How Do I Teach Multicultural Literature: Using Creative Writing to Navigate Ethical and Pedagogical Conflict in the Undergraduate Classroom, through Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*

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**Abstract:** How does an instructor teach multicultural literature? One of the primary theoretical concerns of teaching multicultural literature is how the instructor deals with their students. Will the students “relate” to the material? Or will they find the material exotic, alien, Other? Scholarship provides many broad answers to this deceptively simple binary of relation versus disconnection, but few of those answers come with practical elements, such as class activities, modules, or projects. Through examples from an undergraduate course called Intercultural Encounters, a course in the Global Diversity subsection of a general education initiative, this essay shares moments that sought to achieve this self-awareness, as well as creative writing exercises and assignments designed around a unit on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*. By asking students to consider their idiosyncratic approaches to the material in creative writing rather than expository writing, this essay argues that students teach themselves how to weigh their self-engagement with the text; by asking them to think of themselves as creators of a narrative, students begin to see how narratives are sculpted by their authors, and so may apply the same logic to the literature read for class. Students are therefore prompted toward metacognitive techniques and are encouraged to engage in informed reading, but the “rules” of those techniques and reading are rules the students make for themselves. Simultaneously, the essay questions the ethos of classroom instructor: if the “power” of the instructor to delimit meaning is thus subverted, then are multicultural voices subjected to one less wave of colonialist re-occupancy?

In *Radical Teacher*, Ian Barnard begins an essay on the difficulty of teaching non-Western literature in the United States by citing Priya Kandaswamy's experience in her own classrooms: "In my experience, when confronted with difference, students often adopt one of two approaches to make that difference seem less threatening. Either they try to reduce difference to sameness by immediately focusing on possible points of commonality to their own experience or they treat difference as fundamentally disconnected from their own experience" (Kandaswamy 9, qtd. in Barnard 44). Barnard expands on Kandaswamy's binary account by highlighting the dangers of each approach—that when students believe everyone is the same, "a flattening out of difference…evacuates history and power in order to assure" students of their position in the dominant culture, and that when difference is so "fundamentally disconnected," "the fetishized Other becomes exotic and unknowable, and could never be like ‘us’—a logic that, however inadvertently, reinscribes colonialist
As Barnard continues to respond to Kandaswamy’s observations, using as a touchstone his own class on world short fiction (a senior capstone course for budding teachers), Barnard hits upon a key distinction: that his students were often more "more nuanced" in their group and class discussion work, which took place out loud, than in their individual writing prompts, assignments, and essays (51). Although Barnard never pinpoints the reason why this occurred, his suggestion for solving these binary "traps" into which students fall when discussing multicultural literature is that instructors should play into the "developmental and recursive nature of the learning situation, not only in terms of students' understandings of the literature but also in terms of their learning and unlearning of certain dispositions, political positions, and habits of mind" (51). Indeed, while this all sounds well and good, what Barnard, Kandaswamy, and several theorists, scholars, and instructors tend to do when discussing multicultural pedagogy is to do what we (usually) teach our students to avoid: speak in broadly generalized, abstract, sometimes even clichéd manners about the issues we wish to solve. To avoid the same trap I myself am damning, let me be clear: Barnard and others offer few "real" solutions to the problems they present, favoring the theoretical or inquisitive mode over articulated and detailed practical exercises and assignments.

What this essay seeks to do, then, is to present these writers' thoughts on the ethical and pedagogical conflicts of teaching multiculturalist literature, then attempt to resolve some of these conflicts—for some can never truly be solved, admittedly, in the span of one class, unit, or even a whole semester—through the use of creative writing exercises and assignments. Ideally, what these achieve, aside from providing practical manners through which the instructor can navigate these conflicts, is that they stimulate students' creativity in low-stakes situations, impress upon the students the importance of understanding oneself as a (perhaps flawed, but always subjective) interpreter of the world, and foster a community of writers and thinkers out of the bodies in the classroom. By disrupting the power structure of writing as a declarative, analytical, "right/wrong" tool, I argue that creative writing can show students the pitfalls that Barnard and Kandaswamy rightfully deride, and teach them how to teach themselves out of those traps. If this occurs, then it has the added benefit of disrupting the problematic power structure of the classroom—wherein the instructor is arbiter of all information, always "right," always in power—and settles the locus of insight and learning back in the student, where it is perhaps most effective. To (ironically) employ a cliché: give a
student some fish, and they eat for a night; teach a student to fish, and they eat forever (or, at least, until they are tired of fish).

To do so, this essay will imitate Barnard's example by responding to others' work via the screen of a course I have taught for the past two years, Intercultural Encounters. This course is housed in the "Global Diversity" field in the College of Science, Health, and Liberal Arts at my university, and is designed primarily for sophomores and juniors. In the course, students are to be exposed to ideas of diaspora, identity, and exile via literature and film, such that by the end of the semester, they may create a multimodal artifact which represents what they learned from having taken the course (usually a poster or Prezi presentation, but I have also had students make food, write and perform songs, conduct and splice together interviews, and create entire levels in video games). Students upload this artifact and a reflection on the process of making it to an online portfolio under the core value of "Empathy," which represents what the university believes students should derive from having completed the course successfully. I frame the course by assigning texts (a mix of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction) from African American, Asian and Asian American, and Middle Eastern authors; we discuss the texts once a week, and use the rest of our meetings to address current world and local events as well as snippets from film, drama, or music. Students write one weekly journal entry in response to the literature (and are provided prompts in service of these entries), and create three projects over the semester (a collage with music set to it, a pseudo-lesson plan for a text we have not read but could, and the multimodal artifact). There is no formal writing. Thus since most of the work my students do inside and outside of class is creative and freeform, I have hoped that I might avoid some of the pitfalls Barnard and Kandaswamy decry, but this has not been the case. I therefore supply in this essay a number of exercises and assignments which have either gone well or may go well, and tie them to a text I believe would expose students to the type of self-learning for which this essay advocates: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*.

**Ethical Conflict: The Students' Subjectivity**

As Barnard and Kandaswamy lay out, when my students experience these multicultural texts, their responses are largely binary: they either "relate" to the author/characters/situations, or they "can't imagine" people or situations like the ones they
have read. And at first, I happily sorted my students into these two categories. I did not think I had encountered a result which falls outside the lines of this binary, a result that Mary Frances Pipino characterizes as "resistant." Pipino argues that students read literature to confirm parts of themselves—i.e. to "relate" to the text, to see in the text some aspect of the self—so "when students read a text that makes such a transaction difficult—that is, some element(s) of the text poses obstacles to the reader's drive to re-create her/his identity—resistant readings result" (179). For Pipino, these resistant readings include complete disregard for the material, complete silence regarding the material, a complete plot summary but nothing else, and a response that engages with the material but actively resists any pathetic—whether sympathetic or empathetic—response (176-177). Upon reading Pipino's interactions with her students, I realized that my students are indeed often quite resistant, if I use her definition—they regularly miss journal entries, often summarize rather than analyze, and at least two-thirds of any given class remains silent during any given class period. I had taken their disengagement for being too busy to turn in their reflections, their summarizing for poor writing skills in general, their reticence for merely being unsure and uncomfortable.

But to characterize them as resistant opens the door to a new reading of my students: perhaps, rather than my passive demeanor, they need some healthy challenging. Eric Bain-Selbo advocates for this challenge through an example in his own course, where he teaches Paul's letter to the Romans. When he discusses the text with his students, he finds their overwhelming response to be quite laissez-faire: "People are different. We live in a multicultural society. We should not judge others based on their differences from us (especially if 'we' are in the majority and 'they' the minority)" (208). I find similar results in my own classes—once my students learn that I want for them to move beyond merely sympathizing with the author/characters/situation, they tamp down comments about "relating" to the text and provide responses like these. They say, "It's their choice, not mine." They say, "I could never understand having to be in that situation." They say, "This is so different." In short, they swing all the way to the other end of the spectrum—from relation to alienation. Although I tend to think of this as a triumph—that they admit their inability to "relate" seems to me to be empathy, at least nascently, but perhaps I am mistaken—Bain-Selbo shows the flaws in this logic: "I am certain I could find multiple examples of beliefs that these students would want to condemn, so that if I raised the issues of cultures that practice female genital
mutilation they might want to condemn such a practice" (208). Peter Applebaum agrees: "Superficial levels of multiculturalism can be more harmful than helpful….The focus of much teacher education has been reduced to 'teaching tolerance'" (112). Perhaps, therefore, students should be challenged on their beliefs, made to realize their limitations via the instructor's checking and balancing of student input, rather than both student and instructor merely remaining complacent in this state of tolerant "acceptance."

What I feel this risks, however, is precisely the flattening that Barnard argues occurs when students see the Other as wholly Other, incapable of nuance and individual difference. My student would be "wrong," of course, to read one text from a Vietnamese author and conclude that "Vietnam has always been like this." To do so is to risk what Edward Said's Orientalism warns against: projecting a fantasy of cultural authenticity onto a text that is meant to represent merely one way of life, one experience, one story (as cited in Barnard 48). But as Cherry A. Banks troublesome argues, seeing a classroom full of individualized students with idiosyncratic experiences as wholly wanting correction is, apparently, just fine. In fact, it seems to Banks to be the duty of the instructor to enlighten his students, because students have trouble conceptualizing the reality of, say, discrimination, because it is no longer legal in most Western states: "For many, overt discrimination based on race, ethnicity, and gender is something they read about in textbooks, not something they have recognized in their daily lives" (156). Thinking in this manner, however, is irresponsible at best. If discrimination is illegal, I ask, then why does it keep occurring? Race, ethnicity, and gender scholars would find especially troubling this idea that if it, whatever "it", is, is not visible, then "it" does not exist. Believing students to be incapable of realizing that discrimination takes place illegally juvenilizes those students unnecessarily, with seemingly little pedagogical payoff. As David T. Abalos writes, many students know these realities quite keenly: "Increasingly, students who walk into my classroom have already lived a lifetime. Almost all of them, regardless of race, class, gender, or religious background, have suffered a variety of stories that have left them wounded" (99). As such, instructors must trust that students have at least some foothold for beginning to understand issues of discrimination.

Of course, I take the resultant point that perhaps I invest too much capacity for empathy in my students from the outset. To believe an entire class capable of high levels of empathy from day one is to enact a congruent mistake, just in reverse—instead of flattening,
I overinflate my students’ abilities and engagement with the course. Perhaps my students are not engaging because they are busy, unsure, or possess poor writing skills. But to say that this is the case for each of them is to fall into a trap of failing to see my students as individuals. Thus I can see some value to the idea of challenging one's students. To do so consistently might create an expectation that students’ ideas will always be up for scrutiny, which in turn might motivate my students to want to learn something—what better way to learn what is "right" than to be told by another, more learned person, what is "wrong?" So what if, as Barnard writes, that this creates a “tourist” experience of the multicultural, wherein these students "derive all the expected touristic benefits from their encounter with the exotic: to get the 'benefits' of tourism—to feel that one has gotten one's money worth—one must feel that one has seen something different than 'home'" (49)? What is more important is that my students fear me! As George Yancy writes, cultivating this type of reputation can be fruitful for students' enlightenment: "A philosophy graduate student shared with me recently what a fellow White philosophy graduate student said to her that he is not prepared to take any of my courses as he is not ready to face those parts of himself—yet" (5, emphasis original). If my Intercultural Encounters class becomes legendary across the university for its potential for "keeping it real," as my students might say, then perhaps I will have succeeded mightily as instructor. Perhaps it will even lead to a raise!

**Ethical Conflict: The Instructor's Subjectivity**

As my hyperbole above illustrates, there is conflict, too, in the instructor putting himself ahead of his students' learning experience. If the student commits "error" in putting themselves ahead of the text, looking to relate to it or rejecting it out of hand because they do not—and could not ever—relate to it, then the instructor makes a similar "error" if he places himself in front of the text as its arbiter. Indeed, the instructor often must act as a local expert—a scholar of the text—but in so doing the instructor routinely becomes expert on a variety of other subjects: the historicultural context by which the text is surrounded; the life and motivations of the author; the innermost thoughts, feelings, and desires of the text's characters/speakers, etc. This occurs, of course, because the university system places the instructor in a position of power, hierarchically "above" his students. As such, the ethos of
that power instills within the instructor the ability to give "right" answers and "correct" interpretations, even in situations where he does not mean to do such things.

This tension is perhaps best expressed by Paulo Freire, who identifies a series of troubling situations which result from this power dynamic in the classroom. In the multicultural classroom, these are perhaps the most damning:

(a) the teacher teaches and the students are taught; (d) the teacher talks and the students listen—meekly; (f) the teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply; (g) the teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher; (i) the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her own professional authority, which she and he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students; (j) the teacher is the subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects. (73)

As Freire displays, the power at work in this situation can easily corrupt even the most well-intentioned of classrooms, resulting in a situation (j) where the instructor feels himself the most important being in the room, rather than (one would hope) each student’s learning process being that focus. In the most drastic of these extensions, (f) and (i) clearly represent classrooms with problematic instructors—forcing students into a line of reasoning or misleading (perhaps even lying to) students feel like clear ethical violations. But what about in more passive situations, wherein the instructor is merely lecturing (d), illustrating a point about a literary device in the text (a), or guiding a student through a well-intentioned yet misguided answer (g)? If the student is meant to view the instructor as a locus of experience, knowledge, and thus power, then any action the instructor undertakes is subject to not being seen subjectively. In other words, the instructor's word becomes enforced, and the meek students comply, even if they privately disagree. As such, students become "passive recipients of prefabricated knowledge," which Pierre Orelus says resembles Freire's "banking form of education" (Orelus 92). Some of this is of course influenced by the fact that students want to earn a high grade in the course, and as such are tempted to mold themselves into the shape they feel the instructor will most favorably evaluate. But some of this is inherent in that tricky nature of power itself, which (ironically) flattens its subject into authority, unquestionable unless one climbs the ladder to his superior.
What is the most worrisome about this position, in my case, is the sense of fraudulence I feel when teaching these multicultural texts to my students. Though I risk exactly what Freire warns against here—putting myself ahead of what should be the true focus—I feel that investigating this site of power is worthwhile to this essay precisely because to question power is often to undo its generalizing magic. In so doing, I wish to undo some of other markers of power demonstrated simply by my body being in a space: that I am a white man, young and able-bodied, and (until I open my mouth) can pass for straight. Each of these identifications locates my body in states of ethos because of my privilege, and to rely on them as sources of power in the classroom would of course be irresponsible and unethical.

But because I cannot so easily divorce myself from them—as I cannot literally step out of my own skin—then I wonder what the use is of calling out that privilege for what it is. Specifically, I draw from Lisa R. Lattuca's arguments about interdisciplinarity and confidence in the classroom. As she underscores, abandoning notions of mastery is common among many interdisciplinary courses' faculty: "Interdisciplinary work was a constant reminder of the limitations of one's knowledge. Most informants realized they could not claim the same level of expertise in their adopted discipline or disciplines as they did in their home discipline….Individuals seemed to feel compelled to qualify their comments about other fields with a confession that they lacked expertise in the area" (133-134). Despite all of my preparation, my reading and lesson planning, my meetings with experts and other instructors, at the core of it, I am an instructor who can never know the conflicts these writers put forth in their texts. How, then, can I be the arbiter of these texts if I cannot say "for real" what it is like? As Banks points out, intercultural education "includes individuals who have completed academic multicultural and social science programs as well as individuals whose expertise lies in their life experiences and self-study. Even though these diverse perspectives are sometimes in conflict, each is presented as the legitimate voice of multicultural education" (149). As an instructor who, "really," has neither of these backgrounds, what right have I to be teaching this material?

**Pedagogical Conflict: Theoretical Solutions**

Part of how I attempt to resolve this "fraudulence" is to play into my students' similar discomfort. As Lattuca notes, the irony here is that students in an interdisciplinary course feel
anxiety about what they don't know and comfort with what they do, just like the instructor. As such, I make similar statements to ones that Lattuca makes: "I tell them just at the outset that this is an interdisciplinary course and we have three different majors in here. I want to meet all of your needs and similarly you're going to have some anxiety about whether you are successful or not. So to reassure them, I [have] many more feedback mechanisms than I do in a regular class" (148). By acknowledging what I lack as an instructor—both a background in intercultural education as well as life experience—I try to foster an environment wherein we are all "trying" together to begin to understand the experiences these texts presents us with as well as we are able to do. I think this language is key—to begin to understand rather than to just "understand"—because it begins to undo the binary that Barnard so vehemently despises. To begin to understand another is perhaps a basic and limited definition of empathy, but it is limited because of the subjectivity of those in the relationship. Thus if the end goal is one that can never be reached, but can be stretched toward—like a limit in calculus, a vanishing point in art—then students (and, indeed, the instructor, too) can relax. There is no "right" answer, because there is no "answer."

This theoretical approach of a process of trying is one that is echoed by many instructors and scholars of multicultural education, but the directions in which they take this trying are strangely antagonistic. Eric Bain-Selbo offers an argument for inquisitiveness: "How can we best approach the lives of others?....And if dialogue is the way by which we come to understand the other, then questioning the other is not disrespectful but the most significant sign of respect. It is the responsibility of faculty at all levels to exemplify questioning, and to demonstrate that such questioning can be done in a way that is respectful of the other" (201). Perhaps questioning is not so antagonistic, but the manner in which the questioning is done certainly can be—as my students read in one of our texts, there is a difference between asking, "Where are you from?" and what is often meant, which is, "What is your heritage?"

Curiously, Yancy agrees that discussion and voice are necessary elements of this growth we seek in our students: "White students [need to] find themselves faced with critical questions about race that mark their bodies as problem bodies....We need to create a culture of crisis where White students get to face their finitude, their emptiness, and all of the lies that they have been told and raise to believe" (14-15). Although I respect Yancy's push for conflict as a means of self-reflection, I question whether inverting discrimination in this manner
actually results in the self-reflection we seek. It would seem that it would merely lead to more self-preserving conflict at worst, or more of Pipino’s "resistant" reading at best.

Most inflammatorily, Kirsten T. Edwards adds that the inter-student conflict that could result from such a scene that Yancy describes could allow the voices of life experience to flourish—to use "Black students' voices (and those of other students of color) as pedagogical resources" in the classroom pitted those students against one another, in ways that Edwards stresses led to "beneficial" struggle (22). Of course, while this is laudable for making the marginalized voices visible—for allowing the subaltern to speak, to crib Gayatri Spivak—it simultaneously forces those voices into the kind of representation against which Said warns. If these voices in the classroom stand in for "how it is," then other students may be tempted to accept the ethos of that "real"ness, that life experience, question it no further, and extrapolate it to every situation whose criteria match from that class forward. In other words, if an African American student speaks up to talk about his life experience, my students may be tempted to think, "Oh, so this is what being black is like," and color (pun intended) every experience they have in the future with that same brush, when all this student was doing was attempting to relate (pun intended) his individual experience in one given situation.

Although each of these approaches may very well work to teach students how to teach themselves out of misreading and misunderstanding multicultural texts and experiences, I do not feel comfortable putting my students in conflict with one another in my classroom. Rather, I feel as if there must be more introspective, intrapersonal alternatives. Banks offers that teachers reach out to local experts in the community to give lectures and presentations on multicultural issues, but then again Said’s anxieties about overgeneralization persist (Banks 151-152). Barnard suggests showing students model papers written by other students, but then again Freire’s warnings about students conforming to instructors’ worldviews remain (Barnard 50). Christine Rogers lobbies for demonstrations that teachers are "visibly intertwined with the experiences and successes of their students," which for her manifests in instructors’ presence at local events and the rather vague "community-based applications" (49). While this works for Rogers’ intended audience—schoolteachers—it unravels a little for the undergraduate professor, whose presence at a university basketball game or play performance is perhaps less effective due to the increased audience in such spaces (of course, one’s mileage may vary here, but the point remains that a university usually creates
a community of its own, whereas a school is situated within a community). Perhaps, therefore, the theoretical approach is insufficient.

Pedagogical Conflict: Practical Solutions

What Rogers and others do advise, helpfully, are practical ways in which the instructor may alleviate some of the ethical concerns of teaching multicultural literature to one’s subjective students (remembering, of course, that one is oneself subjective and therefore flawed as a source of power and knowledge in the classroom). Rogers gives voice to the voiceless in her classroom by posting images to her classroom walls: important chiefs, quotations from writers of many different backgrounds, and maps of Native lands (49). Marilyn Lutzek offers a number of strategies for the first five minutes of class, as a kind of jump-start or "bell-time" exercise: projecting biographical information of the day's author(s), playing songs from other cultures, or reading aloud the poetry of poets from marginalized backgrounds (26-27). For class itself, Lutzek suggests a modification to class discussion days, wherein each student must take a position at the beginning of class on an issue relevant to the literature (or, in my case, perhaps to current events or related topics, on days when we do not discuss the literature). They must choose yes, no, or undecided, and sit in appropriate arenas in the room that are segregated for that purpose. Over the course of the discussion, if the student feels as if their opinion has changed, they move to the corresponding arena (28-29). Thus Lutzek encourages self-reflection, but also fluidity of thought—that one's opinions may change is obvious to us all, including our students, but in the classroom, a space so often consumed by the "right/wrong" dichotomy, thought too often goes calcified.

What I propose, in addition to these exercises, is the inclusion of creative writing as a way of teaching students how to teach themselves out of ethical pitfalls. This navigates the midspace which Barnard overlooks—if students do "well" when discussing but "poorly" when writing, then why not change what writing represents? David Abalos offers a helpful start—his essay assignments ask students to connect to the text by telling personal stories, following a character's journey in a novel and annotating that journey with their own stories of relation (102-103). While this risks Barnard's flattening out of difference on the surface, I think it has the potential to undo it at its core. If a student's goal in a piece of writing is to connect to the character/author at meaningful junctures, then the chances are high that the student will
notice the artificiality of such an endeavor. To be perhaps "forced" into doing this means it will not be resisted completely, as Pipino worries—it is for a major grade, after all, and not just a homework assignment—and so each student has this potential to notice the limitations of relation. Even if it fails, the student still works critically—charting plot and characterization while simultaneously having to manage the flow, style, and coherence of their own stories. As such, the instructor may end up triaging the "big" takeaway, but something "good" may occur.

Another helpful example relevant to a course like mine is one that might replace one of my major projects—or even the multimodal artifact meant to capstone the course. Jeff Abell suggests that students practice for a special performance night for the final of the course. To do so, students identify a text they found worthwhile and, in a homework or major-grade assignment, rewrite pages of that text—staying as close to the original events as possible—from a perspective other than the one given. Often this means jumping into a character's head rather than being the mediating voice of the narrator, which prepares students adroitly for the performance night. On that night, students come to the classroom as if it were a party—and they come in character (the character whose perspective they used in the assignment, the author, or maybe even the setting, although that is a bit avant-garde). For Abell, this represents a pinnacle of understanding not only themselves, but surrounding context: "This performance requires that they know not only who they are (i.e., they must have a clear grasp of the minutiae of the artist's biography and a solid recollection of what their artist did when, where, and why), but also how they would interact with all the other people in the room that evening" (148). Abell grades the students on how "in-character" their responses are to contextual questions (he might ask Daisy from The Great Gatsby how the roads were today, or Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Ifemelu [from Americanah] about her latest blog post), so that there is always a basis for the grade—as creative writing and performance can be derided as being overly subjective, this works to circumvent that in a quite quantitative manner.

Case Study: Americanah and Intercultural Encounters

In Adichie's case in particular—as Americanah is a text I wish to add to my course the next time I teach it—I add to Abell and Abalos's creative exercises some of my own. I have honed these exercises over the course of my five years of teaching, and although I have used
them across the spectrum of my composition, creative writing, and literature courses, I find them to be useful and effective in Intercultural Encounters because they demand that the student be aware of themselves. To tie these exercises specifically to *Americanah*, I feel, will only enhance their effectiveness and "legitimacy" for being, perhaps, a major-grade assignment (that is, I will have something practical and quantifiable to grade, as Abell and Abalos both navigate in their assignments).

The first of these exercises asks students to expand an ironic scene from *Americanah*, where Ifemelu participates in a discussion about historical representation of race in film. The scene depicts a class discussion in an undergraduate classroom, one that might very well take place if I were to take Kirsten T. Edwards's advice and pit my students against one another along "color" lines. In the scene, the narrator shows the reader a variety of responses from students who each—rather pedantically, perhaps—represent disparate points of view about representation of race. One argues to never use the 'n'-word because it is painful to some people; another thinks it is useless to ban the word, since it happens in everyday life despite its inflammatory nature (take that, Cherry Banks); another argues the word always contains the same meaning for each person who uses it; Ifemelu argues that the word changes in context (138-139). As the scene devolves into useful commentary on intraracial and interracial identity in conflict, Ifemelu is introduced to the African Students Association and invited to join their conversations, which she does (139). What this exercise would ask, then, is not for the student to expand this scene with Ifemelu, but to imagine other classroom conversations about other "hot" topics, and depict for the reader how those conversation might go, were they structured and presented as Adichie does in *Americanah*. The students would have to think about the source text from which the conversation would spring (this scene hinged on a screening of *Roots*), the identities and personalities of characters who would speak up in a class discussion, how the instructor would or would not participate in the discussion, and so on. All of this makes for more informed creative writing, of course, but it also makes for more informed writing, period. A student who must think about their choices in writing can easily translate that to analytic writing—especially if the act of writing has been removed from the locus of "right/wrong" and repositioned into a state of art and creativity. I find that when I use exercises like this in composition courses, for example, students show a greater attention to detail and support in subsequent essays. I hope part of this reason is that
exercises like these unlock metacognition in my students—that they begin to understand why they write every word that they do, in the order they do it, and can question their intentions as they go.

Another introspective exercise that works well with Americanah is one that investigates Ifemelu's blog entries, and asks students to respond to them. Rather than writing solely as themselves, however, and encountering some of the same issues I have when they write journal entries, I would ask students to once again inhabit a variety of personae. The trick here is that this is done in a round-table format where each student passes the paper around the table when I instruct them to do as such. Ifemelu's blog entries, when read empathically, ask the reader to investigate their own habits and thought processes, especially "What Academics Mean by White Privilege, or Yes It Sucks to Be Poor and White but Try Being Poor and Non-White," which tackles the "It's class, not race" postracial debate. This entry includes Peggy McIntosh's "test for white privilege," which literally asks the reader to scrutinize themselves against the statements made in the test, such as "If a traffic cop pulls you over, do you wonder if it is because of your race?" and "When you turn on mainstream TV or open a mainstream newspaper, do you expect to find mostly people of another race?" (347-348). This rapid-fire exercise is another engagement with characterization—I have found students to be most fond of exercises that ask them to do character work, rather than, say, description or worldbuilding/setting—but it encourages a community of writers who interact with the characters they have created for one another. If someone becomes angry, it is just with someone's character—and they can circumvent that anger into a new character's reply. Thus some of the tension of the classroom discussion becomes removed, and locates that site of tension within an exercise, which can be reflected on afterward. If someone found a character problematic, the writer can explain why they wrote the character that way, and we can discuss that choice without judging the writer themselves. We can discuss that type, thereby alleviating any antagonism.

Other scenes in Americanah that would invite deep personal connections from some of my students are ones I would plumb for an assignment late in the semester, which would ask students to write personal essays. I find that of any genre of writing, the personal essay is often the most engaging and the best-written—loaded with detail, specificity, explanation, intriguing word choice and style…I could go on. Perhaps it is because of the genre—there is
something narcissistic about the personal essay—but I think it is also because the genre elevates and validates students' experiences. It tells them, "Yes, your life experience matters," which I think is not often something that they are told in their more "right/wrong" dichotomy classes. As such, I would ask students to write personal essays that connect with an event in *Americanah* that either created a deep emotional response in them or that they feel *should* have created that response. I imagine popular scenes would include Dike's attempted suicide and Ifemelu's response to it; Ifemelu's sexual encounter with the coach in *Ardmore*; the scenes regarding President Obama's election; Obinze's revelation to Kosi that he wants a divorce, and her reaction; perhaps even the semi-ambiguous ending (366, 379-381; 154-159; 354-361; 463-465; 477). What this risks, again, is relating to the text and thereby flattening its message, but I think what rescues this exercise is its potential for students to recognize characters' motivations and contexts. I would ask students to annotate these choices on the margins of their pages—and, later, in extended form, to identify why those moments connect and also how moments fail to connect with the scene they have chosen from *Americanah*. By highlighting these differences, I hope to keep the relation clear—that they are similar, not congruent experiences, and as such one need not compete to be "the most oppressed" or damaged or fraught.

**Conclusion**

What these scenes and exercises from *Americanah* ask my students to do is twofold: to relate, and also to not relate, to see someone else as distinctly Other and alien. By enacting both ends of the spectrum at once, I land my students squarely in the murky liminal space between those poles. Whether they end up relating or disassociating entirely is their choice—I am not foolish enough to believe I can change that—but what matters is that they make that choice. What matters is that they were exposed to the possibility that they see the world a certain way because of factors they both can and cannot control—and what matters is that they realized this themselves, and not because they read some comment on an essay in shocking red ink and thought, "Aha, this is the way to do it right." In the teaching of multicultural literature, there is no one way to do it right—there are only exercises, attempts, tries—essays.
Works Cited


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