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# **Speculating worlds**



# Against the Idea of Africa as “Absolute Dystopia”: Pragmatism and Possibility in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* and *After the Flare* by Deji Bryce Olukotun

Paulette Coetzee\*  
Nelson Mandela University

## Abstract

This paper examines two works that anticipate Africa-centred futures as positive and possible, without promising utopia. *Americanah* and *After the Flare* both embrace contradiction and complexity. Furthermore, their treatment of societies (mis)shaped by historical violence includes acknowledgement of their own imbrication in global structures of capitalist modernity. Against the grim backdrop of rising inequality, resurgent racism and the effects of climate change – a moment in which dystopic visions tend to predominate – Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Deji Bryce Olukotun’s novels embody a kind of hope. Nonetheless, these alternatives to dystopia do not imagine that the problems and abuses of the present might easily be overcome. Thus, despite their employment of popular genres that invite rather than disavow pleasure, these fictions do not simply offer a form of escapism to distract us as the world burns. Rather, I would argue, they provide useful perspectives on Africa, on race and on humanity, that also have relevance in terms of current discourses of the Anthropocene. Before elaborating my argument in relation to Adichie and Olukotun’s works, I will examine some aspects of the contexts within and against which they operate – in terms of history, geography and representation concerning race, blackness, humanity, and Africa.

**Keywords:** Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Deji Bryce Olukotun, blackness, ecology, Africa, science fiction,

## 1. Blackness as (In)Humanity in Modernity

In *Critique of Black Reason* (2017), Achille Mbembe reminds us of the paradox of race: that it does not exist except as a socially-constructed fiction and yet, simultaneously, persists as a powerful force through its many transmutations. Imaginary constructs of blackness, always linked in some way to Africa, are continually remade in the ugly work of racism. Intertwined

\* Paulette.Coetzee@mandela.ac.za

with and co-constitutive in relation to modernity and capitalism, blackness in and as race is also irretrievably connected to constructions of humanity in the modern period. Racially driven definitions of the human in relation to blackness occur in myriad variations, with humanity defined in absolute opposition to blackness at one extreme, and aspiring toward blackness as its vital essence at the other (2017, 10-37). Conflating racist constructions of (in)humanity with humanity per se presents a danger, however. For, while ‘Blackness does not exist as such’ but ‘is constantly produced’ (Mbembe 2017, 18), humanity, by contrast, asserts its ontological existence prior to and beyond dominant definitions and exclusions. In Mbembe’s words, ‘the Western world *considered itself* the center of the earth and the birthplace of reason, universal life, and the truth of humanity’ (2017, 11; my emphasis). Nonetheless, the lies and depredations committed in the name of so-called civilization did not submerge racially oppressed people’s consciousness of *their* humanity: ‘slaves always remained human, despite the cruelty, degradation, and dehumanization directed at them’ (Mbembe 2017, 48).

Mbembe interrogates a complex collection of interlinked histories of actions, impositions and reactions with material, ideological, and psychological associations and effects. His book’s singular title – with its nod to Immanuel Kant – emphasizes the enormity of suffering imposed in the name of race and the centrality of racialized thinking and exploitation within the modern economies and philosophies spawned by Europe’s imperial expansionist project. At the same time, the continual emphasis on multiplicity guards against viewing either racist whiteness or racially produced blackness as simple or monolithic.

The name ‘Black reason’ is laden with irony, since at first glance it seems to invoke the kind of racialized essentialism it refutes and deconstructs. At a surface level, it suggests a special form of logic placed in binary opposition to ‘white’ or ‘Western’ reason, but such a reading is shown to be part of the cluster-concept itself, that forms the object of Mbembe’s critique. This ‘ambiguous and polemical’ term does not denote an ontological essence. Rather, it is used

to identify several things at once: forms of knowledge; a model of extraction and depredation; a paradigm of subjection, including the modalities governing its eradication; and, finally, a psycho-oneiric complex. Like a kind of giant cage, Black reason is in truth a complicated network of doubling, uncertainty, and equivocation, built with race as its chassis. (2017, 10)

It is important to note the inclusion of anti-racist assertions of black identity within the ‘giant cage’ in the definition above. Mbembe’s investi-

gation of blackness includes ‘different sides of the same framework’ and ‘refers, moreover, to a dispute or a conflict’ (2017, 30). The discursive work of ‘inventing, telling, repeating, and creating variations on the formulas, texts, and rituals whose goal was to produce the Black Man as a racial subject and site of savage exteriority’ comprised a ‘founding narrative... in perpetual reconfiguration’ (2017, 28). This racist construction did not go unchallenged: from its beginnings, resistance created a ‘second narrative’ of blackness that denied capture and control (2017, 28). Mbembe shows the complex and varied history of blackness as chosen identity as an important and necessary recuperative process. However, he also remarks that the second narrative was ‘based on profound ambiguity’ and argues that, as well as ‘profound disjunctures,’ there are ‘also undeniable solidarities between the second narrative and the first narrative it sought to refute.’ Perhaps unavoidably, resistant blackness often is ‘traversed by the traces, marks, and incessant buzzing’ of racist othering (2017, 29).

Current discussions concerning race and the Anthropocene are interesting to consider in the light of Mbembe’s analysis of ‘Black reason’. On the one hand, as Axelle Karera makes plain in ‘Blackness and the Pitfalls of Anthropocene Ethics’, there are apocalyptic theories that ignore or underplay racism and black suffering (2019, 35-42). These treatments reinscribe violent exclusion and reveal the ongoing dominance of whiteness within the academy.

On the other hand, interventions that emphasize blackness incur the risk of simplifying, or even erasing, complex (lived and scholarly) histories if their important focus on the undeniable reality of black suffering reproduces a state of abjection or victimhood as a kind of ontological essence. This danger is apparent in Kathryn Yusoff’s *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (2018). Like Mbembe, Yusoff stresses the centrality of enslavement and instrumentation of black bodies as tools for extraction in the global edifice of capitalism, though she expands his analysis to stress the enormity of fungible black labour in the very making of the geological Anthropocene (2018, 15-20). In other ways, however, Yusoff seems to substitute one key part of Mbembe’s analysis for the nuanced complexity of the whole. In particular, her refusal of the human as conceptual category leads her to a problematic impasse (23-24). For while she acknowledges black resistance, she casts this in quasi-mystical, emotive, instinctual and poetic terms, entirely outside intellectual traditions of modernity, anchored in embodiment and personifying a close relationship with the earth that deconstructs any barriers between people, other species of life, and matter (2018, 133-134; 139-140). Replaying certain tropes of Negritude, Yusoff does not attend to Mbembe’s remark on the link between the latter movement and Western-based anticolonial ‘critique of an aesthetic, avant-gardist, and anarchist bent’ that

largely drew on the very colonial myths and stereotypes that it sought to invert. It did not call into question the existence of the cannibal or of a fundamentally irrational and savage Black world. It sought to embrace all the symptoms of degeneration – like sparks of fire – with the idea that the ardent power of the Black Man, his furious love of forms, rhythms, and colors, was the product of that very degeneration. (Mbembe 2017, 43)

In Yusoff’s work Africa is invoked as the source of those who were enslaved and provides a few examples of ongoing extractive processes, yet there is little attention to the continent’s geographical and historical variety. Furthermore, Africa-based voices are minimised in a manner that collapses the experiences of those whose forebears remained in Africa with those whose ancestors were forcibly removed. As such, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* falls into line with Western views of Africa as “overwhelmed by harshness, violence and devastation” (Mbembe 2017, 49). Karera minimises African experiences and contributions in a similar manner, referencing the continent itself in brief mentions of toxic dumping and the crisis of migration to Europe (2019, 43 and 53). Thus, both Yusoff and Karera reinscribe the ‘market dystopia’ diagnosed by Kodwo Eshun:

African social reality is overdetermined by intimidating global scenarios, doomsday economic projections, weather predictions, medical reports on AIDS, and life-expectancy forecasts, all of which predict decades of immiserization.

These powerful descriptions of the future demoralize us; they command us to bury our heads in our hands, to groan with sadness. Commissioned by multinationals and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), these developmental futurisms function as the other side of the corporate utopias that make the future safe for industry. Here, we are seduced not by smiling faces staring brightly into a screen; rather, we are menaced by predatory futures that insist the next 50 years will be hostile.

Within an economy that runs on SF capital and market futurism, Africa is always the zone of the absolute dystopia. There is always a reliable trade in market projections for Africa’s socioeconomic crises. Market dystopias aim to warn against predatory futures, but always do so in a discourse that aspires to unchallengeable certainty. (2003, 291-292)

The powerful symbolic weights attached to the name ‘Africa’ within the ‘giant cage’ of ‘Black reason’ operate in different ways (Mbembe 2017,

10). While negative visions predominate, alongside the domain of utter devastation exist the realms of ancient wisdom, absolute innocence, and also, in certain guises, the fantasy of Afrofuturist utopia. All of these modes rely upon a certain distance from specific African places to continue their work.

Providing a kind of conceptual opposite to dystopic pessimism, Afrofuturism finds its roots in the experiences of black people in the North American diaspora. When Mark Dery coined the term in 1994, he defined it as "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20<sup>th</sup>-century technoculture" (qtd. in Yaszek 2006, 42). Though this definition has been broadened subsequently, discussions of the body of work termed Afrofuturist focus mainly on African American sensibilities and may invoke Africa as imaginary storehouse in ways that do not necessarily resonate with the perceptions of African people. Thus, Mohale Mashigo remarks that "Afrofuturism is not for Africans living in Africa" who "actually live on this continent, as opposed to using it as a costume or a stage to play out our ideas" and chooses not to apply the label to her own futuristic writing (2018, x).

Africans who remained on the continent have suffered their own traumatic history but have also retained a measure of continuity with their past that was largely severed for African Americans by abduction and forced passage to slavery. And, historically, some of those who remained in Africa (especially West Africa) were complicit to some degree in the enslavement of others. So, while a broad category of blackness – the African diaspora or Black Atlantic – may be a useful generalization at times, it also radically simplifies and masks many complexities. All have suffered, but have suffered differently. Moreover, many changes have occurred over the centuries since the height of the slave trade: Africans have experienced and partially recovered from the brutal indignities of colonial conquest, have contributed to global modernity and lived their own modernities, just as others have done elsewhere.

At a time of global environmental crisis brought about by extractions wrought on human bodies, other life forms, and the earth itself, there may seem to be nothing good to be said about the vast project we term modernity that is intertwined with Western colonial expansion. And yet, as Mbembe emphasizes, "there is only one world" in which we all live, together, at the same time (2017, 180). In that one world and time, we also share access to technologies, including techniques and inventions that are being used to shift current trajectories in more sustainable directions. Scientific technologies are not evenly distributed, but are present everywhere. They have not developed in the absence of Africans, who have been co-producers of modern systems through the last few centuries.

In his famous inaugural lecture, *In Praise of Alienation* (presented and first published in 1982), Abiola Irele effectively decolonizes scientific achievement from being seen as the sole preserve of Europeans and asserts Africa's place within it and rights to it. He does this in two ways. Firstly, he notes that

The scientific and technological supremacy of Europe was a historical phenomenon that was both particular and contingent, marked by all the vicissitudes of human experience. European civilization did not spring forth fully formed from the brain of a providential God but was shaped over time, often under dramatic circumstances that could well have deflected its course in a direction other than the one it was eventually to pursue. (2007, 604)

Secondly, Irele highlights particular ways in which African intellectual products have helped to form modernity, besides the immense role played by human physical labour and environmental resources. Among these, he notes that in the twentieth century,

our traditional art and music have provoked a remarkable revolution in Western aesthetics, the effects of which have been more far-reaching than is generally realized. The visual landscape of Europe is still being transformed by the influence of modern art on architecture and technical design, an influence that goes right back to the impact of African sculpture on artists like Modigliani, Braque, Picasso, and Ferdinand Léger. Indeed, modern technology seems to have found in African art its most adequate mode of presentation: the very organization of volume, shapes, and lines in the manufactured objects we all handle everyday has benefited immensely from the absorption of the formal principles of African art into European aesthetics. You only have to compare nineteenth-century designs to those of the twentieth century to realize the simplifying effect of the application of these principles, and the gain in functionality it has effected. (2007, 605)

The contribution of African design of which Irele writes is indeed far-reaching once one pauses to consider it, yet it barely receives scholarly mention, even today. In the same address Irele urges his Nigerian compatriots to ‘take charge’ of the alienation experienced as a result of colonialism and let it become a source of transformative agency (2007, 601). It is important to emphasize that the alienation of which he speaks is not a result of



‘primitive’ Africans being overwhelmed by a superior civilization, as in one of the classic tropes of colonial anthropology. Rather, Africans experience alienation because the ‘paradigm of modernity’ that is transforming their societies, and to which they may aspire, is associated with conquerors who were ‘especially brutal’ and who imposed themselves psychologically as well as physically: ‘We played Caliban to the White man’s Prospero, Man Friday to his Robinson Crusoe, as part of a historical drama of slavery, colonialism, and racism’ (2007, 599).

Revisiting Irele’s address reminds us that contemporary Nigerian writers are heirs to a rich and robust tradition of postcolonial scholarship. Chimamanda Adichie’s well-established, globally recognised body of work furthers that scholarly tradition creatively and critically, adding texts to the archive that also comment upon it. Deji Olukotun is a newer, arguably less sophisticated and serious writer, who positions his work within the popular genres of thriller and science fiction. Of Nigerian heritage but having grown up in the United States, he is also less of an insider when it comes to Africa. In its own way, however, his work also engages seriously with Africa (as both places and stereotypes) and thus contributes to the postcolonial archive. Both *Americanah*<sup>1</sup> and *After the Flare* summon positive and possible futures beyond colonialism while engaging with concrete, complex conditions and problems affecting African experience in the present. The transnational aspects of these texts mean that they simultaneously perform a bridging function between the African diaspora and Africa. In what follows, I will first examine *After the Flare*, before turning to Adichie’s work.

## 2. Olukotun’s Nigerian Space Race

The prequel to *After the Flare*, Olukotun’s first novel *Nigerians in Space* (2014) is a thriller that incorporates fantasy. It deals with a failed attempt to reverse the Nigerian brain drain and no-one actually goes to space in it. In an address to the School of Arts, Media and Engineering (AME) at Arizona State University (2017), Olukotun comments that at the time of writing *Nigerians in Space* he was feeling cynical and used the title in a somewhat provocative and ironic way. After its publication, he learned more about the space programme that Nigeria indeed has, with plans to send astronauts on missions by 2030.

This knowledge informed *After the Flare* (2017), which is more upbeat and

1 *Americanah*’s title might seem to emphasize the United States, but it refers to a term used by Nigerians to refer to compatriots who have returned home from America. As such, I would argue that it places Nigeria at the centre.

unequivocal about its generic position as fairly technical science fiction of the near future, though touches of fantasy carry over from the earlier book. *After the Flare's* premise is that some countries near the equator have the good fortune to escape the dire effects of a solar flare that has a devastating effect on most of the world's technological systems, and leaves an astronaut stranded in a damaged station with limited time before it plunges to earth. As the owners of the only surviving space programme, Nigerians mount a joint mission, with India providing technical assistance, to build and launch a rocket and accomplish the rescue. A kind of affirmative action human resource programme is built into the plan and only people of part African descent are allowed in to assist. (One of the novel's humorous touches is the manner in which Nigeria grapples with the problem of unwanted migrants from America and Europe.) Since he just makes the criteria, the light-skinned black American protagonist and former NASA employee, Kwesi Bracket, is able to find employment there. Ironically, however, his sense of racial identity and African heritage is continually undermined by his Nigerian subordinates, who insist on addressing him with the name 'oyibo,' meaning 'white man' (65). Indeed, the complex realities of life in Nigeria are completely at odds with Bracket's earlier romantic visions:

Kwesi Bracket had once believed that living in Africa would be like a homecoming, that the throngs would rise up in jubilation to celebrate his triumphant return. He would impart the wisdom that his people had gained during their centuries of surviving in the modern wilderness of America, and his long-lost brothers and sisters would instill sacred knowledge in him. (21)

The driving force behind *After the Flare's* rescue mission is a politician named Nurudeen Bello, who says the following in a speech to the assembled staff:

'There are seeds I've seen on the Jos Plateau,' he began, 'that can only propagate by means of fire... We too have been forged in the fire. We too required the cauldron of the sun to melt down our ambitions, our dreams, and our enmities to seek out a bold new direction. The Flare – the great cosmic intervention – has given us an opportunity to prove our ingenuity and to right the wrongs of the past...' (43-44)

Near the end of the book, Bello reveals his more prosaic reason for insisting that Nigerians would provide astronauts and other human capital as

well as facilities for the rescue: 'The rescue mission is hardly worthwhile to build an entire space program around, wouldn't you say? We could have more easily let the Americans or Europeans operate our facilities for the rescue. Or even the Japanese" (281). Rather, a successful rescue mission would operate as 'proof of concept" for ongoing crewed missions, leading to Bello's ultimate plan, to exploit a niche and engage in asteroid mining. Noting that Nigeria has experience in oil extraction, Bello casts aside Bracket's objections that income from oil has been diverted to line the pockets of the rich through corruption and that this would be no different, promising a new mode of operation 'backed by rigorous contracts and consummate transparency" (282). While the novel ends on a high note, warning signs abound that there will be no perfect utopia and that struggles for justice will need to continue. Moreover, the previously dominant nations have not lost all their power and are recouping. Nevertheless, for Nigerians at least, with global playing fields levelled in their favour, the future looks brighter than the past.

Olukotun's future Nigeria is plagued by familiar and stereotypical problems – ethnic conflict, terrorism, political infighting, superstition, inequality – yet it is also a place of flourishing technological invention, determination and creativity. Of course, everything is helped along by a very large dose of luck and an intervention that prevents extremist fighters from destroying the mission and which seems supernatural, though in fact, according to the archaeologist and scientist Wale Olufunmi, it can be explained scientifically.

*After the Flare* raises an interesting question about perceptions of its plausibility and the degree to which they might be influenced by stereotypical perceptions of Africa, especially for Western readers. This question of plausibility is complicated by the novel's generic placement, however. According to Darko Suvin, science fiction is characterised by 'estrangement" (1979, 4-7). More specifically, Suvin defines SF as 'a metaempirical and non-naturalistic, that is, an estranged, literary genre which is not at the same time metaphysical" (1979, 20; original emphasis). Interestingly, according to this latter definition, *After the Flare* barely qualifies as science fiction at all, having more in common with the 'naturalistic... adventure-journey" that Suvin sees as belonging to the 'compost heap" of juvenile and popular subliterature" (1979, 22; original emphasis).

In terms of its geography, politics, sociology and technology, the world portrayed in Olukotun's novel is very similar to the world we currently inhabit, towards the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century. It is the catastrophic flare that makes the biggest difference to the main plot, from a global perspective, and solar flares are well-documented, frequent phenomena, one or more of which could quite conceivably cause damage to communication systems similar to that depicted in the text.

Thus, in Suvin’s terms, *After the Flare* works mainly from ‘extrapolation’ rather than ‘analogy’ (1979, 27-28). Indeed, the book has more in common with the type of science fiction that Peter Lang describes as having ‘verisimilitudinous narrative plausibility grounded in genuine scientific knowledge – science fiction as an extrapolative or even predictive genre, tomorrow’s headlines today’, than with the type of SF that shows a high degree of ‘irreality’ (Lang 2013, 209; original emphasis).

In ‘Imagining the Future of Nigeria: Accessing Africa through Sci-Fi’ (2017), Olukotun describes his search for a genre that would provide entertainment as well as capture the complexity and ‘extreme contrasts’ (5) of contemporary Nigeria, without succumbing to colonial stereotypes of ‘fabled exoticism’ (3). According to him, seemingly far-fetched elements may in fact be quite realistic in portraying a populous society with high degrees of diversity, inequality, adversity and energy:

You could say that there’s already enough uncertainty and unpredictability in Nigerian daily life: corrupt politicians, exotic animals, dangerous road traffic, millionaire congregationalists, armed conflicts between vastly different cultures and political systems, love affairs across social classes, and labyrinthine bureaucracies that make your average American DMV [Department of Motor Vehicles] seem well-organized. Adventure may be woven into the cultural fabric. (Olukotun ‘Imagining’ 2017, 3)

At the same time, the futuristic aspect of ‘writing science fiction’ could express Olukotun’s sense of optimism, allowing him to ‘imagine Nigeria for what it could become, rather than what it already is’ (‘Imagining’ 2017, 5). However, it is important to emphasize that the scientific developments in the novel extend currently existing and already innovative technologies – such as Nigeria’s space programme, ICT sector and the Nollywood film industry, rather than appearing out of nowhere on a kind of blank slate.

With due allowance for the degree of willing suspension of disbelief raised by its genre, *After the Flare*’s plot might seem implausible, or at least highly unlikely, to some readers. Yet the degree to which one can accept its possibility may also serve as a measure of the reader’s willingness to overcome the weight of dystopia when thinking of Africa. For why shouldn’t contingency work in Africa’s favour? It has done so in Europe’s favour in the past, as noted by Irele (2007, 604). In one example of when disastrous events elsewhere have had positive impacts in Africa, Guy Arnold has delineated how World War II provided a boost for liberation struggles and economies across the continent that was relatively unscathed by direct

conflict in most places (2005, 1-8). Large scale movements of people forged useful connections that, alongside the weakening of the colonial powers, helped to loosen the stranglehold of colonialism, so that most countries in Africa achieved political, if not economic, independence within fifteen or so years after the war.

Moreover, if we can accept the possibility of the solar flare and Nigeria's chance exception from its effects, to reject Olukotun's scenario of an achievable outcome implies a belief that Africans do not possess the capability to succeed and a misrecognition of the current, continuing imbalance in the global economy. In short, if we cannot easily accept that his plot is possible, then we betray an outlook shaped by colonial racism.

Tellingly, Africa is not mentioned in *After the Flare's* prologue, that narrates the crisis on an international space station as the solar flare strikes earth's atmosphere, communication systems are disrupted, one crew member is injured and three are evacuated, leaving the station commander, Masha Kornokova, behind to await rescue. With Kornokova as focalizer, readers witness the flare as an event of astonishing beauty, and also as the death of Europe:

Through the porthole, intense light blinded her momentarily, and when she could see again, Earth was bathed in lime, purple, and tangerine light, the colors dancing like playful sprites along the crest of the globe. Almost as quickly, the light dissipated, and the entire hemisphere fell dark. Moscow and Berlin were gone, extinguished. (2017, 8)

Kornokova has another appearance in a short interlude about halfway through the book. A year on, her space-eye view of the changed world sees Africa as central, as

With each passing orbit she saw distinct features sharpen through the porthole: the equatorial band of Asia seemed to swoon with mysterious light, as if it had captured the moon itself, and Africa pulsed with a bright yellow eminence. It was easy to miss the United States now, when it slid by on the dark side... (2017, 166)

The brief but sympathetic portrayals of Masha's experience prevent her from taking on the simple role of a sleeping beauty. The conventional gendered aspects of a fairy tale narrative are also overturned: her lover Josephine Gauthier directs the mission and a female Naijanaut performs a daring manoeuvre to repair the Nigerian spacecraft, the *Masquerade*,

and enable their safe return together in the end (2017, 282). Moreover, if Kornokova symbolizes Europe, she does so with a certain nuance. As an Eastern European, she comes from the edges of that continent rather than its imperial heartland and, despite her blondeness, she is not strongly identified with whiteness. Passionately in love with Josephine, while spinning in her module she longs to see her mixed-raced Caribbean lover’s real face again, ‘not the polished, simulated image she was beaming up from Nigeria – blue eyes and white skin’ (167).

Ironically, it is Josephine whose ‘skin color [doesn’t] stop her from saying some of the most discriminatory things about Africans’ according to Bracket (35). Josephine Gauthier’s favouring of whiteness for her chosen self-image of cyber-identity resonates with the promotion of skin lightening by the Nigerian Nollywood star Omotola Taiwo, elsewhere in the novel (117). Through these references to a currently widespread phenomenon in his future scenario, Olukotun warns that the internalized effects of a racialized world will be difficult to eradicate.

While the sympathetic portrayal of Kornokova in the framing narrative adds emotional depth to the story and serves as a counterweight to Bello’s pragmatic opportunism concerning the mission, the fact that her plight barely features in most of the novel is precisely the point. Barring Josephine, none of the other characters spend much time worrying about Masha – they have too many other things to think about and do. In fact, the novel’s seeming subplot – Balewa and her fellow Wodaabe women’s quest to find their abducted children and defeat the Jarumi (a later incarnation of Boko Haram) who have raped them and murdered the men of their community – often seems to overshadow the space mission in importance, as indeed it should.

I would argue that the depiction of Balewa and her group is one of the greatest strengths of *After the Flare*. Poor and uneducated in formal or Western terms, following and preserving traditional ways while also adapting them, they are drawn as fully human characters, without patronage or sentimentality. The manner in which their collective lives feature tensions and irritations as well as support and solidarity guards against idealizing them, and the differences among them are as apparent as their similarities. While Balewa is secondary in terms of the main plot, her character is in some ways the most fully realised in the book. Of course, there is a strong element of fantasy in Balewa harnessing the song stones to fight back and it is deeply satisfying to see her achieving a kind of superhero power. But her use of the mysterious stones is also shown as the application of a kind of technology – an application that requires intelligence, work and skill rather than simple magic. The imagery describing Balewa’s creation of a force field, using her song to call up the stones’ power, echoes the description of the solar flare in the novel’s opening lines:

Abir stepped back as Balewa expanded the field, which dazzled a hazy electric blue. The field disappeared when you looked at it directly, but would tug at your vision, like a distant star, if you looked slightly away from it. On the inside she was surrounded by translucent bands of orange colour that leapt and swirled inside. Each stone seemed to play with a different color of light. (102)

Just as the flare is an event that brings harm to much of the world but opens a path for Africa to fulfil its potential, the ancient, hidden technology of the song stones, capable of killing, can be healing in its effects. As the two plotlines converge, Balewa's mission of revenge and recuperation also saves the space mission and thus facilitates Kornikova's rescue and Bello's longer-term plans.

### **3. Adichie's Open-Ended Homecoming: Imperfection and Promise**

While Adichie's work may not seem to be futuristic in an obvious sense, I view an orientation toward positive and possible futures as an intrinsic part of both her writing and her broader activism. With unique and elegant appeal, she combines storytelling and critique to advance multiple interlinked agendas for liberation, whether in terms of race, gender, nationality or (her own) Igbo ethnic identity. In doing so she combines deep, incisive analysis with accessibility in her social commentary, just as she marries intellectual rigour, aesthetic style and popular readability in her fiction.

A crucial component of Adichie's oeuvre is the manner in which she blurs the conventional boundary between creative and critical work. In particular, this amounts to a refusal to adhere to the norms imposed upon African artists. The colonial imaginary has generally been more willing to acknowledge African prowess in creative arts than to acknowledge and respect theoretical outputs by Africans.<sup>2</sup> Working against this legacy, Adichie positions herself as both author and critic. Thus, she self-consciously situates her work within a tradition of African writing, simultaneously honours and interrogates that tradition, and debates its constructions and silencing by outsiders. For example, in the story "Jumping Monkey Hill" (2009), young writers from different countries

2 The twentieth-century recordist, collector and scholar of traditional African music, Hugh Tracey, epitomized this colonial tendency. He recognized and admired the creativity of Africans as artists, but declared them to be incapable of fully understanding their own products, reserving the realm of scholarship for whiteness.

across the continent debate the African canon and caricature the stances of Westerners in Africa in the manner of Binyavanga Wainaina (2006). These characters must either adopt or rebel against the strictures of their workshop sponsor, a white Englishman and self-proclaimed expert who derides them for producing stories he does not consider to be authentically African.

Beginning with her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie shows the depth of her engagement with the work of Chinua Achebe in particular: from the opening sentence: “Things started to fall apart...”, she references his most famous novel and enters into discussion with it (2003, 1). In the story “The Headstrong Historian” (2009), meanwhile, she more overtly rewrites the narrative of *Things Fall Apart* (1958) from a feminist perspective and extends its temporal setting. *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2007) engages in similar, but more detailed, historical work: appraising and mourning the painful history of Nigeria’s civil war in Biafra and providing both tribute to and criticism of Achebe’s *A Man of the People* (1966).<sup>3</sup>

Adichie’s first two novels are set entirely in Nigeria, while her collection of short stories, *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009) includes some works with a transnational focus, dealing with the experiences of Nigerian immigrants to America, including some characters who travel back and forth between the two countries, like the author herself.

In *Americanah* (2013) Adichie performs some of her most serious critical work to date, yet does so with a very light and subtle touch since here she also makes her most extensive use of the popular genre of romantic fiction.<sup>4</sup> Providing a social history of Nigeria and the West over the past few decades, the novel replays and reconfigures the history of the Black Atlantic, performing in the process a kind of deconstruction and a form of decolonization. Adichie moves her young Nigerian lovers, Ifemelu and Obinze, through the racial complexities of both the USA and the United Kingdom and returns first Obinze, then Ifemelu to Nigeria, where she also reunites them.

While in the USA, Ifemelu dissects tensions between Africans and African Americans and explains whiteness in a successful blog called “Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formally Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black” (4). Upon her return

3 See Chikwendu Paschalkizito Anyanwu’s chapter on these two novels in Emenyonu’s *A Companion to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie* (2017, 139-151).

4 Adichie has spoken of her youthful reading and enjoyment of the Mills and Boon romance series. See, for example, her conversation with Jones (2017).

5 See Serena Guarracino’s discussion of fictional blogging in the novel, and of this “real” blog ostensibly by Ifemelu, in “Writing ‘So Raw and True’: Blogging in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*” (2014).



to Nigeria, she begins another blog in which she comments on various aspects of everyday life, emphasizing tensions involving class and gender as well as attitudes (of and toward) "Nigerpolitan" returnees like herself (421). I agree with Gĩchingiri Ndĩgĩrĩgĩ that Ifemelu engages in "reverse appropriations" as she engages in her own form of ethnographic work on American and Nigerian societies, yet I find his tone somewhat disapproving and his conclusion that she, too, "becomes the object of appropriation in both spaces" rather pessimistic (2017, 199 and 211). For me, Ifemelu's open-ended story represents a postcolonial victory that also triumphs over undue academic seriousness in its playfulness.

In an interview with Radikha Jones (2017), Adichie comments, as she has done elsewhere, that race did not really impact her life in a personal way until she arrived in America. Similarly, her character Ifemelu consciously confronts racism for the first time after her arrival in the USA. However, this idea – of race being absent in Nigeria – requires some qualification, since a close reading of *Americanah* reveals many ways in which Nigerians remain tied to aspects of their colonial past, including aspirations toward ideas of whiteness, in terms of practices such as hair straightening and the privileging of lighter skin in regard to female beauty. Indeed, colonial-tinged ideas of the sophisticated superiority of imagined metropolises fuel Ifemelu and Obinze's youthful obsessions with England and America, respectively. (One of the book's ironies is that they each end up in their less favourite Western Anglophone country.) While in the UK, at a dinner party where well-off English guests bemoan their country's harsh stance towards desperate refugees, Obinze reflects on his own, very different, kind of migrancy:

Alexa, flush with red wine, her eyes red below her scarlet hair, changed the subject. "Blunkett must be sensible and make sure this country remains a refuge. People who have survived frightful wars must absolutely be allowed in!" She turned to Obinze. "Don't you agree?"

"Yes", he said, and felt alienation run through him like a shiver.

Alexa, and the other guests, and perhaps even Georgina, all understood the fleeing from war, from the kind of poverty that crushed human souls, but they would not understand the need to escape from the oppressive lethargy of choicelessness. They would not understand why people like him, who were raised well-fed and watered but mired in dissatisfaction, conditioned from birth to look towards somewhere else, eternally convinced that real lives happened in that somewhere else, were now resolved to do dangerous things, illegal things, so as to leave, none of them starving, or raped, or from burned villages, but merely hungry for choice and certainty. (2013, 276)

This sense of “somewhere else” always being better than home changes for Obinze by the end of the novel, but after his return he still encounters many signs of what might be termed a colonized consciousness in other characters – seen, for example, in wealthy parents favouring a British curriculum for their children’s education, fake snow in school Christmas plays (374), or the perceived need to have a white person in a window-dressing position in order to gain prestige for a company (27).

Racially-inflected thought, then, cannot be said to be absent in *Americanah*’s Nigeria. Nonetheless, living in an independent country (whatever its problems) where almost everyone is black at least provides freedom from the direct pain and humiliations of interpersonal racism.

One of the ways in which Ifemelu experiences race in America is through the conversations of “liberal” whites like her employer Kimberley, for whom every black woman is beautiful and “the poor were blameless... she could not conceive of poor people being vicious or nasty, because their poverty had canonized them, and the greatest saints were the foreign poor” (146, 149). Although Ifemelu recognizes Kimberley’s good heart and they become friends, she loses patience with Kimberley’s “repeated apologies” that “were tinged with self-indulgence” (163). Kimberley’s sister Laura is less benign, calling Ifemelu “sassy” and showing an “aggressive, unaffectionate interest” in Nigeria (162-163). On one occasion, Laura mentions a “wonderful” Ugandan woman she had known at university, who “didn’t get along with the African American woman in our class at all. She didn’t have all those issues.” In response, Ifemelu retorts that perhaps “when the African American’s father was not allowed to vote because he was black, the Ugandan’s father was running for parliament” (168). Micro-aggressions by whites like Laura, who sometimes presume to grant honorary white status to black people from other countries, often seek to drive wedges between different groups. As stated in one of Ifemelu’s blog posts, “Native blacks are always treated worse than non-native blacks everywhere in the world” (331).

From a black perspective, however, there are indeed many sources of tension and separation between people from Africa, elsewhere in the diaspora, and America. The novel stages numerous conversations in which various aspects of the history of Mbembe’s “Black reason” are debated, including the foundational trauma of slavery and whether or not Africans bear any responsibility for it. For example, the following exchange between an African American student and Ifemelu’s Kenyan friend Wambui occurs in one of their college classes:

Well, if you all hadn’t sold us, we wouldn’t be talking about any of this,” the gravelly-voiced African American girl said, in a lowered tone that was, nonetheless, audible.

The classroom was wrapped in silence. Then rose that voice again. Sorry, but even if no Africans had been sold by other Africans, the transatlantic slave trade would still have happened. It was a European enterprise. It was about Europeans looking for labour for their plantations.” (138)

Ifemelu drifts into writing her blog, and as she gathers fame through it, she finds that it seems to take on a life of its own. She means what she says and raises important questions in an anecdotal way that resonates with readers. However, she does not always take it very seriously and also leverages it as it turns into a career, saying less threatening things in the diversity workshops she is invited to lead than in her frankly anti-racist online posts, for example (305). After she becomes romantically involved with Blaine, a black academic, she begins ‘slowly... to make changes, to add and remove, because of what he said” (312). Ifemelu is aware that the very possibility and success of her blog in some way is linked to her own position as an outsider in relation to the deepest traumas of African American history. Her position grants her a certain licence, and her observations are entertained in ways that an insider’s might not be. Nevertheless, her blog posts and their ensuing responses provide a colloquial model that serves a pedagogical function on issues of racism, whiteness and black identity.

*Americanah* also gestures toward the possibility of overcoming white supremacy and achieving a genuinely post-racial future, by creating a meeting ground for black consciousness and nonracialism. An example of this mediation can be seen in the way in which interracial relationships figure in the lives of her protagonists – as possible and desirable, but not essential for their happiness. Ifemelu’s romance with her white lover Curt and her friendship with Kimberley are important but not defining involvements for her and an impression is conveyed that they have more to gain and learn than she does. Obinze’s friendship with Nigel, a working-class Englishman who is his colleague at a menial job in the UK and follows him back to Nigeria when Nigel accepts an offer to work for him in his newly successful business, overturns some stereotypes. Rather than just perform the token role of providing a white face when needed, seen as necessary for the company’s image, Nigel insists on performing a real service for his employer. The friendship continues and Nigel seems well on his way to becoming Nigerian by the novel’s end.

Like Olukotun’s futuristic vision, Adichie’s present Nigeria is no paradise. For instance, there looms the vaguely ominous presence of Chief, the ‘big man” who gives Obinze his start in business after he is deported home from England. As Chief remarks to Obinze, ‘No-one knows tomorrow” (14). There are no guarantees of success or happiness and major

fault-lines of class, ethnicity and gender threaten stability. The main characters, Ifemelu and Obinze, are far from perfect, though ethically well-intentioned. Nonetheless, the novel conveys a sense of progress, possibility and renewal.

The characters’ return to Nigeria implies a rejection of the familiar trope of marginalised representatives of the colonised peoples ‘writing back’ to (and thus reinscribing the importance of) the colonising metropole. At the same time, Ifemelu’s insistence on retaining her hard-won transnational status as a dual citizen of the USA rejects the tropes of separatist nativism. Symbolically, Africa becomes central, yet retains connections to, and interest in, conditions elsewhere.

*Americanah* ends poised at the entrance to the reunification of its main characters with each other and Ifemelu with her country. Adichie then also takes them beyond the book – so that, here, her speculative orientation becomes more clearly apparent – by giving them an online echo, an afterlife that also playfully blurs the barriers between ‘real’ (cyber)life and fiction. She does this by creating an actual blog ostensibly written by Ifemelu, thus embodying the blog mentioned at the end of the book and implying its extension as the lives of ‘Ifem’ and ‘Ceiling’ (Ifemelu’s romantic nickname for Obinze) fade into their contingent, quotidian future. This blog recalls and seems to embody Ifemelu’s second, home-coming blog in the novel, called ‘The Small Redemptions of Lagos’ (421). Unlike her earlier one, it is not overwhelmingly focused on issues of race.

#### **4. Avoiding the Trap of Utopia: Blackness and “The Full Range of Humanity”**

In conversation with Jones, Adichie says that it is a ‘dangerous idea’ to think of women as better or more ethical than men. Women are ‘ordinary’ and should be recognised as embodying ‘the full range of humanity’ (2017). Her point, clearly, also applies to blackness, as well as oppression based on class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion and disability. Because of their power, the imperfections of white, heterosexual males tend to be seen as aberrations of an individual, rather than reflecting on the group, particularly when such men are also privileged in terms of class. Yet people who suffer racism, and/or exploitation on the grounds of poverty, sexuality, gender or other forms of identity are often also made to bear the added burden of an expectation of perfection. The slightest misstep is taken as an indictment on the group as a whole. These unrealistic expectations – and the disillusionment that may follow as a result of them – ultimately serve to reaffirm the power of the status quo.

I find hope in the works of Adichie and Olukotun because their idealism

is tempered by a tough and flexible pragmatism. Both authors anticipate complicated and challenging, yet viable futures, that do not exclude goodness and joy.

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