5-1-2020

The New Künstlerroman by Women Writers

Hannah Phillips
Mississippi State University

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CHAPTER 1

The New *Künstlerroman* by Women Writers

How the García Girls Lost Their Accents (1991) and *¡Yo! (1997)* by Julia Alvarez have striking similarities with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah (2013)*, despite novels' many differences including race, nation, and temporal setting. All three novels can be considered *künstlerromane*, a type of *bildungsroman*. A *künstlerroman* does not begin with one single moment, but a whole lifetime makes an artist. In *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and *¡Yo!*, the protagonist, Yolanda, is the artist whose *künstlerroman* is recorded within the two works. Not only is Yolanda an artist, but she is also a Dominican-American (im)migrant [1]who flees the Dominican Republic at a young age with her family to escape the oppressive regime of Rafael Trujillo. As she develops, she becomes a writer who is eventually nationally published, and she writes of her family's experiences as (im)migrants. Similarly, *Americanah* is about a young woman named Ifemelu who immigrates to the United States from Nigeria to attend university, and eventually becomes a renowned blogger about race in the United States. Yolanda and Ifemelu write based on their experiences, and they are the protagonists of their own narratives, but they find, at times, that they are expected to represent larger groups based on their ethnicities or experiences as (im)migrants. They negotiate this expectation and responsibility by including other voices in a variety of ways, including those of their parents, mentors, lovers, and others. It is not one voice that tells the story of the collective, but many voices that come together.

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[1] Carine M. Mardorossian states in her article "From Literature of Exile to Migrant Literature" that "over the last decade or so, some exiled postcolonial writers have reconfigured their identity by rejecting the status of exile for that of migrant. Both Salman Rushdie and Bharati Mukherjee, for instance, have adopted the term "(im)migrant" to describe both their literary production and their personal experience of transculturation" (15). I feel that Ifemelu and Yolanda would also describe themselves as such, so I will be using the terminology of (im)migrant for the remainder of this paper.

According to scholar Katherine Payant, one of the editors of the anthology titled *The Immigrant Experience in North American Literature: Carving Out a Niche*, the black civil rights movement of the 1960s had a great impact on "long-silent" minority groups in the United States, and cultivated a "more tolerant attitude toward difference and an appreciation for diversity created an audience for such literature" (Payant xx). Post-civil rights movement, the genre of immigrant literature shifts from being written by white, European immigrants, to being written by new immigrants "overwhelmingly from what we would call undeveloped nations. In 1994 the top five nations sending immigrants to the United States were Mexico, China, the Philippines, the Dominican Republic, and Vietnam" (Payant xx). One of the distinguishing features of this new wave of immigrants is that "they tend to maintain close ties with their former countries for several generations" (Payant xxi). Yolanda, Ifemelu, and their families are representatives of the generation of immigrants beginning in the late twentieth century, and they are products of this era of "transnationalism."

These works have never been considered in conjunction with one another, but they do have striking similarities. One similarity is that both Yolanda and Ifemelu leave their countries of origin and immigrate to the United States, but they both, eventually, return to their countries of origin. Their returns are made possible by globalization and economic freedom. The Alvarez novels are set beginning in the late 1950s and ending in the late 1990's, seemingly around the time Alvarez publishes *¡Yo!*. *Americanah*'s story, on the other hand, begins primarily in the 1990's when Ifemelu is a teenager in Nigeria and ends in the present day. These novels are not set in the same time period, but both stories are influenced by modern technology and globalization. Yolanda goes back and forth between the United States and the Dominican Republic while Ifemelu lives in the United States for thirteen years before returning to Nigeria.

The genre of the (im)migrant narrative in general has not been extensively studied. William Boelhower's 1981 article, "The Immigrant Novel as Genre" defines the immigrant novel. He states that, "An immigrant protagonist(s), representing an ethnic world view, comes to America with great expectations, and through a series of trials is led to reconsider them in terms of his final status" (Boelhower 5). Boelhower includes a diagram of what he describes as a "fabula" representing the "poles of tension" between the "OW (Old World) and NW (New World)." He claims that there are three major moments of the journey including "EXPECTATION (project, dream, possible world), CONTACT (experience, trials, contrasts), and RESOLUTION (assimilation, hyphenation, alienation" (Boelhower 5). Boelhower claims that, through the (im)migrant narrative, a new point of view is introduced to American literature. He argues that the "immigrant novel introduces into American literary history a new pluricultural world view and this world view, which is strictly related to the collective consciousness of immigrant groups, is, through a homological relationship, originally and dialectically responsible for the genesis of the genre's form" (Boelhower 10). Boelhower asserts that it is only through groups and through their "collective consciousness" that the genre of the immigrant novel becomes "functionally intelligible," but that is not necessarily true. Boelhower's work on collective consciousness in the immigrant novel is productive, but we should not attribute to "BAME" [2]writers the necessity of or responsibility of representing overarching groups The (im)migrant writer is not the sole voice that tells the story of the collective, but the collective has a (metaphorical) voice of its own.

[2] As with the terms "immigrant" and "migrant," there can be a negative connotation with the word "ethnic." Therefore, this paper will use the term "BAME" (Black Asian and Minority Ethnic) to refer to collective ethnic minority populations.

In addition to being (im)migrant artists, Ifemelu and Yolanda are also women artists, and it is through them that the genres of the (im)migrant narrative and the *künstlerroman* about women artists intersect. As Boelhower is one of the first scholars to define the (im)migrant novel, Rachel Blau DuPlessis is one of the first scholars to analyze the bourgeois *künstlerromane* by women writers in a chapter of her 1985 work *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers (Everywoman)*. DuPlessis' analysis of the genre focuses on a number of works entirely written by white, bourgeois women writers. Nevertheless, her analysis can be applied to *García Girls*, *¡Yo!*, and *Americanah* specifically because all *künstlerromane* by women writers regardless of race and ethnicity use the figure of the female artist to encode "the conflict between any empowered woman and the barriers to her achievement" (DuPlessis 84). There is always a conflict between a "designated role" and a "meaningful vocation," and there is still a struggle between the roles of woman and writer even in non-white bourgeois literature. Adichie's and Alvarez's novels fulfill the expectations for the female *künstlerroman* established by DuPlessis, but they also transform the genre in new ways.

Adichie and Alvarez are both women (im)migrant writers whose writings embody the intersection of the immigrant narrative and the *künstlerroman* by women writers. The immigrant novel, as suggested by Boelhower, is always representing a collective, but readers cannot expect one person to represent entire groups of people. Additionally, Rachel Blau DuPlessis plots out the progression of the genre of the *künstlerroman* by white, upper-class women writers, but, since the early 20th century, there have been new women artists who are represented in the public sphere. Alvarez' works and Adichie's novel exceed what both Boelhower and DuPlessis expected of the genres that they helped define. This paper will explore what happens when two

genres intersect in three bodies of work.

CHAPTER 2

"The word becomes flesh": The Female (Im)migrant *Künstlerroman* in Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and *¡Yo!*

The cultural, political, and social contexts of literature affect the way readers perceive certain genres, and the (im)migrant narrative is an example of a genre whose traditions have been transformed by contemporary literature Julia Alvarez's works *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and its sequel *¡Yo!* exemplify both the (im)migrant narrative and the *künstlerroman*. In writing an (im)migrant narrative that is also the story of an artist, Alvarez generates an example of what the role of the (im)migrant writer is, and more specifically, the female (im)migrant writer. The tradition of the woman's *künstlerroman*, as it is developed by Rachel Blau DuPlessis, focuses on the narratives of bourgeois white women who are stuck between obligation and desire, but this tradition overlooks women of varying ethnicities or the (im)migrant woman. It is upon analysis of books such as *García Girls* and *¡Yo!* that the genres of the (im)migrant narrative and the female *künstlerroman* are combined and thus transformed.

The role of the (im)migrant as artist is fulfilled within the character of Yolanda García, who is arguably the central character in both novels. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* depicts a Dominican-American family, the García de la Torres, as they emigrate from the Dominican Republic to the United States during the oppressive regime of Rafael Trujillo. Carlos García, along with his wife, Laura, and four daughters, Carla, Sandra, Yolanda, and Sofía, leave the Dominican Republic after Carlos becomes involved in a plan to overthrow Trujillo. The narrative does not begin at the beginning with their immigration or their lives in the Dominican Republic, but it begins with Yolanda, the third daughter, as she travels back to there as an adult. The novel can be interpreted as a collection of stories told from varying points of view and as a

reverse narrative: the narrative begins at the end. The stories construct a reverse narration of the García girls' Americanization and the struggles they face as they grow older and as they adapt to life as (im)migrants. The novel begins with a third-person narrator focalizing on Yo, and the novel ends with Yo's first-person narrative, which suggests to the reader that she is the central character in the novel. She is the artist in the narrative, and it is she who, as an BAME writer, will either represent the collective consciousness or not. Her *künstlerroman* begins in *García Girls* and continues into the novel's sequel, *¡Yo!*.

¡Yo! is much more blatantly a novel about writing and artistry as compared to *García Girls*. In fact, each story's title contains the relationship the narrator of each story has to Yo and an a literary term that relates to the theme of the story. For example, the first chapter is titled "The sisters: fiction." Even though Yo is the titular character of the novel, no story is ever told from her point of view. Nonetheless, each story is about Yo. The narrative begins with a story from the point of view of Yo's sister, Sofía after the publication of Yo's first novel. The family feels that Yo based her novel on the family's experiences, and they do not feel as if they have been rightfully represented. Sofía's chapter, "The sisters: fiction" says that Yo's argument is about "'art and life mirroring each other and you've got to write about what you know'" (3). Yo argues that her writing reflects her life and that is how she is called to write. The remainder of the stories in the novel reveal how Yo's *künstlerroman* has developed and how she has come to this conclusion about art mirroring life. The novel justifies the claim that the (im)migrant experience affects the traditional form of the female *künstlerroman* and it also depicts what the role of the (im)migrant writer is: to "tell them of our journey" through "a quilting of lives, a collection of points of view" (*¡Yo!* 309, 216).

In both *¡Yo!* and *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, Alvarez allows different characters to narrate their own stories, and it is through this "group narration" that scholars have considered what it means to give voice to a people and how that relates to Alvarez's own voice. Rebecca Harrison and Emily Hipchen consider these two novels and suggest that Alvarez "does not simply give speech to the silent. She has them speak in a tumult, in a context of many like and disparate voices" (3). In doing so, Alvarez is ultimately concerned with how a story is told, and Harrison and Hipchen believe that this implies that Alvarez is interested in the writer's voice, which is significant in the context of *García Girls* and even more explicitly *¡Yo!*. Harrison and Hipchen not only analyze the character of Yo as an authorial voice, but they also examine Alvarez's own voice not only in these novels but her other works as well. They are interested in exploring Alvarez's "distinct, transnational Dominican American female imaginary that contests patriarchal boundaries of nation, self, and genre" (14). Overall, Harrison and Hipchen insinuate that Alvarez speaks for the Latinidad, which becomes controversial in the hands of other scholars who are disconcerted with the representation of the "BAME" writer and Latino family in *¡Yo!*. Alvarez is a Dominican American writer who writes about a Dominican American writer, and scholars such as Marion Rohrleitner think of Yo as a reflection of Alvarez herself.

In thinking this, Rohrleitner is also concerned with how *¡Yo!* challenges "the sanctity of the Latina/o (im)migrant family and the representational role of the ethnic writer in American culture" (44). She compares how *García Girls* portrays the Latino (im)migrant family to how *¡Yo!* portrays the García de la Torre family. *¡Yo!* contains themes of classism and racism that are glossed over in *García Girls*. In illuminating this, Rohrleitner considers Yolanda's role as an "BAME" writer and questions whether she is a traitor. She then goes on to suggest that she is not necessarily a traitor, but that she does not actually speak "'for' or on behalf of an entire

community" (Rohrleitner 52). Rohrleitner then comes back to equating Yolanda with Alvarez herself. She suggests that Alvarez uses Yo to be a voice of dissent in that she represents what is more realistic and less stereotypical of the Latinidad.

Alvarez herself recreates memories in these novels that are loosely autobiographical, but they are changed, and some scholars are considering what it means that both Alvarez and Yo distort memories within the novels. While there is some overlap in scholarship on *¡Yo!* and *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, considering them separately affects the analysis. While Rohrleitner thinks about Yo's role as an Dominican-American adult, Michelle M. Tokarczyk considers the "hyphen: that is, the struggle for BAME Americans to balance their identities as (im)migrants from another country with their identification as Americans," which is best thought of in the context of *García Girls*. In her article, Tokarczyk considers how (im)migrants have to reconstruct narratives to figure out how their home country affects them. That being said, Alvarez has to "recreate what cannot be accurately remembered or known" in the form of representation (Tokarczyk 110). To explain the stories that cannot be known, Tokarczyk accounts for the United States' involvement with the Dominican Republic. Dominican-Americans are left to come to terms with the role the United States played in Trujillo's rule, the tyrannical dictator who ruled from the 1930s until his assassination in 1961 (Tokarczyk 111). The experience of becoming a Dominican-American is held within the hyphen, and Tokarczyk analyzes the experience of the García family in *García Girls* to focus on Americanization and hybridity. The article begins by focusing on accents in the novel, particularly why it is significant that the girls *lost* their accents. She states that "this multivocal narrative structure implicitly questions master narratives of the (im)migrant experience," which is similar to what Rohrleitner is considering in her analysis of *¡Yo!*. Classism, racism, and gender are all themes that Tokarczyk

considers, and she ultimately circles around to thinking about how the Garcías "*invent*" stories in order to survive Americanization (117).

Jessica Wells Cantiello begins her article by quoting Julia Alvarez's poem titled, "Making Up the Past" in which Alvarez proposes the idea of "pseudo-memory" (Alvarez in Cantiello 83). Cantiello goes on to analyze the instances of pseudo-memory within both *García Girls* and *¡Yo!* and argues that Yo makes up pseudo-memories within her own writing and Alvarez makes up pseudo-memories through Yo, her fictional alter-ego. The article analyzes what Cantiello calls the "gun episode" which takes place in both novels (which I also analyze in detail later). This story within both novels is essentially the same, but they are told from different perspectives. The narration of these stories makes a difference, and Cantiello suggests that, while the reader is learning about the power of story-telling, so is Yo: "After the gun episode, she realizes that her stories, whether real or imagined, are powerful enough to put her family's lives in danger" (89). While the gun episode is mentioned in a short snippet of *García Girls*, it is mentioned multiple times and from multiple different perspectives in *¡Yo!*, and Cantiello suggests that Trujillo's regime, trauma, and cultural context all coalesce to affect the telling of the story. Because the gun episode is told from multiple perspectives, the reader is forced to question which one is true. Which one is the real memory and which the pseudo-memory? Cantiello ends her article by briefly suggesting that it is through this thread that both novels create a *künstlerroman*. While I agree with Cantiello, she does not rely on the tradition of the female *künstlerroman* nor how Alvarez's novels revolutionize the tradition. Therefore, I will be building upon her concluding claim by analyzing the novels as examples of female *künstlerromane* and (im)migrant novels.

In the book *Writing Beyond the Ending*, Rachel Blau DuPlessis expounds upon the tradition of the female *künstlerroman*. In the chapter titled "To 'bear my mother's name' *Künstlerromane* by Women Writers," she considers such works as Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, and Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, and, in doing so, she considers the evolution of the female *künstlerroman* and how women writers have begun to "write beyond the ending." DuPlessis states that "The figure of the female artist encodes the conflict between any empowered woman and the barriers to her achievement" (84). In the older examples of female *künstlerromane*, the struggle was primarily between love and vocation – a choice between being a wife and mother or being a "sexless" writer. DuPlessis points out, though, that with time the female *künstlerroman* shifted, and claims that eventually women do not struggle as much with the conflict between love and vocation because of social changes. She delineates the role that the mother plays in the development of the female artist in twentieth-century female *künstlerromane*. She claims that the "maternal parent becomes the muse" for her daughter, and that the daughter as an artist takes up the work that her mother would have done if she had the opportunity to pursue her own artistic interests (93). They become co-artists "separated by a generation. Because only the daughter's work is perceived as art within conventional definitions, it will challenge formulations of decorum, so the mother or muted parent too can be seen as the artist s/he was" (94). The daughter's art can allow her to mature because she looks to the mother as muse.

DuPlessis quotes Alice Walker's essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" in both the epigraph of this chapter and her section on the mother as muse. Walker's essay is about how the mothers and grandmothers of African American artists were also artists despite the way that their enslavement prohibited them from certain kinds of expression. Walker states that "No song or

poem will bear my mother's name" and later on in the chapter she suggests that "Perhaps she was herself a poet – though only her daughter's name is signed to the poems that we know" (Walker 240, 243). Walker says, "in search of my mother's garden, I found my own," and this picture of both mother and daughter as artists is seen in Julia Alvarez's novels *¡Yo!* and *How The García Girls Lost Their Accents*. Walker suggests that the mother is an artist as much as the daughter even if it is not blatantly recognized, and this idea is illustrated through Yo's relationship with her mother, Laura, in both novels.

Laura García is painfully aware of the limitations placed on her as a woman and as an (im)migrant; nevertheless, *García Girls* depicts Laura's obsession with invention. To cope with living in her new home in America, Laura García "tried to invent something" (*García Girls* 133). She became obsessed with coming up with new gadgets and ideas to make life easier for herself and for the average American. DuPlessis suggests that the "maternal muse struggles with her condition to forge a work, usually one unique, unrepeatable work – an event, a gesture, an atmosphere – a work of synthesis and artistry that is consumed or used," and this is precisely what Laura is trying to accomplish (94). She wants to make a tangible piece of machinery that can prove that she can make an impact in the country into which she has been transplanted. For example, she puts a can opener on the bottom underside of a car bumper for the family who forgets a can opener on their picnics, or she draws a blueprint for a children's cup with two compartments and a straw (*García Girls* 134, 137). She gets the ideas for these inventions from her own experiences as a housewife, and she feels that inventions such as these will make the most difference. While Laura spends almost all of her time with a pad and pencil, trying to come up with new inventions, none of her four daughters support her: "here they were trying to fit in America among Americans; they needed help figuring out who they were . . . and here was their

own mother, who didn't have a second to help them puzzle any of this out, inventing gadgets to make life easier for the American Moms" (*García Girls* 138). The girls do not understand that Laura is also trying to figure out how to be American among Americans.

The beginning of Yo's *künstlerroman* is most influenced by Laura, the mother artist. In the story titled "The Daughter of Invention," Yo is chosen to write a speech for Teacher's Day at her Catholic school. The narrator explains that while they were still living in the Dominican Republic, Yo was not a good student, and no one could ever make her stay still long enough to read. When she moved to the United States, though, "she needed to settle somewhere, and since the natives were unfriendly, and the country inhospitable, she took root in the language. By high school, the nuns were reading her stories and compositions out loud in English class" (*García Girls* 141). It is in this chapter that Yo begins her education as an artist, her *künstlerroman*, and her mother is the one who encourages her at the beginning of her journey. While Yo does not realize it, Laura is also an artist, but, as DuPlessis points out, "only the daughter's work is perceived as art within conventional definitions" (94). Nevertheless, Laura recognizes the beginning of Yo's *künstlerroman*, but the narration does not directly indicate that she recognizes the end of her own because the point of view because this chapter is focalized in the third person through Yo; the narration is focusing on Yo, not Laura.

Laura's inspiration for invention comes from a *need* for something, but, through a humorous misquotation, the novel suggests that the creation does not come from the need, but the need comes from the creation. In the story, Yo is excited to give the speech, but the pressure stops her from writing what she really wants to write. Laura tries to give her daughter advice and she tells her to think about what the "Americans say, *Necessity is the daughter of invention*" (*García Girls* 143). Laura is consistently characterized through her what Yo perceives as

misquotations of American sayings throughout the novel. This story is focalized through Yolanda, so Yo sees it as misquotations, but the reader knows better. Laura is not misquoting but writing something new. The actual saying is that "necessity is the *mother* of invention." While this misquotation can easily go unnoticed in the text, the misquotation can be construed as an argument that the role of art in society is to create *new* problems, not fix old ones. By saying that necessity is the *daughter* of invention, Laura is reinventing invention itself. For Laura, necessity does come before her inventions - necessity is the inspiration for her inventions – but she tells Yo that necessity is the *daughter* of invention, so that implies that the work of art, the invention, comes first and the need for it comes later. In this particular story, it is completely necessary for Yo to write this speech because otherwise she will be letting down the school and will more than likely get punished by the school's administration. At the beginning of her *künstlerroman*, the need for Yo's inventions is self-protection and also family protection, but, much like how her interest in art changes as she migrates from the Dominican Republic to America, her inspiration for her art changes as she migrates from adolescence into adulthood.

Despite Laura's reinterpretation of the American proverb "necessity is the mother of invention," she is fully aware of what the original meaning of the saying is, and she attempts to encourage her daughter's emergence as an artist by encouraging her to make a name for herself in American culture. Laura consistently thinks of her inventions not as necessities but as commodities, particularly because she recognizes the emphasis American culture puts on inventiveness and consumerism. Laura puts much stock in this American saying or else she would not recreate it. She emphasizes the Americanness of invention through relying on this phrase to encourage Yo. She is putting stock into the American creative experience – the American ideal – and she is encouraging Yo to do the same. Laura does not use the tradition of

Dominican culture to encourage Yo's art, but she relies upon the American values of ambition and progress to encourage Yo's conscious decision to become an artist. The motivation for art is different in the context of immigration, and both Laura and her husband are trying to help their daughter reconcile the past, the present, and inevitably the future.

Aside from using the English language to come to terms with her identity as she comes of age, Yo also uses her newfound competence in the English language as a tool for rebellion. While Laura decides to help Yo by giving her advice rooted in American ideals, Yo's father chooses to help her with her speech by instructing her with the ideals he learned during his time in the Dominican Republic. Carlos tells Yo that "humbleness and praise and falling silent with great emotion" are the best tips for speech giving (*García Girls* 142). Yo did not listen to her father nor necessarily her mother, but she did take advice from Walt Whitman. She read lines of his poem "Song of Myself," and was inspired enough to write the first draft of her speech. Her father's emphasis upon tradition and her mother's emphasis upon invention did not make sense to Yo until she read the words of someone else. Nonetheless, Yo did recreate, or reinvent, the words of Walt Whitman, much like her mother reinvented the words of American proverbs and sayings. As Carlos reads the first draft of Yo's speech, he refers to the line that says, "'*I celebrate myself*,'" which is a quote directly from Whitman's "Song of Myself." The novel calls these "plagiarized words," but Yo does not plagiarize the words. She references them and adds another layer of definition to the words as her mother does with her "misquotations." Laura and Yo are not plagiarizing but creating something new. In this case, the inventions of both mother and daughter prove their artistry.

While this is the origination of Yo's journey as an artist and as a Dominican-American, there remains a tension because of her parents' (im)migrant journey, which is displayed in this

story through Laura's and Carlos' reactions. Yo took pride in her work and so did her mother. When Yo reads her speech aloud, Laura says, "*Ay*, Yoyo, you are going to be the one to bring our name to the *headlights* in this country" (*García Girls* 143, emphasis added). Alvarez again uses Yo's focalization of Laura's "misquotation" to characterize Laura's (apparent) insufficiency in the English language as compared to Yo's and her sisters' competency. Laura is confident in her claims, but she also recognizes her limitations. Laura genuinely wants the García name to be in the headlights/spotlights in America, which is one of the reasons why she is so obsessed with inventing. She wants to introduce something new to American culture that will prove that she can be an American. [3]

Laura encourages her daughter to speak her own truth in a country that encourages creativity since they no longer live in a country that adheres to tradition. Laura is proud of Yo's progress, and she wants Carlos, her husband, to also be proud of their daughter, so she encourages Yo to read her paper to the father. Instead of being proud, Carlos is angry at Yo for her speech because it is "boastful . . . insubordinate . . . improper." Carlos yells in broken English and the text says that "his anger was always more frightening" when he spoke like that (*García Girls* 145). Carlos yells at his daughter out of anger, but he yells in English, not Spanish. Even

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[3] Alternatively, Laura recognizes that, as a woman, she has more of a chance of being "somebody" in America than she did in the D.R. The text says that it is better she be "an independent nobody than a high-class houseslave" (*García Girls* 144). Moving to America gives Laura the opportunity to recognize her rights as a woman, and in a way, Laura encourages Yo to rebel against her father's suggestions, and Laura has a hand in encouraging Yo's evolution as a young feminist as much as she encourages her in her evolution as an artist. Crystal Parikh suggests that Yo's and her sisters' "adoption of a politics of liberal feminism, portrayed as sexual freedoms, free movement, and public outspokenness" as they grow older, "corresponds to an assimilation to consumer culture, providing a gendered sign of the changes they undergo" (4). America's emphasis on consumer culture is related to the sisters' mindfulness of their rights as women. Parikh creates a link between Laura's obsession with consumer culture and the budding obsession her daughters have with the feminist cause as they mature into women. Laura does not necessarily align with American ideals of femininity like her daughters do, but she is aware of America's consumer culture and the female role in American society and economy.

though Spanish is his first language, he still speaks in English to his daughters, even when he has lost his temper and is not thinking rationally. This suggests that even Carlos recognizes that English is their language now, not Spanish. He recognizes that they live in America, but he is still fearful of the danger of the Dominican Republic. He is angry with Yo because her speech makes her sound as if she is rebelling against her teachers, when her intention was actually to write in what she thought was her own voice, to sing her own "song." The text says that when she read "Song of Myself" and wrote a speech emulating it she "finally sounded like herself in English" (*García Girls* 143). This specific line relates to another quote in *¡Yo!* when an American woman comments upon Yo's English. Yo says that, "'Language is the only homeland. This poet once said that. When there's no other ground under your feet, you learn quick, believe me" (*¡Yo!* 153). Yo, as an adult, realizes that at this moment she rooted herself in English, and, through her writing, begins to come to terms with her new Americanness.[4]

While Yo begins to write in English, she is still aware of the power of Spanish. Carlos tries to explain to Yo why her speech is not appropriate, but his anger does not come out of disappointment but out of fear. In anger, he tears her speech into pieces while Yo cries, "This is America, Papi, America! You are not in a savage country anymore!" (146). She is so angry with her father that she calls him a "Chapita," which is a nickname for Trujillo, the worst slur she can think of at her father. Before, she tells him that he is not in a savage country anymore, but then

[4] Silvia Schultermandl suggests that "Language is also the battleground of fierce conflicts within the Garcia family, where accent-free English becomes Yolanda's means of rebellion against and liberation from paternal restrictions upon her individuality" (8). Combining Yo's characterization of language as a "homeland" and Schultermandl's characterization of language as a "battleground" creates a landscape that is both a comfort and a cause for conflict. The beginning of Yo's journey as an artist is also the beginning of the conflict her writing and her language creates within her family. Nevertheless, it also cultivates rebellion, protection, and identity.

she reminds him of where he came from and associates him with the violence of the Dominican Republic that they fled. Both Carlos and Yo speak in Spanish out of anger.

Although Carlos eventually comes to terms with Yo's writing and encourages her, it is Laura, her mother, who is her muse. After Carlos tears up Yo's speech, it is Laura who helps Yo rewrite another version. They write a speech together "wrought by necessity and without much invention by mother and daughter late into the night on one of the pads of paper Laura had once used for her own inventions" (148). Yo's speech was a success at her school and Laura was excited to know that the line she had recommended Yo put in at the end received a standing ovation. After this, the novel suggests that Laura stopped inventing. The text states, "Yoyo thinks of the speech her mother wrote as her last invention. It was as if, after that, her mother had passed on to Yoyo her pencil and pad and said, 'Okay, Cuquita, here's the buck. You give it a shot' (*García Girls* 149). The caveat is that the quote says "Yoyo thinks" that her mother stopped inventing, because this story most importantly, is focalized through Yolanda. DuPlessis suggests that the mother is still an artist even after her daughter becomes one, and even though it seems that Laura stops being an artist in *García Girls*, *¡Yo!* proves that she does not stop inventing.

Laura teaches Yo how to invent, and she continues to be aware of the need for invention specifically when it comes to self and family protection. *¡Yo!* is told from the point of view of many different people, and the second section in the novel is told from the point of view of Laura when her daughters are all grown up. Laura, as well as the other voices in the novel, tell their own stories to either corroborate or negate Yo's own story telling. Laura tells a story about when Yo first began "inventing" stories in the Dominican Republic. She was a child with a big imagination, and she tried to make sense of things the best way she could. In Laura's story, Yo

finds a gun that Carlos had hidden in his closet. Laura is terrified that Yo will tell someone about the gun, which would put the family in grave danger because they were not allowed to have weapons under Trujillo's ruling. Laura threatens Yo when she asks her if she saw the gun and Yo denies ever knowing about it. Yo seems to make a covenant with her mother that "the bear won't be coming anymore," which is a reference to a scare tactic that Laura had used on her daughters when they were younger (*¡Yo!* 28). To punish the girls, Laura had put on a mink coat and acted like a bear, and it truly frightened Yo, so to set the bargain Yo asked her mother not to do that anymore. To accelerate the story to after the García's move to America, Laura says, "Isn't a story a charm? All you have to say is, *And then we came to the United States*" (*¡Yo!* 28). Laura's commentary adds to the novel's emphasis upon storytelling, and it also addresses the possible reasons for storytelling including protection and self-identification.

Laura does not only invent gadgets as she does in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, but she too invents stories to protect her family. Shortly after the family has moved to the United States in the story titled "The mother: nonfiction," Laura tells the reader that Yo finds the coat in her mother's closet in their home in America that Laura had put on in the Dominican Republic as a part of a bear costume that she would use to scare her children. Yo becomes very angry with her mother because, as Laura suggests, Yo associates the coat with "a monster she was sure we had left behind in the Dominican Republic" (*¡Yo!* 30). For Yo, the coat symbolizes trauma she experienced in the D.R. that was not necessarily caused by the oppressive regime the García's were living under but was her own mother dressed up as a monster. For Laura, that coat symbolizes the difficulty of being a mother. Apparently, Yo told stories to her teachers at school about a bear and about how she and her sisters were locked in closets. To a teacher's ear, these kinds of stories seem disturbing especially if they are true. Laura was so concerned that her

children would be taken away from her that she lies to a social worker about what the family has gone through. She tells the social worker all about the horrors that they encountered in the Dominican Republic, and Laura says, "I get little carried away and invent a few tortures of my own" (*¡Yo!* 32). Laura herself is doing the same thing she accuses Yo of doing – inventing stories. Nevertheless, her inventions still have a necessity that precedes them. She invents to protect her family. Laura, in this instance, is still adhering to the actual American phrase "necessity is the *mother* of invention." For Laura, necessity comes first.

Just as Laura passes on her "need to invent" to Yo, Yo tries to pass on her artistry to others including a little girl she meets during one of her many visits back to the Dominican Republic. In the chapter titled "A stranger: epistle," Yo helps a woman who lives in the same village as her aunt and uncle write a letter to her daughter in America. Consuelo's daughter, Ruth, lives in New York with a Puerto Rican husband whom she married to get her residency. Ruth wants to leave the man, but he refuses to divorce her and tells her that if she leaves him that he will turn her in to immigration. Consuelo must write a letter to her daughter, but she does not know how to write, so she asks Yolanda to help her. Consuelo comes to Don Mundín's house with her young granddaughter in tow, and as Yolanda writes the letter that Consuelo is dictating, she stops to talk to the little girl. The text says that the child "came forward on the couch to look at the lady's hand dancing across the paper. The lady smiled and offered the child some sheets as well as a colored pencil. 'You want to draw?' she asked" (*¡Yo!* 105). This episode is narrated through a third person point of view and focalized through Consuelo, so Yolanda is referred to as "the lady." Even though the narrative is not focalized through Yolanda, the reader is still given a picture of Yo's kindness and her desire to share her love of art with others. She offers this little girl, who cannot even write yet, a piece of paper and a colored pencil. The girl is reticent, but

eventually she stops staring at the sheet of paper and bears begins to mark on it, and the end of the chapter reveals that the little girl had written on the sheet of paper "with little crosses, copying the lady's hand" (*¡Yo!* 107). Yo put this piece of paper into the envelope with Consuelo's letter to Ruth, and allows the child, in a way, to speak for herself. This moment in the text can be interpreted as the beginning of the girl's *künstlerroman* – a journey she begins because another woman encourages her to do so.

While Yo considers herself an artist and firmly believes that artistry is important enough to teach to other people, she shifts from being the speaker to being the one spoken of in *¡Yo!*. Each section is told from the point of view of a different person, but the chapter titled "The wedding guests: point of view" is focalized through many different people with their own distinct portions of the chapter. The narrative style of this chapter emulates the chapter in *García Girls* titled "The Blood of the Conquistadors" in which the family is worried that they will be apprehended, so they decide to flee to America. Both "The wedding guests" and "The Blood of the Conquistadors" happen at pivotal moments in the two narratives, and Alvarez uses multiple points of view to describe one single event. She literally states in "The wedding guests" chapter that the theme is going to be "point of view." The chapter starts with the focalization of Luke, Yo's fiancé's friend and the priest who is officiating their wedding. The chapter begins with the narrator saying that Luke "would like to say, friends and family, we are gathered here to celebrate this coming together of. . . rich lives and many stories, the coming together of all of you" which is exactly what the narrative itself is doing (*¡Yo!* 213). Luke's narration goes on to name all of the people in attendance, but he narrows in on Yolanda who "seems almost subdued amid this tintinnabulation and emotional commotion as if she were trying to pull all of these people together in her head, a quilting of lives, a collection of points of view" (*¡Yo!* 216). The

novel is trying to quilt together lives, which begs the question: to what extent is the writer supposed to tell other peoples' stories?

¡Yo! allows many different people to tell their own stories because they did not believe that Yo told their stories well enough for them in her book, but Yo is not able to tell her own story, either, throughout the course of the novel. Nonetheless, the end of "The wedding guests" chapter says an "angel comes forward a few steps, and the word becomes flesh, Yolanda García!" (*¡Yo!* 240). Luke is using a biblical allusion to describe Yolanda and is comparing to her to Jesus Christ himself. She is the word made flesh: the embodiment of all things unsaid. It is her duty to represent the collective. If the reader considers Yolanda as the word made flesh, the Christ, she becomes the substitution for the collective. As Christ metaphorically gave himself as the embodiment of the World's sin, Yolanda is to give herself as the voice of the masses, if she is an allegory for Jesus Christ. It is her duty to represent the masses, and Carlos, in his chapter at the very end of the novel, tells Yolanda that her "destino" is to "tell them of our journey. Tell them the secret heart of your father and undo the old wrong" (*¡Yo!* 309). Carlos gives Yolanda his blessing to fulfill her destiny and write for the sake of her family and for the sake of everyone else. Carlos understands Yo's gift, but he also remembers that it was "her storytelling that got her in trouble" as a child, and he tells the same story of the gun episode as Laura did in her section. Carlos, like Laura, is aware of the power that storytelling has and he was also frightened by the power of Yo's storytelling as a child, which is illustrated in the "Daughter of Invention" story in *García Girls*. At the beginning of his chapter titled "The father: conclusion" he says that he told Yo the "whole story," even the one he did not want "her and the others to know" (*¡Yo!* 293). Carlos understands the power of storytelling, and through his own narrative he hopes to encourage Yo in her artistic journey.

While Carlos is confident in Yo's role as an artist, she herself struggles with believing writing is her destiny. DuPlessis considers the mother/daughter relationship in her chapter on the female *künstlerroman* as well as the female artist's struggle with choosing between her art and conforming to "exactingly interpreted feminine roles" such as marriage and motherhood (DuPlessis 91). Carlos' chapter at the end of *¡Yo!* reveals that Yo, like the female artists of nineteenth century *künstlerromane*, regrets not having children. Carlos is concerned when he finds out that Yo has been telling her husband "'that women in the Bible who never had babies were said to have a curse on them'" (*¡Yo!* 294). He writes to her and tells her that he is proud of her because she has "*created books for the future generations*," and he tries to convince her that "her books are her babies" and that they are his "grandbabies" (*¡Yo!* 294). She calls him on the phone and tells him that she wonders if she a made a mistake in becoming a writer and that maybe she could be a mother too because "many people are writers *and* mothers too," but Carlos tells her that she is "not many people" (*¡Yo!* 295). She is different – set apart – holy. Carlos decides to give Yo a blessing to "make the curse of doubt go away," and he says that his blessing "has to be in story form for Yo to believe in it" (*¡Yo!* 296). Carlos then goes on to tell Yo about when he knew that writing was her "*destino*," the gun episode which is retold in both *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and *¡Yo!*.

The narrator talks briefly about the gun episode in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* through Yo's focalization and her sister Sofía's. The story titled "The Blood of the Conquistadors" depicts the day the García family decides to flee the Dominican Republic an immigrate to America. A couple of *guardias*, Trujillos' police, come to the García's house with guns, and Yo's narration says that, when she sees the guns, she "now knows guns are illegal. Only *guardias* in uniform can carry them, so either these men are criminals or some kind of secret police in plain clothes Mami

has told her about who could be anywhere at anytime" (*García Girls* 197). This excerpt from Yo's perspective reveals that the events of the gun episode lingered in her mind, and Sofía's narration mentions it again. The story of the gun is mentioned throughout both novels, but it is not clarified until Carlos tells the story at the end of *¡Yo!*. He reveals that Yolanda had found her father's gun for hunting hidden in his closet and had told the general who lived next door about it. She framed her father's ownership of an illegal gun as a story, and the story remains in the pseudomemory of multiple members of the family.

In the same chapter, the narrator shifts from third person omniscient to first-person, and Sofía tells her own narrative. Sofía does not narrate this section as if she is still a child, but it seems that she is narrating it as an adult because she says "I'm the one who doesn't remember anything from that last day on the Island because I'm the youngest and so the other three are always telling me what happened that last day. They say I almost got Papi killed on account of I was so mean to one of the secret police who came looking for him" (*García Girls* 217). Sofía goes on to talk about how Yo adds to the family's collective memory of the Dominican Republic:

> But then whenever we start talking last-day-on-the-Island memories, and someone says "Fifi, you almost got Papi killed for being so rude to that gestapo guy," Yoyo starts in on how it was she who almost got Papi killed when she told that story about the gun years before our last day on the Island. Like we're all competing, right? for the most haunted past. (*García Girls* 217)

Because Sofía does not remember their last day on the island, she is forced to hear her own story from other people, but this section allows Sofía to tell her own story when Yo tries to force her story on her sister.

Sofía's narration reveals that Yo believed that the gun episode gave her a "haunted past," but Carlos' narration of the event reveals that the gun episode is more a part of his "haunted past" than his daughters. Sofía can tell her own story as can Carlos. His version of the gun episode is his blessing for Yo because it is the "story of when I first realized her destino was to tell stories" (*¡Yo!* 296). While this story is ultimately Carlos' to tell, he states "sometimes I get confused as to what exactly happened. . .because I have read the story of those years over and over as Yo has written it, and I know I've substituted her fiction for my facts" (*¡Yo!* 299). Yo has not only told this story to her younger sister, but to her readers. She has told this story so much that it has been distorted, even for her father. While Yo's version of the story suggests that Carlos had a gun for protection, Carlos reveals that he actually had it because he enjoyed hunting guinea hens. He hid the gun in the floorboards of his closet for his family's protection from the *guardias*, but one day Yo found it. She kept the secret until the sisters went to visit a general who lived close to the García's, and when they were watching a cowboy movie, Yo told the general that her father had a bigger gun than the cowboy. When the general questioned her further, she said that her father will use his gun to kill "the bad sultan ruling the land and all the guards who protect him in his big palace" (*¡Yo!* 305). After Carlos and Laura heard this, they took Yo into the bathroom, turned on the shower, and beat her. With every lash, he told her she "must never ever tell stories!" (*¡Yo!* 307). That is his shame. He beat Yo for her creativity because he then realized her destino, and it scared him.

But now, his blessing for Yo is that he is going to learn from her and change this story. Carlos says "I can add my own invention – that much I have learned from Yo. A new ending can be made out of what I now know" (*¡Yo!* 308). His retelling of the story changes the moment he lifts the belt:

> So let us go back to that moment. Let us enter that small, green-tiled bathroom that will have a fictional hidden closet behind the toilet in stories to come. I am turning on the shower. Her mother sits down on the toilet seat to hold Yo for me. It sounds like Isaac pinned on the rock and his father Abraham lifting the butcher knife. I lift the belt, but then as I said, forty years pass, and my hand comes down gently on my child's graying head. (*¡Yo!* 309).

If Yo can change the story, then Carlos believes that he can too. He had once made his daughter a holy sacrifice for his own fear, but now he wants to offer Yo a holy blessing to encourage her in her destiny. Carlos recognizes that there is a necessity for invention in this moment, and that necessity is still protection. He needs to invent his story to protect Yo's artistic journey, but he also needs to invent a story to get rid of his own shame and to tell the story that he wants to tell. He gives Yo permission to tell the collective narrative of their family and their people, but he knows that it is important for him to tell his own. In blessing Yo, Carlos is blessing her stories. Her *künstlerroman* transforms into his progeny. It does not matter that she alters the narrative, just as long as she shares the journey. The responsibility of the BAME writer, for Carlos, is not to tell the truth necessarily, but to offer a vision. Yo is the daughter of invention because of her relationship with Laura, and she is the mother of invention because her stories are her children. She is the mother of correcting the wrongs of the past and providing redemption for the future.

While scholars consider the traditions of the female *künstlerroman* and the (im)migrant narrative separately, the intersection of the two is not well researched. In analyzing *¡Yo!* and *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* as models of the intersection of these two genres in contemporary literature, the genres transform. In the current political atmosphere, immigration is a worthy topic of discussion, and the (im)migrant narrative has the potential to influence the

perception of (im)migrants. The BAME writer's responsibility is to the group they are representing and to the future of the American ideal.

CHAPTER 3

"Unzip yourself": Non-American Black Women Writers in Adichie's *Americanah*

In my last chapter, I concluded that Julia Alvarez's novels *How the García Girls Lost Their Accent* and *¡Yo!* occur at the intersection of the *künstlerromane* by women writers and the (im)migrant novel. As explained in the last chapter, William Boelhower's article about the (im)migrant defines the (im)migrant narrative as genre and is particularly beneficial in relation to the Alvarez novels, and it is equally helpful in this chapter in relation to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel 2013 novel *Americanah*. Boelhower's analysis of the (im)migrant novel is mathematical and tedious, but he does flesh out the various tropes of the genre, and states that "through the genre model, then, one must root a mythic conception of the American dream within a specific historical context, which means requalifying the Dream each time there is a new (im)migrant protagonist, with a specific response in a specific location" (12). Like Alvarez's Yo, Adichie's Ifemelu becomes a writer who is influenced by her experience as an (im)migrant and becomes a "non-American black" writer for an American black audience in Adichie's *Americanah*.

Americanah tells the story of Ifemelu, a young (im)migrant from Nigeria, as she travels to America and learns about race and discrimination, American culture, struggle, and writing. Ifemelu's story is paralleled by Obinze's, her former lover and fellow (im)migrant, who travels from Nigeria to London, England. At the beginning of the narrative, Ifemelu is at a hair salon outside of Princeton, New Jersey to get her hair braided, and she laments the lack of ethnic braiding salons in Princeton. As she sits in the hair salon, Ifemelu reflects on her life and her journey to America from Nigeria, and her analepses are marked by her relationship with her high school boyfriend, Obinze. Both Ifemelu and Obinze emigrate from Nigeria to the United States

and Great Britain respectively. Ifemelu and Obinze do not flee Nigeria because of war or destitution, but because they simply want more opportunities than the education system in Nigeria can offer them. Ifemelu faces hardships and near poverty during her first few years in the United States, but eventually she graduates from college and begins her blog "Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black" before receiving a fellowship at Princeton. Obinze's story makes up a portion of the novel, but Ifemelu is the primary protagonist, and it is through her that the novel is both an (im)migrant novel and a *künstlerroman*.

While Ifemelu eventually becomes acclimated in America, Obinze immigrates to London where his visa expires, and, after working multiple illegal jobs, Obinze is deported back to Nigeria. Obinze becomes a successful businessman in Nigeria, and Ifemelu becomes a successful blogger in the United States and has two serious relationships with American men. Eventually Ifemelu stops writing her blog and decides to return to Nigeria where she inevitably begins another blog because she realizes that she sees Nigeria differently after living in America for so long. As she tries to become reacquainted with Nigeria, Ifemelu comes back into contact with Obinze. The novel does repeatedly come back to their relationship, but also represents the complexities of race, culture, and identity in America, Britain, and Nigeria. Ifemelu's relationship with Obinze makes the novel seem like a romance novel, but Ifemelu's blogging makes the novel a site of social commentary and a *künstlerroman* as well. Arguably, the novel is about how Ifemelu's (im)migrant identity affects her journey as a writer.

While some critics of *Americanah* analyze the explicit feminist ideologies, political commentary, and the role of the African writer in the novel, others consider *Americanah* as an illustration of the African diaspora in both America and Great Britain. H. Oby Okolocha

addresses Ifemelu as a representation of the African diaspora and is primarily interested in the concept of "transnational migration" and "the complex dynamics of race in diasporan existence" (Okolocha 143). The article asks, "how racism affects the identity of Africans in the diaspora" and how it "combines with other factors to encourage return 'home'" in such works as *Americanah* and Pede Hollist's *So the Path Does Not Die*. Okolocha claims that *Americanah* interweaves multiple genres including "bildungsroman, romance, comedy and social commentary" (Okolocha 143). Okolocha's focus is on the characters' "reasons for departure from their homelands, their experiences of racism in America, how these experiences affect their self-definition, and how the resulting evolution and acceptance of their identities propel them to return to their respective homelands" (143). Ifemelu leaves Nigeria because of unrest in the education system, and in the United States she becomes aware of race as a social construct and struggles to come to terms with the complexities of transnational migration. Okolocha takes the triangular migration of the slave trade and adds another leg to it, creating a "quadrangle" in which Ifemelu leaves Nigeria, travels across the Atlantic Ocean, adjusts to life in America, and then returns to Nigeria (Okolocha 146-147). The slave trade is abolished, but the effects of the slave trade on the United States and the identities of African (im)migrants remains. Ifemelu is able to choose to leave Nigeria and come to the United States and she always has the option to return home.

Like Okolocha, Yogita Goyal's article on "Africa and the Black Atlantic" is also primarily about *Americanah* as a depiction of the African diaspora and is said to be "the most detailed and accurate account of *Americanah*" by other critics (Berning 3). Goyal's article is a response to Paul Gilroy's book *The Black Atlantic*, "which identified a hybrid counterculture to modernity in the real and metaphorical journeys of African-descended peoples across the

Atlantic" (Goyal v). Goyal, in the first part of her introduction, reevaluates the African diaspora in the context of Gilroy's book, and eventually begins to analyze the African diaspora in the context of Toni Morrison's works before moving on to *Americanah*. Goyal praises *Americanah* for being a story of a first-world minority *and* a study of race (Goyal xi). It is easy to conflate Ifemelu as a writer with Adichie as a writer, but Goyal goes on to evaluate the two separately. Before delving into Ifemelu's role as writer, Goyal contends that *Americanah* is obviously an (im)migrant narrative but does not align with the (im)migrant narrative's generic offering of a way to "fix" host cultures. Goyal claims that Ifemelu critiques American culture, but she does not stay to change it before returning to Nigeria. Ifemelu comes to America and is a victim of racial prejudice, but the "novel self-consciously foregrounds its own reception as a new kind of black novel, an exploration of blackness that does not highlight injury or trauma, but focuses on romantic love, hair, and nostalgia" (xiv). African literature, American literature, or any literature for that matter, cannot completely encapsulate a people or a genre, but Goyal suggests that, in a time of neoliberalism and globalization, books like *Americanah* can generate *new* "itineraries" for (im)migrant narratives.

While Goyal speculates that new "itineraries" for (im)migrant narratives are being cultivated and should be discussed in the context of contemporary literature, one scholar who is working on these new itineraries is Nora Berning. In her article "Narrative Ethics and Alterity in Adichie's Novel *Americanah*," Berning claims that "a new, specific turn-of the-century ethics emerges in novels whose authors' preoccupation is intercultural alterity" (Berning 2). The turn of the century has allowed for an "age of migration" to begin, and the "ethics of alterity" must be reevaluated (2). She cites new ethicists such as Judith Butler and Derek Attridge who see the novel as an artifact as "inherently politicized" (3). *Americanah*, as a contemporary (im)migrant

narrative, becomes an example of how the ethics of alterity are being reshaped and how Adichie, as a female (im)migrant writer, can succeed "in delineating a narrative ethics of alterity that is related simultaneously to questions about agency, gender relations, sexuality, and national politics" (4). Eventually, Berning suggests that it is the responsibility of the scholar of literature to consider how the ethics of narrative can affect real-world problems.

The issues of diaspora and writing in *Americanah* come together in Serena Guarracino's article "Writing 'So Raw and True': Blogging in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*." The article begins by arguing that Ifemelu's blog is "both embedded in but also outside creative writing," and uses Ifemelu's blog as an outlet for Adichie to use technology and bloggings as a "metanarrative device" (2-3). Guarracino begins to merge together Ifemelu's blog and Adichie's role as writer, specifically as a Nigerian writer. Guarracino claims that Nigerian writers are tasked with being "interpreters of their own land of origin for a mainly Western and English-speaking audience," which speaks to how writing, both fiction and nonfiction, is shaped by its readership (6). Nigerian writers play a role in defining Afropolitanism and thus make literature "the locus for the elaboration of new African identities" (9). Guarracino notes the way the blog entries disrupt the narrative of *Americanah*, but how they also show how Ifemelu processes her experiences and how her blogging is a hybrid of "storytelling, reportage, and emotional value" (14). Ifemelu, throughout the novel, uses her blog as a space to separate herself from the world around her, be it America or Lagos after her return, and Guarracino claims that Ifemelu has different modes of writing in the two different spaces. This might depend on audience and it might depend on purpose; either way, Guarracino asserts that "Ifemelu's trajectory does not disown the Afropolitan need to rewrite Africa's catastrophic and pitiable narrative, yet it does not embrace the possibility of doing so by marketing the experience of privileged migrants as the

new global fashion trend" (20-21). There emerges, through Ifemelu's writing, a new African (im)migrant and emigrant identity, and it is wrapped up in discovery, writing, and coming home.

Critics have considered the topics of feminist ideology, diaspora, and blogging in the novel, but none have analyzed the novel in the context of the two-century old tradition of the *künstlerroman* by women writers. Rachel Blau DuPlessis claims that the mother plays a role in the development of the female artist in twentieth-century female *künstlerromane*. This, along with other aspects of the tradition of the female *künstlerroman*, can arguably be applied to Ifemelu's *künstlerroman*, and includes her relationship with multiple women in *Americanah* other than her biological mother. DuPlessis' article refers to and is influenced by Alice Walker's "In Search of our Mothers' Gardens" which pioneers the inclusion of the black daughter as artist and the black mother as muted artist into the tradition of the *künstlerroman* by women writers. Walker suggests that perhaps the mother is also an artist "though only her daughter's name is signed to the poems that we know" (Walker 243). DuPlessis utilizes Walker's work in relation to a number of nineteenth and twentieth century *künstlerromane* by women writers, but Walker's analysis of the black woman as artist is especially resonant in relation to *Americanah*. Walker is writing about the American black woman as artist, burdened with the history of slavery and oppression. Ifemelu grew up in Nigeria where she had no concept of herself as "black," but as an artist in the United States, she also becomes burdened with centuries of racial discrimination. Walker suggests that black female artists must "fearlessly pull out of ourselves and look at and identify with our lives the living creativity some of our great-grandmothers were not allowed to know" (Walker 237). Ifemelu's female ancestors did not have the same experience as Walker's enslaved female ancestors, but that does not mean that Ifemelu does not have a maternal muse.

Ifemelu was not forced from her motherland of Africa, but that does not mean that she does not write with the influence of generations of women behind her.

When we meet Ifemelu at the beginning of the narrative, we know she is a writer and that she has recently stopped writing, but we do not witness the beginning of Ifemelu's *künstlerroman* until about halfway through the narrative. Nevertheless, we can track the influences other women have on Ifemelu's artistic journey from the beginning of her story. *Americanah* begins with Ifemelu getting her hair braided at a salon, so it is only fitting that Ifemelu's analepsis to her earlier life begins with the statement that "Ifemelu had grown up in the shadow of her mother's hair" (Adichie 41).[5] Ifemelu begins to think of her mother's hair as an extension of her mother's identity, and she remembers when strangers would ask her mother if she was Jamaican because they thought that "only foreign blood could explain such bounteous hair that did not thin at the temples." When Ifemelu's mother cut her hair as a symbol of her religious conversion, Ifemelu thinks that her mother "was not her mother, could not be her mother" (Adichie 41). Ifemelu did not share her mother's faith, but she did come to think of it as much a part of her mother's identity as her hair had been; it "comforted her; it was, in her mind, a white cloud that moved benignly above her as she moved. Until the General came into their lives" (Adichie 45). The General was Ifemelu's Aunty Uju's much older lover. Ifemelu's mother did not admit that the General was Aunty Uju's lover and chose to believe that he was simply Uju's mentor and wanted to help her become a doctor. The narrator reveals that "Ifemelu could

[5] Ifemelu also begins blog-writing after joining a conversation on a blog about hair care. While it might seem off topic to divulge what scholars are saying about hair in the novel, I think that Cruz-Gutiérrez's analysis of the cultural "safe spaces" of hair salons and blogs in *Americanah* displays how physical perception affects (im)migrant storytelling. The article looks at the "main stages of Ifemelu's 'hairstory', a term understood as a journey of personal development revolving around the importance of hair for Black women's identity formation. Hairstories involve both cherished and dreaded memories influencing Black women's self-perception and socialization habits" (68). The hair salon, like a blog, is a place for the black diaspora to come together and make connections and make sense of their communal migration.

not understand this, her mother's ability to tell herself stories about her reality that did not even resemble her reality" (Adichie 45). At this point, Ifemelu begins to bring together her mother's story-weaving, her hair, and her faith to build her mother's identity in her mind.

Later in the story, we learn that Ifemelu becomes a writer even though her mother never does. In this way, Ifemelu's mother is, arguably, a type of muse in that she is one of the first storytellers Ifemelu ever gets to learn from. Ifemelu is also influenced by other women in her life including Aunty Uju and Obinze's mother. While Aunty Uju is not as much of a storyteller as Ifemelu's mother, she does introduce Ifemelu to other storytellers through the books that she gives her. When Ifemelu thinks back on her relationship with her young aunt, she thinks about how constant Aunty Uju was as a presence in Ifemelu's life. She "sewed Ifemelu's little-girl dresses," would "pore over fashion magazines" with Ifemelu, and "brought her James Hadley Chase novels wrapped in newspaper to hide the near-naked women on the cover" (Adichie 53-54). While Aunty Uju herself was not a storyteller by nature, she did give Ifemelu access to creative writing by providing her with novels and access to social commentary by introducing her to non-fictive journalism through fashion magazines, both of which are genres that influence Ifemelu's own writing later on in her *künstlerroman*.

Obinze's mother is also a female influence in Ifemelu's *künstlerroman* and a much more obvious one because Obinze's mother is a professor of "literatures in English," "not English literature" which she makes very clear because she, arguably, is not interested in aiding and abetting the history of British colonialism. There are rumors that she fought a male professor and was fired from her job, but, in reality, the male professor slapped her and, after speaking out against him, she decides to take a sabbatical and move her and her son to Lagos. Obinze says that his mother found out that the other professor had been misusing funds and, when she confronted

him, he slapped her. She was so angry about the male professor's behavior that she "wrote circulars and articles about it, and the student union got involved. People were saying, Oh why did he slap her when she's a widow, and that annoyed her even more. She said she should not have been slapped because she is a full human being, not because she doesn't have a husband to speak for her" (Adichie 59). Not only does Obinze's mother write the articles about her own experiences, she knows that she does have her own voice and that her voice can make a difference. Before Ifemelu even meets her, she is beginning to learn how to find her own voice from Obinze's mother. When Ifemelu first meets Obinze's mother, one of the first questions she asks her is "What are your favorite novels, Ifemelunamma?" (70). She tells Ifemelu that Obinze only reads American novels, and that the "human stories that matter are those that endure" (Adichie 70). Not only does Ifemelu learn how to find her own voice, but also how to appreciate the voices of other people. The lessons Obinze's mother teacher Ifemelu over the dinner table are lasting.

Ifemelu does not appreciate what Obinze's mother teaches her until she immigrates to the United States. She is struck by loneliness and confusion at the world around her, and her correspondence with Obinze is a form of solace during her assimilation. He encourages her to read American books even at the beginning of their relationship in Nigeria, so she begins to spend all of her free time at the local library devouring books about America because she "hungered to understand everything about America, to wear a new, knowing skin right away" (Adichie 135). Once she begins to enjoy reading the books off the shelves, "she wrote to Obinze. . . careful, sumptuous letters that opened, between them, a new intimacy" (Adichie 136). Ifemelu's budding appreciation for the written word begins with Obinze. He is the one who encourages her to read, and their correspondence is the foundation of their transatlantic

relationship with Ifemelu in the United States and Obinze still in Nigeria. Unfortunately, Ifemelu is sexually assaulted by a tennis coach who needs someone to help him "relax." After her assault, Ifemelu becomes depressed and stops writing to Obinze. Her experiences in the United States cause Ifemelu to see herself differently as a woman and particularly as a black woman. She stops writing to Obinze and takes a break from writing in general. Therefore, because of hardships in the United States and mental illness, Ifemelu's *künstlerroman* is temporarily deferred.

As Ifemelu adjusts to American life, she also becomes aware of the cultural difference of race and identity between the United States and Nigeria. The narrator says that Ifemelu found that race was not an issue in Nigeria. In fact, she tells some people at a dinner party, "I did not think of myself as black and I only become black when I came to America" (Adichie 290). As Ifemelu begins to heal from her sexual assault and cultivate a place for herself in the United States, she experiences two of the pivotal moments of the (im)migrant protagonist's "fabula" that Boelhower proposes in his article: contact and resolution. Contact is a negative experience that involves trials and contrasts while resolution can be both positive and negative as it involves "assimilation, hyphenation, and alienation" (5). Ifemelu's "contact" moment begins when she arrives in America and continues through her struggles with poverty, assault, ridicule, and depression until she does become accustomed with and assimilated into American society. That being said, Ifemelu's "resolution" moment is marked by alienation and racial discrimination, but it is also marked by moments of self-realization and self-confidence.

As Ifemelu assimilates to American culture and social expectations, she becomes self-conscious of her body image including her weight and her hair. The narrator says that "since she came to America, she had always braided her hair with long extensions" and waited for months in between braiding because she could not afford to have it done often (Adichie 203). After

Ifemelu graduates from college with a degree in communications, she is turned down by multiple employers after she interviews, and a friend advises her to "lose the braids and straighten your hair. Nobody says this kind of stuff but it matters" (Adichie 202). After Ifemelu has her hair relaxed at a salon, she develops chemical burns on her scalp and eventually her hair falls out (204, 208). At the advice of a black female friend, Ifemelu cuts her hair. To become more confident in her natural hair journey, Ifemelu begins visiting a blog called HappilyKinkyNappy.com where black women can post in online forums about their own journeys with natural hair and tips they have to appreciate it. After a black man made a comment about Ifemelu "looking jungle" with her natural hair, she thinks about a post on the forum by a woman who says "*I love the sistas who love their straight weaves, but I'm never putting horse hair on my head again*." Ifemelu writes that "*Jamilah's words made me remember that there is nothing more beautiful than what God gave me*" (Adichie 213). People began to respond to her comment on Jamilah's post, and Ifemelu feels that "posting on the website was like giving testimony in church; the roaring echoing roar of approval revived her" (213). When Ifemelu must learn to appreciate her black hair as a black woman in a racialized society, she turns to a place where she can read other peoples' stories and she can begin to tell hers. I believe it is significant that Ifemelu feels that writing about her hair is like "giving testimony in church." It is as if she is combining two of the things her mother reminds her of, faith and hair, to begin to realize that writing can help her discover the truth about who she is in this new context.

Ifemelu's body image is not the only thing she must come to terms with in her journey to understanding her role as a black woman in America. As she transitions to becoming an American African (not an African American), she learns about race relations in a very personal way when she dates a white man named Curt. While her relationship with Curt is functionable,

she is constantly reminded that she is a black woman dating a white man whenever they are in public, and she struggles to intimate to Curt what it means to be black in a falsely colorblind society. In one particular scene, Curt says that Ifemelu's copy of *Essence* magazine is "kind of racially skewed" because only black women are featured (Adichie 294). To make a point to Curt, Ifemelu takes him to a local bookstore and has him page through every woman's magazine on the display shelf and count the number of black women featured. He can only count three, maybe four, women who could arguably be black. She explains to him why *Essence* magazine is not racially skewed because it is the only magazine that features women that look like Ifemelu. When they return home from the bookstore, Ifemelu writes an email to another black friend named Wambui, and Wambui says "This is so raw and true. More people should read this. You should start a blog" (Adichie 295). Ifemelu then begins to craft her blog and breaks up with Curt. She longs to know "How many other people had become black in America" and to hear their stories while also telling her own story (Adichie 296). Ifemelu's story becomes the communal story of other Non-American blacks.

The reader of *Americanah* does not only get to witness Ifemelu becoming a writer, but we also get snippets of Ifemelu's writing in the form of her blog posts throughout the novel. The blog posts begin to appear at the end of chapters, and they work as a form of social commentary both within the story and in the real world. Even before Ifemelu begins to write in the story, the narrative foreshadows her writer's journey. The blog posts range in topic from body image to the Obama administration to racial ideologies in America, and Ifemelu's tone in her blog posts is conversational, passionate, and, often times, poetic. The blog post that the text includes directly after the scene when Ifemelu begins writing takes up the "problem of race in America" and romantic love as the solution to the problem. Ifemelu says that friendship is not good enough to

solve the problem, but "real deep romantic love, the kind that twists you and wrings you out and makes you breathe through the nostrils of your beloved" (Adichie 296). Ifemelu may be writing social commentary, but she is, also, arguably crafting poetic prose.

Her writing is direct and interactional, and she addresses the readers of her blog pointedly. In one of her blog posts titled "To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: In America, You Are Black, Baby," Ifemelu writes as if she is corresponding with her reader. She tells them to "Stop arguing. Stop saying I'm Jamaican or I'm Ghanaian. America doesn't care. So what if you weren't 'black' in your country? You're in America now. . . So you're black, baby" (Adichie 220). She stands by her desire to know more about other people's stories of "becoming Black in America," and she almost forces her readers to write back to her. She gives them a space to share their stories and encourages them to become writers too. There is one rather short blog post that is titled "Open-Thread: For All the Zipped-Up Negroes" that asks the readers to share their stories:

> This is for the Zipped-Up Negroes, the upwardly mobile American and Non-American Blacks who don't talk about Life Experiences That have to Do Exclusively with Being Black. Because they want to keep everyone comfortable. Tell your story here. Unzip yourself. This is a safe space. (Adichie 307)

Ifemelu invites her intended audience to begin their *künstlerromane* and share their own stories. She creates proper nouns out of unnamed communal experiences and makes unspeakable things speakable.

Ifemelu's intended audience shifts when she moves back to Nigeria and begins another blog titles "The Small Redemptions of Lagos" in which she discloses her experiences after returning to Nigeria as an accustomed American African. The text only includes one blog post

from “The Small Redemptions of Lagos” in the last chapter of the novel. The post is about “the government’s demolishing of hawkers’ shacks” and the first paragraph begins with “It is morning” and the next with “It is evening” (Adichie 474). Ifemelu’s tone in this blog is different from her tone in “Raceteenth.” The text notes that when she put up this post, an anonymous commenter writes, “*This is like poetry*” and she knew it was Obinze – “She just knew” (Adichie 474). Ifemelu does not only communicate with her intended audience through her blogs, but she eventually communicates with Obinze. She “wrote her blog posts wondering what he would make of them” after they had broken off their love affair when Obinze returns to his wife and daughter (Adichie 475). Nevertheless, she wrote her blog posts with Obinze in mind, but she still did it for herself. The text states that “still, she was at peace: to be home, to be writing her blog, to have discovered Lagos again. She had, finally, spun herself fully into being” (Adichie 475). Ifemelu defines her identity through her writing, not as a Non-American black or as a Nigerian, but as a Nigerian American writer who returns home. Home is arguably not America or Nigeria, but the place where she finds herself in her writing and the voices she represents.

The novel does not end there because Ifemelu and Obinze do come back together. Previously in one of her blog posts, Ifemelu had said that the race problem could not be solved with friendship but with “romantic love,” and Adichie ends the novel with a variation of this romantic love (Adichie 296). When Obinze comes to Ifemelu’s door to ask her to have him back, he stands there “holding a long sheet of paper dense with writing” and tells her “I’ve written this for you. It’s what I would like to know if I were you. Where my mind has been. I’ve written everything” (Adichie 477). He writes down what he wants to say to her, but he does not leave it as written word. He tells her that he could just leave it to turn into “the poetic tragedy” of their lives, but he wants to act on his love. This is taken in the context of their relationship, but it

could also mean that nothing should simply stay written. People's stories can remain the "poetic tragedy" of their lives, or it can be acted upon. The role of the (im)migrant, or any writer for that matter, is to write down the stories that encapsulate a life and encourage people to want to act. The first step is writing it down, and the second step is doing something about it.

Ifemelu knows this, which is why she chooses a creative medium that accommodates many voices. She actually encourages her readers to write for themselves. Ifemelu knows that she cannot represent every voice solely with her own, so she encourages others to write for themselves, including Obinze. While the novel is about Ifemelu's *künstlerroman*, it ends with Obinze starting his own. One person's story is not the same as another's, so they all must be voiced.

CHAPTER 4

Conclusions

Yolanda and Ifemelu are characters who emulate the authors who brought them to life, and they are representative of a generation of transnational middle-class (im)migrant writers. Alvarez and Adichie are members of a new generation of (im)migrant writers who are no longer representative of politics of exile but politics of migration. These works are not concerned with "here" versus "there," the United Versus the "Mother country." They are more concerned with self-identity and self-fulfillment. Yolanda and Ifemelu are not exiled, but they are transnational, thus they have the opportunity to write their way into a global readership. As migrant voices, they can inhabit two identities of being a stranger and of being at home. The protagonists in these works migrate between identities and times, and these works migrate between two genres.

Yolanda and Ifemelu are not exiles simply because they are transnational. They, arguably successfully, traverse borders through their writing. They bridge a gap between writer and audience by encouraging their audience to write. These characters are migrants and are transitional as well as transnational. These works are transitional pieces for the genres of (im)migrant narratives and *künstlerromane* by women writers. They are not forced to be one or the other, but they can be both. Likewise, Yolanda can be both American and Dominican and Ifemelu can be both Nigerian and American. They can be both speaker and audience. They can be both woman and artist. Their conflict of roles transcends the traditional wife/mother and artist/creator conflict. Yolanda and Ifemelu are, nevertheless, maternal and pursue romantic relationships, but they are artists first and foremost.

Yolanda and Ifemelu are consistently encouraged to write, but they also encourage others to create and share their stories. In ¡Yo!, Yolanda is criticized for how she represented her family

in her books, so other characters are given the opportunity to tell their own stories. The narrative itself encourages polyvocalization. Alvarez as a writer gives her characters a voice and shows how Yo encourages others to create something and let their voice be heard. Additionally, *Americanah* gives multiple people a chance to speak up. As an artist, Ifemelu picks a medium that encourages conversation and interaction. She actually encourages her readers to write their own entries and correspond with her. She tells them "Tell your story here. Unzip yourself. This is a safe space" (Adichie 307). Ifemelu creates a safe space in her blog and literally commands her readers to tell their own story. She knows that she cannot be representative of all of them, and she should not be responsible to be representative of all of them.

Works of this nature are traditionally categorized as diasporic literature, but I am interested in studying them as works of American literature. Yolanda and Alvarez are Dominican American writers and Ifemelu and Adichie are Nigerian-American writers, and their writing should be studied in conjunction with other American literature; they migrate between the two. Ultimately, the American (im)migrant experience is an American experience and should be given a place within the canon. (Im)migrant literature allows the reader to experience many different perspectives. Arguably, that is a goal of every form of literature: perspective. Readers can learn to empathize with people who do not live the same life as them.

It is through this empathy that we can gain a new perspective in light of current debates on migration.Recently in the United States and in other Western countries, immigration policy has been heavily discussed, and it is often a leading issue within political campaigns. Immigration, though, is a topic that is ultimately humanitarian. It is economic and political, but the topic of immigration is also people-based. Therefore, how can we better understand the people who make the decision to leave their country of origin and move to a foreign place? In

my opinion, we can read people's stories and learn their motivations for leaving and witness their struggles. The story of one is not representative of everyone, but it is a start. Within the age of globalization and modern technology, the world is getting smaller and smaller, and we can embrace it. We can read books, blogs, and talk to real people, and, together, we can share our stories.

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