

The Land of White Conformity

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Commentary

Over the course of our class we have read several African diaspora novels. These novels have allowed me to see a new genre of books that are both enticing as well as something to learn from. One thing that I noticed from all these novels is that the main characters almost always suffered from a form of depression due to having to throw away their own culture to assimilate to the white dominant culture. That's why in this essay I argue the U.S. only allows for those who conform to white standards to triumph in the US. This is important because the U.S. shouldn't be a place where one has to conform to achieve their dreams but the place of possibilities that so many people believe the US is.

The start of the 20th century brought about several debates on immigration but even before then it was still a topic to address. I am looking at immigration specifically because having studied African immigrants and their stories all semester I am interested in this image/reality gap that appears when immigrants experience the U.S. for their first time. When talking about Immigration people are either for it or against it.

Body IB: Why Immigrants Come to the US

I feel that people who are against doing fully understand why the immigrants come to the U.S. Immigrants come to the U.S. for a number of reasons, which can be seen in Christina Nuñez's why people migrate: 11 surprising reasons. Christina highlights 11 reason but they can be split into two main reason. Immigrants come to the US to flee from persecution, conflict, and violence and they come for better opportunities for themselves as well as their family. Everyone can relate to just wanting a better future for his or her own family.

In the case study *The Hidden Prejudice in Selection: A Research Investigation on Skin Color Bias* by Mathew Harrison he reviews a study of how the lighter the skin the higher the likelihood of getting hired in the U.S. is. I found this study interesting because I originally thought it was a different study that I was originally looking for, which I originally came in contact with in a sociology class in high school. However, a difference between the two studies was the original study was looking for is an older study that focused on the different job opportunities' between blacks and whites while this study regarded whites being favored as common knowledge. This case study focuses on how being lighter than someone else can be the difference between being hired and not. Harrison blatantly states that whites are favored and are given better treatment when he says, "There is no doubt that preferential treatment for Whites does exist in America". Harrison also speaks of how opportunities can be based on the shade of ones skin because we have been doing it the past two centuries, "This anticipated partisan behavior as a result of skin tone dates back to the chattel system of slavery in America, where skin color was used by slave owners as the basis of their division for work chores". Harrison goes onto link this to why it affects us now by saying, "Lighter skinned

Blacks were more likely to have completed more years of schooling, to have higher salaries, and to have more prominent jobs than darker skinned Blacks". This shows how the stigma of different skin tones affects job applicators as well as applicants. The reason I include this is because when people discuss the unequal opportunities' of blacks vs. whites, everyone questions on how the applicators can be so cruel. The applicators are not being cruel, rather they are just trying to find the best suitable person for the job and because of how we treated darker shades to lighter shades of black overtime this stigma of lighter shades over darker shades has become a large occurrence. Harrison simplifies this by stating, "They found that lighter skinned Blacks were more likely to have completed more years of schooling, to have higher salaries, and to have more prominent jobs than darker skinned Blacks". Harrison's study was able to conclude from their study that being a lighter shade skin color allowed for more favorability. This can be seen when he states, "because of the prominence of skin tone, lighter skinned applicants would receive comparable ratings, regardless of having lower qualifications. The results suggest that this was, in fact the case, given that no significant differences were found between means for these tests". From this study we can see that lighter skin toned people are picked over there darker skin counterpart even If the darker toned person is more qualified for the position. These facts show how and why segregation occurs in the U.S. workplace as well as proves that the U.S. is geared to only accept people who try and conform to being white.

Immigrants come to the U.S. in search of opportunity and usually, more often than not, to escape persecution, violence, and conflict. These immigrants come to the U.S. filled with hope but due to the image they hold they are let down. From our readings, such as in *Americanah* or *We Need New Names*, we can understand that immigrants usually derive what they know of their "land of opportunity" from television and other capitalist propaganda. This can be seen in *We Need New Names* when Darling and the other children relate the image of luxury and gifts to America. They relate the idea of luxury to the U.S. because the only contact that they have come with America is the NGO, which gives them rations for their survival. The reason they are let down is because they realize that the U.S. isn't this utopia they had imagined it to be but rather a land of conformity that requires one to have a certain whiteness to succeed. Darling, when first arriving in the U.S. whispers, "This place doesn't look like my America". This just showcases how different the idea of America is from the reality. This image gap between imagination and reality leads to disparity in most immigrants.

As we have seen throughout the semester, several characters of the novels we have read this semester have experienced a culture shock that changed their character. In most of the stories the characters go through a cultural withdrawal that causes a detrimental effect on all of them. Avey from *Praise song for the Widow* had to be reborn to recover from her years of attachment to her culture, Ifemelu from

Americanah

Americanah contracted depression, and Darling from *We Need New Names* acted out and stood out for being unlike others. Immigrants when they first come to the U.S. stand out whether it is due to an accent or how they look. Unless they “white wash” themselves, as in lose their accent, adopt the American culture, and just try to look and sound as white as possible, immigrants will not be able to fully integrate into the U.S. society. As Jie Zhang, PHD holder and professor in the Sociology department at the State University at New York, states in his study “Depression, Anxiety, and Suicidal Ideation Among Chinese Americans: A Study of Immigration-Related Factors”, “Immigrants may have a lot of expectations of what their lives will be like when they move to the United States, but the reality is usually not so satisfactory. Thus, immigrants may experience disappointment, resentment, depression, anger, and culture shock in their lives in a new county”. This shows that the America that immigrants imagine and the one they come to are completely different. It is true that there are numerous amounts of jobs in the U.S.; however, nobody told the immigrants that to obtain these jobs they had to adopt the white way of life. As mentioned before this is because in the U.S., historically, the darker the pigment of ones skins the less of an education they had. This belief created a stigma that exists till this day as we can see in Mathew’s case study. The problem is that immigrants don’t know about this at all. The integration process can be frightful because there are so little groups who fully understand the international newcomers, which leads them to be left alone as outcasts. Americanah is a novel that explicitly showcases the depression that some goes through due to the integration process. It showcases it so well because unlike the other novels we have read this semester rather than alluding to depression or something similar, Ifemelu is “diagnosed” with depression. “She woke up torpid each morning, slowed by sadness, frightened by the endless stretch of the day that lay ahead,” this is how Ifemelu’s life was described and yet when Ginika expresses that Ifemelu may have depression she denies it. This is another reason that I enjoy Americanah because it recognizes the problem that immigrants don’t want to accept the idea of the medical disorder depression. It is because immigrants feel that idea of depression was created by white people because, “Depression is what happens to Americans, with their self-absorbing need to turn everything into an illness” [1]. Immigrants don’t want to recognize depression since it is something that they believe they shouldn’t have because it is believed to stem from an absurdity based on the notion of being self-absorbed. Ifemelu also describes how other immigrants feel the same when she blogged, “On the Subject of Non-American Blacks Suffering from Illnesses Whose Names They Refuse to Know”. She goes in depth by using another immigrant who came to the U.S. and had every symptom of panic attacks but failed to recognize it because, “panic attacks happened only to Americans”. Immigrants are forced to fight a blind fear that they themselves do not want to recognize, which does nothing but allow more and more immigrants to fall into depression.

Americanah didn’t just hit the nail on the head for how immigrants deal with depression but also exhibited aspects of workplace segregation. A form of workplace segregation has slipped itself into every novel we have read this semester. In all our novels the characters have had a tough time finding humane jobs because nobody wanted to hire colored people. In Americanah both Ifemelu and Obinze had to go through terrible experiences before they succeeded in their job search. For Ifemelu the bad experience was when she almost slipped into the shady work of “helping relax” the tennis coach, and Obinze jumped

through hoops to take jobs yet he got kicked out in the end for not having citizenship papers. Obtaining citizenship papers is no easy task because even if one has all the correct paper work it is completely up to their proctor to decide whether they are able to receive their visa or not, which I fully understand with having several family members have to have gone through the same ordeal. Throughout the beginning of *Praise song for the Widow Avey* explains how her and her husband, Jay, had to scour the city to find a job. Looking at the case study “Factors shaping workplace segregation between natives and immigrants” that analyzed neighborhood segregation and workplace segregation by Magnus Stromgen I found, “indirect evidence in support of previous studies that show that having a nonwhite skin color is a powerful factor explaining difficulties to integrate in the labor market”. Both studies are that we have looked at, Stromgen’s and Mathew’s, have conducted research in workplace-segregation and proven that it exists and is a very real problem. Immigrants come to the U.S. in search of an opportunity to create a better life for themselves as well as their family; however, with the job market being as segregated as it is immigrants and colored people alike are having a tough time finding and or receiving a job. With skin color being such a large factor in finding a job immigrants are forced to conform so they can appeal to the applicants “white” standards. This conformity can be observed most prominently in *Praisong of the Widow* and *Americanah*. In *Americanah* Ifemelu’s hair comes to symbolize her culture. For a period when she was trying to find a job she threw away her cultural self and dawn a white counterpart that spoke with an American accent and had straight hair. Speaking with a more white accent is a factor because in “Is the Melting Pot Still Hot?” Jacob Vigdor [2] a research affiliates of the Census Bureau states, “Immigrants from countries where the predominant language is more linguistically similar to English tend to be less segregated”. Ifemelu didn’t recognize this form of her, this “whiteness.” Later she allows for her hair to go back to the way it was and at the same time became more a part of the African community while she was looking for ways to restore her hair to its former glory. Her hair can be seen as her cultural identity because when she turns it into something it isn’t, straight, she feels that something is missing. She then joins an online community of women that help teach her how to properly treat her hair. Ifemelu doesn’t regain her cultural self-till she is able to live in her own skin again and not that of her white counterpart. In *Praise song for the Widow* a similar event occurred when J made the change to Jay. The name change in *Praise song* symbolized J’s shift to a different person. J became a man that didn’t resemble the man that Avey fell in love with at all. Jay was a man that shunned blacks for speaking against the whites and saying that blacks were only griping because they weren’t working hard enough. Avey didn’t like Jay because he was someone that J would never have been, a person that spoke badly of his own people in front of his white friends. Jay became this way due to an argument with Avey. The argument was started by Avey and brought to life her worry about J cheating. This argument was fueled by the couple’s anxiety about money and the fatigue of job searching coming to a boiling point. After that argument J became Jay and eventually was able to find a job, but he was never J again. It is similar to how Ifemelu adopted a white counterpart to be successful; however, unlike Ifemelu who liberated herself Jay stayed shackled down. In both cases the characters dawn a separate self that was distanced from their ancestry, or rather a white self, to achieve “success.” The books we have read are implying that to succeed in the U.S. people must conform to the white standard and they are not wrong at this point. There is inconclusive evidence and data that being whiter, whether that means literally or figuratively, allows for a higher likely chance of getting hired and

integration. Immigrants shouldn't have to decide between success and ancestry when they come to the U.S. looking for opportunity.

In Vigdor's [2], "Is the Melting Pot Still Hot" he tackles the question "why has immigrant segregation increased even as racial segregation has declined?" The fact that immigrant segregation is increasing is important to understand. According to Vigdor [2], "Preliminary data from the 2000 Census suggest that immigrant segregation is now higher than at any point in the preceding century, and continues its upward trend" Immigrant segregation is a rising problem especially since the country's becoming more diverse than ever. It is because our nation is becoming more diverse that we need to reduce the amount of segregation. Segregation is no longer necessary. It is a practice that has no basis anymore. Thus why should we make it harder for the immigrants, who are filled with hope, come to the U.S. just to have them suffer for a worn out stigmata. Immigrants come to the U.S. for a land of possibility and that is what they should find rather than this society that only accepts one way: the white way.

There is a controversy when people think of immigrants. When most people think immigrants they think about how immigrants affect the job market since that is the timeless argument whenever immigration is brought up. The problem is that nobody recognizes these jobs that immigrants take as jobs that nobody wants to do. When people think Mexican everyone thinks lawn mower, as a Hispanic I've heard a lot of the jokes. The thing is the main problem seen with immigrants isn't really a problem because the main problem with immigrants is that they take up jobs from Americans. But again, these jobs are usually jobs that nobody wishes to strive for such as hard labor and some sort of cleaning staff. In Latin American Migration to the U.S. Heartland Linda Allegro speaks about Postville, Iowa a town that almost disappeared due to the town going bankrupt for a time but was able to survive thanks to a newly bought and refurbished meat-packing plant. The plant was able to thrive so quickly due to immigrant workers flocking to the job opportunity. The town was saved, but due to it thriving so quickly the town ran into resource problems. When the town began to run into trouble the town residents grew hostile at the immigrant work force for causing the resource problem. In the end the residents of Postville elected a new leader and the support for diversity dropped. Relations between the native residents and the immigrants grew worse until the town called immigration on the immigrants to get rid of them. From this example we can see the dual concept of immigration very clearly. Immigrants provide a service that we take for granted and only label it as ours once we see that someone else has it like a selfish child. We can't reap the benefits of immigrant cheap labor and then get mad at them as soon as something goes wrong. It isn't fair and isn't right to do so. We as a nation need to not create borders between natives and immigrants, but rather fully integrate the two.

In the U.S. we need to strive for integration rather than what we do now: assimilation. According to Zoua Vang [3], "As immigrants become more culturally and economically similar to the dominant group, subjective and/or real differences in-group status will be diminished, and as result, residential mixing will occur". For immigrants to be fully accepted into our society, at this moment in time, they need to develop a certain level of whiteness so as to blend in and be accepted. This means that those who have deep ties to their ancestry such as African and Hispanic immigrants will fail to fully integrate into our society. In fact, according to Vang, "the persistent pattern of residential segregation for black immigrants has led some scholars to forecast a grim future in which all blacks, irrespective of

nativity status, face unparalleled forms of social exclusion in America society". Researchers are basically saying that unless we become a society that allows for integration rather than assimilation we are going to become a segregated society. Becoming a completely segregated society could lead to several consequences, at worse' another civil war. Out of all the novels that we have read this semester the best book to express the U.S.'s assimilation method would be *We Need New Names*. A lot of the things people do in their daily lives come from how they were taught to do them by their parents, who learned it from their parents and so on. In *We Need New Names* the journey to the U.S. is described as, "They will never be the same again because you just cannot be the same once you leave behind who and what you are, you cannot just be the same" [4]. The elders understood what the U.S. did to immigrants and I, at the time, couldn't understand why they viewed the trip with such horridness, but now I do. The elders express this message trying to warn the children of what the U.S. does to people but none of them listen because they are blinded by their hope in finding a land of possibility. As the story continues the main character, Darling, comes to a point where she smacked another families child on the back of the head, which is something done in her homeland, but in the U.S. hitting a child in public is a no-no. After the incident Darling's aunt says "Don't do it again, I always tell you, you are in America now". Due to the culture gap Darling did something that she viewed as right but those around her saw it as a terrible act. Even after an elder who was there tried to explain how it was something frequently done in their home to silence naughty children. For one act everyone looked at Darling with spite, but she didn't mean to. She was programmed to do what she initially learned, what she was taught to do. Like I mentioned before we learn what we are taught from our parents. Unfortunately what she learned wasn't acceptable in the U.S. When people fail to successfully integrate into the U.S they return home. Another character in the story named Stina talks about leaving and then coming back when he says, "Leaving your country is like dying, and when you come back you are like a ghost returning to earth, roaming around with a missing gaze in your eyes". The reason he says this is to basically state that once you turn your back on one's own ancestry there is no going back. Nobody should have to abandon his or her ancestry to be successful in the U.S. To abandon one's own ancestry is to abandon and lose one's self. If that's the cost of opportunity it's too much. We need to become a nation that strives for integration, so that those who come to the U.S. can retain their beliefs as well as be able to provide better opportunities for themselves and their families. We owe it to them since we have made immigrants feel like outsiders [5-7].

In *Americanah* Ifemelu speaks briefly of the "oppression Olympics." The oppression olympics is basically the idea that American racial minorities each secretly believe that they receive the worst treatment in comparison to the other minorities. In reality there is no oppression Olympics. The ones who suffer the most are the non-native immigrants. A study conducted by John Iceland expresses that, "among all racial/ethnic groups, the foreign-born are more segregated from U.S.-born non-Hispanic whites than are the U.S.-born of these groups" [1]. This shows that amongst all the minorities their immigrant counterparts are the ones who are segregated the most. "Not all Africans are African-American" this quote is a quote that I will remember for a long time because it changed my perception. I hadn't considered the difference between the two, but there is a difference. This difference is talked about briefly in *Americanah*. While Ifemelu is going through college there is a line drawn between African-Americans and Africans. There is a line drawn because African-Americans don't understand the problem that comes with integration

and switching cultures. In the book it states that making friends with international students, as an immigrant is a better idea than with an American because, "Many of the internationals understand the trauma of trying to get an American Visa". Not only that but it is implied that the two parties, African-American and Africans, don't get along due to the African-Americans having this exaggerated sense of home which is implied when Wambui, a friend of Ifemelu, says, "The Africans who come to our meetings are the ones who write poems about Mother Africa and think every African is a Nubian Queen". Reading between the lines one can see that there is a gap between the American and the native African. This gap means that unlike what most believe being the same color or of the same ancestry doesn't mean that everyone will get along. Immigrants can't take refuge in their U.S. counterparts because they are too different, so immigrants must connect with other immigrants who have gone through similar ordeals and troubles in life. This is the opposite of what most believe, which we came to understand when we watched the video in class that brought up this very problem of assuming that if people share the same ancestry they will share each other's culture. This false idea of family amongst the immigrants and their native "family" casts a blind-eye over how separated the immigrants actually are from our society. In the end the most comfortable group that immigrants can find to relate to is not those of similar ancestry, but rather other immigrants. When I hear that immigrants can only get along with other immigrants it sounds like the outcasts can only get along with the other outcasts. That is not right. The U.S. should be an open place that can accept any culture and ideology just like it is perceived to be by the hopeful people who come here simply to create a better life [8-10].

Conclusion

In the end the U.S. is not the utopia that most immigrants believe it to be. The U.S. is a place where white conformity runs rampant by only allowing those who fall to its whiteness to prosper. Immigrants come to the U.S. expecting a land of opportunity where they can provide a

better future for themselves and their family. When in reality they come to the U.S. to either conform and toss aside their culture or fail at their goal and fall into a depression. Immigrants are only outcasts due to an outdated viewing of them as job mongers when in reality they simply pick up the jobs that are less than desirable. The U.S. should be the land of opportunity that they wish for. The U.S. should be able to accept them for who they are and integrate them into our society so as not to create gaps and boarders between people of the same ancestry. I want the U.S. to become the land that they envision it as.

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