

The Social and Spatial Politics of Hair in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

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ABSTRACT: The social and spatial politics of hair in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) are complex matters that require a discussion about more than just the consequences of slavery and colonialism on the performance and spatial constraints of black culture in America. Broken down, social and spatial politics refer to the societal and cultural ways black hair is perceived in the United States, as well as the spatial restrictions put on salons producing and performing black hair culture. A threefold approach drawing on gender and cultural studies with an emphasis on Michel Foucault's work on heterotopias is a productive way to address the aforementioned issues. Entangled in the performance of black hair in the United States is also the performance of femininity and how it is policed through race and gender norms with whiteness seen as ideal. Lastly, discussing the geographical space taken up by black hair in *Americanah* through the theoretical framework of heterotopias is important in understanding how black hair culture is represented in contemporary literature.

KEYWORDS: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; *Americanah*; hair; beauty; race; heterotopias

The social and spatial politics of hair in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) are complex matters that require a discussion about more than just the consequences of slavery and colonialism on the performance and spatial constraints of black culture in America. Broken down, social and spatial politics refer to the societal and cultural ways black hair is perceived in the United States, as well as the spatial restrictions put on salons producing and performing black hair culture. A threefold approach drawing on gender and cultural studies with an emphasis on Michel Foucault's work on heterotopias is a productive way to address the aforementioned issues. Entangled in the performance of black hair in the United States is also the performance of femininity and how it is policed through race and gender norms with whiteness seen as ideal.¹ Lastly, discussing the geographical space taken up by black hair in *Americanah* through the theoretical framework of heterotopias is important in understanding how black hair culture is represented in contemporary literature.

¹ The notion of gender performance is taken from Judith Butler's idea of an "essential woman" as expressed in "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution."

Obioma Nnaemeka defines the Igbo proverb “*Adiro Akwu ofuebe enene nmanwu*” as being a way to describe the “lessons learned [by Igbos] from their encounter with the masquerade to articulate the way they see and relate to/with the world—from different perspectives” (9).² This proverb encompasses “shifting patterns, territorial claims, location, movement, aesthetics, paradox, and perspectives” on a national and international level (Nnaemeka 9). It is a way of introducing not only Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie herself, but also her novel *Americanah*, as Adichie’s novel seems to encompass the complicated and shifting nature of the masquerade through the journeys of Ifemelu, Auntie Uju, Obinze, and Dike, to name just a few of the novel’s characters. Adichie’s TED Talk, “The Danger of a Single Story,” also embodies this idea of movement in many ways, especially the changing perspectives and broader understandings of culture and life. Adichie shows that Africa and African people are dynamic and multi-storied, particularly when it comes to their hair stories. Each character in Adichie’s novel shows Nigeria (as well as other African nations like Senegal and Mali) and the United States from different angles that involve multi-generational, transnational and intercontinental experiences. Sometimes these movements are forced upon the characters—like Auntie Uju who is forced to leave her home after a military coup—while other movements are chosen and calculated, like Ifemelu’s decision to return to Nigeria. No matter how one approaches the novel, *Americanah* can be considered a geographically and emotionally moving narrative.

Black hair, black hair salons, and black hair history are central themes in Adichie’s novel. No matter the ethnicity, certain types of hair colors, textures, lengths, and styles are prized over others at some point or another. Like all fashion trends, cultures, and traditions, our relationship with growing, removing, and styling hair is constantly changing. It also tells a story: as Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps highlight in *Hair Story*, “in the early fifteenth century, hair functioned as a carrier of messages in most West African societies. [...] Because a person’s spirit was supposedly nestled in the hair, the hairdresser always held a special place in community life” (2, 5). What Byrd and Tharps outline is the intrinsic mystical and

² Translation: “One does not stand in one place to watch a masquerade.”

social link hair had and still has in (West) Africa. The hair stories told by Adichie through the characters Ifemelu and Auntie Uju speak of the struggles of African hair in the United States. The conflicted desire and pressure to assimilate into white culture by relaxing (or chemically straightening) their hair suggests that Ifemelu and Auntie Uju struggle to honor their Nigerian heritage while also being successful in America. As Dina Yerima states, a “lack of conformity to [westernized beauty] results in the woman being viewed as unfeminine, unprogressive, and even uncivilized” (643). The tension between Nigerian heritage and western assimilation is therefore not just a question of cultural loyalty, but also one of success, respect, and employability in the West, with whiteness equaling all that is “good” about hair, and blackness everything that is “bad” (Byrd and Tharps 29).

The divide between black and white hair is further complicated by the beauty industry. Whiteness is seen as the ideal and as bell hooks rightfully suggests, “White supremacist thinking informs the consciousness of everyone irrespective of skin color” (11). From a very young age, black females are taught how to perform femininity through the media, often with a focus on or preference for whiteness. The global beauty industry problematizes women—fat thighs, frizzy hair, “bad” skin—and the treatment of African hair is no different. As Byrd and Tharps write, “the contradictions that seem to lie at the core of creating an industry that is pro-Black while pushing an agenda of altering or ‘improving’ on Black features by making them appear ‘Whiter’” has not helped foster positive feelings about Black hair or skin within the African American community (31). Despite the continued growth of the black beauty industry, black beauty and hair is still marginalized, both physically and socially. Moreover, the segregation of black culture in the United States has relegated the hair salon, a once central part of African village life, to the peripheries of American society. This geographical separation and cultural isolation further highlights the need to discuss the social and spatial politics of hair in America.

"Good Hair"

White America rarely sees natural black hair as "good hair" unless it is a white woman appropriating a traditional black hairstyle, or a black woman mimicking white hair.³ However, like many features of colorism, the notion of "good" hair is not something that only comes from outside of the black community.⁴ On the contrary, sometimes it is within the black community that the harshest judgments take place—an internalized racism with respect to hair. Black hair salons are the perfect places for the policing of black hair, with stylists imparting their "wisdom." In *Americanah*, Ifemelu's hair braider, Aisha from Senegal, asks her which hair extensions she wants as braids.⁵ What transpires is a dialogue that highlights the complex nature of "good" hair:

"Color four."

"Not good color," Aisha said promptly.

"That's what I use."

"It looks dirty. You don't want color one?"

"Color one is too black, it looks fake," Ifemelu said, loosening her headwrap.

"Sometimes I use color two but color four is closest to my natural color."

Aisha shrugged, a haughty shrug, as though it was not her problem if her customer did not have good taste. She reached into a cupboard, brought out two packets of attachments, checked to make sure they were both the same color.

She touched Ifemelu's hair. "Why you don't have relaxer?"

"I like my hair the way God made it."

"But how you comb it? Hard to comb," Aisha said.

Ifemelu brought her own comb. She gently combed her hair, dense, soft, and tightly coiled, until it framed her head like a halo. "It's not hard to comb if you

³ An example of the former can be found in *Americanah* and is addressed later in this article.

⁴ Definition: "Prejudice or discrimination against individuals with a dark skin tone, typically among people of the same ethnic or racial group" (Oxford Dictionaries 1).

⁵ In the novel, Adichie describes Aisha as: "a true market woman, immune to the cosmetic niceties of American customer service. Ifemelu imagined her working in a market in Dakar, like the braiders in Lagos who would blow their noses and wipe their hands on their wrappers, roughly jerking their customers' heads to position them better, complain about how full or how hard or how short the hair was, shout out to passing women, while all the time conversing too loudly and braiding too tightly" (15–16).

moisturize it properly," she said, slipping into the coaxing tone of the proselytizer that she used whenever she was trying to convince other black women about the merits of wearing their hair natural. Aisha snorted; she clearly could not understand why anybody would choose to suffer through combing natural hair, instead of simply relaxing it. (14–15)

While blackness does not have the same complications in many African countries as it does in the United States, the racialized legacy of slavery, colonization, and European "civilization" have all played a role in complicating hair in Africa. Immediately, Aisha questions Ifemelu's choice of hair extensions. Aisha calls Ifemelu's color choice for her hair extensions "dirty," and this word seems to ricochet off the walls of the salon and through the history of black hair itself. Ifemelu and Aisha never actually overtly express their feelings about "good hair"; the only statement from Ifemelu that sounds assertive is that God made her natural hair the way it is, which implies that it too must be "good" hair. However, the fact that femininity is always problematized—something that always needs fixing—means that even divinely ordained hair can still use a bit of relaxer and shiny black extensions. The discussion of hair relaxer is another point of contention for the two women. Aisha believes that one should not waste time on combing unrelaxed hair. Anticipating this, Ifemelu brings her own comb and does Aisha's job for her, until her hair is combed into an angelic halo. The fact that Ifemelu uses her own comb and quickly combs out her supposedly impossible hair suggests that this conversation has occurred more than once between Ifemelu and her hair braiders.

Discussions of "good" hair also appear outside of the salon, which further implies that good hair governs more than just a woman's aesthetic. In a discussion between Ifemelu and Auntie Uju about job interviews, Auntie Uju tells Ifemelu: "I have to take my braids out for my interviews and relax my hair. Kemi told me that I shouldn't wear braids to the interview. If you have braids, they will think you are unprofessional" (146). It is unclear if Kemi is Auntie Uju's friend or hairdresser; however, the two are not always mutually exclusive. What is apparent here is the reoccurring theme that hair must look and act white in order for people to be taken seriously in the United States. Ifemelu retorts, "So there are no doctors with braided hair in America?" (146), to which Auntie Uju simply replies, "I have told you what they told me. You are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do if you want to succeed" (146). Auntie Uju's words resemble those spoken by Nnaemeka's father:

"My daughter, [...] when you go to *obodo oyibo* walk like the chameleon" (14).⁶ Fighting white notions of "good" hair is, in theory, one thing and in practice another. Even though Ifemelu believes that her Aunt Uju should not have to remove her braids, the reality is that white western ideals in America dictate otherwise. To walk like the chameleon, as Nnaemeka conveys, is to walk between worlds. Underneath the façade that allows one to blend with (or assimilate into) one's environment is a multitude of identities that are often kept hidden. In part, it is this obfuscation that makes blackness in the United States so complicated.

Ifemelu's criticism of Aunt Uju's decision to remove her braids and relax her hair stems from Ifemelu's own "new adventure, relaxing her hair" (250). Her first attempt at relaxing her hair is conducted at home, after she is given the advice: "Lose the braids and straighten your hair. Nobody says this kind of stuff but it matters" (250). Her hair does not react to store-bought relaxer so she decides to go to a hair salon. After enduring "stinging pain," Ifemelu acquires what her hairdresser calls "the white-girl swing" (251). The reaffirmation of white hair, which equals "good hair," strips Ifemelu of her self-identity:

Her hair was hanging down rather than standing up, straight and sleek, parted at the side and curving to a slight bob at her chin. [...] She did not recognize herself. She left the salon mournfully; while the hairdresser had flat-ironed the ends, the smell of burning, of something organic dying which should not have died had made her feel a sense of loss. (251)

The burns that Ifemelu has on her scalp after the relaxer treatment add a layer of physical trauma to the struggle for "good" hair. After chastising Aunt Uju for capitulating to white beauty standards and relaxing her hair, Ifemelu finds herself voicing a similar strategy: "I need to look professional for this interview, and professional means straight is best but if it's going to be curly then it has to be the white kind of curly, loose curls, or, at worst, spiral curls but never kinky" (252). Wambui, Ifemelu's friend, summarizes the mental and physical struggles of relaxing black hair: "Relaxing your hair is like being in a prison. You're caged in. Your hair rules you" (257). In this context, "good" hair is a form of oppression that is covert

⁶ Translation: "The land of white people."

in nature, and one that also conveys the idea that women of color are problematic in their natural state. However, blackness can never be mitigated in the way the beauty industry demands, so the time, money, and energy spent on trying to achieve “good” hair will always be invested in a losing battle.

The African Hair Salon as a Heterotopia

Before discussing the complications of hair and the implications of space, it is important to first understand and define space and more specifically as a certain type of space: the heterotopia. Foucault discusses heterotopias in a number of works; however, the most notable is “Of Other Spaces,” where he outlines a definition and also provides a taxonomy of different types of heterotopias. For Foucault, it is “the space of emplacement,” or the “intersection of places” that defines a heterotopia (“Of Other Spaces” 22). Heterotopias are usually defined either as places for individuals who do not meet societal norms, or as places for those who are deviants. According to Foucault, such “crisis spaces” include mental asylums, boarding schools, and prisons. However, heterotopias are much more than crisis spaces: they are also places of intense meaning and contradiction, where knowledge clashes and collides (Topinka 54). However, this does not make the space unknowable. In *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Foucault addresses heterotopias through the destruction of “syntax”:

Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this *and* that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy “syntax” in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite to one another) to “hold together.” (xviii)

This intersection of places allows for different worlds to exist inside each other and also to be layered on top of each other. Consequently, Foucault has also defined heterotopias as sites of resistance, and as Robert J. Topinka expresses, “shifting the focus from resistance to order and knowledge production” allows us to understand how “heterotopias make the spatiality of order legible” (54).

Foucault suggests that “[w]e are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed” (“Of Other Spaces” 22). This statement is rather poignant when we think of the history of African Americans in the United States. Foucault’s “Of Other Spaces” was written in 1967, which was a time of great social change in the country. Racially segregated spaces were disappearing, the *Loving v. Virginia* Supreme Court case ruled that prohibiting interracial marriage was unconstitutional, and the following year, Martin Luther King, Jr. would be assassinated.⁷ In the midst of all this, new interracial spaces were being created, and “Places of this kind,” explains Foucault, “are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality” (“Of Other Spaces” 24). While Foucault does not specifically refer to the Civil Rights Movement in “Of Other Spaces,” these complex black and white sites resemble those he describes: they are “sites that can be found within the culture [that] are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (“Of Other Spaces” 24). Additionally, as Foucault contends, society “can make an existing heterotopia function in a very different fashion; for each heterotopia has a precise and determined function within a society and the same heterotopia can, according to the synchrony of the culture in which it occurs, have one function or another” (“Of Other Spaces” 25). This means that all heterotopias can change, some even constantly. Thus, their ability to elude definition makes them inherently unstable. However, this does not make them unknowable or meaningless. As Topinka suggests, in heterotopias, “epistemes collide and overlap, creating an intensification of knowledge” (55). It is this “intensification of knowledge” that is problematic in heterotopias, for epistemes can collide and create white noise we cannot always decipher.

There are several aspects of the African hair salon that, when taken together, render it a heterotopia.⁸ It enables bodily changes and allows black women to reshape their masks of makeup and hair to become a reflection of what they perceive as their “true” face. Going to

⁷ For more information regarding the *Loving v. Virginia* case, see “Loving: Looking Back at the Landmark Case *Loving vs. Virginia*” by the ACLU: <https://www.aclu.org/feature/loving>

⁸ When talking about African hair salons, it is important to note that they refer to both the type of hair styled at the salon, and also the workers’ and clientele’s African heritage.

the hair salon promises change and rebirth. The mirror, a key feature of the hair salon, reinforces its status as both a utopic and a heterotopic space. As Foucault posits:

The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there. ("Of Other Spaces" 24)

The large mirrors secured to the walls of every hair station at the salon have a twofold function: firstly, the person getting their hair done can see themselves slowly transforming into the new vision of themselves. Secondly, the mirror facilitates the relationship and conversation between the stylist and the client. The hairdresser is often behind the client, which means they cannot look at each other directly. It is mostly through the mirror that the hairdresser and client look at each other, once the transformation has begun. It is through this space, that is simultaneously "absolutely real" and "absolutely unreal," that a connection is formed. Each looks upon the other, seeing his or her own absence and affirmation in the reflection of the mirror. When mirrors are also placed on opposite walls, this relationship extends into infinity.

Clearly, the mirror plays an important role in contemporary female beauty politics as it affirms beauty (or its absence) and is also a tool used to transform female subjects through hair and makeup. However, the "desired" self is both attainable in the moment and never fully attainable because part of that desired self will always remain in the other space of the mirror. An example of this can be seen in *Americanah* when a client enters the hair salon: "She stood in front of the mirror, describing the kind of cornrows she wanted. 'Like a zigzag with a parting at the side right here, but you don't add the hair at the beginning, you add it when you get to the ponytail'" (229). There, in the hair salon, is the promise of change. Yet, the mirror is not the only heterotopic aspect of the African hair salon. The African hair salon is a racially charged crisis space. With its roots in Africa, it has taken a journey, or a new route, to North America. This transformation leaves it both detached and attached to its Africanness, since it now negotiates white and black space. Moreover, it preserves African cultures and is usually filled with artifacts that are brought or imported from Africa.

Nevertheless, the African hair salon is isolated in the sense that it is usually on the geographical outskirts of white society—a restricted space that whites can enter, but to which they can never truly belong.

The issues concerning black hair and the space of African hair salons are addressed on the first page of *Americanah*. Adichie contrasts the “tranquil greenness of the many trees, the clean streets and stately homes, the delicately overpriced shops, and the quiet, abiding air of earned grace” that is Princeton, New Jersey, with the state capital, Trenton, the closest place she could purchase braids since “it was unreasonable to expect a braiding salon in Princeton—the few black locals [Ifemelu] had seen were so light skinned and lank-haired she could not imagine them wearing braids” (1–2). As she immediately realizes, African hair that does not conform to white standards of beauty is ostracized and cast out of the pristine bubble of Princeton. As Byrd and Tharps point out, black college students either find a hair salon, mostly on the outskirts of town or in brown neighborhoods, or they do it themselves “to avoid the costly maintenance and annoying travel time” (139). Due to the segregation between white and black hair spaces, many African Americans and Africans living in the United States feel like their black hair is a burden rather than a blessing (Byrd and Tharps 142). However, despite the social, cultural and geographic challenges, many black men and women seem to love to hate their hair (Byrd and Tharps 143). “It would be erroneous to assume that all Black people dislike their hair or even have problems working with it. From celebrity stylists to adolescent boys on the road to self-discovery, Black people often use their hair as a medium for celebrating creative energy” (Byrd and Tharps 143). In many ways, *Americanah* follows the journey of Ifemelu’s love-hate relationship with her hair, which includes trying to conform to western beauty standards while also remaining true to herself.

The hair salon, Mariama African Hair Braiding, is comparable to Foucault’s heterotopic cemetery: “the cemetery was placed at the heart of the city, next to the church. [...] From the nineteenth century cemeteries began to be located at the outside border of cities. [...] The cemeteries then came to constitute, no longer the sacred and immortal heart of the city, but ‘the other city’” (“Of Other Spaces” 25). Just like, as Foucault explains, the cemetery lost its place within society, African hair salons have also been relegated to the periphery. Once

occupying a central role in African communities, African hair was uprooted in slavery and transported to the Americas. "The one constant Africans share when it comes to hair is the social and cultural significance intrinsic to each beautiful strand," however, this was no longer celebrated in white society (Byrd and Tharps 1). In this new world, black hair, braiding, and hair salons acquired new meaning, usually on the geographic edges of white society in minority communities. However, these salons are only peripheral when white society is taken as the center. Depending on the lens through which one views the location of the African hair salon, it is either a peripheral or a central location.

According to Ifemelu, Mariama African Hair Braiding looked like her regular hair salon and actually like all other African hair salons (10). As Adichie describes:

They were in the part of the city that had graffiti, dank buildings, and no white people, they displayed bright signboards with names like Aisha and Fatima African Hair Braiding, they had radiators that were too hot in the winter and air conditioners that did not cool in the summer, and they were full of Francophone West African women braiders, one of whom would be the owner and speak the best English and answer the phone and be deferred to by the others. Often there was a baby tied to someone's back with a piece of cloth. Or a toddler asleep on the wrapper spread over a battered sofa. Sometimes, older children stopped by. The conversations were loud and swift, in French Wolof or Malinke, and when they spoke English to customers, it was broken, curious, as though they had not quite eased into the language itself before taking on a slangy Americanism. (10–11)

Adichie describes a so-called ghetto or slum area of the city. "Graffiti" and "dank buildings" suggest a neglected and forgotten space that was perhaps once a well-kept suburb or part of town that has fallen into disrepair. It has become a place for the other. The absence of whites also racializes the space and adds to its socio-economic segregation. The run down nature of the salon seems to be part of its charm; the malfunctioning air conditioner and radiator, the loud multi-lingual conversations, and the children tied to the backs of hair salon workers are reminiscent of the stereotypical African hustle and bustle that is both chaotic and functional.

Mariama's salon is located between a "Chinese restaurant called Happy Joy and a convenience store that sold lottery tickets" (11). In other words, in an ethnic neighborhood where businesses are generally run by immigrants and racial and ethnic outsiders. When

Ifemelu enters the salon, she notices “a small TV mounted on a corner of the wall, the volume a little too loud,” showing a Nigerian film, “a man beating his wife, the wife cowering and shouting, the poor audio quality jarring” (11). The Nollywood film is a cultural product brought over from Africa, but it is not the only artifact from “home.”⁹ “Next to the fan were combs, packets of hair attachments, magazines bulky with loose pages, piles of colorful DVDs” (12). While these objects are key features in every hair salon, they are not the same as those found in white salons. A “rusty hair dryer that had not been used in a hundred years,” which lay next to a candy dispenser, highlights a major difference between styling black and white hair (2). Hair dryers are a key styling tool for women with “white hair” (or who want to acquire white hair), but it is discarded at Mariama’s salon. Perhaps the hair dryer is left there as a symbol of the business—a tool that connects it to every other salon— or to make whites who cross the threshold into that neighborhood and into Mariama’s salon a little more comfortable?

The grouping of these African and European hair tools with magazines and DVDs shows the eclectic and transnational nature of the African hair salon. It also shows the intermingling of cultures through the European colonization of Africa, as well as the diversity of African nations and cultures. It is a hybrid space that is neither completely African nor white/European. French and English are also colonizer languages that are now used as a main mode of communication between the people in the salon, albeit in dialect form. Interestingly enough, Mariama does not appear apologetic for this eclectic, thrown together space. The space simply is what it is. Foucault suggests that

the idea of accumulating everything, of establishing a sort of general archive, the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages, the project of organizing in this way a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place, this whole idea belongs to our modernity. (“Of Other Spaces” 26)

⁹ Nollywood refers to the Nigerian film industry, which burst onto the scene in the late 1990s and has since become a series competitor for Hollywood and Bollywood in terms of profits and popularity.

What Foucault refers to here are museums and libraries, institutions he claims stems from the nineteenth century. Foucault's historical inaccuracy—it has been well documented that libraries and museum-like places of great archival significance have existed long before modernity—does not diminish the fact that the collection of things from multiple eras in one place seems to be part of the human condition. Collections bring together different cultures, languages, times, and tastes. Mariama's salon is both a makeshift museum for African hair, but also an eclectic amalgamation of West African and European cultures.

Mariama's salon is more than just a place for black hair; it is also a place for the black community. It is what Foucault might call an "open/closed" heterotopia: certain rituals and rites must be performed before one can be truly part of the space—"to get in one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures" ("Of Other Spaces" 26). Mariama's rituals are so subtle that customers can presume they are indeed "in" the space when really they are not. As Foucault points out, "we think we enter where we are, by the very fact that we enter," however, this is not enough to be admitted ("Of Other Spaces" 26). When Adichie describes how "a young white woman came in, soft-bodied and tanned, her hair held back in a loose ponytail," her presence in Mariama's salon does not signal her actual "entry" into the space (232). The white woman identifies herself as Kelsey and she begins to chat with Mariama about her hair and the salon. "I want to get my hair braided. You can braid my hair, right?" Kelsey asks Mariama (232). When Kelsey asks Mariama about her business, she presumes that Mariama had no opportunities in her homeland: "But you couldn't even have this business back in your country, right? Isn't it wonderful that you get to come to the U.S. and now your kids can have a better life?" (232). The presumptions Kelsey makes about her hair, about the women doing her hair, and the lives they had or did not have "back home," and her life in the United States (marriage and kids) reveal that she is an outsider with a very one dimensional, racist, classist and perhaps even heterosexist view of African life, African hair, and this African woman.

Despite Kelsey's physical presence in the salon, she is not truly in the space or *of* the space. She is also not accepted by the other women in the hair salon. The true marker of Kelsey's outsider status comes from Mariama's question, "You want to use hair?" (234). Kelsey's

reaction—"eyes widened, [...] she glanced around quickly, at the pack from which Aisha took small sections for each braid, at the pack that Halima was only just unwrapping"—shows her ignorance of African hair and its culture (234). As Byrd and Tharps explain, "familiarity with the tools and fluidity in the language of Black hair culture does not automatically qualify a person as a member of the club. Certain rituals and rites of passage must also be experienced" (131). Kelsey was probably in the salon for the first time, and was uninitiated into African hair rituals. Ifemelu describes Kelsey as a liberal American "who copiously criticized America but did not like you to do so, they expected you to be silent and grateful" (232–233). This statement speaks volumes about how Kelsey perceives the world around her and also how Ifemelu sees white America. Kelsey's insular ideas about Africa, and African hair, reveal her naïveté but also her white privilege. She presumes she can enter any space, and co-opt anyone's culture, because she is protected by her skin color. However, Mariama's salon does not follow outside rules. Whether or not Kelsey truly understands how out of place she is, is not really explained in the novel. However, I would argue that Kelsey's knowledge of her spatial acceptance is irrelevant in this open/closed heterotopia. Kelsey's mere presence is what underscores this jarring opposition between being *in* a space, and being *of* a space.

In "Of Other Spaces," Foucault conveys the idea that colonies are "extreme" types of heterotopias (27). Mariama's salon is a postcolonial space because of the history of African colonization, as well as the history of the Americas. Colonization is not just a state of spatial politics, but rather something that seeps into every aspect of humanity. Both the colonizer and the colonized cannot escape this history, and this is seen in the way that Kelsey and Ifemelu react to the novel *Bend in the River* (233–234). "Oh, well," remarks Kelsey, "I see why you would read the novel like that" to which Ifemelu replies: "And I see why *you* would read it like you did" (234). Encapsulated in this dialogue are the complexities of colonialism. The exchange also highlights the very nature of the open/closed heterotopic space. Even though one is able to read his or her surroundings, it does not mean that s/he will understand or be "in" the space.

Foucault suggests that the role of the heterotopia is

to [either] create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory. Or else, on the contrary, their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled. ("Of Other Spaces" 27)

I would argue that Foucault's thoughts, as outlined above, work in both ways for the salon. Mariama's space is "a space that is other"; however, it is only othered and pushed to the peripheries of white society. For many people within the black community, Mariama's place is central to their way of life. Foucault does not explicitly address the racial elements of places like the salon, but these racial elements are what helps segregate, close, and other the space to the larger part community. Black hair is prepared in these hidden-in-plain-site salons, and discussions of black hair outside the black community are often seen as taboo or at the very least awkward. *Americanah* creates a dialogue about black hair in a way that allows both sides to read the open/closed heterotopic space and the politics of black hair.

Imagined, real, and othered spaces are central in all hair salons. The mirror, like the kitchen or the back porch of many black homes, has been a stage for black hair and its culture (Byrd and Tharps 133). The mirror is a space where black hair exists outside of the discourse of black/white relations. In the mirror, there is an allure of freedom and change. It has been a silent witness to black hair and has recorded its transformation, albeit fleetingly. Adichie's book is a critique and a celebration of the complexities of black hair and doing black hair. She shows the depths of black female beauty, collegiality, and sometimes conflict, and more importantly illustrates that black hair salons are more than just places for twists, braids, extensions, and relaxers. They are a central place in black female communities, where women come together and are unapologetically black and female.

By creating a literary space for African and African American female voices, Adichie addresses and challenges ideas about black beauty and femininity in contemporary America. As we see in *Americanah*, African and African American women must contend with the gendered and racialized world around them, which creates conflict inside and outside of their communities. Despite these struggles, African/ American women (and men) have carved out a place for themselves within white society, and hair braiding salons are a central part of this place.

Deploying Foucault's conceptualization of the heterotopia to understand the spatiality of hair salons in *Americanah* creates a constructive analytical landscape for black hair, salons and their representations in contemporary literature. The hair salons are located on the periphery of white America, but are actually central to black America. The open/closed nature of this space highlights the rituals of doing and producing black hair and culture. The eclectic nature of these places, with relics of white and black hair culture, the mixture of African cultures, and the use of colonizer and indigenous languages can render the space, at least on its surface, disorganized and discordant. However, it is here in this space of contradictions that meanings evolve and change, and knowledge is produced. *Americanah* showcases African/American culture through its focus on black hair. As it explicates, "Africa is not waiting there in the fifteenth or seventeenth century, waiting for you to roll back across the Atlantic and rediscover it in its tribal purity, waiting there in its prelogical mentality, waiting to be woken from inside" (Hall 209). By opening up a discussion on space, gender, and race, *Americanah* suggests that Africa is in America, in the heterotopias of the contemporary world.

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