

Love, Limb-Loosener: Encounters in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*

Jennifer Leetsch

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Abstract: To redraw the boundaries of what love, desire, and romance mean in the context of postcolonial and transnational writing, this article will use arguments by Anne Carson, Catherine Belsey, and others who regard love as inherently transformative, as the springboard for my discussion of Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie's novel *Americanah* (2013). The notion that love functions as a productive interruption of norms can be applied to three aspects of the novel: space, body, and text. The construction of a specific transnational space for the two protagonists of *Americanah* is marked by geographical travel and emotional border crossing. Accordingly, the first part of the paper will analyse how the lovers fashion their respective spaces of home and belonging, both in Africa and the diaspora. The second part of my analysis will focus on the bodily encounters Ifemelu and Obinze experience, and how intimate sexual acts of love may break down previously erected barriers. The third part of this paper will examine the textuality and language of *Americanah*'s love story and how its romantic trajectory ultimately escapes its conventional boundaries – geographically, digitally, and meta-textually.

In connecting love with spatiality, corporeality, and textuality in Adichie's novel, I acknowledge the different affects and effects of love and what it *does* – as material practice, as embodied experience, and as a discursive and textual construct. Writing a love story against oppression and against restrictive orders, *Americanah* engages in an empowering act of giving voice to the formerly silenced, of providing wiggle spaces for alternative identity constructions.

About the Author: After studying English, American and Comparative Literature at Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich and King's College London, Jennifer Leetsch joined the department of English Literature and British Cultural Studies at Würzburg University, where she is currently working on her PhD thesis on postcolonial romance, focusing on connections between female diasporic identity and the constructs of home and migrant-hood within a broader context of romance, love, and desire. Her research interests include: transnational

and postcolonial literatures and theory, gender and queer studies, disability studies, and contemporary Black British literature.

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In Greek the act of love is a mingling (mignumi) and desire melts the limbs (lusimelēs) (Sappho, Fr. 130). Boundaries of body, categories of thought, are confounded. The god who melts limbs proceeds to break the lover (damnatai) as would a foe on the epic battlefield: Oh comrade, the limb-loosener crushes me: desire.

– Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*

As Carson argues via her explorations of Sappho's poetry and other literary texts, both classical and modern, in her essay collection *Eros the Bittersweet*, the Greek poets portray the god of love, Eros, as *limb-loosener*. The god Eros belongs to a collective of winged gods of love and sex called Erotes (amongst them Anteros, Hedylogos, Hermaphroditus, Himeros, Hymenaeus, and Photos). Eros, however, is also one of the four words in Ancient Greek to describe "love". While *storge* refers to familial love, *philia* to friendship, and *agape* to selfless love, *eros* concerns intimate and romantic love, often with sexual overtones. When E/eros (as god and as concept) is described as melting limbs and breaking the lover, it becomes evident that love, driven by the desire for the other, has the potential to rattle boundaries and cross borders. The juxtaposition of opposites (self and other, pleasure and pain, longing and fulfilment, bitter and sweet) that is inherent to love creates movement and provokes action. "Mingling" and "loosening" mark a disturbance of categories of thought, body, place, and identity.

Referencing the descriptions of eros in Plato's *Phaedrus* and the philosophical dialogue staged between its protagonists Socrates and Phaedrus, Carson posits love as "an invasion, an illness, an insanity, a wild animal, a natural disaster" whose action is

to melt, break down, bite into, burn, devour, wear away, whirl around, sting, pierce, wound, poison, suffocate, drag off or grind the lover to a powder. Eros employs nets, arrows, fire, hammers, hurricanes, fevers, boxing gloves or bits and bridles in making his assault (1986, 8).

But even though potentially destructive and life-threatening, love always also possesses the capacity for transformation (expressed in the above quote through imagery of natural catastrophes and corporeal processes such as eating and digestion). As Catherine Belsey argues in *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture*, love "marks the limits of human mastery" (1994, 27). Love unhinges, makes fluid, makes loose and in doing so draws attention to the perimeters of how we fashion our world and interpersonal relationships through hierarchies of power and control. At the same time, love can mark "the location of resistance to the norms, proprieties and taxonomies of the cultural order" (Belsey 1994, 6). Love can thus be delineated as profoundly active and restless, potentially undermining certain hierarchies

and normative orders. In reading this disturbance as creative, productive, and powerful, love emerges as a harbourer of change and innovation:

Each narrative of love expresses a compound and contradictory impulse: on the one hand, the narrative ventriloquizes cultural values, perpetuating and naturalizing patriarchal models of gender [...]; on the other hand, the narrative talks back, revealing frustration, dissent, and potentially subversive responses to those patriarchal constructions. (Strehle and Carden 2003, xii)

In other words, fictions which concern themselves with love and desire – such as romance texts and love stories – are well-established in a position where they are able to interrogate boundaries and to draw back into light what would otherwise be marginal, unspoken, repressed. Love stories can pose resistance to oppressive representation and there is a transformative potential inherent in the very structure of love. The fluidity and instability of love makes it a peculiarly flexible tool for teasing out ever-changing emotions, identities, and alliances; its narratives are specially “attuned to the heteroglossia of cultural and countercultural voices” (Strehle and Carden 2003, xii). When dealing with literary and cultural texts that stem from a point of origin marked not only by their deviance from patriarchal norms (such as feminist or queer voices), but also from colonial or neo-colonial norms (such as diasporic or postcolonial voices), a focus on love and how it is put into narratives will bring to light numerous possibilities for speaking back against these oppressing structures.

I will use the arguments by Carson, Belsey, and Strehle and Carden about love as breaking down boundaries and as an agent of change as the springboard for my discussion of Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s novel *Americanah* (2013). The fact that love functions as a loosener of boundaries and crosser of borders can be applied to three aspects of the novel: space, body, and text. The construction of a specific transnational space for both Ifemelu and Obinze, the two lovers and protagonists of *Americanah*, are marked by geographical travel and emotional border crossing. Accordingly, the first part of the paper will analyse how the lovers, in the face of the absence of their loved one, fashion their respective spaces of home and belonging, and how both ultimately return to Lagos, where they enact their romantic happy ending. The second part of my analysis will focus on the bodily encounters Ifemelu and Obinze experience, separately and together, and how intimate sexual acts of love break down previously erected barriers. The erotic and bodily aspect of love in the novel, however, is not only portrayed as positive and empowering, but is also marked by trauma and tensions, and I will outline how Ifemelu’s body and hair become a site of contested identity. The third part of this paper will examine the textuality and language of *Americanah*’s love story and how its romantic trajectory ultimately escapes its conventional boundaries – geographically, digitally, and meta-textually. By focusing in turn on spatiality, corporeality, and textuality, I want to acknowledge the different affects and effects of love and what it *does*, as material practice, embodied experience, and as a discursive and textual construct. In the course of my discussion, I will link back to both Anne Carson’s conceptualisations of love as limb-loosener and Catherine Belsey’s examinations of love as an act of resistance, while also drawing on the (surprisingly spare) critical commentaries by scholars on *Americanah* specifically and postcolonial feminist theory more generally.

Reading Between the Lines: Adichie and the Importance of Love Stories

All of Adichie's work surreptitiously deals in some way or other with (familial, platonic, romantic, erotic) love. Her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), is set in postcolonial Nigeria and accompanies its protagonist, the young woman Kambili, on her emancipatory journey as she escapes from the domination of her violent and fanatic Catholic father. Living with her aunt, she falls in love with the young priest Amada, while also discovering her burgeoning sexuality.[1] *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), a sensitive rendering of the Nigerian Biafran war, has at its centre two pairs of lovers. The novel traces the war and its traumatic consequences as it follows the fates of the sisters Olanna and Kainene and their romantic entanglements. Significant socio-historical and political questions posed in the novel are thus refracted and subverted through the love relationships of its protagonists. Similarly, Adichie's short story collection, *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009), focuses not only on the politics of a hybrid, progressive African identity, but always implicates the political with the personal by tracing relationships between family members or lovers.[2]

In "Between the Lines," a conversation with Zadie Smith in March 2014 at the Schomburg Centre New York, Adichie actually calls *Americanah* her "fuck-you book" (2014, 16:31), "a fuck you to another version" of herself (16:35). What she means by that is that her first two novels, especially *Half of a Yellow Sun*, followed the footsteps of the founders of modern African literature, epitomized by such seminal works as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958)[3], engaging with questions and subject matters heavily informed by Nigeria's colonial past, processes of decolonisation and nation-building: "With *Half of a Yellow Sun* I was very dutiful. For so long I have been a dutiful daughter of literature. I've followed the rules... show don't tell" (2014, 16:40). In going against traditional "African" writing and in transgressing Achebe's treatment of Nigeria's traumatic pasts, Adichie opens up pathways for new ways of writing about African experiences. Breaking out from the single story, Adichie's *Americanah* pays attention to smaller stories: it "challenges the association of Africa with trauma, torture and politics, bringing into view non-Afro-pessimist representations of Africa" (Goyal 2014, xiv).

In the same conversation with Zadie Smith, Adichie drives home this point as she argues that love and sexuality are an integral part of her stories and her characters. Tongue-in-cheek, she positions herself in the grand tradition of Mills and Boon popular romance novels, but at the same time argues that her work is *anti*-Mills and Boon (2014, 19:27-21:50) – with female protagonists who strive to decide themselves when and where they want to engage sexually, emotionally, intellectually with their partners, who own and actively tell their own stories.[4] In broaching and narrating love, Adichie's novels garner a voice that deals not only with the political complexity of its Afro-diasporic characters but also their smaller, more personal stories of love, lust, and loss. In exploring constructions of love in Adichie's *Americanah*, this paper sets out to show that love enables encounters between humans and the transgression of borders. As Ifemelu, Adichie's protagonist in *Americanah*, says:

The simplest solution to the problem of race in America? Romantic love. Not friendship. Not the kind of safe, shallow love where the objective is that both

people remain comfortable. But real deep romantic love, the kind that twists you and wrings you out and makes you breathe through the nostrils of your beloved. (367)

According to Ifemelu, romantic love can act as an antidote for the repressive and dangerous mechanisms of racism and other systemic structures of oppression.

Routes and Roots of Love

Americanah's love story is not stationary: its chapters travel and migrate between past and present and between Nigeria, Great Britain, and the United States. We first meet Ifemelu, the female protagonist of *Americanah*, when she resides in Princeton. She came to the United States on a scholarship after finishing school in Nigeria and has since lived in various American cities, such as Philadelphia, Baltimore, New Haven, Brooklyn, and Princeton. But already on its very first pages, the novel opens up the American space Ifemelu finds herself in: she has to leave clean, affluent, and academic Princeton to have her hair braided in Trenton, a suburb of Princeton: "it startled her, what a difference a few minutes of train travel made" (6).[5] The readers accompany Ifemelu to the hair salon, where she not only has her hair braided but where she also begins a more pervasive braiding process of weaving her story, of travelling back into time to her childhood and youth in Nigeria. These thoughts, which will span several chapters, are marked by "amorphous longings, shapeless desires" to leave America and return to Nigeria: "Nigeria became where she was supposed to be, the only place she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil. And, of course, there was also Obinze. Her first love, her first lover" (7).

Ifemelu and Obinze meet in secondary school and continue their relationship all the way through university, when their ways part. Theirs is love "at first sight", playing on a romantic trope at work since Greek poets first described the "love madness" caused by Eros' arrows. From the beginning on, then, Ifemelu and Obinze's relationship conforms to the structures of what we expect of a "proper" love story: love at first sight, being star-crossed (i.e. facing obstacles and hindrances), and the happy end. This trajectory, however, is complicated and enriched by *Americanah's* engagement with space building and movement.

The correlation between love and spatial practices is frequent in the novel. In the first chapter, when Ifemelu describes her growing estrangement from her then boyfriend, black American Blaine, she says that "her relationship with him was like being content in a house but always sitting by the window and looking out" (9), referring to the locked-in feeling of confinement and stasis she feels. In contrast, a few pages later Obinze thinks back to the acts of love making between him and Ifemelu when they were young and her statement: "My eyes were open but I did not see the ceiling. This never happened before" (24). Not seeing the ceiling, not seeing the borders of the room, suggest an openness and fluidity that comes with love making. In the course of their relationship, Ifemelu begins to call Obinze Ceiling, the word becoming a shorthand for "what they did together, their warm entanglements" (24).

Movement becomes one of the most important factors in Ifemelu and Obinze's relationship as they move away from each other and lose contact (the reasons for which I

will discuss in the next section). Ifemelu makes her home in various American cities, takes lovers that are white American (Curt) and black American (Blaine), while Obinze moves to Great Britain where, under great duress, he tries to gain legal status and is deported back to Nigeria after a failed attempt at a sham marriage to an Angolan-Portuguese girl called Cleotilde. The spaces both find themselves in are marked by a multitude of affects and relations and both engage in attempts to fashion their belongings abroad. Ifemelu struggles to reconcile her Nigerian identity with the American spaces of femininity and friendship offered to her:

She was standing at the periphery of her own life, sharing a fridge and a toilet, a shallow intimacy, with people she did not know at all. People who lived in exclamation points. [...] People who did not scrub in the shower: their shampoos and conditioners and gels were cluttered in the bathroom, but there was not a single sponge, and this, the absence of a sponge, made them seem unreachably alien to her (156).

With time, however, she adapts and finds joy in the acts of mapping her American geography, “[s]he hungered to understand everything about America, to wear a new, knowing skin right away” (166). Obinze in London, in turn, works various jobs at cleaning or moving companies and lives a shadowy, restricted existence in the metropolis: “He would walk fast on the pavement, turned tightly into himself, hands deep in the coat his cousin had lent him, a grey wool coat whose sleeves nearly swallowed his fingers” (281). He is swallowed up by the grey and hostile urban topography, where he is regarded as foreign and not-belonging, “his existence like an erased pencil sketch” (318). The fear and trauma of being an illegal migrant as well as the consecutive exportation becomes deeply inscribed into Obinze’s relationships to space and to others. When he returns to Nigeria, he becomes a wealthy business man but marries a woman he does not love, and feels not moored but “as if he could float” (44). Both in London and Lagos he experiences a multiple sense of place and alienation. He only can truly “come home” when he is reunited with Ifemelu, who returns to Lagos years later.

As Sara Ahmed argues in her essay “Wiggle Room,” the act of adjusting to spaces is an act of meaning making: “Sometimes to create space we have to wiggle about. You know those moments when you try and fit in a space that is smaller than you are” (2014, n.p.). By distorting the rooms and spaces, be they social categories, gender assignments, or the skins we wear, we enlarge them, we make them fit. This act of fitting adjusts spaces but it can also make them fill up and spill over: “We might in spilling out of the rooms we have been assigned, in our struggle with an assignment, mess things up” (2014, n.p.). In this transgressive move of messing things up, one can locate an act of resistance and appropriation. Looking at both Ifemelu’s American spaces and Obinze’s London experience and their homecoming, I argue that both in some way spill over the rooms assigned to them. Their returns to Nigeria (one voluntary, one forced) mark both successful and failed engagements with space, but also pose a comment on the structure of love and desire. Many critics have expressed a “sense of disbelief that Ifemelu would choose to go back to Nigeria (and not under duress of any kind)” (Goyal 2014, xii), and within the novel, Ifemelu is faced with the same doubt: “Everyone she had told she was moving back seemed surprised, expecting an explanation, and she said she was doing it because she wanted to, puzzled lines would appear on foreheads” (16). The return to Africa seems to not sit well with a novel that

explores transnational and diasporic identity. But instead of reading the return home as a failure, I think it is much more interesting and fruitful to see it as “an exploration of blackness that does not highlight injury or trauma, but focuses on romantic love, hair, and nostalgia” (Goyal 2014, xiv), love being the key word here.[6] The story of *Americanah* ends happily, reuniting Ifemelu and Obinze in Lagos.

Adichie plays with the usually normative and rigid borders of social categories and national spaces as well as the conventional, conservative plot structures of the love story, and in doing so she makes them wider, more porous. In desiring and in realising her desires (returning to Nigeria, returning to Obinze, having a happy ending), Ifemelu wiggles free and spins “herself fully into being” (586).[7] This movement underlines the argument from the beginning of this article: love has the inherent potential for movement, for change. In performing the love story with all its obstacles and resolutions, and in swapping Nigeria with America and then back, divisions are made fluid. Conceptions of original or authentic “homeland” and of “away” are being questioned and complicated – “And this was Nigeria, where boundaries were blurred” (483) – as continents are travelled, cities rediscovered, and oceans and borders crossed.[8] The seemingly binary opposition between routes and roots is cancelled, as both Ifemelu and Obinze find home in each other. It is no coincidence that the last words of the novel are “Come in” (588) and that Ifemelu invites Obinze to cross the threshold into her house. The intimacy and the romantic, sensual happy ending proposed by *Americanah* here does not seem static or terminal at all.

“Multi-boned, multi-ethnic”: Erotic Encounters, Corporeality, and Self Love

Besides the affective spatiality performed in the novel, the locus of the body is another contested point of contact in the web of love that is spun within the text of *Americanah*. How corporeality and love are intertwined is made abundantly clear when the text of *Americanah* dwells on the moments of “entanglement” between Ifemelu and Obinze. When they first meet as teenagers, they are drawn to each other like magnets, and of their first encounters Ifemelu says: “[S]he was jolted by a small truth in those [Mills and Boon] romances. It was indeed true that because of a male, your stomach could tighten up and refuse to unknot itself, your body’s joints could unhinge” (69, 70). Here, the bodily, sensual experience felt by the two lovers brings to mind Carson’s extrapolations of love as limb-loosener, as twisting and unhinging the joints of your body. In both referencing the very conventional and kitschy Mills and Boon romance stories Ifemelu reads as a young girl and simultaneously asserting an authentic embodied experience of love and desire, the novel gives weight to what is elsewhere perceived as light (entertainment): the act of love between two people. When Ifemelu and Obinze meet again after years of absence, the sex is described as “seamless desire” (551) and “an awakening” (551) which un-numbs the body.

But bodily encounters, if painfully and violently enforced, have the reversed, opposite effect. When Ifemelu undergoes a traumatic episode of sexual assault, she closes herself off from the world and from Obinze. Early on during her time in Philadelphia when she is still a newcomer in America, Ifemelu struggles to find a job. Following a newspaper advertisement for a “personal assistant”, she finds herself confronted with a white American man, a tennis

coach from Ardmore, who forces her to be sexually intimate with him in exchange for money. Ifemelu undergoes the ordeal and afterwards falls into a deep depression, cutting off her friends, her family, and her long-distance boyfriend:

She could not bear the thought of touching her own body [...], wishing she could reach into herself and yank out the memory of what had just happened. [...] She was bloodless and detached, floating in a world where darkness descended too soon. [...] She felt herself sinking, sinking quickly, and unable to pull herself up (190-192).

The sexual violation of her body not only brings with it depersonalization disorder symptoms and disgust but also causes a detachment from the world around her. Only years later, sitting at her kitchen table in Lagos, she tells Obinze what happened to her and starts the reparative work of talking through her trauma: “She would not cry, it was ridiculous to cry after so long, but her eyes were filling with tears and there was a boulder in her chest and a stinging in her throat. The tears felt itchy. She made no sound. He took her hands in his” (543). In the silence that follows their words, she feels “safe” (543). Obinze’s love for Ifemelu enables her to pull down the walls she had built around herself.

Romantic love in *Americanah*, then, is closely connected to self-love. This is mirrored by what Ifemelu feels from the very beginning of her relationship with Obinze: “She rested her head against his and felt, for the first time, what she would often feel with him: a self-affection. He made her like herself. With him, she was at ease; her skin felt as though it was her right size” (73). Self-love and the problems that come with it in the novel play out in a space marked by restrictions put upon the black female body. As Gayatri Gopinath has observed, femininity and womanhood are often used “as primary markers of an essential, inviolable communal identity or tradition” (2003, 138). The female body becomes a symbol and marker for how national borders are drawn. Both Ifemelu’s weight and her hair are contested sites, not only regarding the politics of how women should look and behave like, but also for the more personal question of self-care and interpersonal relationships.

On the first pages of the novel, while she waits on the Princeton Junction platform for her train to Trenton, Ifemelu ruminates on the shape of her and of other women’s bodies, recognising that “‘fat’ in America was a bad word, heaving with moral judgment like ‘stupid’ or ‘bastard,’ and not a mere description like ‘short’ or ‘tall’” (6). Coming to America, she had learned to avoid that word, but when a man in the supermarket verbally harasses her, the word comes back to her: “She said the word ‘fat’ slowly, funnelling it back and forward, and thought about all the other things she had learned not to say aloud in America. She was fat. She was not curvy or big-boned; she was fat, it was the only word that felt true” (7). The stranger in the supermarket had wanted to offend her, but instead “prodded her awake” (8) to rethink her American space and eventually return to Nigeria. In admiring another woman who wears a mini skirt, and in being content in her own large body, Ifemelu argues back against white Western ideals of femininity and respectable female bodies. That her relationship to Obinze, however, adds to that act of self-love, becomes clear later in the book when she has returned to Lagos. When meeting after years of being apart, Ifemelu is self-conscious about her body size but reassured when Obinze calls her beautiful: “Oh, no, Ifem, you’re not fat. You’re being very American about that. What Americans consider fat can just be normal” (531). What is being made visible here are the different national stances towards

female bodies, and the always harmful notion of others dictating how a (black) woman should look, dress, and behave. Instead of merely relying on male reassurances, Ifemelu throughout the novel engages in processes of critically questioning these notions, continuously advocating for a “multi-boned, multi-ethnic world of women” (219), a multifaceted politics of beauty.

In drawing attention to the tensions of conflicting attitudes towards the black female body, Adichie sheds light on the legacy of colonialism and its essentialist position towards African sexuality and corporeal difference. She connects her protagonists’ sexual encounters and their physicality with broader and deeper running discourses on national identity and alterity – as Judith Butler would argue: “Discourses do actually live in bodies. They lodge in bodies; bodies in fact carry discourses as part of their own lifeblood” (Butler, Meijer and Prins 1998, 282). In complicating “normal” or “neutral” embodiments, *Americanah* “wittily undermines American perceptions about Africa” (Goyal 2014, xi). Another aspect which links to the self-empowering strategies of the body and of loving oneself is the conversation about hair opened up in the novel. As mentioned above, in the opening pages, the reader accompanies Ifemelu to a hair salon, where she gets braids in preparation for her return to Lagos.[9] The question of black hair – weaves and braids and afros – and its unruliness is taken up time and time again during the novel; it is a sign of the deeply entrenched assumptions that constitute blockages and hindrances in the dynamics of black female corporeality, sensuality, and sexuality. As Adichie says in an interview with the Guardian: “Hair is hair – yet also about larger questions: self-acceptance, insecurity and what the world tells you is beautiful. For many black women, the idea of wearing their hair naturally is unbearable” (Kellaway 2013, n.p.). In finding support via the internet and the blogosphere, Ifemelu learns to accept her hair; in cutting off the straightened, relaxed, smoothed and burnt part of her – “something organic dying which should not have died” (251) – that conforms to society’s expectations of her, she releases her fractious hair. Accompanying that material act of cutting and releasing is a speech act stating that she “simply, fell in love with her hair” (264), and, I would argue, herself.

By refusing to be a ready-made product for desire or consumption, Ifemelu, then, moves exactly against the harmful mechanisms Adichie cautions against in *We Should All Be Feminists*: “We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller” (2014, 27). Instead of shrinking herself, Ifemelu expands herself and the rooms she moves in through negotiating her body, sexuality, and her desires. The erotic and embodied aspects of love performed by *Americanah* open up conversations about race, consent, sexuality and free will. Reading the female black body and identity *within* and simultaneously *against* discourses of oppression and discipline (patriarchy, (neo-)colonialism) means to inspect and appraise expressions of love as inherently connected to identity constructions and subversions. Love can function as a tool to re-appropriate and to rebuild certain power relationships. By regarding love as empowering tactic, cultural and literary representations such as Adichie’s *Americanah* harbour the potential to destabilise stereotypical and restrictive orders and advocate new ways of speaking about relationality, affiliation, and alliance.

“Desire moves, eros is a verb”: Love and/as Text

Having discussed love in *Americanah* with relationship to space and to body, I now want to turn to the third category: textuality. The textual architecture of the novel is built around different linking devices, focal points, and temporal levels. As delineated above, the chapters alternate between Ifemelu and Obinze’s perspectives and always reach back into the past, consciously drawing parallels and correlations between both lovers’ developments. One of the structural linking devices employed by the novel is the hair salon Ifemelu travels to in the first chapter. This hot, noisy, and female space serves as the point of departure for Ifemelu’s “time travels” (see chapters 1, 3, 9, and 18). Thinking back to her roots (her childhood and her mother), the decidedly feminine space of the hair salon becomes a meeting point for various female genealogies (49). Another linking device is the blog Ifemelu starts after having lived some years in the States. The blog is called *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*, and connects the different themes and story parts to each other. Blogging anonymously, Ifemelu creates a safe space where she can talk about her experiences relating to racism, sexism, and (female) black politics of resistance (topics include Michelle and Barack Obama, WASPs, or Beyoncé). Her call to “Un-zip yourself” and to open up conversations mirrors how Angelika Bammer, Minrose Gwin, Cindi Katz, and Elizabeth Meese (1998) regard cyberspace as “a frontier through which we enter a nonspace, the space that isn’t ‘really’ there. It is a safe space, which the actual, material spaces in which many people live is not.”[10] Through blogging, she “writes herself into existence” and counters “the silence that she feels defines her in America” (Isaacs 2016, 179).

Communication via different channels and the obstruction of that communication play an important role in the fabric of *Americanah*’s romance text. The two lovers Ifemelu and Obinze, once separated by the Atlantic, call each other on the phone, send each other letters, voicemail messages, and later emails. Similarly to the way the blog and the hair salon function as linking devices, the emails Ifemelu and Obinze exchange after their estrangement propel the text from one place and one focal point to another. New media, like emails, Facebook, and the blog, create intimacy and convergence; a possibility of connection and closeness that is open and multi-branched, multi-directional: Ifemelu interacts with her readers; she quickly composes emails to Obinze on her phone only to afterwards delete them again; Obinze stalks Blaine (Ifemelu’s ex-boyfriend) on Facebook and roots through her blog’s archives to clandestinely “keep in touch.” The expression of keeping in touch is a curious one, where the digital space enables touching and contact: “They had kept in touch, she and Ranyinudo, throughout the years. At first, they wrote infrequent letters, but as cybercafés opened, cell phones spread, and Facebook flourished, they communicated more often” (17). As Camille Isaacs contends, *Americanah* uses these channels “to constitute peculiar spaces of access to both homelands left behind and the host cultures” (2016, 174). I would argue, however, that the specific textual architecture the novel displays not only links different focalisations or geographic places of belonging together, but makes another argument about the text’s love story and its affective dimensions.

With regards to the relation between love and language, Catherine Angel posits, “The desire to speak desire is a desire to burst through silence, to puncture. As such, it is also erotic; it contains its own excitement. It undoes the perceived straitjacketing. Unlaces the

corset, winds down the hair” (2012, 205). The dynamics of love as acted out by Ifemelu and Obinze (their desire for each other, represented by reaching out, keeping in touch via words) create processes of sense-making and bridge geographical as well as emotional distance. Obinze says of his email writing: “He began to write to her about his time in England, hoping that she would reply and then later looking forward to the writing itself. He had never told himself his own story [...] Writing to her also became a way of writing himself” (461). Desire for the other produces action, language, creation. Love becomes a story to be told, a narrative: “Desire moves. Eros is a verb” (Carson 1986, 17). Love is a site which acts as a starting point for, as I would argue, text and textuality: “As Socrates tells it, your story begins the moment Eros enters you” (49). A story begins with love entering; it initiates the processes of the creation and production of story, flows of narrative and textuality are induced by the advent of eros. Love enables communication: “Desire in Western culture is inextricably intertwined with narrative, just as the tradition of Western fiction is threaded through with desire” (Belsey 1994, ix).

The love story of *Americanah* punctures silence; inhabits the gaps – and thereby engages in actions of breaking down or melting away distance and difference. Perhaps the most significant example for how the textuality and language of *Americanah*’s love story escapes boundaries and loosens borders is the second blog featuring in the novel. This blog, titled *The Small Redemptions of Lagos*, is both Ifemelu’s blog once she has returned to Nigeria in the last chapters of the novel, but it is also blog that actually exists on the internet under the WordPress address <https://americanahblog.com>. While this can clearly be regarded as a marketing strategy for the publication of the novel (the blog entries were mediated and managed on Adichie’s Facebook profile by her publisher Alfred A. Knopf, cf. Guarracino 2014, 21) and to heighten impact and circulation, the blog, which is still online and features entries from August 27, 2014 to November 2, 2014, is also a metatextual continuation of *Americanah*’s text, which escapes even the confines of the lovers’ happy ending. During the story in the book, the blog functions as a self-identificatory tool for Ifemelu to settle back down in Nigeria and to speak to Obinze. The “real-life” continuation on WordPress features, among others, blog entries on Nigerian politics, Ebola, African politicians, and infrastructure (“Problem and Solution”), hair care, skin care, and vaginal care products (“The Aruidimma Centre”), and lipstick, fashion, and beauty (“Style”), all written by the first-person author figure of Ifemelu.

There is also, however, a category called “Ifem & Ceiling”, Ifemelu and Obinze’s nicknames throughout the book. As Serena Guarracino has argued, the novel’s characters “keep expanding beyond the finished confines” (2014, 21) of the text, and I argue that the blog also writes forth the love story beyond the happy end of the novel. The blog entries in the “Ifem & Ceiling” category continue writing the love story into the future, beyond the “Come in” of the novel, describing their shared everyday life: “Ceiling is different here in Enugu. He’s lighter, he jokes more, he is less silent. But I sometimes see his face fall and I know he’s missing [his daughter] Buchi” (“Ifem & Ceiling 2”). They also describe little connections and touching points: “So, we support the same Charity. We started supporting the same Charity at about the same time without, of course, knowing what the other was doing. #Lovenwantiti #truecompatibility #mostromanticcoincidenceever” (“Ifem & Ceiling 7”). The love story moves out from its confines between the covers of the book and displaces the oppositions between fiction and metafiction, text and metatext. Thus, the blog outmanoeuvres the reader and defies all desire for control and closure. With this strategy of

empowerment, the lovers' voices of the text, in the text and also outside of it, do not cease to speak.

Conclusion: "It's just a love story"

Having examined the interrelation between love and space, body, and text in Adichie's *Americanah*, I would like to argue that the novel showcases the transfiguring, transformative momentum of love in the context of postcolonial transnational writing. The love story engenders not only creative textuality, but also subversive configurations of space and of feminine corporeality. Tracing the relationship of the two lovers Ifemelu and Obinze, the above discussion has illuminated the different effects and affects of the love story. Spatially, the text exists between Africa, America, and Great Britain, but the romantic happy ending, a stock characteristic of every love story, complicates one-sided conceptions of national borders and belonging. Regarding the sexual and erotic components of love, I have traced the corporeal tensions Ifemelu has to negotiate as she experiences both traumatic and reparative intimacies. Textually, the novel similarly escapes constraints as the love story wilfully extends beyond the frame of the book into the open and multi-directional digital space of the internet.

In writing against oppression and against the restrictive powers of the norm, *Americanah* engages in an empowering act of giving voice to the formerly silenced, of providing wiggle spaces for alternative identity constructions. The novel as a transnational love story tries to take first steps in subverting certain ingrained divisions by dissecting and diagnosing social, cultural, political, and emotional patterns. *Americanah* is a text which seeks to un-bind boundaries, to unsettle settlement and to deal in all things human: love and romance are powered by the motion of meeting, of encountering and touching each other. In *Americanah*, love stands for fluidity and fractiousness – sometimes ugly, painful and twisted, but always disturbing boundaries. It is culturally contrapuntal: it functions as a site of resistance and resilience for oppressive ideologies. Instead of stasis, the novel argues for flexibility and for overcoming divisions and boundaries. As Anne Carson argues:

Eros is an issue of boundaries. He exists because certain boundaries do. In the interval between reach and grasp, between glance and counter glance, between 'I love you' and 'I love you too,' the absent presence of desire comes alive (1986, 30).

The boundary is a place at which something may begin, may become present; it acts as a starting point. Love exists because of boundaries but also in the boundaries. Love can "whirl" binary oppositions, it constitutes a playground for the struggle with other systemic relations of power, for interpersonal affiliations, as national and transnational meeting points. Love stories, like *Americanah*, might be "only" love stories, but as such they are important:

Don't we all in the end write about love? All literature is about love. When men do it, it's a political comment on human relations. When women do it, it's just a love story. So, although I wanted to do much more than a love story, a part of

me wants to push back against the idea that love stories are not important. I wanted to use a love story to talk about other things. But really in the end, it's just a love story. (Adichie, interviewed by Brockes 2014)

[1] For a more in depth discussion of *Purple Hibiscus*, see, for example, Marta Sofia Lopez' "Creating Daughter-lands: Dangarembga, Adichie, and Vera" (2007).

[2] For further readings of the interconnections of the personal and the political in Adichie's earlier work, see Manisha Basu's "Loving and Leaving: The Ethics of Postcolonial Pain in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*" (2012) or Susan Z. Andrade's "Adichie's Genealogies: National and Feminine Novels" (2011).

[3] *Things Fall Apart* has since become the most widely published/read work of modern African fiction and has cemented Achebe's position as the father of African writing. The novel writes back to "the vision of Africa as a land of savagery and darkness, the distorted reflection of the continent depicted in the work of writers like Joseph Conrad and Joyce Cary" and has become the cornerstone in the project "of recuperating notions of African culture and heritage" (Krishnan 2014, 11).

[4] This echoes what Adichie argues for in her published TED talk on feminism and its discontents, *We Should All Be Feminists*: "The idea that sex is something a woman gives a man, and she loses something when she does that, which again for me is nonsense [sic]. I want us to raise girls differently where boys and girls start to see sexuality as something that they own, rather than something that a boy takes from a girl" (33). *We Should All Be Feminists* follows Adichie's own processes of unlearning the restrictive and oppressive perceptions of how gender is woven into the fabric of social, cultural and political structures and constitutes an invocation for gender equality.

[5] The confrontation of different spaces with each other is a thing that *Americanah* excels in. The opposition never stays binary and clear-cut, the text rather teases out the geographical differences and similarities to de-essentialise conceptions of "Western" and "African". Princeton is wealthy but also bland, smelling of "nothing". Trenton is hot and sticky and dirty, but also marked by the feeling of connection and sisterhood, however stilted, Ifemelu experiences with the hairdressers. As Yogita Goyal argues, "*Americanah* takes on the charged questions of race, travel, and migration, it shows how black Atlantic concerns and American conceptions of race are reshaped and transformed in relation to the postcolonial state and its own itineraries of hope and despair, migration and return" (2014, xvi).

[6] It would be interesting to compare *Americanah* with other contemporary reinventions of the immigration novel, such as the recently published *Behold the Dreamers* (2016) by Cameroonian author Imbolo Mbue or Zimbabwean writer NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013), as all deal with cultural dislocation and the idea of original "home" and "exile" in a globalized twenty-first century world of interconnectedness and alternative spaces of belonging.

[7] In returning, Ifemelu also becomes the eponymous *Americanah* – a word which signifies someone having left and then come back, demarcating a hybrid in-between identity: "They roared with laughter, at that word 'Americanah,' wreathed in glee, the fourth syllable extended, and at the thought of Bisi, a girl in the form below them, who had come back from a short trip to America with odd affectations, pretending she no longer understood Yoruba, adding a slurred *r* to every English word she spoke" (78).

[8] An article forthcoming in November 2016 in “Diaspora & Returns in Fiction,” the 34th issue of *African Literature Today* (edited by Helen Cousins, Pauline Dodgson-Katiyo, and Ernest N. Emenyonu), called “Negotiating Race, Identity & Homecoming in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* & Pedie Hollist’s *So the Path Does Not Die*” by H. Oby Okolocha, will discuss this as well.

[9] The hair salon acts as a place of female community and a meeting point, just as much as the online community of HappilyKinkyNappy.com which Ifemelu finds through a friend. It is a natural hair community “done with pretending that their hair was what it was not, done with running from the rain and flinching from sweat. They sculpted for themselves a virtual world where their coily, kinky, nappy, woolly hair was normal” (263). In engaging with both these communities, Ifemelu not only takes part in an act of self-love, but also an act of loving other women. *Americanah* thus clearly articulates a feminist ethics of care, which can especially be found in Ifemelu’s female friendships and alliances.

[10] For a more in depth and detailed discussion on gender and cyberspace, see Mary Flanagan’s influential piece on “Navigating the Narrative in Space: Gender and Spatiality in Virtual Worlds” (2000).

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