# Digital Forms, Migrant Forms: Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

Bhakti Shringarpure
University of Connecticut

> "A first type of book is the root-book. The tree is already the image of the world, or the root the image of the world-tree."
> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*

Today, contemporary African literature and the discourses surrounding it have intersected with a fertile digital moment whether on the African continent or in Euro-American spaces. Within scholarly publishing and mainstream cultural spheres, these colluding phenomena raise a variety of questions about the history of African literature as well as digital forms and innovations that have emerged alongside one another. The digitality and the digital culture referred to here is our contemporary existence that is steeped in technology whether it is smartphone usage, reliance on the Internet for news and information, networked identities on social media, virtual reality and artificial intelligence in our daily lives as well as the transformation of all communication from the material to the cyber spheres such as email and various chat services, amongst others.

The African continent's already vast literary production has found renewed vigor as writers have created, exploited, appropriated, stretched, altered and reshaped the realm of the digital to extraordinary results. There has also been a proliferation of publishing platforms, literary prizes and literary festivals, and Nesbitt-Ahmed has referred to these developments as having brought about a "'digital revolution' in African literature" (378). Whether it is an intensification of archiving and digitization activity, availability of low-cost platforms for storytelling or the interest shown by commercial Western publishing in African writing that spurs vigorous debates and controversies on the Internet, it appears that digital media continues to alter the form and

scope of African literature today. Of course, the reverse is also important to note; the ways in which the African literary landscape is potentially altering the digital one. During the Covid-19 pandemic, when the world has been in lockdown, a host of African writers from across the globe gathered together to create an African literature festival convened entirely online (Latif). Thus it was an African literary space that gave impetus for digital spaces to reinvent themselves.

Achille Mbembe argues that there exists a distant digital past for Africa and a distant African past for the digital. In a short interview with Bregte van der Haak titled "The Internet is Afropolitan," he argues that "the world of Africa, the pre-colonial world, as well as the world of now, has always been somewhat digital" (2015). It is productive here to extrapolate digitality as gesture, as affect and as mode. Mbembe's claim that "the archive of permanent transformation, mutation, conversion and circulation is an essential dimension of what we can call African culture" maps directly onto the philosophy of new digital technologies. James Yéku has reiterated something similar and claims that "[d]igital media through online literary spaces (including literary blogs and social media pages of authors) recast the monologic frame and individual authority of print. What results is a decentred medium, structured on the logics of interactivity and participatory culture, ideas that gesture back to the representational strategies of oral literature in pre-colonial Africa" (Yéku 263). Digital media and the Internet's participatory, interactive and collaborative nature does hark back to a precolonial past borrowing from it as well as building upon it. Yéku asks us to be attentive to the ways in which "new media reimagine significant paradigms of both indigenous aesthetics and the ways they are now being rematerialized in online platforms" when it comes to thinking about the formal experiments occuring in new African writing (263).

Another related element in Mbembe's essay is that he emphasizes Africa as constantly engaged in circulation and mobility. "When you look at African myths of origin, migration occupies a central role in all of them. There is not one single ethnic group in Africa that can seriously claim to have never moved" (2015). Lastly, he speaks of extraordinary plasticity, the ability to embrace and re-invent that which is new. "This flexibility and this capacity for constant innovation, extension of the possible, that is also the spirit of the Internet, it is the spirit of the digital, and it is the same spirit you will find in pre-

colonial and contemporary Africa" (2015). Thus in articulating a fundamentally digital paradigm for understanding Africa as place and as a culture, Mbembe centralizes migration and migrant proclivity towards creation and innovation. African literature is indeed a protagonist in a global new media and digital ecology, and in imbricating digitality and migration, Mbembe inadvertently offers a useful framework for the recent spate of novels that focus on migration but which also engage digital technology, cyberspace and social media. African literary studies can thus be said to be simultaneously engaged in a migration turn and a digital turn, and this article attempts not only to tease out those connections but to see them as intertwined with regards to formal and narratological choices.

Using the term "migrant forms," Stephanie Bosch Santana maps "new literary geographies" and argues that these literatures are, in fact, "structured by, feature, and textualize such processes of continuous migration" (2014, 168). Persistent deterritorialization and reterritorialization among characters, lives characterized by mobilities, and representation of transportation, for example, are some of issues that populate the literature where these migrant forms proliferate. In contemporary works on migration, technology is often part and parcel of the text whether due to the author's reliance upon particular modes of writing itself such as a computer, phone or a specific software or whether as a thematic or plot-driven presence. In enfolding digitality and migration, it becomes imperative to ask in what ways digital culture contributes to migration novels and what types of symbiosis can be observed when these texts explicitly and implicitly engage questions, forms and themes emerging from technology. I explore the productive and complex relationship between migration and digitality through stylistic, aesthetic, political and narratological engagement with concepts such as hypertext literature, networked identities, media intertextuality and the performance of political selves.        The two novels, *Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi (2016) and *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2013), both of which were disseminated in print, offer a preliminary understanding of how digital forms and migrant forms intersect in order to expand the scope and representation of the migration experience for African subjects in contemporary literature. Pairing *Homegoing* and *Americanah* is generative and even though they both explore similar transatlantic trajectories, they engage vastly different subject matters. The novels were published within three years of each other and both straddle North America alongside

national heritage affiliations (Ghana and Nigeria) imbuing them with an inherently diasporic ethos. This preoccupation with diasporic identity, migrant trajectories and itinerancy in both novels is expressed through complex women protagonists. *Homegoing* spans a few hundred years and *Americanah* zooms in on two decades in the life of protagonist Ifemelu. *Homegoing,* despite its engagement with the historical past of slavery is not a historical novel and employs formal techniques that harness many aspects of digital media, especially those of hypertext fiction. *Americanah* takes a different approach and explores the impact of digital culture upon the protagonist who is deeply steeped in technology because she has founded and writes a blog that gains immense popularity. Both novels show how contemporary African authors engage and explore digitality, thus making them an interesting comparative study. More importantly, both novels are centered on migration and mobility, and it is these experiences that find a mirror in the digital forms; virtual worlds, networked identities, rhizomes, digital intimacies, elliptical writing and an overarching proclivity towards non-linearity. Migrant forms and digital forms are indeed related if not deeply dependent on each other, and the following individual sections on the two novels will illustrate this imbrication in detail.

## Homegoing

Ghanaian-American novelist Gyasi's debut novel *Homegoing* is a set of linked stories that start at the beginning of the West African slave trade in order to illustrate the ways in which West African elite were complicit in selling their own kin to the colonial powers. Two sisters separated by slavery give birth to a biblical genealogy. The novel moves from generation to generation picking and choosing characters in seemingly random ways to enter the contemporary moment in the final chapter, almost three hundred years later, where two characters that the reader has been able to identify as distant kin now feel a connection with each other. Though the characters, Marjorie and Marcus, feel that their bond is largely a combination of physical attraction and a parallel racial and political itinerary, the reader has been able to locate this connection through an immense chrono-cartography from the seventeenth century to the present day, from the West African coastline to the American South to California. Though

the description may appear reminiscent of an epic multi-generational novel in the vein of *Buddenbrooks* by Thomas Mann or Alex Haley's *Roots*, *Homegoing* is unique in the way that the material is organized. Liza Ze Winters describes it accurately when she writes that "*Homegoing* unfolds through a series of vignettes, each focusing on an individual descendant in its split family tree" (340). Additionally, the characters in Gyasi's novel "persistently navigate the never-ending reverberations of their diasporic beginnings" (340).

This seeming dichotomy between content and form immediately sets *Homegoing* apart from other contemporary projects—the material appears to belong to the genre of epic, historical novels but it is rendered through short, interlinked and decentered stories that place pressure upon the reader to navigate the text. Some reviews have been disapproving and one critic wrote that the novel "struggles to make linked-story form suit epic enterprise" (Miller 2016). However, this seeming disconnection is not a problem with the novel's style of associative linking, but rather with the defamiliarized way in which this work invites the audience to read a text that is in codex form not as a linear story but in a style inspired by digital storytelling. *Homegoing*, I insist, must be evaluated through careful attention to ways in which it can be seen as engaging with or borrowing from forms expressly found in digital universes.

The last three decades have witnessed a robust proliferation in approaches and theories about reading as well as writing digitally. Only a decade ago, N. Katherine Hayles asked, "[w]hat large-scale social and cultural changes are bound up with the spread of digital culture, and what do they portend for the future of writing?" (2008, 2). While the excitement around the possibilities opened up by the Internet and new technologies and their impacts on reading practices are more easily discussed, it is far more difficult to track the ways in which digital culture and the particularity of certain technologies impact the process of writing itself, especially when the novel's contents reveal no discernable interest in media-inflected textual modes. In his influential work, *Writing Space: Computers, Hypertext, and the Remediation of Print*, Jay David Bolter discusses the fact that "our culture is also redefining the visual and conceptual space of writing" (12). Bolter explains that "the writer enters into a reflective and reflexive relationship with the written page, a relationship in which thoughts are bodied forth" (13). Though materiality of writing has changed from stone to paper to computer screens, there is no doubt that the

relationship between the mind and the writing space is inextricably tied. "The writer always needs a surface on which to make his or her marks and a tool with which to make them," Bolter observes, "and these materials become part of the contemporary definition of writing" (16). The question is how precisely does the use of a particular material object impact the actual process of writing and the precise text that gets produced even if the end product will be in codex form.

Bolter believes that the technology generates predispositions that come to be deemed as "natural" to the writing. For example, he states that the "printed book favors linear writing; the computer makes associative linking easier" (20) Here, Bolter argues that all writing technologies come imbued with a latent pressure; linearity becomes the norm for a printed text and electronic literature is compelled to dabble with associative linking (20-21). Writers who push back against these "culturally constructed" norms are indeed rebelling against the mediums in order to experiment and create against what is regarded as natural. To that end, Gyasi's work is befuddling when it comes to questions of form and reveals a tension between accommodating the norms of a printed book versus styles borrowed from digital cultures. These include multilinearity, associative linking, nonclosure, decentering, the image of the rhizome, reader navigation, and proclivity towards ellipses; all of which I will cumulatively refer to as "digital forms."

It is fitting that Gyasi has herself published a blog on the difficult process of finding a writing routine and the importance of having a "writing space." Though the words "computer" or "laptop" or "typing" or "keyboard" never appear in the blog, the evidence of her reliance on writing via typing on a keyboard and looking at a computer screen as well as her fluency in navigating the Internet was everywhere. Gyasi started by recounting a story of a botched online order for a desk she really wanted and then spoke of her writing process:

> I write a sentence. I read it aloud. I delete the sentence. I look at the clock and wonder if it's too early to think about lunch. I tell myself that, if I can make it to 300 words, I can break for lunch. I write another sentence. This one I might like. If I'm lucky, it leads to a second sentence. I think: "What is the point of all of this? Is anyone truly happy?" I delete the second sentence. I check my email. I have 15 new ones. I respond to them in my head, but don't actually respond. I write a few more sentences. I get seven new emails. These ones following up on the emails that I didn't respond to a few days ago … I plead with myself to write at least another 200 words.

The omnipresence of the computer (as an object) and the Internet (as background) floods this passage. Typing out and deleting sentences, preoccupations with the word count that is easily visible, and interruptions via emails show that Gyasi is connected to both computer and Internet for the duration of the writing process. This is characteristic of Gyasi's dependence on and connectedness to the various, available writing tools and technologies and makes clear that her writing space is a digital space. However, the illustration of Gyasi that was published alongside her blog erases these clues to her digital engagement. Here, she is shown writing with a pen and paper as stacks of books and sheaves of paper askance further develop a persona as one entirely committed to traditional writing rituals and implements. The supposed disconnection experienced by the readers between form and material in *Homegoin*g is reinforced by such a portrait of Gyasi that erases the digital dependency within which the novel was written.

*Homegoing* invites the reader into the novel through an epigraph, an Akan proverb that states: "The family is like a forest: if you are outside it is dense; if you are inside you see that each tree has its own position." The next page shows a family's genealogical tree. We have not yet encountered these characters but two types of navigation systems have immediately been made available through the map and through the proverb, both of which privilege spatiality. The image of the forest is also presented as a space to navigate, if one is outside it yields a particular experience and perspective but if one is inside, that experience can shift. These two images, one an actual map and one metaphorical, evoke navigation and the potentiality of their more multicursal structures thus becoming the first illustration of *Homegoing's* engagement with digital forms.

The concept of hypertext immediately comes to mind due to the autonomy that hypertext has always granted the reader by signaling possibilities of reading that may not always be imposed, linear and strict. Hypertext, after all, is defined through words such as branches, roots and paths to indicate a type of organization that encodes and enables "multilinear reading, interrelating, annotating, and cross-referencing" (Ensslin 2014, 258-259). Deleuze and Guattari's much circulated ideas about rhizomatic writing are relevant here especially since theories of new media claim a large debt to the image of the rhizome (see Wardrip-Fruin & Montfort 2003, 405). They write that "unlike trees or their roots, rhizome connects any point to any other

point" (409). Furthermore, calling the rhizome an antigenealogy, a short-term memory and an antimemory, Deleuze and Guattari write that "the rhizome pertains to a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectible, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight" (409). These ideas have been influential in theorizing and better qualifying hypertext in new media literature, and they are particularly fitting for *Homegoing* which exists at the interstice of codex and hypertext, and is certainly exploring questions of genealogy and memory but through depictions of antigenealogy and antimemory that often tend to characterize the paradoxical and complex nature of all diaspora.

Gyasi's map of the family tree is indeed rhizomatic. Expanding further on the metaphor of the forest in the epigraph, the map moves to enunciate the myriad ways in which the Maame's family has branched out. In reading just a few chapters it becomes clear that this map is indeed modifiable and does in fact suggest multiple points of entry and departure. Even the two half-sisters, Effia and Esi, who are the starting point of the story, have no physical contact and the narrative's decentered and elliptical approach is revealed early on. It is a matriarchal line starting with Maame but the reader soon learns that the novel's organization privileges certain characters and entirely omits others. In an interview with Eli Wolfe, Gyasi claimed that her research was "not extensive" and describes it as "wide but shallow" thus revealing that traditional close-reading methods might not be appropriate for her method of writing. For the most part, chosen characters do not necessarily overlap or interact with one another, especially as time and space increasingly separates the characters. To that end, if a reader chooses to read a chapter randomly, it would not take away from the novel's plot but rather reinforce the theme of ruptured genealogies, scattered and dispersed diaspora, acute disconnection, and the spectral and corporeal presence of slavery in the life of Africans and African-Americans alike. The map is useful and useless, the map is connective and disconnective; it is a tool that the reader can choose to make central to the reading or disregard entirely. Notions of antimemory, antigenealogy and multilinearity are built into the structure of the novel and the tension between codex and hypertext only heightens the embedded rhizomatic nature of Gyasi's work.

This novel is certainly *not* hypertext fiction but evokes practices of digital media due to its engagement with non-sequential writing and a decentered plot that tends to encourage multilinear

reading. Though the novel does follow linear time taking the reader through eight generations, and is thus "unicursal," to use Espen Aarseth's theory on labyrinthine texts (1997, 5), there is no plot or event that actually connects these characters but only the reader's knowledge that these now disparate characters were once kin. This nugget of information has a melancholic effect on the reader wherein the heaviness of what slavery can do keeps sinking in. It also allows the reader to generate affective maps by doing the work of linking the suffering of one character through the story of a character that came before. There is a stone pendant that the reader is made to believe continues to pass through several generations but there is neither evidence nor any concrete description of this object's journey that could convincingly trace its material history. The reader has a very large role as navigator, cartographer and information consolidator and thus multilinear reading paths, while not mandatory, are very much available for the reader. To that end, *Homegoing* indeed employs not just readers but also *users*.

  *Homegoing'*s story of involuntary dispersals and decentered plots is mirrored in a narrative that privileges ellipsis and nonclosure. The rhizomatic story moves speedily in time leaving large lacunae not only in terms of actual temporality but also by providing little to no information about key events in the character's lives and skipping several members of the Maame family as the seven generations unfold. Gerard Genette's compact definition of ellipsis as "leap forward without any return" is pertinent here (1980, 43). This "acceleration of narrative" occurs as the fourteen chapters assigned to fourteen different characters rush through approximately three hundred years. Each chapter that contains the story of a single protagonist begins *in media res* and while we are given a basic arc of their life, they remain suspended without much context. The reader becomes a short-term visitor and is given a glimpse into something significant that may be unfolding in the character's life. But there is no returning to find out how certain events unfolded or what the impact of those might have been. Time moves very fast and the ellipses serve to illustrate the theme of disconnection between kin that have been forcibly separated by cruel historical circumstances. Each chapter is its own narrative and its own story arc and does not necessarily map back to the overarching narrative of the novel. Focused on writing a broadly contoured history of eight generations, Gyasi explained that she "didn't outline" but instead used a family tree and "pegged each chapter to a significant

historical event" (Wolfe 2016). The narrative is thus decentered at all times and there is no real closure for characters or events in the novel nor in the fourteen micro-narratives. Ellipsis and nonclosure along with its investment in non-sequentiality illustrate the novel's engagement, however inadvertent or accidental, with digital forms.

*Homegoing'*s themes of dispersal, mobility, fragmentedness, disconnections and ruptures are beautifully captured in its adoption of digital forms that are refracted in paradoxes such as linkages/breakages, rootedness/uprootedness, associative/dissociative and part/whole usually observed in digital-born literature such as hypertext fiction. The novel puts a network in place rather than a traditional family history, and the reader is made to map the precarity of the enslaved body as it travels through time and space, and which then transforms into a racialized body that carries this precarity in its DNA. By employing mobility and mutation in its theme and its form, it conjures up Mbembe's argument about a plasticity that is entirely grounded in the African continent's intensive history of migration and which is etched out even in its now prolific digital activity whatever form it might take.

## Americanah

Without doubt, *Americanah* is the more heavily publicized, written about and taught novel of the two and part of the attention received by *Americanah* has to do with Adichie's relationship to digital and social media themselves; her viral TED talks, her occasionally controversial statements that generate vigorous social media debates, her fashion posts on Instagram, and the fact that she originally disseminated the text of her short non-fiction book *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* on Facebook. Given Adichie's strong relationship with various media it is no surprise that her third novel, *Americanah*, explores the digital realm quite thoroughly. Ifemelu, the protagonist, has a digital avatar in a belligerent and hip blogger who tackles all sorts of scandalous and politically incorrect discussions about race in the U.S. In addition to a well-rounded depiction of the figure of a blogger, the novel foregrounds the use of the screen technology with characters that rely heavily on their computers and Blackberries as well as descriptions of actual interaction with technology through scenes about typing texts or emails, scrolling, cybersnooping and online navigation. I focus on the ways in which

*Americanah's* protagonist Ifemelu forges a connection between her many split subjectivities through the creation of an online identity and also dabbles in the complicated realm of microcelebrity dynamics. The novel juxtaposes somewhat rigid frameworks of nation by depicting technology as being imbued with utopian and post-nationalist potential, thus bringing the role of digital media and cyberspaces to bear heavily on experiences of migration. I also examine Adichie's engagement with digital forms through the blog that is embedded within the fabric of the novel's narrative.

*Americanah* is one of the early novels to delve deeply into the representation of online identity and its transformative impact upon a protagonist. Ifemelu's first encounter with an online community takes place after a mishap with her hair. Taking a friend's advice, Ifemelu visits the website happilykinkynappy.com where she finds a community of black women who take pleasure in maintaining natural hair. Having a hair epiphany after reading about other women's comments about hair, Ifemelu logs on and sends out her first message into cyberspace along with a photo of herself: "*Jamilah's words made me remember that there is nothing more beautiful than what God gave me.* Others wrote responses, posting thumbs-up signs, telling her how much they liked the photo she had put up" (215). As Ifemelu steps out into the day after having posted her message, she feels exuberant and completely in love with her hair. Having referenced God, she first manages to exorcise the long-lasting trauma of having witnessed her mother chop off her beautiful hair for a new church she had joined. Secondly, this is Ifemelu's first encounter with a like-minded community who seem to fully grasp the depth of her alienation regarding hair. Having felt unattractive, heavily racialized and maladjusted, the "roar of approval" that her post manages to elicit becomes a game changer for Ifemelu. Not only is her online avatar born in this moment but the realization that an invisible but vocal virtual community can be counted on for appreciation, accolade, support and friendship allows Ifemelu to break free from a tense migrant subjectivity of being a Nigerian in the U.S. that has been further exacerbated by her experience of being black.

Ifemelu's first taste of self-realization and communal approval comes with computer-mediated communication and hooks her to the first rung of the ladder of networked media. These media include one-to-one as well as one-to-many communication through websites, homepages, chat rooms and discussion boards (Hartley *et al* 2013, 367). Networked identity invites fluidity by letting the user change

their profile pictures and preferences and, in fact, social media platforms have introduced "an additional kind of dynamics to self-representation online by suggesting continuous, even near-live updates and self-disclosure" (Hartley *et al* 2013, 368). It is the promise of self-authenticity in her online identity and the immediacy with which she could communicate those aspects of herself that allows Ifemelu to start experimenting with the medium and slowly widen the scope of her online participation. One of the interesting inherent paradoxes of networked identity is its ambivalent, perhaps amorphous, relationship to the offline identity of the user. While older aspects of networked identity reinforced playing with and changing up identities and donning a virtual life avatar, there has been a shift towards allowing the online identity to be more in sync with the offline identity. The dichotomy between virtual life and real life seems to be vanishing and this is attributed to "the rise of social media where people extend and articulate social connections from their daily life, which requires at least some congruence between their online representation and offline identity" (Hartley *et al* 2013, 369). Ifemelu's identity navigates this particular tension rather skillfully as she draws source material for her blog from her real life by remaining loyal to her settings, interactions and experiences and by circulating a repeated cast of characters involving her boyfriends who are given pseudonyms such as the Hot White Ex or Professor Hunk.

Adichie's novel uses Ifemelu's blog cheekily titled *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black* to set up an online identity that allows Ifemelu to overcome, bypass and even heal from her experiences as a racialized Nigerian woman migrant in the U.S. Ifemelu feels doubly othered, first as a migrant and secondly as a Black person in the racially charged American cultural and political arena. Though the experience of being a woman is not expressly indicated as being a third layer of othering, Ifemelu is not only sexually traumatized after answering an ad to be a personal assistant but, in fact, works as a babysitter in her early days thus logging expressly gendered experiences as part of her migration journey. Her rigorous examination of the politics of hair, almost strictly women's hair, is also an indicator of Adichie's interest in female subjectivities and experiences. Obinze, Ifemelu's primary love interest and the male protagonist of the novel, works as a delivery man in the U.K. He also suffers rough treatment at the hands of deportation police, illustrating the deeply gendered slots that both characters are put in when it comes

to the jobs that they find and the ways in which their bodies are alternatively sexualized in the case of the woman, Ifemelu, or roughed up in the case of the man, Obinze. In the most literal sense, Ifemelu puts herself out there, online, as a woman, as a migrant, as an African, and as a black person. The dynamics of microcelebrity are particularly relevant here especially when thinking of ways in which Ifemelu's blog disseminates, garners positive and negative responses, finds monetary backing, hires interns and makes her famous within large communities of people. Microcelebrity can simply be defined as a narrow fame often stemming from highly publicized elements of sharing aspects of the private self that then come to be seen as unique, thus leading to a branding of the self. The Internet thus becomes a theatrical arena as well as a marketplace where those unique, branded aspects of the self not only get likes, shares, tweets, comments and reposts but also result in a fairly reliable income.

For Ifemelu, online identity is not simply performance of a particular cyber avatar but in fact, a consolidation of her authentic self; a site where her many subjectivities can find a coherent, supported and safe home. "Emails came from readers who wanted to support the blog. Support" (305). Ifemelu is deeply invested in identitarian politics in the U.S and comes to depict, debate and hypothesize about these many identity tensions she has been experiencing since her arrival. *Raceteenth* is an intersectional blog that works through issues of race, class, gender and nation and it becomes a space where Ifemelu makes these connections, grows intellectually and performs her most honest self. Without the blog, a fierce and honest window into her character, Ifemelu would come across as a woman who is hyper-reliant on her boyfriends to authenticate her identity—Obzine becomes her first experience of intimacy, sexual relations and companionship; Curt stabilizes her financially and professionally; and Blaine impacts and shapes her intellectually. It is only because of *Raceteenth* that a self-realized, and professionally and economically stable Ifemelu emerges; a character that is not reliant on strong male figures but has in fact managed her online and networked identities so successfully that she is now a homeowner, a recipient of a prestigious fellowship and a widely respected and influential thinker.

*Americanah* becomes a site where online identity and technological success alternatively interrupts, ruptures and sometimes re-assembles national identity. Ifemelu moves through several stages in her migration from being a broke and miserable student to an office worker to an independent blogger who generates income through her

digital writing. However, Ifemelu gains a stronger control over her identity as a diasporic Nigerian only after she dabbles in the somewhat amorphous and virtual, imagined community that exists online. Spending many years somewhat dislocated and disconnected from her home country, getting online and writing online allows her to articulate the difficulties of migration and the accompanying nostalgia and alienation. Camille Isaacs writes that "the multi-layered, synchronous, affective communication enabled by online communities allows for a complex, non-fixed diasporic subjectivity that is not limited to one geographical space or the other, but rather present simultaneously in different places" (178). Bypassing nation-bound rules of incomes and salaries, Ifemelu's blog becomes a lucrative and stable source of income. The character has come a long way since showing up at a sleazy tennis coach's house for an under-the-table, illegal gig. It is also unclear who is supporting Ifemelu's blog; it could be someone in the U.S. or Nigeria or anywhere else in the world. While some of these developments may not necessarily reflect the reality of financial policies, Adichie depicts the blog as arming Ifemelu with a radical, utopian post-national potential. To that end, Adichie ruptures the monolithic character of nation by portraying a flow of cash that cannot be policed either by Nigeria or by the U.S., the two countries that have granted Ifemelu legal documentation. Isaacs uses Homi Bhabha's theories to argue that Ifemelu inhabits various liminal spaces that are exacerbated by interstitial nationalities (177). Upon returning to Nigeria, she attends meetings with other diasporic Nigerians in what are called Nigerpolitan sessions and it is here that she learns that her attempts to reassemble national identity will never truly succeed. Over time, Ifemelu simply learns that these identities and nationalities can only be mediated. "Despite her desire to connect physically with home, then, Ifemelu's position suggests this may not be as simple as she expects. She merely trades one mediated position for another" (Isaacs 186). The online identity is the closest Ifemelu comes to an authentic sense of self where her many mediated identities can exist and perhaps even thrive on the fine line between nation, non-nation and post-nation.

One of the more innovative aspects of *Americanah* is the exploration of the connection between digital technology and emotional intimacy whether it is the intimacy that Ifemelu builds with her online community of readers or the romantic intimacy that is sustained between her and Obinze because of longstanding email exchanges but also due to mutual cybersnooping practices.

*Americanah* represents technology, digital culture, the Internet and social media as they permeate all aspects of quotidian individual lives. Ifemelu and her readers develop what Theresa M. Senft has termed "strange familiarity" which refers to microcelebrities and their audience developing an odd familiarity that "arises from exchanging private information with people from whom we are otherwise remote" (Hartley *et al* 2013, 352). Adichie writes about one of the fans of Ifemelu's blog: "SapphicDerrida, one of her most frequent posters, wrote: *I'm a bit surprised at how personally I am taking this. Good luck as you pursue the unnamed "life change" but please come to the blogosphere soon"* (Adichie's italics, 5). Indeed this remote yet familiar reader expresses a personal reaction to Ifemelu's life decision and admits to feeling bereft of the intimacy that has sprung up. Ifemelu on the other hand copes with a range of different feelings towards these equally familiar strangers for whom and with whom she has performed so much of her online persona and microcelebrity. "All those readers, growing month by month linking and cross-posting, knowing so much more than she did; they had always frightened and exhilarated her" (308). Sometimes this familiarity is claustrophobic, even dangerously anxiety-provoking for Ifemelu: "There were times, lying awake at night, when her growing discomforts crawled out from the crevices, and the blog's many readers became, in her mind, a judgemental angry mob waiting for her, biding their time until they could attack her, unmask her" (308). The relation between real life and cyber life is intensely heightened in *Americanah* to the point that the distinction even comes to be occasionally unsafe. The book affectively and powerfully enwraps, entangles and immerses its characters in an emotional life where the lines between online and offline have been blurred if not erased.

The love story between Obinze and Ifemelu is not simply one where migration has separated the two characters over a period of time. In fact, it is a story built around digital intimacy generated through traditional email exchanges and also through awkward and imaginative activities such as cybersnooping. Email exchanges already envelop Ifemelu and Obinze in a romantic connection. They do not simply write to and read emails from each other but they both manage to generate a tense emotional intensity around every email. On receiving Ifemelu's email, Obinze "stared at his Blackberry, his body suddenly rigid … He read it again slowly and felt the urge to smooth something … She had called him Ceiling" (Adichie 2014, 19). Anxious fidgeting with the technology is followed by speculation over

the usually unromantic and unsentimental emails by speculation over subtext, close reading of every word and punctuation, and seeking paratext and the milieu of the email. Ceiling is Ifemelu's nickname for Obinze and immediately evokes their sexual relationship. "A gracious email. He had hated it … He hoped she would write something mocking back" (19). Soon, Obinze starts snooping around the Internet looking for a photo of Ifemelu's current boyfriend and is barely able to contain his jealousy. danah boyd and Jeffrey Heer write that "[d]igital expressions have properties not normally considered in everyday life; they are easily copied, searched, or archived. In digital conversations, *what are the possibilities and consequences of replicability, searchability, and persistence?"* (boyd & Heer's italics 2006) The emails between the two characters lead to a frenetic and emotionally complex meaning-making and meaning-seeking activity; the email is read over and over, and contents from the email spills out into the wider cybersphere as the characters look to fill the gaps in the exchange by scouring the Internet for information about their object of longing. Additionally, the emails passing between Obinze and Ifemelu are different from letters because each email exchange often occurs in tightly compressed units of time. They can feel each other typing and communicating in a way that creates an urgent sense of closeness despite the distance.

Cybersnooping also sustains both Obinze and Ifemelu's interest in and attraction towards one another. The two characters have not physically met each other in over ten years and have not been honest about new relationships and life changes with each other. Yet, they both have a fairly accurate idea about each other's lives thanks to pointed navigation of the Internet. In the beginning, it is simple online research where they both search for updates or information about the other's life. The diasporic Nigerian network manages to keep them somewhat updated through a network of gossip and rumors as certain friends travel back and forth carrying information. But cybersnooping adds a significant new layer of desperation and longing to an already tangled web. Obinze tries to get an accurate and complete picture of Ifemelu's life by going back and forth through the archives of her blog *Raceteenth.* He also develops an unhealthy obsession with Ifemelu's current boyfriend Blaine and claims that "the black American had become, absurdly, a rival" (370). He snoops around on Facebook, googles Blaine and even reads an academic paper that Blaine published in order to check if he is a good match for Ifemelu. Ifemelu on the other hand develops an unhealthy fascination with Obinze's

extremely pretty wife, Kosi. Ifemelu "looked at Kosi's photographs on Facebook. Kosi's beauty was startling, those cheekbones, that flawless skin, those perfect womanly curves. When she saw one photo taken at an unflattering angle, she examined it for a while and found in it a small and wicked pleasure" (452). Adichie thus builds a multi-layered narrative where much of the plot advances and deepens due to the characters' relationship with digital objects, digital technology and digitally ordained cultural behaviors. Ifemelu and Obinze do not remain frozen in time for the other and they do not perceive each other as the same people they were when Ifemelu left Nigeria. Their sense of each other keeps moving forward even though they do not meet in real time and it is entirely due to the affective reliance upon the Internet and social media.

Like in the case of Gyasi, it cannot be argued that *Americanah* is a novel that is rendered in digital form but it does rely intensively on aspects of digital culture and in fact, upon our hyper-dependent and deeply entwined relationship with digital media. Adichie also experiments and innovates on the narratological level by embedding an actual blog within the novel. The blog is  rendered in a separate font and is thus typographically distinct, and presented as visually different from the text. The blog is pivotal to the story, and manages to advance the plot, play with temporality and generate characterological shifts in a variety of ways. When Adichie was asked about why she chose to create a blog within the novel, she replied: "I wanted this novel to also be social commentary, but I wanted to say it in ways that are different from what one is supposed to say in literary fiction" (Guarracino, 2) The blog thus allows Adichie to perform and enunciate a politics of race, migration and feminism without presenting Ifemelu as preachy or moralistic; in fact, one of Blaine and Ifemelu's quarrels is over Ifemelu's lack of political conviction. The blog enables a different self and the posts capture Ifemelu's reactions to the world around her in scathing ways that are also authentic to her mode of political engagement. While Blaine complains that Ifemelu avoids protests and marches, Ifemelu places her virtual body at the center of controversies through her blog. The blog also aims to act as witness to a shifting political moment in the U.S. With the election of Barack Obama, debates and discussions on race undergo considerable upheavals and Ifemelu records these moments through her blog. Thus *Raceteenth* indeed functions "as a hybrid form that brings together storytelling, reportage, and emotional value" (Guarracino, 14).

Indeed, *Raceteenth* interrupts the main framework of the story by padding it with social commentary and context but it also serves to create a layered temporality within the novel. The novel's present time is juxtaposed with a series of flashbacks and blog entries. The present time shows Ifemelu having wrapped up her career as a blogger and getting ready to move back to Nigeria. The reader is able to track what happened through non-linear flashbacks into the last thirteen years. Part of Adichie's goal is to map Ifemelu's multiple, mutating subjectivities as she straddles being Nigerian, American, migrant, student, insider, outsider, thinker, blogger and feminist. The blog makes its presence felt early on in the novel and weaves itself in and out of the real life events by offering insights into the important turns in Ifemelu's evolution as a young migrant. The blog posts are not necessarily always connected or simultaneous to the exact life events; these are often flash-forwards and thus generate a "double chronology" (Guarracino, 13). Guarracino explains: "The chronological shift allows for a double take on many of the characters' experiences as a black migrant in the US, so that the reader confronts the young Ifemelu's sense of bewilderment and emotional pain together with the older Ifemelu's more distanced elaboration of the same episodes and issues" (13). Indeed, it is her mutating subjectivities that the blog serves to portray and deepen in the narrative.

The digital forms embedded within Americanah enliven and offer deterritorialized, mobile and transnational spaces for layered performances of the self. This engagement with virtual spaces allows the characters to navigate "their shifting conceptions of self and other, community and home" and thus "speak to the ways in which liminality, language, sexuality, and transatlantic identity are mediated in a digital age" (Isaacs, 175). I would go as far as to say that three performances intertwine in this novel: Ifemelu the blogger, Ifemelu the protagonist narrated by the author and the author Adichie herself as she circulates within the cyberspace. It is impossible to read *Americanah* without becoming cognizant of the hype and attention that is given to the author. The novel has shown a tendency to generate commentary on the author's own biography as well as events as they unfold in Adichie's real life. Guessing games are part of the reading experience of this work. Is Ifemelu the same person as the real-life Chimamanda? In fact, Adichie has not shied away from these connections and did indeed start a Wordpress blog titled "The Small Redemptions of Lagos," which is the same title as Ifemelu's blog started upon her

return to Nigeria (*Brittle Paper* 2014). This offbeat and fascinating phenomenon is grounded in the fact that the book not only circulates within a newly synthesized digital African moment but also because of the novel's inherent ability to embody and perform digital life. The overlapping narrators, the pressing sense of simultaneity, the text's ability to articulate an entire range of affective registers as they pertain to the ways in which our lives are infected by technology, and the book's vast outer-life (for want of a better word than after-life) makes this novel a valuable addition to any discussion about digital and migrant forms in African literature.

Conclusion

It is only recently that novels focusing on migration have been thrust into the limelight, mainly because of prominent writers such as Adichie, Imbolo Mbue, Leila Aboulela, Teju Cole, Dinaw Mengestu and Taiye Selasi, among several others. However, these novels and their authors owe a lot to the role that the digital sphere has played in amplifying and disseminating these works. It is indeed not surprising that the relationship between migration, digitality and a range of African experiences has colluded in certain works that have implicitly or explicitly embraced the fundamentally interwoven nature of these themes and forms. One of the goals of my article is to present migration and digitality as a paradigmatic framework for contemporary African literary studies. Migrant forms and digital forms have begun to proliferate and it is imperative that these are not taken as separate from the codex form in which they tend to be published. Santana Bosch writes that there is indeed a crisis around grounding new African literature theoretically and that these hybrid, potentially misfit works are "better seen as *emplaced*, positioned between digital and print, the material and the immaterial, the continent and the wider world" (Santana Bosch 2018, 191). Both *Homegoing* and *Americanah* employ digital and migrant forms together to express dynamics of dispersal, movement, fragmentation that the migration experience embodies and that digital technologies encourage and nourish. Both novels have sometimes been dismissed on literary grounds and these are novels that scholars, in fact, love to hate. *Americanah* is panned for its inclination towards romance and for lack of formal richness. *Homegoing* is similarly seen as falling short at the level of a

descriptive and historically dense realism. Part of the problem is that traditional literary methods usually employed for codex works are not sufficient for these novels. Only when judged against the vast array of digital and migrant forms and the exciting hybridity and textual innovation that accompany them will these works gain appropriate weight and relevance.

## Works Cited

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Americanah.* Alfred A. Knopf, 2014.

Aarseth, Espen. J. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. The Johns Hopkins UP, 1997.

Bolter, J. D. *Writing space: Computers, Hypertext, and the Remediation of Print.* Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001.

Boyd, danah and Jeffrey Heer. "Profiles as Conversation: Networked Identity Performance on Friendster," "Proceedings of the Hawai'i International Conference on System Sciences" (HICSS-39), *Persistent Conversation Track.* Kauai, HI: IEEE Computer Society, January 4 - 7, 2006. https://www.danah.org/papers/HICSS2006.pdf, Accessed May 18, 2020.

Hayles, N. Katherine. *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*. U of Notre Dame P, 2008.

Genette, Gerard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method.* Cornell UP, 1980.

Guarracino, Serena. "Writing 'so raw and true': Blogging in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah," Between*, vol. IV, n. 8, November 2014. https://ojs.unica.it/index.php/between/article/view/1320/1173 Accessed May 18, 2020.

Gyasi, Yaa. *Homegoing*. Viking/Penguin Books, 2017.

Gyasi, Yaa. "I write a sentence. I delete it. I wonder if it's too early for lunch." Guardian, UK, October 28, 2017, Accessed May 18, 2020.

Hartley, John, Jean Burgess & Axel Bruns. *A Companion to New Media Dynamics.* Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.

"Ifemelu Comes to Life in Adichie's New Blog." *Brittle Paper* blog. September 16, 2014. https://brittlepaper.com/2014/09/ifemelu-adichie-blog/, Accessed May 18, 2020.

Isaacs, Camille. "Mediating Women's Globalized Existence through Social Media in the Work of Adichie and Bulawayo," *Safundi,* no. 17, vol. 2, 2016, pp. 174-188.

Dahir, Abdi Latif. An African Literary Festival for the Age of Coronavirus. *New York Times,* May 14, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/14/books/afrolit-sans-frontieres-africa-literature.html?smid=tw-share, Accessed May 15, 2020.

Mbembe, Achille and Van der Haak, Bregtje. "The Internet is Afropolitan," *Chimurenga Chronic*, March 17, 2015, Accessed October 14, 2019.

Miller, Laura. "Descendants," *New Yorker*, May 30, 2016. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/05/30/yaa-gyasis-homegoing, Accessed February 12, 2019.

Nesbitt-Ahmed, Zarah. "Reclaiming African Literature in the Digital Age: An Exploration of Online Literary Platforms," *Critical African Studies*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2017, pp. 377–390.

Santana Bosch, Stephanie B. "Migrant Forms: African Parade's New Literary Geographies," *Research in African Literatures,* no. 45, vol. 3, 2014, pp. 167-187.

—-. "From Nation to Network: Blog and Facebook Fiction from Southern Africa," *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 49, no. 1, Spring 2018, pp. 187-208.

Winters, L. Z. "Fiction and Slavery's Archive: Memory, Agency, and Finding Home," *Reviews in American History,* no. 46, vol. 2, Johns Hopkins UP, 2018, pp. 338-344.

Wolfe, Eli. "How Yaa Gyasi Found Her Story in Slavers' Outpost," *SFGate*, June 28, 2016. https://www.sfgate.com/books/article/How-Yaa-Gyasi-found-her-story-in-slavers-8329849.php, Accessed October 14, 2019.

James Yékú. "Thighs Fell Apart": Online Fan Fiction, and African Writing in a Digital Age," *Journal of African Cultural Studies,* vol. 29, no. 3, 2017, pp. 261–275.