

**'SAIDS' AND 'NOT-SAIDS' IN IFEMELU'S  
BLOGGING: A HOOKSIAN-MACHEREYIAN  
APPROACH TO CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE'S  
AMERICANAH**

**«LO QUE SE DICE» Y «LO QUE NO SE DICE»  
EN EL BLOG DE IFEMELU: UN ENFOQUE  
HOOKSIANO-MACHEREYIANO DE AMERICANAH,  
DE CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE**

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## **Abstract**

This article focuses on Ifemelu's blog posts in Chimamanda Adichie's third novel, *Americanah* (2013), as seen through bell hooks's (1989) concept of 'talking back' in conjunction with Pierre Macherey's (1966) notion of 'disparate text' or 'symptomatic' reading to shed some light on the construction of the racialised condition of Black female immigrant subjectivity in America. It is argued that Ifemelu's writing blog posts as a way of talking back to white supremacy leads to the (re)definition of Black female consciousness and autonomy. Drawing on the notion of the 'not-said' explicated by Macherey, the article then addresses the articulate silences in blog posts, trying to make the lacunae of the narrative speak, to picture a reverse racial narrative, and to reveal ideological gaps between racial minorities. Through a symptomatic reading, this article attempts to explain how the aesthetic silences, absences and the not-said in Ifemelu's blog posts reflect the conflict between hegemonic and counterhegemonic discourses in the context of

the struggle for social justice and racial equality in the United States. The study concludes that Ifemelu's blog posts present a revealing picture of the Black female experience in America and illustrate the workings of racial injustice with their *said*s and *not-said*s.

**Keywords:** Chimamanda Adichie, *Americanah*, bell hooks, talking back, Pierre Macherey, symptomatic reading.

## Resumen

Este artículo se centra en las entradas del blog de Ifemelu en la tercera novela de Chimamanda Adichie, *Americanah* (2013), a la luz del concepto de 'respuesta' de bell hooks (1989), junto con la noción de 'texto dispar' o lectura 'sintomática' de Pierre Macherey (1966), para arrojar algo de luz sobre la construcción de la condición racializada de la subjetividad de las mujeres negras inmigrantes en Estados Unidos. Se argumenta que las entradas del blog de Ifemelu, como forma de responder a la supremacía blanca, conducen a la (re)definición de la conciencia y la autonomía de las mujeres negras. Basándose en la noción de 'lo no dicho' de Macherey, el artículo aborda los silencios articulados en las entradas del blog, tratando de hacer hablar a las lagunas de la narrativa, de imaginar una narrativa racial inversa y de revelar las brechas ideológicas entre las minorías raciales. A través de una lectura sintomática, este artículo intenta explicar cómo los silencios estéticos, las ausencias y lo no dicho en las entradas del blog de Ifemelu reflejan el conflicto entre los discursos hegemónicos y contra-hegemónicos en el contexto de la lucha por la justicia social y la igualdad racial en Estados Unidos. El estudio concluye que las entradas del blog de Ifemelu presentan una imagen reveladora de la experiencia de las mujeres negras en Estados Unidos e ilustran el funcionamiento de la injusticia racial a través de lo que dicen y lo que no dicen.

**Palabras clave:** Chimamanda Adichie, *Americanah*, bell hooks, responder, Pierre Macherey, lectura sintomática.

## 1. Introduction

The current study attempts to critically unmask Ifemelu's textual speeches and silences in her blog posts in Chimamanda Adichie's third novel, *Americanah* (2013). It aims to demonstrate how the novel's protagonist is ideologically motivated to articulate Black indignation over racial prejudice and cultural stereotyping in America. It draws on bell hooks's (1989) postcolonial theory of 'talking back' and the 1966 post-structuralist Marxist theory of decentered, 'disparate' or uneven

text to demonstrate how Ifemelu limns the contours of white racism and how it could be contested. Likewise, we examine how Ifemelu utilises blogging as a strategy for survival and as a means of challenging the one-dimensional and stereotypical image of African immigrants in racialised America in particular. The study contends that, through blogging, understood as an act of outright rebellion against the white power structure, Ifemelu can offer a viable alternative to challenge dominant Western ideologies and epistemologies concerning race and gender and create space for imagining new trajectories of racial justice. The way her blogging channels female Black voice and, by implication, the failure of Western ideology will be explored under hooks's postcolonial theory of talking back and Macherey's notion of disparate text.

This article also aims to reveal the symbolic meanings embedded in the more implicit, unspoken parts of Ifemelu's blog posts. Silences and absences are frequent in literary works. Decoding them in various modes gives rise to a variety of fresh interpretations. However, they do not easily yield to analytical frameworks due to their free-floating and implicit nature. This study delves into the silences of Adichie's novel through the perspective of Macherey's theory of disparate text to present the concealed realities of Ifemelu's blog posts. What is silenced can be as meaningful as what is voiced. The not-said alludes to the sociopolitical and racial tensions of Black female immigrants in the United States, which Ifemelu attempts to articulate in a disguised form in her blog posts. In putting words to these tensions, she brings to light an unconscious discourse, and a clear picture of racialised America can be attained by revealing its concealed ideological agenda. In her attempt to depict the dominant racial ideologies, Ifemelu in her blog posts constructs a suggestive vision entailing an aesthetic blend of conscious and unconscious discourses behind the ideological struggle. Along with disclosing the unjust social problems facing Black immigrants, Ifemelu tends to elucidate in her blog posts how racial inequities and inequalities in America give birth to the appearance of the not-said, which, in turn, reveals her aspiration for racial justice. The present study aims to delve deeply into the unspoken, muted or hidden layers of the text to bring to light the power of the political unconscious and how the critique of ideological stances and manipulative maneuvers is embodied in terms of latent materials and not-saids.

*Americanah* deals with the immigrant experience in America and Great Britain through the Nigerian perspective. The story follows Ifemelu and Obinze, secondary school sweethearts, in Lagos, who go off to university together in Nsukka but then decide to leave Nigeria after a series of university strikes threaten their education. Ifemelu migrates to America to study in Philadelphia on a university scholarship, where her observations about race, gender and class as a non-American Black

woman become perfect materials for her anonymous blog. Ifemelu struggles in America, experiencing a number of unsatisfying relationships and jobs, but she then gains financial stability, and eventually develops a positive self-image that enables her to reject her own habits of pretense and even stop faking an acquired American accent and straightening her hair with relaxers. On the other hand, Obinze, being denied a visa to the US following the World Trade Center terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, travels on his mother's visa as her research assistant to Great Britain, where he resides as an undocumented immigrant after his permit expires. Having overstayed his visa in London, Obinze gets a job on the National Insurance card of Vincent Obi, a Nigerian immigrant, in exchange for thirty-five percent of his earnings. Obinze is arrested on the day of his sham marriage that he hoped would grant him citizenship and is then deported to Nigeria. After a thirteen-year residence in America, Ifemelu decides to close her blog and return to Lagos. She initially finds a job as a features editor in *Zoe* magazine and then returns to blogging. Ifemelu eventually reunites with her first love, Obinze, now a successful 'big man', who has accumulated a vast amount of wealth, living with his wife, Kosi, and their two-year-old daughter, Buchi, in a large house in the residential area of Lekki, the home of the wealthy in Lagos.

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As will be further discussed, the blog posts are a narration of growth in the face of violent, racist institutions and systems of thought and are stimulated by Ifemelu's self-acceptance process amid racial oppression and discrimination. The blog offers a dynamic and vital space for Ifemelu to mature and find her voice against racist silencing of Black female voices which has inflicted restrictions and confinements on female being and expression. In Adichie's third novel, racial violent ideologies act as the means of repression for the protagonist; hence, the expansion of critical horizons and development of independence of action, thought and expression in an assertive manner demands an investigation of the sway of Western values on her life as a Black immigrant and her aim to eliminate those values. With a pervasive tone of humor in her blog posts, the female protagonist attempts to challenge a victimising view of those who experience racial discrimination, while strengthening intimacy and building trust within American and non-American Blacks in America.

Based on the French post-structuralist Marxist literary scholar Pierre Macherey's critical discussions of 'symptomatic' reading, the present study concentrates on the significance of the unsaid in Ifemelu's blog posts in pursuit of a new humanity and a new world order. The concept of symptomatic reading, as Geoffrey Wall (translator of Macherey's 1978 *A Theory of Literary Production*) states, enables one "to identify those gaps and silences, contradictions and absences, which deform the text and reveal the repressed presence of those ideological materials which are transformed in the labour of literary production" (1978: viii). Macherey's

approach, in fact, oscillates between the different polarizations of ‘telling’ (*diegesis*) and ‘showing’ (*mimesis*). There is in Althusser’s 1971 jargon an ‘internal distanciation’, between what a text aims to articulate and what a text actually articulates. To shed light on the meaning of a text, it is essential to transcend it and comprehend the meaning of its “unconscious”, namely in Macherey’s expression, “what the work is *compelled* to say in order to say what it *wants* to say” (1978: 94, emphasis in original). The association of a text with the historical and ideological terms of its production is disclosed in its unconscious. The meanings of Ifemelu’s blog posts are not only articulated in the conscious discourse but also silenced in the unconscious discourse, hence requiring a detailed investigation that accounts for the discrepancy between what is articulated and what is silenced.

## **2. The Covert and Overt Technologised Multiplicity of Voices in Ifemelu’s Blogging**

An integral component of Adichie’s third novel is Ifemelu’s anonymous blog, initially called “Raceteenth or Curious Observations by a Non-American Black on the Subject of Blackness in America”, later altered to “Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black”. In her blog posts, the novel’s protagonist freely lays out her views on race and racism. The blog is not only a channel that facilitates Ifemelu’s communication of her experiences of institutional racism in the United States, but it also develops into a significant medium in constructing a protective online community whose audience exchange their observations in the comment sections. The blog is also influential in “deliberately defamiliarizing American habits of responding to race, describing each as strange and artificial” (Levine 2015: 594) and, thus, it is part of Ifemelu’s ambition with her ‘said’s’ and ‘not-said’s’ to transform the stereotypical, pejorative narrative on African-American migration in America. The launching of a blog coincides with Ifemelu’s breakup with her white boyfriend, Curt, signifying a heightened sense of racial consciousness and reflection. The blog can be regarded as a milestone in the protagonist’s life, displaying how Ifemelu perceives herself and how she aspires to exhibit herself to the outside world. By launching her blog, Ifemelu overlooks the imperfections, the rage, the irritations that unjust or oppressive circumstances can produce and admits herself as a Black female person without idealising Blackness or demonising whiteness.

Having identified some of the repressive methods that have often existed to impose silence on racial matters in America, Ifemelu aims for a multiplicity of discourses on race, gender and class, whether explicit or implicit. This is compatible with Adichie’s

aim as a writer, avoiding telling a single story in her novels. The novelist has claimed that the single story “creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story” (2009). Adichie’s protagonist uses the potential of social media “to break with the stereotypes, simplistic definitions, and traditional roles created and imposed by Western culture, as well as enabling diasporic subjects to express their own experiences, perspectives on history, stories and voices that would otherwise remain unheard” (Duce 2021: 244). Through a multiplicity of authentic narratives in her blog posts, Ifemelu strives to reconstruct and rehabilitate Black community in America, deepen their sense of belonging, and propagate a common interest that knows no color, race, gender or socio-economic status.

In fact, Ifemelu develops modern versions of hooks’s theory and Macherey’s concept of the unsaid, uncannily using technologies as ways of speaking out and filtering what she talks about in the 21st century. Technologies are particularly useful for women to articulately or inarticulately verbalise their experiences, thoughts, actions and feelings and counteract gender discrimination. Technologies make it easy for Ifemelu to adopt a self-reflective stance, gain a better understanding of reality, and not to depend solely on her own knowledge. “Given that the capitalist apparatus of the Internet, while offering the illusion of connection, can simultaneously encourage us to become atomized nodes in a network”, Camille Isaacs contends that concerning “the transmission of affect, formation of identity and building of community, technology both enables and restricts” (2016: 179). With her saids and not-saids via a technological means that makes anonymity possible, Ifemelu enables “fashioning blackness not in the singular or as a concrete, static state, but as a continuous, even expedient, process of re-invention” (Phiri 2017: 133). The protagonist can thus defy many of the stereotypical portrayals of the experiences of American and non-American Blacks in America through her blogging.

Ifemelu’s understanding of the accepted Western norms of beauty and hairstyle is decisive for her resolution to launch a blog. When Curt considers the magazine *Essence* as “racially skewed” (Adichie 2013: 294), since only Black females are depicted, she takes him to a bookstore to observe all the beauty/fashion magazines. Ifemelu states: “So three black women in maybe two thousand pages of women’s magazines, and all of them are biracial or racially ambiguous, so they could also be Indian or Puerto Rican or something. Not one of them is dark. Not one of them looks like me” (295). This way, the protagonist claims that, while these magazines seem to address “everyone” and introduce “universal” cosmetics, they are practically written for white women: “This tells you about different hair products for *everyone* — and ‘everyone’ means blonds, brunettes, and redheads. I am none of those. And this tells you about the best conditioners — for straight, wavy, and

curly. No kinky" (295, emphasis in original). Curt's failure to notice the true nature of the problem leads Ifemelu to write a long email to her friend Wambui, "about the bookstore, the magazines, the things she didn't tell Curt, things unsaid and unfinished. It was a long e-mail, digging, questioning, unearthing" (295). Despite Curt's reaction, Wambui, a Kenyan woman who also migrated to America for her studies, acknowledges the significance of the matter, encouraging Ifemelu to approach the issue with utmost seriousness and consideration: "This is so raw and true. More people should read this. You should start a blog" (295).

The blog brings about a sense of revival of Black traditions for Ifemelu and offers her an opportunity for reflection on racial issues and promises with its saids and not-saids to open up political possibilities to undermine racial prejudices and to foster more welcoming attitudes toward African immigrants. In Ifemelu's words: "Posting on the website was like giving testimony in church; the echoing roar of approval revived her" (Adichie 2013: 213). The blog's undertakings challenge Ifemelu's first "presumption of being able to give objective (true) and unprocessed (raw) accounts of what happens to her" (Guarracino 2014: 15). The blog posts reveal Ifemelu's critical consideration of race, gender and class in America and her own stance within these structures of discrimination and marginalization.

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### 2.1. bell hooks's Notion of 'talking back' in Ifemelu's Blog Posts

As mentioned above, for Ifemelu, blog posts are the space where she talks to Black women and concurrently, like writing back to the empire, talks back to a hierarchical system that affirms and validates white superiority and dehumanises and negates Black existence in America. As a silenced subaltern, Ifemelu attempts to talk back to authority and recreate and reclaim her racial and cultural identity. For hooks, talking back means "speaking as an equal to an authority figure [...] daring to disagree and sometimes [...] having an opinion" (1989: 22). Talking back to white supremacy is a defiant assertion of agency and a significant act of resistance. It provides an opportunity to counter the discourses of power and to recreate oneself in a manner that is distinct from the self-image endorsed by the hegemonic ideology. For hooks, "[m]oving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible" (9). Breaking this silence is of paramount significance to empower those who experience racial discrimination and to push them from obscurity into visibility. Underscoring the importance of speaking truth to oppressive hierarchies as an assertion of identity, hooks argues, "[i]t is that act of speech, of 'talking back,' that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject — the liberated voice" (9).

In talking back, Ifemelu can position herself as a liberated agent who is empowered and self-constituting, resisting gender, racial and class oppression. The protagonist conveys that, even though she was never taught absolute silence, she was taught that it was important “to speak but to talk a talk that was in itself a silence”, in hooks’s words (1989: 25). According to hooks, “true speaking is not solely an expression of creative power; it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless” (27). Talking back breaks oppressive hierarchies rather than sustaining those hierarchies. As hooks states, true speaking is “a courageous act — as such, it represents a threat. To those who wield oppressive power, that which is threatening must necessarily be wiped out, annihilated, silenced” (27). Fearing the silencing of her views, Ifemelu thus expresses some of her observations in an implicit, silent, ironic form, while her “talking back” acts against “unwittingly silent perpetuation of racist imagination” (Oniwe 2017: 91). Therefore, in Ifemelu’s blog posts, “the ‘Subalterns’ are not only speaking; they are silencing certain prejudiced voices from the West. Ifemelu often speaks up to correct myopic views about Africa and Africans” (Opeyemi 2019: 24).

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The blog is thus a political, psychological and ideological strategy for Ifemelu to write all of her saids and unsaid of her experiences in America. With all saids and not-saids at her disposal, Ifemelu “repeatedly disputes not only the descriptions of white friends and acquaintances who misperceive racism but also those Nigerian immigrants who stubbornly nurse misleading ‘mythologies of home’” (Levine 2015: 593). The blog is a space in which her observations cannot be silenced any longer. In an unnamed blog post, Ifemelu clearly writes, “*When it comes to dressing well, American culture is so self-fulfilled that it has not only disregarded this courtesy of self-presentation, but has turned that disregard into a virtue*” (Adichie 2013: 129, emphasis in original). Ifemelu notes, “*We are too superior/busy/cool/not-uptight to bother about how we look to other people, and so we can wear pajamas to school and underwear to the mall*” (129, emphasis in original). Here, Ifemelu plainly talks about “foreign pathology” (128), displaying one of the pitfalls of Western culture, not complying with the proper dress code.

In the post titled “Why Dark-Skinned Black Women —Both American and Non-American— Love Barack Obama”, at the end of chapter 20, Ifemelu explicitly observes that “dark women love Barack Obama. He broke the mold! He married one of their own. He knows what the world doesn’t seem to know: that dark black women totally rock” (Adichie 2013: 214). Ifemelu plainly demonstrates that dark women desire Obama to win the presidential election because perhaps eventually “somebody will cast a beautiful chocolate babe in a big-budget rom-com that opens in theaters all over the country, not just three artsy theaters in New



York City" (Adichie 2013: 214). This hopeful expectation is plainly indicated by Ifemelu to reveal that there is a remedy in the form of awareness-raising to select a promising political leader to heal pathologies of Black culture in the current US sociopolitical context, emerging from within the Black community itself.

In the post titled "To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: In America, You Are Black, Baby", at the close of chapter 21, Ifemelu addresses non-American Blacks, "when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. 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" (Adichie 2013: 220). Here, as Maia L. Butler argues, Ifemelu evidently "underscores how a hypercollective conception of Blackness in the US works against Black immigrants, erasing the particularity of their identities previously informed by national histories and cultures, ethnicities, religious affiliations, and languages" (2022: 299). Ifemelu clearly displays, as Butler affirms, "America has no respect for Black diversity" (2022: 299). In the same post, Ifemelu utilises humor strategically as a means of resistance against racial oppression and as a refusal to cohere to white homonormative values. Uncovering her racial fears, Ifemelu attempts to cope with the trauma of loss of dignity through humor, stating for example that "If a black cashier gives poor service to the nonblack person in front of you, compliment that person's shoes or something, to make up for the bad service, because you're just as guilty for the cashier's crimes" (Adichie 2023: 221). Therefore, here, Ifemelu attempts to give a voice of bitter humor to Black people at the margins of the US society.

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In a post titled "Open Thread: For All the Zipped-Up Negroes", situated at the end of chapter 33, Ifemelu invites Black people to speak about their experiences of oppression and exploitation, namely racism, sexism and classism: "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" (Adichie 2013: 307). Addressing her readers, but simultaneously herself, Ifemelu confirms, "This is a safe space" (Adichie 2013: 307). This safe space aims to "help Black women resist the dominant ideology promulgated not only outside Black civil society but within African-American institutions" (Collins 1990: 111). Ifemelu desires her safe space to "form prime locations for resisting objectification as the Other" (Collins 1990: 111). This way, Ifemelu's safe space allows "Black migratory subjects [to] seek belonging in communities with boundaries broader than those of their respective nations" (Butler 2022: 295).

In her blog post, "A Michelle Obama Shout-Out Plus Hair as Race Metaphor", at the end of chapter 31, Ifemelu explicitly articulates the "desire of the 'Other'

rested in taming the curly, kinky African tresses by straightening and smoothening them so that they resemble the White woman's hair pattern" (Mallya and Susanti 2021: 409). Ifemelu here openly discusses her observations about the dislike of African natural hair: "Some black women, AB and NAB, would rather run naked in the street than come out in public with their natural hair. Because, you see, it's not professional, sophisticated, whatever, it's just not damn normal" (Adichie 2013: 297). Nevertheless, Ifemelu openly confesses against the 'desire of the 'Other': "I have natural kinky hair. Worn in cornrows, Afros, braids. No, it's not political. No, I am not an artist or poet or singer. Not an earth mother either. I just don't want relaxers in my hair" (Adichie 2013: 297). Through her open confession as a Black woman, Ifemelu asserts her existence as a subject by challenging the system that makes her an object. Thus, Ifemelu "critiques the positive and negative sign-significations associated with the woman's hair as well as questions the process of becoming the 'Other'" (Mallya and Susanti 2021: 410). The blog post develops into "the cathartic voice of many African-American women who are forced to use relaxers and other harmful chemicals everyday so that it resembles the hair texture of the White woman" (Mallya and Susanti 2021: 410). Black women's coming to voice in a public sphere can be thus understood as an act of insurrection against white authority and provides an opportunity for their self-transformation.

## 2.2. The Machereyian 'not-said' in Ifemelu's Blog Posts

Ifemelu would not desire her blog posts to be deemed as only expanding the boundaries of existing knowledge. In the way she writes, Ifemelu, like Macherey, embodies that "[t]he act of knowing is not like listening to a discourse already constituted, a mere fiction which we have simply to translate. It is rather the elaboration of a new discourse, the articulation of a silence" (1978: 6). Ifemelu demonstrates that, by articulating silences in her blog posts, she can set up possibilities for new knowledge about race. As Macherey maintains, knowledge is not "the discovery or reconstruction of a latent meaning, forgotten or concealed. It is something newly raised up, an addition to the reality from which it begins" (6). While Ifemelu is at some parts quick to reveal most of her feelings about race, racism and gender in her blog posts, she is sometimes hesitant to disclose some of her concerns about race or some of the experiences of abuse and violence against Blacks in America. It is the ideology shaped in a specific historical reality which governs what needs to and what needs not to be verbalised. As Macherey writes, "Like a planet revolving round an absent sun, an ideology is made of what it does not mention; it exists because there are things which must not be spoken of" (132). An ideology provides the specifications by which authors can relate their tales, while avoiding particular aspects. The language of ideology, as

Macherey observes, is always eventually found, "at the edge of the text", which is "momentarily hidden, but eloquent by its very absence" (60).

As there is an elusive quality to silences and absences, implicit in the words of notable thinkers and critics, the parts that remain cut off and left out from Ifemelu's blog posts, either intentionally or unintentionally, open a Pandora's box of possible interpretations that demands serious contemplation. The ambiguity of her silences on some matters invites myriad possible meanings. Language, in its silence, provides a space for reflection, intuition, creativity and deeper understanding, challenging traditional modes of communication. Ludwig Wittgenstein observes, "[w]hereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (1922: 189). Language cannot capture topics, particularly in the realm of aesthetics, ethics or metaphysics, that are inherently ineffable or beyond empirical perception. Exploring the interconnection between speech and silence, Maurice Merleau-Ponty asserts that silence "continues to envelop language; the silence of the absolute language, of the thinking language" (1968: 176). Jacques Derrida remarks that silence performs "the irreducible role of that which bears and haunts language, outside and *against* which alone language can emerge. [...] Like nonmeaning, silence is the work's limit and profound resource" (1978: 65-66, emphasis in original). Derrida's notion of silence is thus the source of all meaning. Michel Foucault declares that silence functions within discourse; it is "an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies" (1978: 27). Using the term 'sigetics', meaning 'to be silent', to describe the governing logic of silence, Martin Heidegger pronounces that silence "corresponds to the soundless tolling of the stillness of appropriating-showing Saying" (1971: 131). Heidegger's silence, in its various forms, is thus analogous to showing. Søren Kierkegaard states that silence is "like the tone, the fundamental tone, which is not given prominence and is called the fundamental tone precisely because it lies at the base" (1990: 49). Kierkegaard's silence hence implies that silence acts as a foundation upon which discourse is built.

To begin with, Ifemelu has formerly lapsed into prolonged silence when she struggles with severe depression as she experiences utmost poverty while studying in America to the extent that she has to prostitute herself with the tennis coach; then she isolates herself from contact with friends. Therefore, "Ifemelu's bout of depression closely aligns with the extent to which she alienates herself linguistically" (Esplin 2018: 80). At this point in her life, "her self-loathing had hardened inside her. She would never be able to form the sentences to tell her story" (Adichie 2013: 158). Owing to the inability to call for assistance, Ifemelu's condition deteriorates and she ceases interaction with Obinze for years. However, Ifemelu's not verbalising her own abuse in her blog posts reveals her self-

awareness of the vulnerability of Black female victims and her conscious attempt not to stereotype them.

Regarding language, Ifemelu, as a member of a minority, does not desire her reflections and observations to be excluded from the dominant culture, so Igbo language is absent from her blog posts lest her voice and perspective be silenced by the white-dominated narrative. As Ifemelu knows the fact that the West views Igbo language with derision, she does not intend her posts to adopt negative stereotypes. Without her blog posts in English, her anti-racist sentiments would not have materialised; they would have remained locked in their own silences, unable to be listened to or listen to the voice of others who needed to be heard, while Ifemelu actually “longed for other listeners, and she longed to hear the stories of others” (Adichie 2013: 296). By not using Igbo words in her blog posts, Ifemelu allows many suffocated whispers concerning race to be heard. She is addressing non-American Blacks, so she uses a language that non-American Blacks make use of in America, thus “she masters the English of the blogosphere, and she becomes proficient in, though wary of, the jargon of higher education” (Esplin 2018: 75). These absences chart the means by which Ifemelu has initially internalised the ideal state of being known as an educated woman in America and then enacts her definition of it.

Giving examples from the posts, in one blog entry titled “Understanding America for the Non-American Black: American Tribalism”, at the end of chapter 17, Ifemelu writes, “In America, tribalism is alive and well. There are four kinds — class, ideology, region, and race” (Adichie 2013: 184). Butler refers to Ifemelu’s “elision of gender from her description of American tribes”, when “she observes the workings of a racial hierarchy ladder in the popular American imaginary” (2022: 297). Butler, however, notes that “Ifemelu’s understanding of this racial ladder lacks intersectional considerations of identity; Blackness means everyone who appears Black, regardless of their nation of origin or immigration status” (2022: 298). Ifemelu, in the same post, refers to “a ladder of racial hierarchy in America. White is always on top, specifically white Anglo-Saxon Protestant, otherwise known as WASP, and American Black is always on the bottom, and what’s in the middle depends on time and place” (Adichie 2013: 184). Ifemelu is again silent about matters that are subject to change, depending on time and place. These statements imply, as Palapala talking about Adichie’s *Americanah* declares, “If American Black is at the bottom of the hierarchy of races, it is logical to conclude that the African immigrant is below the American Black; and if there is a hierarchy of oppression, we can further deduce that the black African woman is at the very bottom of such a hierarchy” (2018: 138). Ifemelu leaves the lowest step of the hierarchical ladder of race unsaid since she may aim to challenge and

subvert the pre-existing racial narratives, allowing the Black African women to “continuously reconstruct their racialized, classed, and gendered identities” through “digital diaspora” (Butler 2022: 311). This way, Ifemelu aims to offer the possibility for Black African women to proactively embrace a fluid, dynamic subjectivity.

In a post titled “Understanding America for the Non-American Black: What Do WASPs Aspire To?”, at the close of chapter 19, Ifemelu narrates a discussion between Professor Hunk, a Black professor, and a Jewish professor about ‘oppression olympics’. Here, she informs the reader of one reason to explicate the Machereyian not-said situation in the racist American society: “‘oppression olympics’ is what smart liberal Americans say, to make you feel stupid and to make you shut up” (Adichie 2013: 205). The term oppression olympics suggests that American racial minorities “all get shit from white folks, different kinds of shit, but shit still”, but that everything is always more awful for Black people: “However, all the others think they’re better than blacks because, well, they’re not black” (Adichie 2013: 205). Ifemelu thus informs that oppression olympics is what precludes Black people from talking about their feelings, or better precisely, about the effects of racial discrimination. Ifemelu thus implies that racial minorities in America need to work together to view marginalization as a basis for fostering a sense of solidarity rather than a competition so that they prevent the silencing of the individuals who speak out against racial discrimination.

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In the post titled “To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: In America, You Are Black, Baby”, at the close of chapter 21, Ifemelu further promotes the Machereyian not-said position. Sometimes Ifemelu’s implicit language reveals her ignorance of a particular topic: “We all have our moments of initiation into the Society of Former Negroes. Mine was in a class in undergrad when I was asked to give the black perspective, only I had no idea what that was. So I just made something up” (Adichie 2013: 220). Here, Ifemelu deliberately beats around the bush, refraining from discussing a subject that she is unfamiliar with. Yet at another point, she asks Black women to be reticent: “If you are a woman, please do not speak your mind as you are used to doing in your country. Because in America, strong-minded black women are SCARY” (220). Having decided not to be a perfect Americanah to adopt American customs, values, and practices,<sup>1</sup> Ifemelu chooses to voice her views on racial, class, sex-based discrimination in America, but she simultaneously decides not to voice nearly any of the fears and concerns tumbling through her head because they are entirely too overwhelming to be laid out in words. In the same post, Ifemelu encourages Black Americans to be silent about racist injustices that befall them because they will be condemned of being real racists themselves through voicing them: “Don’t even bother telling a white conservative about

anything racist that happened to you. Because the conservative will tell you that YOU are the real racist and your mouth will hang open in confusion” (221). Ifemelu may aim to imply that being taciturn about racist experiences better helps the racial minorities to cope with racism and circumvent the internalization of disturbing realities.

Accordingly, Macherey argues that, in order for something to be articulated, other things must be left unarticulated. In Ifemelu’s posts, these gaps are acknowledged by readers but often tricky to explore. These silences might represent fundamentally oppressive operations against non-American Blacks, crushed under the ideological burden of America’s racist, oppressive laws. These gaps and omissions display how Ifemelu as a Black woman watches herself and others and is watched as she observes, explains and comments upon the racial issues that she encounters in the US. These ruptures display the interconnections between the white and the Black in America, on how each evaluates and is evaluated through the ideological lens of racial assumptions. The gaps are potential outlets that reveal racial truth of American society. Therefore, in a post titled “So What is the Deal?”, at the end of chapter 32, Ifemelu argues:

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They tell us race is an invention, that there is more genetic variation between two black people than there is between a black person and a white person. Then they tell us black people have a worse kind of breast cancer and get more fibroids. And white folk get cystic fibrosis and osteoporosis. So what’s the deal, doctors in the house? Is race an invention or not? (Adichie 2013: 302).

Here, the protagonist leaves the response to the question of “what’s the deal” unsaid, aiming toward contraction rather than expansion. One cannot, according to Macherey, claim to comprehend what a literary work expresses without realising accurately what it does not express: “What is important in the work is what it does not say... what the work *cannot say* is important, because there the elaboration of the utterance is acted out, in a sort of journey to silence” (1978: 87, emphasis in original). Macherey’s theoretical framework suggests that meaning is not simply attached to the text. Rather, it is accomplished from the negotiation between text and context. A narrative rupture is not “a lack” that has to be “remedied” or “an inadequacy” that needs to be “made up for” (84). Therefore, “the radical otherness” created by the unsaid should not be “resolved or absorbed”, but should simply be “*displayed*”, namely “the imprint of a determinate absence” must exist in the work as “the principle of its identity” (80, emphasis in original). Nevertheless, the deal is that, as Bernard Ayo Oniwe expounds in his analysis of the novel, “genetics do not explain the reality that color of skin and false science of race has been used historically to justify the minimization of some people’s humanity and intelligence by another group of privileged people” (2017: 89-90).

Macherey sees absence as an essential constituent of a narration, "the explicit requires the implicit: for in order to say anything, there are other things *which must not be said*" (1978: 85, emphasis in original). He relates the absence of certain information to Freud's concept of the unconscious so that silence is associated to a disavowal of certain materials: "it is this silence which tells us —not just anything, since it exists to say nothing— which informs us of the precise conditions for the appearance of an utterance, and thus its limits, giving its real significance, without, for all that, speaking in its place" (1978: 86). Therefore, as Oniwe informs, even white Americans are afraid of discussing racism because they do not desire to be designated as the oppressors: "The root of this dismissal of existence in some quarters is the fear and anxiety from discussing the subject because it would eventually place them as the oppressors" (2017: 90). In a post titled "Job Vacancy in America — National Arbiter in Chief of 'Who Is Racist'" at the end of chapter 34, Ifemelu attempts to substitute "Racial Disorder Syndrome" for racist (Adichie 2013: 315). This implicit phrase camouflages the unspoken truth and opts to express such an unvoiced, agonising experience in a disguised form.

In the post titled "Obama Can Win Only If He Remains the Magic Negro", at the end of chapter 35, Ifemelu attempts to feature the Machereyan not-said position when she writes about "American Blacks", stating that they "know an America different from American Whites; they know a harsher, uglier America. But you're not supposed to say that, because in America everything is fine and everyone is the same" (Adichie 2013: 321). In trying to picture positive and colorful representations of life in America, many racist discriminatory practices remain unarticulated. When Ifemelu writes "how Barak Obama can only win if he remains a safe Black in the eyes of white Americans" (Nwabara 2017: 139), she aims to imply that Obama needs to remain silent on "great suffering", "all kinds of racist shit" and "the sad but understandable prejudice" (Adichie 2013: 321). So, the not-saids are often vital for navigating social interactions and maintaining personal well-being.

In a later post, in the middle of chapter 36, titled "Friendly Tips for the American Non-Black: How to React to an American Black Talking About Blackness", when enumerating the reasons for the hatred of American Blacks, Ifemelu only specifies two of them, namely their laziness and unintelligence, and becomes reticent about other reasons: "In the hatred of American Blacks, there is no possibility of envy — they are so lazy, these blacks, they are so unintelligent, these blacks" (Adichie 2013: 326). As she does not aim to reduce the Black community into further stereotypes and negative perceptions, she limits herself to two reasons. In the same post, after going through a list of 'don'ts', demanding an American Black person not to disclose too much information about the experience of being

Black, Ifemelu selectively recommends only one ‘do’ and chooses to leave out other ‘dos’. Her hesitation to name them exhibits her reticence not to divulge too much information and make herself vulnerable. To reveal so many unsolved racial challenges in the white American society where Black people are struggling to find solutions, Ifemelu prefers to leave these challenges unarticulated, shrouding them in an aura of enigmatic mystery:

So after this listing of don’ts, what’s the do? I’m not sure. Try listening, maybe. Hear what is being said. And remember that it’s not about you. American Blacks are not telling you that you are to blame. They are just telling you what is. If you don’t understand, ask questions. If you’re uncomfortable about asking questions, say you are uncomfortable about asking questions and then ask anyway. It’s easy to tell when a question is coming from a good place. Then listen some more. Sometimes people just want to feel heard. Here’s to possibilities of friendship and connection and understanding. (Adichie 2013: 327)

Here, Ifemelu aims to imply that listening to the experiences of American Blacks who are kept silenced by the white racist authorities in America may be the only important remedy for their age-long anguished, silenced suffering. The loudest sounds are embedded in the silenced Black suffering. Expressing the Machereyian not-said fosters connection, understanding, healing and empathy and contributes to a harmonious, meaningful existence. Listening to the experiences of African Americans can be understood as a matter of respecting their voice, even if it is not enough for an effective alleviation. In the post “Is Obama Anything but Black?” at the end of chapter 37, Ifemelu states, “race is not biology; race is sociology. Race is not genotype; race is phenotype. Race matters because of racism. And racism is absurd because it’s about how you look. Not about the blood you have” (Adichie 2013: 337). Here, Ifemelu observes that race is considered as phenotype—the observable physical properties of an organism— and racism occurs out of the negative influence of only three phenotype examples: “the shade of your skin and the shape of your nose and the kink of your hair” (Adichie 2013: 337). There are, however, approximately 5,000 phenotypes that are currently known such as eye color, which Pecola Breedlove, the protagonist of Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970), desperately longed for. One of the reasons Ifemelu possibly leaves out other proofs is to display that “[b]ecause this is America. You’re supposed to pretend that you don’t notice certain things” (Adichie 2013: 127). She may intend to uncannily limit the visibility of Black differences from the privileged whites, hence challenging the official discourse of Black deviancy from the white norms. Through the concealment of some information, Ifemelu may aim to “horizontally interpellate and refute an overarching heteronormative, heteropatriarchal narrative of blackness” (Phiri 2017: 132). Perhaps she limits her reasons only to those Eurocentric ideals of beauty in order to look professional. From Ifemelu’s



perspective, a Black may be subjected to dehumanising treatment in America due to these reasons.

Ifemelu is of the opinion that non-American Blacks cannot discuss racism in America. They need to remain silent on racial matters, as Ifemelu explains in one blog post, titled "Understanding America for the Non-American Black: A Few Explanations of What Things Really Mean", at the end of chapter 39: "If you are having a conversation with an American, and you want to discuss something racial that you find interesting, and the American says, 'Oh, it's simplistic to say it's race, racism is so complex'", it may signify that "they just want you to shut up already. Because of course racism is complex" (Adichie 2013: 350-351). She also states that if Black people need a job or favour from white Americans, they need to be reticent about race. Ifemelu develops the Machereyian not-said position more when she makes use of irony in the same post, providing explanations for white American people's implicit racial statements. She states, "Sometimes they say 'culture' when they mean race. They say a film is 'mainstream' when they mean 'white folks like it or made it'. When they say 'urban' it means black and poor and possibly dangerous and potentially exciting. 'Racially charged' means we are uncomfortable saying 'racist'" (Adichie 2013: 351). Annalena Geisler observes that the stark distinction between the explicit and the implicit in these statements has "the effect of mocking Americans' dread of openly engaging with racism" (2022). Thus, the whites also leave so many not-said's and ambiguities about racism to separate themselves from it and to deny they are racists.

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In a blog post titled "Understanding America for the Non-American Black: Thoughts on the Special White Friend", at the end of chapter 40, Ifemelu defends the Machereyian not-said position once more, encouraging Black people not to talk about the jobs which they could not have because they are not white: "But in fact, since the beginning of America, white people have been getting jobs because they are white. Many whites with the same qualifications but Negro skin would not have the jobs they have. But don't ever say this publicly. Let your white friend say it" (Adichie 2013: 361). Ifemelu believes that if they make the mistake of revealing this subject, they will be "accused of a curiosity called 'playing the race card'" (Adichie 2013: 361). Eventually, as she does not desire "to live with a computer-mediated notion of her homeland, Nigeria", she closes her blog and figuratively silences her posts in America (Isaacs 2016: 174). This temporary silence gives Ifemelu's audience an ideal opportunity for reflection to read between the lines and to fill in the gaps which they have been previously left with. In fact, Ifemelu essentially plays a fort/da game with her audience and upon her return to Lagos, after resigning from *Zoe* magazine, starts her new blog under the name "The Small Redemptions of Lagos", coming to voice once more.

### 3. Conclusion

Applying hooks's notion of talking back and the Machereyian not-said, the current study argues that Adichie's *Americanah* is characterised by the contradictions inherent in the tension between what Ifemelu's blog posts express and what they repress about the experiences of American and non-American Blacks in America. Ifemelu both outwardly and inwardly reveals realities about American and non-American Blacks in her blog posts, displaying the impingements of racist politics on the formulation of her writing, among other things. The overall impact of the sociopolitical context on Ifemelu may be more realistic in understanding how the novel's protagonist participates in the process of revealing and concealing information to display the condition of female Black subjectivity in America. Ifemelu, as a blogger, interweaves the said and the not-said to demonstrate the plausible outcome of the suppressive ideologies and agendas enacted by the white racist liberal community to subject Black immigrants in the US to abject oppression and victimization and Blacks' counter-measures against the white racist power structure. Ifemelu produces a work containing presences and absences because within ideology, there are subjects which can or which cannot be articulated. The explicit directly verifies Ifemelu's intention pertaining to race. The unspoken areas of Ifemelu's blog posts also speak expressively without words. The silenced thoughts are presented more prominently by their very absence, for they feature what cannot be voiced. To enunciate them would be to swim against the current of the American racial discourse. Ironically, attempting to silence thoughts only does the reverse, for they address realities more effectively than what are straightforwardly uttered in Ifemelu's blog posts. These gaps are not a mechanical imposition forced on individuals. The aesthetic effect these gaps produce instills in the reader a new awareness and sensibility of Black female struggles to find their niche in expression in the US.

The multiplicity of voices in Ifemelu's text challenges the preponderance of a single story of female Black subjectivity, embracing multiple perspectives and welcoming diversity. The protagonist's limited vision is compensated for by allowing the readers of her blog posts to share their opinions in the comment sections. Each reader presents Nigeria and the United States from different angles, featuring diverse ways of thinking and feeling. Through rejecting a monolithic voice in her blog posts, Ifemelu aims for a broader and more nuanced understanding of diasporic, racialised subjects. Therefore, in order to reclaim agency over Blacks' self-perception in relation to whites, Ifemelu takes the opportunity in her blog to challenge the ideological misrepresentation of vulnerable immigrants by talking back to the privileged whites. The unconscious of the text also unsettles the articulation of the dominant hegemonic discourse, revealing the hidden mechanisms of ideology. The overt or covert knowledge or discourse that Ifemelu produces in her blog posts consequently challenges racist interpellation of diasporic subjects by the dominant white social order of America.

## Notes

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1. In an interview with Terry Gross, Adichie defines Americanah as a Nigerian term, describing those Nigerian immigrants who go to the United States and then return to Nigeria, either taking on American affectations, or pretending not to understand their mother tongues any more, or refusing to consume Nigerian food, also it is often used for those individuals who are truly Americanised (2013).

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