally speaking, Americans see the values of liberty, equality, and tolerance as essential and vibrant in their society, whereas the African immigrant perspective reveals how inaccessible those ideals are for minorities today. A history of cultural superiority and a national ideology of divine exceptionalism only pressure Americans to ignore criticisms of their national values. The outside perspective, however, sheds light on how these false ideals damage the daily lives of immigrants and Americans alike. Financially, exaggerated promises of economic opportunity shock and cripple immigrants when they arrive to find that those opportunities exist mainly for the white, wealthier side of America. Psychologically, these immigrants are either ostracized or forced to shed their subjective identity in order to assimilate to American standards. As black African immigrants these authors poignantly convey how Americans view race as a homogenizing and central factor of identity, which creates an awkward schism between themselves and African Americans who share race but greatly differ in culture. Still though, living black in America does allow them to affirm much of the unacknowledged racism, both institutional and individual, that pervades daily American life. The characters’ frequent encounters with stereotyping of Africans also demonstrate that Americans practice this discrimination to maintain cultural superiority. These authors’ insights into average life in the US reveal how the nation’s purported ideals are not carried out at the human and the structural level, and
call for Americans to reexamine how they advertise and practice freedom, equality, and diversity.

What allows these African voices to effectively shine a light on American reality is their use of the fiction narrative to convey their perspectives. While many of their stories are based real experiences from the authors’ lives, creating scenarios that can fully draw on the emotionality of personal experiences allows for the reader to develop a greater sense of empathy with these realistic characters. Most of the revelations that the characters have occur either in an average activity or an internal monologue. By reading these moments in narrative form, the audience can better commiserate with those experiences that affect the character’s psyche or emotionality. This is especially important for American readers who are largely in denial of inequalities that immigrants face and the misconceptions of Africa, as it creates a personal connection between the reader and the African character. The novel, in its length and emotionality, can also highlight the entirety of these issues succinctly in one journey, as opposed to the journalistic or scholarly approach of an article that relies both on specificity and facts. A researcher could also analyze how these American attitudes carry out in the larger political system, but the novel allows for an exploration of the less-analyzed cultural behavior in daily life. Furthermore, it is incredibly beneficial for American culture to hear African voices in order to humanize a continent that for so long has been treated as an ahistorical backdrop for white, Western purposes. For those within the US who are ostracized by cultural intolerance, novels like these acknowledge the emotional trauma of discrimination that is so commonly
ignored by mainstream culture. The novel thus paves the way for honest human interaction between Americans and the diverse immigrants living amongst them.

In a rapidly globalizing world, cross-cultural engagement has become an increasingly important tool to analyze the morality and efficacy of internal cultural behaviors. Blinded by a history of cultural superiority, the US is in need of honest self-reflection of its professed values, particularly those pertaining to equality and tolerance. An outside viewpoint, especially those coming from African nations that for so long have been neglected and dehumanized, can pinpoint how intolerance seeps into US society in ways that more privileged Americans tend to ignore. While legal and political agendas can certainly aid in this effort, there is a great need to confront these issues at the level of individual cultural behavior as well. Increasing the diversity of perspectives in education, media, and the arts is one among many adjustments that US society can make locally to better address the largely unacknowledged false promises and prejudice of contemporary times. Capitalizing on the information age’s increased access to foreign or minority voices allows us to keep this reflection relevant with the ever-changing face of America as an immigrant nation. In fact, US Census Bureau studies show that white people in America are expected to become a minority within the next thirty years, due both to increased immigration and the diversification of the millennial generation.48 Taking note from the outsider voices that compare various cultures with the US and universally find it lacking in tolerance and opportunity, it is

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imperative that this country contemplate and adjust its cultural behaviors that fall incredibly short of its widely purported ideals.
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