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Keisha N. Blain
University of Iowa

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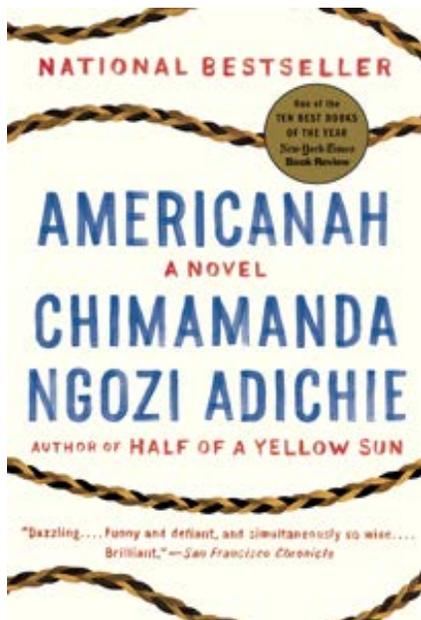
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Teaching Black Internationalism and Americanah

KEISHA N. BLAIN • POSTED JANUARY 27, 2015



As an historian of ‘black internationalism,’ I am constantly thinking of new ways to explain the type of work I do, especially to students who encounter the term for the first time. After reading Chimamanda Adichie’s *Americanah*, I decided to revise my black internationalism syllabus (one of my ‘dream courses’). When the opportunity arises to teach it, I will assign the novel as one of the supplementary texts. While *Americanah* is not a black internationalist text per se, it nicely captures some of the tensions and complexities of the term.

There are multiple ways to define ‘black internationalism.’ However, I generally describe it to my students as an insurgent political culture emerging in response to slavery, colonialism, and white imperialism. I tell them that black internationalism is about political struggle.[1] It centers on visions of freedom and liberation movements among African descended people worldwide. It captures their efforts to forge transnational collaborations and solidarities with other people of color. This is the kind of black internationalism that emerges in the scholarly works of Michael O. West, Gerald Horne, Minkah Makalani, and others.[2] This is the kind of black internationalism I want my students to fully understand and appreciate.

Americanah is not that kind of text. It’s a work of fiction. Some might say it’s a story of love and loss or perhaps a story about national belonging and feelings of displacement. Yet the themes in the novel are very real and relevant. Instructors can use it to help tease out the richness and complexities of black internationalism in theory and in practice. Alongside some of the aforementioned scholarly texts—as well as key primary sources such as Richard Wright’s *The Color Curtain* (1956) and Eslanda Robeson’s *African Journey*

(1945)— *Americanah* will initiate lively classroom conversations about the complexities of race, ethnicity, and nationality in a world where categories and hierarchies abound. Indeed, the novel implicitly calls for a reconsideration of what we mean when we evoke the term ‘black internationalism’ and even what we mean by the term ‘black.’

How do we conceptualize ‘black internationalism’ in light of the multi-faceted meanings of *blackness* in the United States and across the globe? Instructors can assign the novel to engage this question. Largely through the eyes of Ifemelu, a Nigerian student who relocates to the United States for a university education and stays for her early professional life, *Americanah* takes the reader on a journey across time and space where racial categories are constantly in flux. Chimamanda Adichie makes this observation in the novel when she describes Ifemelu’s encounter with someone named Alma: “If Ifemelu had met Alma in Lagos, she would have thought of her as white, but she would learn that Alma was Hispanic, an American category that was, confusingly, both an ethnicity and a race, and she would remember Alma when, years later, she wrote a blog post titled ‘Understanding America for the Non-American Black: What Hispanic Means’” (128). This is one of many examples of how the novel opens up an intellectual space in which to grapple with the fluidity of racial (and other) categories in the 21st century.

Adichie’s *Americanah* also captures the limitations of ‘black internationalism’ as a theoretical concept. On one hand, the novel exemplifies the salient links between Africans on the continent and those in the Diaspora. At the same time, it demonstrates the tenuous nature of these connections in a world where ethnicity and national identities sometimes trump racial ones. What then to make of black internationalism— this concept that unifies all people of African descent or people of color more broadly? In Adichie’s novel, the answer comes through clearly for me as a scholar of the modern African Diaspora: *black internationalism is just as real as it is imagined*. It functions as a unifying force, as we have witnessed in various social, cultural, and political movements since the 1700s (i.e. Garveyism during the 1920s).

However, at times, black internationalism is only something we might hope for. It is, to borrow a term from Benedict Anderson, an “imagined community”— a socially

constructed identity and community envisioned by the people who see themselves as members of the group.[3] This is demonstrated throughout the novel. In one instance, Wambui, one of Ifemelu's acquaintances, evokes black internationalism when she tells Ifemelu, to "[t]ry and make friends with our African American brothers and sisters in a spirit of true Pan-Africanism" (172). Yet, in the same statement, she goes on to suggest that Ifemelu ought to feel some type of connection with other people of color, perhaps even more so than African Americans. In Wambui's words: "You will also find that you might make friends more easily with other internationals, Koreans, Indians, Brazilians, whatever, than with Americans both black and white" (173). Her statements, filled with contradictions, exemplify the ways in which black internationalism is both real and imagined in the book—as it is in real life.

At various moments in the novel, Ifemelu seeks to immerse herself in a community of black men and women—from various ethnic backgrounds. At other times, she tries to distance herself from those who are not native Africans. Still, at other times, she draws a clear divide between Nigerians and those from other African nations, often embracing an ethnic hierarchy in which Nigerians generally seem to emerge at the top. Throughout the novel, the small interactions between Ifemelu and a hairdresser or taxi driver, for example, gesture to the complexities and indeed, contradictions of black transnational identities. It demonstrates how these social categories—as fluid, conflicting, and confusing as they might be—continue to dictate how we live our lives. At times, they determine how others view us; how we view others; and certainly, how we view ourselves.

If *Americanah* leaves some questions unanswered or some topics unexplored, I think it enriches our understanding of the complexities of black internationalism in theory and in praxis. It captures the 'messiness' of black transnational identities in a world shaped by histories of slavery, colonialism, imperialism, and globalization. *Americanah* highlights the varied meanings, constructions, and uses of hegemonic categories such as race, nation, and ethnicity, and exemplifies how individuals struggle to make sense of these categories in their day-to-day lives. For these and other reasons, *Americanah* is a useful teaching tool—one that will generate spirited discussions about race, ethnicity, nationality, and of course, black internationalism.

1 See Michael O. West, William G. Martin, and Fanon Che Wilkins, eds., *From Toussaint to Tupac: The Black International since the Age of Revolution* (UNC Press, 2009).

2 Examples include West, Martin, and Wilkins, eds., *From Toussaint to Tupac*; Robin D. G. Kelley, “‘But a Local Phase of a World Problem’: Black History’s Global Vision, 1883–1950,” *Journal of American History* 86 (1999): 1045–77; James Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans: Black Americans and Africa, 1935–1961* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917–1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2011).

3 See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London; New York: Verso, 1991). Also see Sidney J. Lemelle and Robin D. G. Kelley, *Imagining Home: Class, Culture, and Nationalism in the African Diaspora* (London; New York: Verso, 1994).

Beginning in August 2015, Keisha N. Blain will be an assistant professor of History at the University of Iowa. She is currently a postdoctoral research fellow in the Africana Research Center and in the Department of African American Studies at the Pennsylvania State University. She completed a PhD in History at Princeton University in 2014. She is currently at work on a book manuscript tentatively entitled, *Contesting the Global Color Line: Black Women, Nationalist Politics, and Internationalism, 1927–1957*.



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