

# FIRST-YEAR DIALOGUE 2017

Each year, the College of Arts and Science chooses a recent literary work that opens a new perspective on what it means to live as an engaged student in a complex world. This year is no exception.

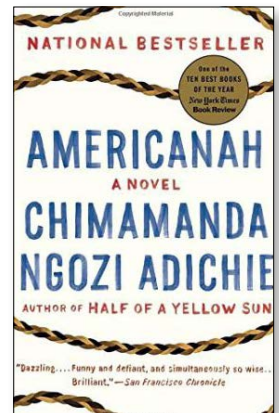
Winner of the 2013 National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* is a rich, sprawling novel that traverses three continents and stitches together an array of seemingly disparate lives. It is, in the words of its author, "a book about love, immigration, race, hair, and so much more." Ideally pitched to our particular political and cultural moment, *Americanah* questions how we relate to one another, and how our histories and the histories of the places we inhabit bear on us with a renewed urgency.

This year, you'll have the fun of reading this rewarding book alongside not only your new peers at NYU, but also thousands of fellow New Yorkers. Earlier this year, New York City

“ *A book about love, immigration, race, hair, and so much more.* ”

the coming year. In the months that followed, commuters, students, pedestrians, passersby, parkgoers, and people on their lunch breaks could all be seen carrying copies of the book you will be exploring this summer.

announced the inauguration of a community reading program called "One Book, One New York," in which 50,000 people from all five boroughs voted on the book they'd most like to read together in



Adichie's novel follows a young woman, Ifemelu, as she moves to the United States from her native Nigeria and becomes a student, writer, and keen observer of the nuances, norms, complications, frustrations, and perversities of our complex social world. At



**Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie**

its core, *Americanah* is a novel about how we make sense of ourselves and each other, how we relate to the world in which we find ourselves, and how our identities are deeply tied to the places where we choose to live. But it is also about how challenging, even infuriating, these processes often are. Relation, in this novel, is never easy. Time and again, Adichie shows us, as readers, how difficult it can be to come to a full, generous understanding of the people around us, how exasperating it is to be misunderstood, how profoundly intractable our assumptions and blind

spots can be. This is both the great challenge and the great reward of reading *Americanah*, and the reason it is so fitting for a vibrant community of diverse young scholars to engage alongside the inhabitants of this vibrant city.

As you begin to think about *Americanah*, you might start by considering the peculiar work novels do. Unlike other literary genres, novels have the potential to tie together a diverse array of experiences into a single, animated, and complicated text. But novels also tend to be messy. They are ungainly things. They cram together incommensurable stories. They sag, feel garbled, get led astray. Rather than thinking of these features of the novel as artistic flaws, however, we might instead think of them as reflecting a certain experience of the world, in which the lives and histories that intersect one another do not always do so seamlessly.

Think, for instance, of how Adichie's novel is framed: Ifemelu leaves the austere calm of Princeton's verdant campus and travels to nearby Trenton to have her hair braided by a woman she dislikes immediately. Their encounter with one another is plagued by embarrassment, misapprehension, and animosity—even by physical pain. But over the course of the six awkward, exasperating hours

Ifemelu spends at the salon, something else—a new mode of relation—emerges. It's not affability really. Not fellow feeling or sentimentality. It's something more like a provisional, hard-fought understanding, a connection that wasn't there before.

Forced to sit in their discomfort, the two women eventually, if only for a moment, see each other. And as the novel progresses, Ifemelu will work through what can seem like an onslaught of similar moments: slights at parties, racist judgments, aggression, insult, and galling misogyny. All in all, the social world of *Americanah* is a place of considerable friction and alienation. Characters belittle and hurt each other; they fail to fully understand or care for even those who are closest to them.

But it is also a world of great possibility. Living alongside one another—sharing the world with those who are different from us—is no easy task. But as Adichie insists, it is only through working to bridge the obdurate distances that separate us that we can begin to forge a new world of connection and possibility. This is true for her even—or perhaps especially—in those moments when it doesn't feel good. Page by page we begin to see how *Americanah* is a novel full of determination, even of hope.



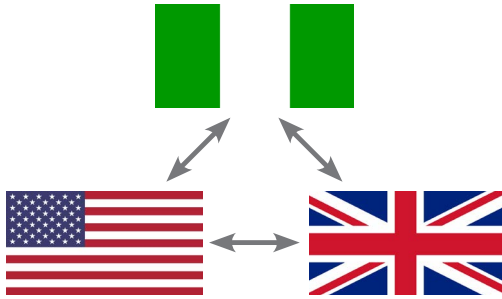
*Page by page we begin to see how Americanah is a novel full of determination, even of hope.*

This is why the messiness of novels means so much. It reminds us of something important: The world is an unfinished project. As you begin to explore *Americanah*, and prepare for this next phase in your lives as citizens of a complicated world, keep this difficulty—this messiness—in mind.

*Americanah* is a generous, brimming book that is difficult to summarize concisely. But to start, here are a few key categories of experience where these questions of relation and its vicissitudes play out:

### **Community**

By now, we perhaps all understand ourselves to be part of an increasingly “connected” global community. But given this understanding, Adichie provokes us to ask, how well do we actually know one another? What, really, is the substance of



our connection? And what responsibilities do we have to the people we encounter, the people whose lives traverse ours? How in the world do we manage these responsibilities?

Certainly, there is a lot that is good about living in a globally connected world—about being able to imagine ourselves

as part of a community that extends beyond our immediate surroundings, and includes people from all over the globe. But the novel also provokes us to think beyond the pieties of our age, and to ask hard questions about the reality of the worlds we inhabit.

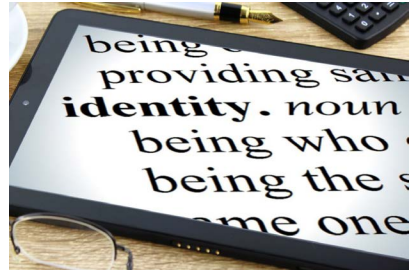
On the one hand, Adichie invites us to think about what new opportunities for relation, self-expression, and communication have been opened up by these worlds of intricate connection. What new venues, her novel asks, have emerged for the exchange of ideas? What new possibilities for thriving? On the other hand, *Americanah* also forces us to ask: To whom are these options ultimately available? What happens to those who are unable to access them? What kinds of experiences are considered valuable or desirable, and who determines this value? Consider, for instance, the divergent paths of Ifemelu and her high-school companion Obinze. While Ifemelu finds a way to migrate to the U.S. on a student visa, Obinze is forced into a condition of degradation and precarity as an undocumented resident in the U.K., only to realize that he was perhaps misguided in his uninterrogated belief that a life forged in the West is somehow inherently more valuable than life in his native Nigeria.

In our forever emerging global communities, we must confront difficult sets of questions: What does it mean to make a meaningful life? How is it possible to make and remake ourselves in a complex world? And where can we go to access new possibilities for personal growth and community flourishing?

## Identity

Identity is at once the most deeply personal of experiences, and the basis for some of our strongest connections to fellow members of our social world. Throughout the novel, Adichie's characters return ceaselessly to questions of identity—around race, gender, class, sexuality, religion, and migration—and struggle to communicate the ways they experience their identities both to other people and to themselves.

Race plays a crucial role in these ongoing negotiations. Ifemelu repeatedly reflects that in America she experiences her blackness differently than she does at home. Finding herself in an at times racist society, she often registers shock or dismay at the ways in which those around her make judgments based on her racial identity. These moments typically register in the novel as profoundly humiliating—both for Ifemelu and for her at times oblivious interlocutors, whose assumptions are so deeply imbedded it proves difficult even to confront them.

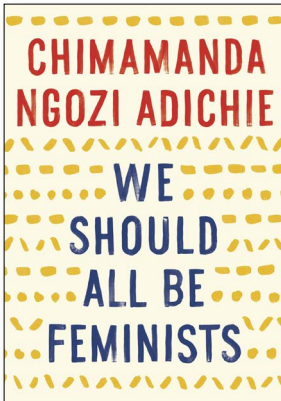


In this way, we might think of Ifemelu's blog posts as a profound and courageous catalogue of responses to one of the most urgent and infuriating problems facing communities today. So ask

“ *How do different settings rely on or reveal the complicated dynamics of racial identity?* ”

yourself, how do they amplify, undermine, complicate, or supplement Ifemelu's own experiences and behavior in the novel? Consider not only how we, as readers, encounter Ifemelu's blog, but pay

attention to how her posts are themselves read and responded to by other characters in the novel. How do they develop, clarify, or complicate our ongoing conversations about contemporary racism? In particular, how do they work to atomize the ways in which racial categories and racist attitudes shift across various boundaries—including national, professional, and class borders? How do different settings rely on or reveal the complicated dynamics of racial identity?



The blog posts also illuminate Adichie's complex thinking about gender. Throughout the novel she calls our attention to the ways in which her characters express and explore their various genders differently, depending on their place in the world and place in their own lives. As a woman of color, Ifemelu in particular struggles to be taken seriously and confronts a seeming onslaught of misguided assumptions about her worth, intentions, capabilities, and even her desires on the part of those around her.

Adichie has since become a major voice in the international feminist movement, and her recent book-length essay *We Should All Be Feminists* is an invaluable companion piece to the novel. It will be clear from the outset that a vital feminist project undergirds her fiction. You'll notice, for instance, that *Americanah* is framed by Ifemelu's overlapping decisions to leave one boyfriend and return to Nigeria, her home and the home of her first love. This overlap is key: For Adichie, the question of where we thrive is inextricable from the question of who will enable us to do so. What types of intimacies and personal connections enable a woman like Ifemelu to flourish? Under what circumstances can she assert a proud, public version of herself and under what circumstances does she consider compromising her values? Reading *Americanah*, we are pressed from the outset to ask how, and in what type of community, a brilliant, ambitious, caring woman like Ifemelu can forge an independent intellectual life and a sustaining professional career.

The richness of the novel derives largely from the fact that Adichie is careful to atomize and explore how issues of identity never operate in isolation. Ifemelu's status as a migrant, a woman, and a racialized modern subject all variously intersect and interleave. Each aspect of her identity, at some point in the novel, has an impact on both how she perceives herself and her own worth, as well as how she is valued by those around her—her boyfriends, family members, colleagues, casual acquaintances, even a veritable stranger braiding her hair. While we focus on race and gender above, consider all elements of identity that will help you to connect and succeed in a vibrant place like NYU.

## University

The university plays a key role in the novel, both as a setting and an ideal. Not only does most of the narrative unfold in and around university campuses, but the fantasy lives of its central characters are deeply motivated by their academic aspirations.

This seems obvious. Universities are sites of enormous possibility and great promise. They are places where scholars from all over the world assemble to share ideas and think through burning questions.

But Adichie also shows us something that may be less obvious: The fulfillment of this promise isn't automatic, and it's by no means guaranteed.

Rather, it takes a concerted effort on the part of every member of the university community. In *Americanah*, universities provide space for the vibrant exchange of ideas and experiences, but they may also foster cultures of elitism and exclusion. As new university students, this question of how to draw

out the university's most

positive potential is more pressing than ever. And as the novel demonstrates, it is up to all of us, individually and collectively, to realize the university's enormous promise to foster what Adichie has called "possibilities of friendship and connection and understanding."

This might also seem like a lot to think about, and a lot to take on. But consider it this way: Each of you is about to commit to a course of study that comes with its own assumptions about what kinds of questions are important to ask, what kinds of knowledge are most valuable, what kinds of lives we want for ourselves and the people with whom we share the world. It is easy at times to take these assumptions for granted, and to focus on the tasks, pleasures, and exciting challenges immediately in front of us. But what if, as often as possible, you didn't? What if you challenged yourself to



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think not only about what you need to do to complete your college education, but also how you can use your time as a member of the university community to draw out its most productive, dynamic, rewarding possibilities?

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In not only uncovering but also dissecting and reflecting on complicated matters of experience, Adichie shows us both ambivalence and promise. Our similar and divergent

experiences are the sources of both our most robust relation to one another, and the greatest impediments to real, deep connection. The problem the novel asks us to think about is this: How do we overcome these impediments? As Ifemelu admits, there’s no easy answer. But in one of her blog posts, she offers a piece of advice: “Try listening, maybe.” It can be harder than you think.

As Adichie’s novel consistently shows us, it takes a certain courage to listen—to ask about what we don’t already know and to be willing to open ourselves up to the possibility that we won’t like or won’t understand what we hear—that what we discover will confound us or force us to rethink the way we fundamentally apprehend the world.

But for Adichie, this difficulty is also the signal of opportunity: “If you don’t understand, ask questions. If you’re uncomfortable asking questions, say you are uncomfortable about asking questions and then ask anyway...Then listen some more.”



Nnamdi Azikiwe Library, University of Nigeria, Nsukka