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BLACK LIVES: NOT A SINGLE STORY

by

Jane Horovitz

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors  
(English and Journalism)

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Advisory Committee:

Margo Lukens, Professor of English, Co-Advisor

Margaret Killinger, Associate Professor of Honors, Rezendes Preceptor for the  
Arts, Co-Advisor

James Brophy, Lecturer in Classics

Richard Brucher, Associate Professor of English, Retired

Gregory Howard, Associate Professor of English

## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores depictions of Black lives in America through consideration of journalism, along with novels and plays by 20th- and 21st-century African American writers. It looks, in particular, at Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 2013 novel *Americanah* and her famous TED Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story." In the latter, she warns against telling a single story about Africans, one that often involves pain, trauma, and poverty; Adichie's warning is also especially relevant to a critique of stereotypical conceptualizations of African American suffering. *Americanah* provides a new Black narrative and a new definition of Blackness, one that tells a story focused on romantic love (Black joy) more than the single story of pain or trauma (Black suffering). This thesis will demonstrate how Adichie's novel challenges the reader to recognize that single stories of Black suffering render too narrowly the fullness of Black human experience.

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## INTRODUCTION

In her TED talk “The Danger of a Single Story,” Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warns against a single story about Africans, one that often only involves pain, trauma, and poverty. Single stories are harmful because, as humans, we are extremely “vulnerable in the face of a story.” For example, Adichie recalls traveling to Mexico but only having experienced media coverage that had portrayed Mexican people in a single way, as immigrants who were “fleecing the healthcare system, sneaking across the border, being arrested at the border.” When Adichie arrived in Mexico, she became ashamed that she had bought into this single story of Mexicans. She teaches her TED Talk audience: “So that is how to create a single story, show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become.” Likewise, media coverage in America has a tendency to depict Black communities almost exclusively through narratives of pain, suffering and death, and therefore, provides incomplete images of Black lives (“The Danger of a Single Story”).

Fiction, however, can serve as a tool for readers to understand the complexities and multiple stories within the Black experience. Adichie does not argue that one story is better than another but that telling multiple stories provides a more complete picture of a person. She tells a personal anecdote about how, growing up in Nigeria, she had a “very happy childhood, full of laughter and love,” but she also experienced hardships and loss:

All of these stories make me who I am. But to insist on only these negative stories is to flatten my experience, and to overlook the many other stories that formed me. The single story creates stereotypes. And the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete.

They make one story become the only story. (“The Danger of a Single Story”)

Adichie also teaches that “*nkali*,” the Igbo word meaning “power,” plays a role in telling stories: “How they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power.” In addition, “Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person.” Media or journalism, for example, has the power to determine what the story of a group of people might be (“The Danger of a Single Story”).

Telling only negative stories about a group may create a situation where there is “No possibility of feelings more complex than pity.” For instance, Adichie recalls leaving Nigeria to attend university in the United States. Her American roommate clearly had grown up with a single story of Africans and thus could not get past feelings of pity to forge real relationships. As Adichie says, there was “No possibility of a connection as human equals” (“The Danger of a Single Story”).

Yet stories can have the power to humanize. I have a strong interest in working in the publishing industry and interned at a publishing company, Islandport Press, in Yarmouth, Maine, in summer 2019. In the wake of the countless murders of Black men and women at the hands of police and the Black Lives Matter protests that erupted that summer, I noticed a social media movement which sought to educate white and non-Black people about racism and police brutality against the Black community. In doing so, posts across Instagram highlighted literature by Black authors; however, the literature was primarily dominated by the single story Adichie critiques. I recognized the need to highlight other types of stories by Black authors and about the Black community.

Many of the works by Black authors I had read in high school and throughout my undergraduate career focused on Black pain, so I became interested in the idea that publishing and society are narrowly focused on narratives of pain, ideas that were confirmed after watching Adichie's TED Talk. However, in fall 2020 I encountered *If Beale Street Could Talk*, *The White Card*, and *The Water Dancer* in Professor Margo Lukens' course ENG 440: American Seminar "Life in the USA after the first Abolition." The course provided me with texts that included themes of Black love and joy alongside those of Black pain and suffering.

My thesis does not try to speak on behalf of the Black community, but to amplify a variety of Black voices, rather than just a single story. In order to do so, this thesis will explore the ways the industry of journalism often constructs a single story of the Black experience through reporting on narratives of pain, suffering, and death, including stories about police brutality. I will next consider how literature can be a way to engage with multiple stories of the Black experience, suggesting that fiction demands a complexity of a lived experience beyond journalistic renderings. I will analyze examples of 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century literature that move beyond a single story of Black pain illustrating themes of Black joy and love, as well. Finally, I will examine Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel, *Americanah*, using theoretical lessons learned from Audre Lorde's seminal essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House," to demonstrate how stories that depict the Black experience must also include the human stories of love and joy for readers to understand the full Black lived experience.

## CHAPTER I

### JOURNALISM AND THE SINGLE STORY OF BLACK PAIN

Both fiction and journalism can create narratives that represent Black experience; however, the two serve different purposes. Journalism can be thought of as the first draft of history, while fiction brings history into context, expanding and complicating the single narrative journalism sometimes settles on. Since journalism can be considered the first draft of history, it's important that Black people are able to tell their own journalistic stories. But Black journalists struggle within the journalism industry. As an illustration, this section will explore how American journalism has represented Black lives and impacted Black journalists, as well as how reporting of police brutality in 2020 represented Black lives.

In an article for *Columbia Journalism Review (CJR)* Matthew Ingram compiled the thoughts of a number of contemporary Black journalists on systemic racism in the workplace and the extra burden that is often placed on Black journalists. Some journalists in the article feel a responsibility to cover stories about the Black community and face a number of mental health problems as a result of reporting on trauma in their own communities. Karen Attiah, global opinion editor for the *Washington Post*, finds being a Black journalist exhausting. A number of Black journalists in Ingram's article agree that Black journalists are expected to cover so-called "Black stories" as reporters. However, the problem with that is figuring out what the definition of Black stories is. For Attiah, for the journalism industry, and for those who consume journalism, "covering 'Black stories' means covering pain, trauma, and racism, which in and of itself, is not only

taxing but a limited way to look at the totality of what it means to be a Black person in America.” Attiah argues that the journalism industry needs to highlight more stories that center around the Black experience, “without having to constantly cater or explain ourselves to a white gaze” (Ingram).

A problem for the Black community is that these Black stories are often published by the journalism industry for a white audience, or what is often referred to as the white gaze. The white gaze assumes that default readers come from the perspective of a white person and that people of color almost always feel the need to take into account a white reader or observer’s reaction. MSNBC correspondent and “Into America” podcast host Trymaine Lee agrees that Black journalists have an unfair expectation to cover Black stories, while also feeling they have to explain and extrapolate “on black pain for oftentimes a white audience” (Izadi and Farhi). This, in turn, affects Black journalists’ mental health. In another interview in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Allissa Richardson discusses the death of Darran Simon, her friend and former colleague at the *Washington Post*, as a result of a suicide in April of 2020 (Ingram). Richardson claims that “it is time for newsrooms to examine the trauma that comes with reporting Black pain, over and over again” (Ingram). Conversations about Black journalists should always be accompanied by conversations of mental health, Richardson argues (Ingram). A duality exists between ensuring that Black journalists are able to write their own stories and allowing for workplaces that make sure all of the mental burden of these stories of Black pain is not solely placed on the few Black journalists in the workplace.

During 2020’s reckoning with racism and police brutality, in a few instances, Black journalists were barred from police brutality beats due to their “racial biases.” On

June 1, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* banned two Black journalists from reporting on police brutality after one posted a tweet about looting on May 31. *Post-Gazette* journalist Alexis Johnson ironically compared Black Lives Matter protestors to concertgoers at a Kenny Chesney concert tailgate, including photos of a parking lot covered in trash and debris (Romine). The next day, Johnson pitched four protest-related stories to her editor and was notified that her tweet violated social media policy, and she was barred from protest coverage (Romine). In addition, a white male reporter also tweeted about the protests but was only given a warning and was not removed from protest coverage until the issue was brought up (Romine). Photojournalist Michael Santiago was also removed from protest coverage after tweeting in support of Johnson (Romine). Guests on *1A*, a podcast by NPR which fosters debate on national conversations, challenged this decision in an episode in June 2020 entitled “The Debate Over Objectivity in Journalism.” *1A* producer Morgan Givens and Nikole Hannah-Jones, a reporter for the *New York Times Magazine*, claimed that every single person—and therefore every single reporter—has their own biases. White people have their own biases toward police brutality, so why are they not banned, and why are only Black journalists taken off of police brutality beats (“The Debate Over Objectivity in Journalism”)?

Not only do Black journalists face a number of difficulties within the white-dominated field of journalism but reporting on the Black community itself can very easily become a narrative of pain that does not represent the complexity of the Black experience. Writing for a white gaze and within a professional culture established by white people are both sources of this problem. These professional standards may only be valid or useful when writing about and for white people. Like Chimamanda Ngozi

Adichie says in her TED Talk, “It’s impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person” (“The Danger of a Single Story”). Journalism is a difficult space to properly engage all of the stories of a group of people, especially when stories of Black pain can start to become the stories demanded of the media or by a predominantly white audience. According to Amanda Ripley, reporters are taught to create a narrative out of the story they are reporting on, so reporters try to create a narrative that is coherent and natural, and if a quote doesn’t fit into that coherent narrative, it is often cut to prioritize clarity rather than complication (Ripley). Journalists have a habit of simplifying narratives and in doing so, often lose the nuanced and sometimes contradictory, information that Adichie advocates for in order “to engage properly with a person,” or in this case, a story (“The Danger of a Single Story”).

The professional standard of objectivity in journalism may at times hinder journalism from reaching accurate reporting. Journalists are taught to be objective in their reporting from early in their careers—keep a neutral voice, don’t bring in your own biases, and rely on attribution to sources rather than reaching your own conclusions. However, this practice of observing the professional standard of objectivity, in its traditional definition, often prevents reporters from achieving accurate reporting since the practice can encourage passive, single-story narratives about the world, can excuse lazy reporting, and can eventually be deceptive.

Brent Cunningham claims that the standard of objectivity is flawed in that “Objectivity makes reporters hesitant to inject issues into the news that aren’t already out there.” Injecting issues into the news might not fit in as neutral reporting if sources are

not already talking about an issue (B. Cunningham). Objectivity makes reporters wait for sources to discuss issues within society rather than seeking out stories. Reporters could also lose access to sources or lose credibility if their story conflicts with official sources. The idea of objectivity encourages the societal status quo. Journalists have biases toward narratives that confirm the status quo because those stories are safer. In addition, the 24-hour news cycle has put more strain on having the time to research and dig deeply into the issues being covered. Instead, time constraints can leave reporters seduced by “readily provided research” that already exists or by building a story around easily available official sources which don’t challenge the narratives within the news (B. Cunningham). This can lead to similar narratives that the structure of objectivity only reinforces by requiring little effort to tell stories that are already told and making it difficult to tell new ones. For journalists, it requires little effort to continue to follow the standard of objectivity that a journalist can simply lay out two sides of the story. By only lining up the “two sides of the story” journalists are staking claims without changing the narrative about police brutality.

Journalism’s long-held professional standard of objectivity has failed as a standard to accurately portray police brutality and Black Lives Matter protests. Wesley Lowery wrote about this issue in an op-ed for *The New York Times* in June 2020 called “A Reckoning Over Objectivity, Led by Black Journalists.” Objectivity in its traditional sense often renders us farther from the truth, because it can remove language that holds groups accountable, claiming that that language is biased reporting. Cunningham says that “Objectivity excuses lazy reporting” (B. Cunningham). For example, if a journalist is on deadline for a story and all the journalist has is “both sides” of the story, that is usually

enough for the story to be published (B. Cunningham). Objectivity sets up a reader with both sides of the story and allows them to make their determination of which side is correct from there. There is something valuable in presenting all sides of a story; however, given journalists' obsession with getting a story out as soon as possible, sometimes they do not have the time (or even feel the desire) to "push the story, incrementally, toward a deeper understanding of what is true and what is false" (B. Cunningham).

Because objectivity suggests that it is okay to simply lay out the sides without pushing deeper toward the truth, the effect can be surface-level reporting that fails to hold groups accountable and to present reality. For instance, Lowery claims, "Neutral objectivity trips over itself to find ways to avoid telling the truth" (Lowery). In journalists' quest to remain neutral, they often get farther from the truth, using "clunky euphemisms like 'officer-involved shooting'" when journalists could have just said "'the police shot someone,'" which is the closer to the truth (Lowery). By switching around the sentence and ignoring objectivity, the journalist is holding a group accountable which presents readers with a more accurate reporting on the situation.

In terms of reality, Black lives should matter outside of the single story of pain and death that the traditional definition of objectivity stands to reinforce. One Black journalist for CNN, John Blake, claims that in the Black Lives Matter movement, "Black lives should matter outside of trauma. Any true racial reckoning should acknowledge all of our humanity—not just that we're dying" (Blake). Social media have responded in interesting ways to the single story of pain often depicted by journalism. Since stories of Blackness that surround joy, romance, and beauty don't tend to grab the headlines in the

reporting world, social media users on Twitter have taken to telling those stories through social media instead (Blake). Movements such as #BlackBoyJoy and #BlackGirlMagic took off around 2014. Studies suggest that these hashtags became prevalent in response to narratives of pain or negativity surrounding Black people in order to inject joy as resistance to these narratives (828). A study by Lu and Steele analyzed deployments of three different hashtags for Black movements that celebrated joy: #freeblackchild, #carefreeblackkids, and #CareFreeBlackKids2k16, respectively (828). They analyzed these hashtags in response to times when the media would tell negative or painful narratives of Black people, such as the public shaming of Blue Ivy Carter, the child of Beyoncé and Jay-Z, in 2014, critiques of Willow and Jaden Smith, the children of Will and Jada Pinkett Smith in 2016, and finally the murders of two Black men, Philando Castile and Alton Sterling, in 2016 (829). A previous Lu and Steele study found that these hashtags were used as “intentional acts of resistance to mainstream news cycles demonizing Black children and proliferating coverage of Black death” (828), depicting joyous moments counter the narrative that depicts Black life as constantly under threat (Lu and Steele 828-830).

Another important aspect of these social media movements is that they allow Black people to create narratives in which they are at the center in spaces where they are not captured in the eyes of a white gaze. Normally these hashtags are dominated by members of the Black community sharing moments of accomplishment, joy, love, and beauty. The importance of these hashtags’ providing an online community is that, Lu and Steele argue, the Black community’s “physical movements and gatherings have been and continue to be heavily policed” (831).

Throughout 2020, the term Black joy has also become popular as a counter to narratives of Black death seen through reporting around police brutality. *CNN* recently published an article calling for more trauma-free depictions of Blackness in which it included examples where Black lives existed outside of the lens of racism and the single story of trauma. Black journalist John Blake collected depictions of trauma-free Blackness through cultural examples such as Black family reunions, memes, movies that are funny and/or romantic, and music that celebrates Black life. He also used examples from literature and visual art, and television shows in which Black actors and actresses star in roles where racism and suffering aren't center screen (Blake). Other articles have surfaced that call not for a denying of the narratives of suffering or a minimizing of the ways in which racism continues to cause trauma for the Black community, but rather for a complicating of this single narrative, or a seeking of balance of stories to counter that narrative.

In addition to the ways the Black community resist the news cycle by sharing images of joy and love through social media movements, the publishing industry can likewise provide an opportunity for Black authors to share the complexity of their experiences through literature. Following the death of George Floyd in May of 2020, the additional police brutality against Black people, and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protests, a spotlight was placed on Black literature with the intent that white people needed to listen to and learn from Black voices. With that, an influx of articles appeared which discussed the obligation of the publishing industry to include the complexities of the Black experience. Representations of Black joy were and are needed more than ever as the media report on police brutality, because Black Lives Matter not just Black death

(Reddin). On the flip side, some articles also put a responsibility on readers/consumers of literature to actively seek out and engage with literature that does not solely focus on the single story of pain. Critics in the United Kingdom, for example, recognized a need to engage with Black experience beyond a single story. Freddie Reddin's piece for *Harper's Bazaar* in the UK examines the importance of being exposed to the full spectrum of Black experience through literature and challenged the ways we engage with Black experience. Because literature is "a gateway into exploring the layers of society and ourselves . . . We do not expect the same language, the same behaviours, or the same conversations from literature because it would mean living within a vacuum." Reddin believes that it is important that readers are exposed to a variety of voices to stop subconsciously "solely viewing blackness through the prism of racism and slavery," and therefore advance "societal growth and maturity" (Reddin). Reddin spotted this gap within the literary world and her article highlights the event series the first African publishing house in UK, Cassava Republic Press, organized to celebrate the diversity of Black voices.

The publishing industry has a specific problem engaging with Black voices that do not make themes of race the primary focus of their work. According to Reddin, a publisher may refuse to review a book because it is "too niche," either "too Black or not Black enough," and therefore not be of interest to the publisher's audience of readers even if the book were written exceptionally well. L.L. McKinney, an African American young adult writer and advocate for equality and inclusion in book publishing, published an article in June of 2020 on Tor.com that explored similar themes of the flaws in publishing. McKinney's article discusses social media's current and significant push to

amplify the works of Black authors and writers, leading to “a boom in follows subscriptions, book sales, likes, and retweets across the board” (McKinney). But McKinney also argues that this moment is bittersweet because the support is only coming at this moment and likely won’t last. In the end, according to McKinney, the most successful books are going to be the ones that focus on Black pain: “publishing has a way of rewarding a particular type of Black story, and—for lack of a better term—punishing the rest” (McKinney). McKinney feels as though his books were never the “right” Black books and that the publishing industry’s concentration on rewarding the right books is significant:

But this laser-like focus on the “right” books sends a clear message to Black authors, Black readers, and Black people as a whole: your stories aren’t worth much if you don’t bleed on the page for us. Not only does this take Black narratives hostage, and pigeonhole them into being trauma porn, it exposes the intended audience for those stories to tangible harm. Harm that has been documented and discussed extensively. (McKinney)

Readers and writers also expressed that they have noticed this trend or that they want to be aware of the kinds of books they are reading and engaging within the comment section of the McKinney’s article. A number of Black writers agreed with McKinney’s sentiments, claiming that they felt heard. Commenter Cynthias wrote: “Black writers need the freedom to tell stories that deal with the condition of being Black in America but are also fun, adventurous, and even silly. We are not wounds that people gape at and diagnose” (Cynthias). Another user said that the article made them consider the types of books they consider when diversifying their writing: “This is something I’ve been trying

to do for years, but looking back at all the books I've read by black authors, I'm not sure I can even think of any that weren't issue books" (G). Both journalism and the publishing industries must come to terms with the ways in which they perpetuate single stories that are harmful, recognizing the extent to which, as Adichie suggests, readers of journalism or literature about the Black community are "vulnerable in the face of a story" ("The Danger of a Single Story").

## CHAPTER II

### NARRATING BLACK LOVE AS RESISTANCE: AN ANALYSIS OF *THE WATER*

#### *DANCER AND IF BEALE STREET COULD TALK*

“Black love literally shouldn’t exist in America, in any form,” Reginald Cunningham writes in a 2017 *Huffington Post* article. Cunningham—who is a Black journalist, photographer, activist—labels love between African Americans as revolutionary. The fact that it does exist in the forms of familial, heterosexual, trans, queer, and community love is a miracle. The structure of slavery mandated that love and relationships shouldn’t form, but despite all efforts of slavery to destroy families and relationships, love persisted. Ta-Nehisi Coates 2019 novel *The Water Dancer* (2019) about an African American man who has the ability to transport people using the power of memory and storytelling, can be used to examine the structures that slavery established to ensure that relationships between African Americans couldn’t form. The remnants of the structures of slavery continued to exist in the 1970s in New York City where James Baldwin sets his fifth novel *If Beale Street Could Talk*. In this novel, 19-year-old Tish and her fiancé Fonny are separated when Fonny is imprisoned after being falsely accused of raping a woman. Tish is pregnant with Fonny’s child. Here Baldwin portrays Black love as a form of resistance to the injustice which separated the couple and their families. However, Black love isn’t always the focal point of stories about the Black experience. Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warns in her TED Talk against telling a single story about Africans, one that often involves pain, trauma, and poverty; her warning is also relevant to a critique of stereotypical conceptualizations of African

American suffering. Telling only narratives of Black suffering—or single stories—does not provide a complete picture of the Black experience and fails to acknowledge and represent the complexities of Blackness. By examining these works of 20th and 21st-century fiction, one can understand a more complex vision of Blackness that is rooted in depictions of love and joy.

*The White Card* (2019), a play by Claudia Rankine, explores the idea that white art about Black people and even Black art made for a white market run the risk of commodifying Black pain and suffering. In the play, a family of wealthy white Americans collect art but their collection brings up a worrying fascination with depictions of Black death and suffering. Wealthy white art collectors Charles and Virginia invite Charlotte, a Black photographer, over to their home for a dinner party in hopes of buying Charlotte's work. However, Scene One culminates when Charles unveils his latest acquisition, *An Anatomy of a Death*, which is literally the autopsy report of Michael Brown, the 18-year-old Black man who was fatally shot by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014. In Scene Two, Charles shows up at Charlotte's studio one year later, "shopping for more black death," as Charlotte puts it (Rankine 74). After Charlotte's year of reflection following the dinner party, Charlotte tells Charles that "I don't mean to suggest that you shouldn't celebrate the work of black artists. It's the emphasis on black death that I needed to question for myself. What does it mean to portray black suffering as art?" (Rankine 76). Charlotte both had to question Charles' obsession with black death in art but also her own internalized obsession, as well. Charlotte suggests that obsession with black suffering "allows you not to look at

your own whiteness” and that Charles collected that art because he was comfortable with the dead black body (Rankine 79, 81).

Since this family feels comfortable displaying Black suffering in art, the play might raise concerns about how there may be a specific group of Americans who are narrowly interested in consuming content, whether through visual art, on the screen, or in fiction, that depicts Black people in specific ways. According to an article in *Vulture* by Black author Roxanne Gay, Hollywood often has specific ideas about how they want to see Black people on screen: often times “critical acclaim for black films is built upon the altar of black suffering or subjugation” (Gay).

*The Water Dancer* exposes the structures that slavery established to ensure that relationships between African Americans couldn't exist by examining slavery from a 21<sup>st</sup>-century perspective. The strategy of tearing apart families was fundamental to enslaving people. There was a purpose to it—disestablish relationships, love, and community and strip the power of networking and the motivation to stay loyal as a family from the African American community, in order to create dominance in the hands of white people. In *The Water Dancer*, the main character, Hiram Walker, is in a unique position; his father is the white owner of Lockless, the plantation he lives on, and his mother, a slave at Lockless, has been sold away, but he can't seem to remember anything about her. Hiram's talent for imitating the singing voices of others and his magical gift of memory leads to the plantation owners moving Hiram to begin working in the plantation house. Hiram is invited to live inside the plantation house and help train his white

half-brother Maynard to be the future owner of Lockless. Hiram is excited at first, but his foster mother Thena warns Hiram that “they ain’t your family . . . You cannot forget yourself up there . . .” (Coates 21). His conceptions of family are distorted due to the structures of slavery. It seems like Hiram has a father who loves him, but in the end, even when his half-brother drowns, the reality of the difference between the two, because Hiram’s mother is enslaved, is revealed: his father won’t give the plantation to him. However, it is more than just one man’s decision that prevents Hiram from inheriting the plantation. Coates shows how the social structure of the slave-owning class, which Coates calls the “Quality,” would implode if Hiram or anyone in the enslaved population, the “Tasked,” became owner of Lockless. In addition, Hiram’s father sold Hiram’s mother Rose to a different plantation, separating her and Hiram. The novel records other instances of family separation and devastation; when Hiram escapes slavery he meets others who yearn to be reunited with family members and have instead had to form families through other relationships rather than bloodlines.

Coates writes of the bonds the enslaved people established between themselves despite the ways in which slave owners tried to separate and weaken their community. In one scene near the beginning of the novel, Hiram silently observes the way in which members of the “Tasked” interact with one another:

I marveled at the bonds between us—the way we shortened our words, or spoke, sometimes with no words at all, the shared memories of corn-shuckings, or hurricanes, of heroes who did not live in books, but in our

talk; an entire world of our own hidden away from them, and to be part of that world, I felt even then, was to be in on a secret... (Coates 52)

The “Tasked” community isn’t divided into “Low” and “Quality” people like the white people in the world Coates has imagined from history, but rather Hiram decides that this unity of experience of being “Tasked” was “its own America, was its own grandeur—one that defied Maynard, who must forever carp about his place in the order” but also defied the entire system of slavery (Coates 52). The “Tasked” community could silently defy its slaveholders and the entire system of slavery, by the community bonds and relationships they forged between each other, allowing them to communicate due to shared experiences.

Coates puts emphasis on the power of telling stories, specifically stories about relationships between African Americans. Deploying magical realism into the story, Coates creates the idea of Conduction which is the power to transport oneself and others across space and time, which can take them out of slavery. But Coates’ decision to link the power of Conduction with remembering stories about family members, shows the clear value of love (often familial) and identity as a form of resistance to slavery and a path to freedom. For instance, Harriet explains how Conduction, or “jumps” work to Hiram: “The jump is done by the power of the story. It pulls from our particular histories, from all of our loves and all of our losses. All of that feeling is called up, and on the strength of our remembrances, we are moved . . . I have made this jump so many times before” (Coates 278). In this novel, narrating stories about family and relationships is a way to resist the injustice of slavery.

Conduction in *The Water Dancer* is powered by relationships which in this case are between the enslaved. While the narrative doesn't entirely focus on the romantic love between two characters which *If Beale Street Could Talk*, which will be discussed later on, does, Hiram forms an alliance with fellow Tasked woman Sophia to escape the plantation. Hiram dreams of starting a life and family with Sophia when they are freed and readers might think for a second that the novel is a love story, as well. However, after attempting to escape Lockless, the two are caught by Ryland's Hounds and Sophia is taken, leaving the two separated. It turns out that Sophia's alliance with Hiram was largely motivated by a desire to be free, while Hiram has hopes of a family. Nonetheless, Hiram and Sophia's relationship is formed out of resistance to slavery and a desire to be free from it.

If Black love animates the desire for freedom in *The Water Dancer*, love in James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk* powers Fonny's desire to be released from jail and become free. However, the romantic loves in the two novels are clearly different; Sophia is interested in feminist ideals, whereas, Tish is powered by a desire to free Fonny since they were about to get married and begin to start a family. Slavery's damage of Black love can also be seen in Hiram's slaveholder uncle Nathaniel who takes Sophia as his mistress in *The Water Dancer*. But even years later after slavery has been abolished, remnants of the system, which include structures of domination, can still be found within society in *If Beale Street Could Talk*. For instance, a white man tries to assault Tish in the grocery store, and Fonny comes to her defense. However, this moment triggers the attention of a police officer who is now very aware of who Fonny is and sets the police-

jail-courtroom-prison pattern in motion resulting in Fonny's imprisonment. This is an example of how the novel shows the systemic racism that exists within the justice system.

*If Beale Street Could Talk* was James Baldwin's fifth novel, written while Baldwin lived in France and published in 1974. While this novel continues to explore Baldwin's interest in the themes of race and sexuality in America, it also marks a turning point in Baldwin's career (Norman 121). At this point, Baldwin started to turn away from narratives about interactions and relationships between Black and white characters and began to write almost exclusively about the African American community through a story about Black love, both romantic and familial (Norman 121). Baldwin's interest in this idea may come from both the emergence of the Black Arts Movement which helped raise Black consciousness and focused on intra-racial relationships rather than inter-racial ones (Woubshet) and the emergence of a younger generation of Black Americans who were starting to change their attitudes toward themselves (Scott 72). Baldwin's generation struggled with a sense of "self-loathing that comes with internalizing white standards and collaborating in one's own oppression"; however, a new one was being formed who started to attribute less value to white people's judgments of them and began to relate more to one another (Scott 72). It seems in *Beale Street* that Baldwin was interested in creating a novel with characters who are not solely defined by their relation to white people but rather have an identity that is formed within their community. Academic Amy Yeboah agrees when she argues in her article that "Baldwin centers Black thought, life, and experiences. Through the prism of Baldwin's novel and specifically his protagonist,

Tish, Baldwin's focus was not in narrating difference *or* sameness with the West, but I will argue, rather speaking about, with, and to a complex Black experience" (Yeboah 3).

*If Beale Street Could Talk* follows Tish who has just learned she is pregnant and Fonny who is in jail after being falsely accused of raping a woman. In the novel, the law-and-order system is a structure remaining as a remnant of slavery that tried to prevent love and family relationships. Specifically, the system tried to tear apart Fonny and Tish right when they were about to get married. Tish's family and Fonny's father Frank try to fight that structure of injustice with love and action.

According to scholarship on the novel, *If Beale Street Could Talk* is one of Baldwin's most overlooked, underappreciated, and negatively critiqued novels for a variety of reasons but mostly because a number of readers felt as though Baldwin portrayed the Black experience inauthentically. One literary critic, John W. Aldridge, dismissed the novel as "pretentious and cloying with goodwill and loving kindness and humble fortitude and generalized honorableness" in a review in the *Saturday Review* in 1974 (24-25). However, Baldwin most faced this criticism from white readers and critics; they begged that he represent a "single story" of black writers. As Joyce Carol Oates says in her review of the novel in *The New York Times*, "The black writer, if he is not being patronized simply for being black, is in danger of being attacked for not being black enough. Or he is forced to represent a mass of people, his unique vision assumed to be symbolic of a collective vision" (Oates). Just as Baldwin had to fit into a narrow description of what it meant to be a black writer, critics of *If Beale Street Could Talk* seemed to expect the same single story about the Black experience. Oates had a positive review of the novel and described it as a "traditional celebration of love," and instead of

being sentimental, “Baldwin’s insistence upon the primacy of emotions like love, hate, or terror... [are] but basic psychology” (Oates). The novel *is* a celebration of love, but the theme of love also plays a larger role within the novel: love is a form of resistance against systemic racism in the United States in the 1970s. The Black family, the Rivers in *If Beale Street Could Talk*, represents a “site of personal and political resistance to racist values and actions” and it is the love the family has for one another that becomes the source for this resistance (Scott 63).

Oates’ review, while mostly positive, also only entrenched the idea that *Beale Street* is a traditional love story. For instance, another white reviewer for *The New York Times*, Anatole Broyard, criticized the novel as a “vehemently sentimental love story” (37). However, Yeboah argues that “there is nothing traditional about Baldwin’s presentation of Black love, his narrative style...” (2). In fact, she argues that many of these reviews reveal the biases that they read the novel with: “For example, instead of discussing the love story that forms the core of the narrative, the word “love” is strangely absent in [Broyard’s] review...”; instead Broyard focuses on words “like jail, chains, pregnancy, baby, and even Tish’s belly,” showing a centralization of Black bodies rather than of the powerful love story (Yeboah 3). These white reviewers and critics could reveal that their discomfort with stories that do not fit in the single stories they might be used to seeing told about Black people.

In 2018, Barry Jenkins released a film adaptation of *Beale Street* which took care to highlight joy and love, arguably even more than the novel. According to Black writer Roxanne Gay, the silver screens often does not depict Black people experiencing joy and love (Gay). Jenkins is a film director known for film adaptations of African American

literary works such as the Academy Award Winning film *Moonlight*. In an article for the *New Yorker*, Doreen St. Felix argues that the film even takes away some of the grit of Baldwin's stories, avoiding reveling in "the spectacle of its characters' pain" (St. Felix). For instance, Jenkins chooses not to include the heartbreaking scene at the end of the novel where Tish finds out that Fonny's father, Frank, killed himself after being caught stealing money for Fonny's trial by his boss. St. Felix claims that Jenkins filled the scene but chose not to include it. A culture article from the *Atlantic* and written by Hannah Giorgis claims:

The movie doesn't revel in the spectacle of its characters' pain, and indeed scrubs some of Baldwin's grit from its visuals. Where other stories might have pitted the fantasy of Tish and Fonny's love, *Beale Street* paints a luminous portrait of a delicate balance: Their love undergoes duress, but this is a story, above all, of joy. (Giorgis)

Jenkins' adaptation of *Beale Street* romanticizes images of Harlem by presenting it as beautiful, with music, colorful pastel outfits, and conventionally pretty actors. By excluding Frank's suicide, it presents a happier ending than the book although Fonny is still in jail, we do get a glimpse at their child, showing that Jenkins' took real thought into placing the focus on Black love and less on the protest of the novel.

Yoshinobu Hakutani discusses Baldwin's novel in comparison to Richard Wright's 1940 novel, *Native Son*. Hakutani claims that while both are similar "protest novels" on the surface, each novel supplies "fundamentally different ideas about the existence of black people in American society" (73). This comparison can provide a useful lens to understand how *Beale Street* emphasizes human bonding and love as

resistance to racist social structures while *Native Son* emphasizes anger, violence, and fear. Tish and Fonny's relationship actually "thrives on the strength of the communal bond in African American life" (Hakuntai 74). Baldwin's novel doesn't home in on the strength of this romantic bond, but rather on how Tish's family and Fonny's father help ensure that the love and child between the two have a future. One example of this is the ways Tish's mother, Sharon, along with Tish's whole family, serve as a support system to protect the love between Tish and Fonny and ensure a future generation will be together. Apart from Fonny, who is the father of the baby, Sharon is the first person Tish tells about her pregnancy. Her mother only reacts with love. And after Tish has a nightmare about Fonny, Sharon comes into her room and tells her this: "You got that child beneath your heart and we're all counting on you, Fonny's counting on *you*, to bring that child here safe and well... remember, love brought you here. If you trust love this far, don't panic now" (Baldwin 112). She reminds Tish that their child was created out of love and that love will continue to nurture and guide Tish and their baby.

But the love of Tish's entire family is actually nurturing her child. Tish has this moment of realization while she is surrounded by her family, even before she tells the rest of her family of her pregnancy:

And it was though, out of all these elements, this patience, my Daddy's touch, the sounds of my mother in the kitchen, the way light fell, the way the music continued beneath everything, the movement of Ernestine's head as she lit the cigarette, the movement of her hand as she dropped the match into the ashtray, the blurred human voices rising from the street, out

of this rage and a steady, somehow triumphant sorrow, my baby was slowly being formed. (Baldwin 41)

The chaotic city and the community that Harlem is a part of is also forming the baby in the “blurred human voices rising from this street” (Baldwin 41). But yet the lyricism and detail of this paragraph counter the chaos of the city. In the way that love is a form of resistance, so is the baby: “out of this rage” seems to refer to the rage at the injustice of Fonny’s case, but “a steady, somehow triumphant sorrow” characterizes how bringing a baby into a new future is an act of both defiance and hope (Baldwin 41).

Tish’s pregnancy is the spark that ignites the Rivers family to fight. Michelle Phillips notes that the story, which seems centered on Tish’s pregnancy, doesn’t begin with Tish’s discovery that she’s pregnant, but rather with her telling Fonny and her family about it (77). This just shows that “Fonny and the family’s acceptance and support are crucial not only to her but also to the health and future of her unborn child” (Phillips 77). In addition, the promise of a baby is essential to keeping Fonny’s confidence up while he is in jail. Sharon says when Tish first tells her about the baby, “that baby be the best thing that ever happened to Fonny. He needs that baby. It going to give him a whole lot of courage” (Baldwin 33). The hope of a future generation that will be free, not trapped in jail, and perhaps free from injustice, keeps Fonny going. It keeps the two lovers from the loneliness of being apart and dominates much of what they talk about when Tish goes to visit Fonny in jail. Tish’s pregnancy represents the promising hope for the future that while Fonny is jailed by injustice, the baby has hope for a free future in a country that “seems bent on destroying the black family and keeping young lovers apart” (Scott 121).

Sharon and the family further support Tish and Fonny's love when Sharon takes the trip to Puerto Rico to find the woman that accused Fonny of raping her. In a scene between Ernestine and Tish, Ernestine realizes that their mother is probably the only one who could go. Tish protests, saying, "She don't want to go to Puerto Rico" (Baldwin 121). But Ernestine replies to Tish showing just how devoted to her family her mother is: "That's right. And she hates planes. But she wants your baby's father out of jail. Of course she doesn't want to go to Puerto Rico. But she'll go" (121). Sharon doesn't want to go; however, Ernestine knows that she will go if it is a matter of making a difference in Fonny's case. This moment of dialogue speaks to their mother's strong devotion to keeping her family, and the promise of a future family, safe. In addition, Tish's father, Joseph, and Fonny's father, Frank, also go to great lengths for their family. Both begin stealing from their jobs and selling the stolen items to raise funds for the lawyer that will hopefully help get Fonny out of jail.

While Sharon's parental love takes her to Puerto Rico for her child and for her child's future husband, the novel also shows the limits of this kind of love as a form of resistance against the structures of racism. Sharon does not succeed in getting Victoria Rogers to reverse her claim that Fonny raped her. However, Mrs. Rogers has been victimized as both a woman who has been raped and traumatized that is set up to incriminate the Black man. Black love can only do so much in a system that has been built against African Americans since slavery. As Yeboah puts it, "love prevails, but justice does not in Baldwin's fiction;" love has the power to continue but not to secure justice (Yeboah 11).

A sense of love is felt within the Black community, including the entire Harlem community, which is pitted against the structures of white supremacy. Tish feels a sense of comfort in Harlem surrounded by all of these people who cared about her that she doesn't feel anywhere else in the city. For instance, when Fonny is showing Tish around Greenwich Village, she feels uneasy: "It was strange. Everyone was in the streets, moving and talking, like people do everywhere, and yet none of it seemed to be friendly. There was something hard and frightening about it" (Baldwin 54). Although it seemed like Harlem, Tish notes that something seemed left out or something put in that made the scene much more unfriendly than Harlem. However, there are small places of "home" within Greenwich Village. Tish returns to a place surrounded by people she feels comfortable with when Fonny takes her to a little Spanish restaurant farther west. Immediately, Tish recognizes that the people in the restaurant are different from the ones in the streets and she feels at home. People outside of the African American community support Tish and Fonny, showing a human bonding that transcends race. In one scene, a man assaults Tish in a grocery store near Fonny's apartment in Greenwich Village and Fonny comes to defend her. At the same time, a white cop strolls by the scene and targets Fonny as the offender in the situation. However, the Italian woman who owned the store speaks up in both Tish and Fonny's defense. She says, "Oh no... I know both of these young people... And that little good-for-nothing shit over there, he *did* attack her. And he got exactly what he deserved. What would *you* do if a man attacked your wife?" (Baldwin 138). If the Italian woman hadn't spoken up in their defense, the white cop, Officer Bell, likely would have taken Fonny down to the station and charged him with assault. The Italian lady displays the camaraderie and sense of community felt not just

between the Black community, but also by other people in New York City. The Italian woman, among others, have the African American community's back using their love to fight the structure of white supremacy that tries to separate Tish and Fonny.

Near the end of the novel, Tish talks again about how she feels outside of Harlem in the Village—this time she is recalling when Fonny and Officer Bell would cross paths: “I was frightened because, in the streets of the Village, I realized we were entirely alone. Nobody cared about us except us; or, whoever loved us was not there” (Baldwin 172). Tish's feeling that people in Harlem care about and love Tish and her family seems to be the difference between Harlem and anywhere else in the city. This idea just shows that the community Tish has built with the people in Harlem, between her family and other members of the community, is only so strong as a form of resistance against large structures of injustice. Outside of their community, Tish ponders the thought that Bell could have raped her if she were alone, and perhaps if the Italian women hadn't been there, Fonny would have been arrested for defending Tish. However, ironically, the Italian women's defending of Fonny and her put-down of Officer Bell keeps Bell from taking Fonny in the moment, however, this event ends up embarrassing Bell so that he ends up continuing to persecute Fonny. This eventually leads to Officer Bell targeting Fonny as the man who raped Victoria Rogers.

The structures of domination that *The Water Dancer* exemplifies and that the Rivers family tries to fight can be seen internalized in *If Beale Street Could Talk*. For instance, Fonny's mother, Mrs. Hunt, and his sisters, Sheila and Adrienne, work against Tish's family's love. It seems that Mrs. Hunt has internalized the idea that whiteness is the desired ideal and has never respected or even valued Fonny as a person because he

looks and acts more black than them. Fonny's family, excluding Frank, is a complete contrast to the family that celebrates Black love rather than despising Tish for getting pregnant as an unmarried woman. However, Baldwin clearly shows that the Rivers family and Frank, fight for and embrace Tish and Fonny's love through action, while Mrs. Hunt resorts to praying.

*The Water Dancer* exemplifies the ways strong bonds between the African American community still formed despite the structures of slavery which separated family members and sought to weaken their communities in order to increase white domination. Coates emphasizes the power of telling narratives about these relationships since they literally allow people to be transported to freedom in the novel. For Baldwin, relationships are important, but he delves more deeply into the way that love is a powerful form of resistance to racist structures. In both novels, relationships and love fuel a desire to be free, with the Rivers family in *If Beale Street Could Talk* driven by the hope of a new generation that might be free of the structures that separated them. The novels craft a richness of the Black human experience that doesn't too narrowly associate Blackness with suffering but instead with the power of joy and love to combat racism.

## CHAPTER III

### DISMANTLING THE SINGLE STORY IN *AMERICANAH*

In her 1984 essay, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” Black feminist writer Audre Lorde calls for recognition of the intersection of gay rights, women’s rights, and the rights of people of color. She claims that none of these rights can be achieved without recognizing their intersecting identities. Introducing the discourse of intersectionality, a term Kimberly Crenshaw would coin in 1989, Lorde consistently calls for attention to difference and, most importantly, to the places where differences meet:

Advocating the mere tolerance of difference between women is the grossest reformism. It is a total denial of the creative function of difference in our lives. Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic (Lorde 1).

Lorde suggests that in order to be feminists we must engage with and advocate for all types of women and against all systems of oppression. Her argument resonates with Adichie’s argument that in examining the experience of a specific group, such as the Black community, we need to engage with all narratives from that community, not just the “Master’s” narrative that we might be familiar with: Black pain. Extending Lorde’s theory, you can’t dismantle a master’s narrative using the master’s tools, or in this case, single stories.

Lorde's essay could be read as an argument for the value of literary production to deal radically with the "genuine condition" of Black lives, immigrant lives, women's lives. Any literary character worth reading is more than a single category. Any character is a specific individual who must then be intersectional because they hold a dozen different identities. Just as Lorde calls for feminists—heteronormative, white female feminists in particular—to recognize and celebrate the differences between women, I am calling for readers of literature to celebrate the diverse experiences of specific groups, in this case, the Black community. Black experience isn't all sorrow and victimhood; it includes joy and love, as well. We can't solve problems of oppression with tools of oppression. We must embrace the power of difference.

In an essay published on the online literary magazine *Electric Literature* in 2017, Jennifer Baker, publishing professional and contributing editor, writes about the need for art to engage with Black vitality, not just Black pain. She recognizes the extent to which journalism and the publishing industry are adding to the narrative of Black victimhood. As a writer and member of the book publishing community, Baker struggles with her self-awareness as an African American woman who often asks herself: "To what extent am I adding to our pain *and* our humanity? When I write an abused Black woman or an incarcerated Black teen, am I introducing them with solely pain on the page or am I giving the character an existence someone else can see themselves in?" (Baker). Baker writes of an instance when she found a collection of essays that particularly resonated with her as the collection "provided a deeper connection because Black pain was *part* of the story" but "Black pain was not the sole criterion for the anthology's existence" (Baker).

This is what Adichie's novel *Americanah* succeeds in. Her characters experience hardship and microaggressions, and those hardships are essential to include, but there is also more to the characters' experiences. Adichie wrote *Americanah* after her TED Talk which explored her thinking around single stories, thus demonstrating like Baker that she is self-aware as an African author and does not want to contribute to the single story about Africans. For instance, there are moments in the novel when Adichie refers to African authors and their challenges meeting the expectations of their readership who are looking for that master narrative, or single story. One character describes a Nigerian author's struggle:

He's always fretting about how his books don't do well. I've told him he needs to write terrible things about his own people if he wants to do well. He needs to say Africans alone are to blame for African problems, and Europeans have helped Africa more than they've hurt Africa, and he'll be famous and people will say he's so *honest!* (*Americanah* 394)

With the line "he's so honest!" Adichie's character expresses the irony at that heart of these stories—that the honesty falls short of the truth. The same character, Blaine's sister Shan, returns to this topic of writing as a Black person or writing about race at a dinner party, claiming that "You can't write an honest novel about race in this country" (*Americanah* 416). Shan discusses the high expectations placed on Black writers to fit into a narrow description: "Black writers who do literary fiction in this country . . . have two choices: they can do precious or they can do pretentious" (*Americanah* 417). But when a writer does neither, when a writer's narrative doesn't fit within the single story expected by publishers from Black writers, "nobody knows what to do with you"

(*Americanah* 417). Yogita Goyal, in her article “Africa and the Black Atlantic,” praises Adichie’s critique of “non-Afro-pessimist representations of Africa” through “excavating with care the delicate subjectivities of middle-class Africans” (Goyal 14).

For example, Adichie challenges the need to read a single type of novel through her characters Ifemelu and Blaine’s conversations about reading. As Blaine is an academic, he invites Ifemelu to read scholarly texts that she’s not interested in. Blaine hopes that, “with a little more time and a little more wisdom, [she] would come to accept that the novels he liked were superior, novels written by young and youngish men and packed with *things* . . . She had read many of them, because he recommended them, but they were like cotton candy that so easily evaporated from her tongue’s memory” (*Americanah* 14). Blaine also has expectations for Ifemelu’s blog posts to serve a certain purpose, to educate. Ifemelu starts to let Blaine edit her posts less and less: “‘I don’t want to explain, I want to observe,’ she said” (386). Blaine’s expectations for Black writers or Black celebrities to take a role as activist and push boundaries with their work fits in with notion of a single story. For instance, when Ifemelu “blogged about two novels she loved, by Ann Petry and Gayl Jones, and Blaine said, ‘They don’t push the boundaries’” (*Americanah* 387). Blaine demands that she be a Black activist, while Ifemelu just wants to enjoy what she loves.

Pain and hardships are essential for Adichie’s characters and story; however, Black pain is not the only reason Adichie writes *Americanah*. Her characters experience love and joy as well. Goyal even argues that *Americanah* “self-consciously foregrounds its own reception as a new kind of black novel, an exploration of blackness that does not highlight injury or trauma, but focuses on romantic love, hair, and nostalgia” (Goyal 14).

Adichie's characters, specifically her protagonist Ifemelu, have the opportunity to fall in love or wear their hair however they want to. There isn't a single story chosen for Ifemelu, although there are moments when she fights against what is the single story—or the master's narrative. Adichie's depictions of her characters' full life conditions harkens back to Lorde's sense of "the creative function of difference," as Lorde depicted through a Simone de Beauvoir quote: "It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our lives that we must draw our strength to live and our reasons for acting" (Lorde 1).

Adichie is writing against the established single story, questioning what it means to be an African immigrant in the United Kingdom and to be black in America.

*Americanah* frames multiple stories together, as the novel features a variety of characters who are each having different experiences, speaking to the idea from Adichie's TED Talk that "It's impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person" ("The Danger of a Single Story"). The multiple storylines and the multiplicity of experiences they encourage, "contribute to the formation of the opposite of a single story," argues literary critic L. L. M. de Bock (6). The novel represents stories of non-American Black people in America through Ifemelu, Aunt Uju, her cousin Dike, and Aisha; African Americans in America through one of her boyfriends, Blaine; and Africans in the United Kingdom through Obinze.

*Americanah* focuses on intimate moments and Ifemelu's relationships with men and her family and friends. Ifemelu's blog posts on *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black* often lead to Ifemelu examining larger, cultural movements. She uses her blog posts for change, but oftentimes her posts are inspired by moments between herself and her

romantic partners. Overarching the entire novel is the love story between Ifemelu and her high school boyfriend Obinze, even though the two are separated throughout most of the novel. That plot line connects Ifemelu's story with Obinze's when the novel changes point of view and focuses on Obinze's experience in the United Kingdom. The novel also flashes back from scenes in America to scenes in Nigeria with Obinze. While Obinze is in the UK and before Ifemelu returns to Nigeria, Ifemelu has relationships with two American men, Blaine and Curt. While Curt, a white American, and Ifemelu are together, she writes this in her blog about the power of interracial romantic love:

The simplest solution to the problem of race in America? Romantic love. Not friendship. Not the kind of safe, shallow love where the objective is that both people remain comfortable. But real deep romantic love, the kind that twists you and wrings you out and makes you breathe through the nostrils of your beloved. And because that real deep romantic love is so rare, and because American society is set up to make it even rarer between American Black and American White, the problem of race in America will never be solved. (*Americanah* 327)

Here Ifemelu argues that romantic love could be a solution to fighting ingrained, racist structures of oppression. However, readers don't really get to see how romantic love across racial borders might solve the problem of race in America, as it's merely a hope for Ifemelu that is never realized in America. It also turns out not to be Ifemelu's primary interest. Ifemelu and her partners fail to recognize difference through intersectionality, just as Lorde described in her essay. For instance, Blaine and Ifemelu have a difficult time reconciling with differences in their relationships. Blaine often thinks he is right in

terms of what types of books Ifemelu should read, how her blog posts should be written, and how she should react to what Blaine considers microaggressions, but Ifemelu is unbothered from, such as a woman asking to touch Ifemelu's hair. Blaine often believes himself to be correct because of his identity as an African American who, he feels, has had to grow up experiencing racism in America, while Ifemelu has grown up a country that only allowed her to "become black" (*Americanah* 273). Obviously, Ifemelu's experiences with Curt, as white American, as well, represent her struggles with differences. While Ifemelu had to reconcile with differences in her two relationships in America, Ifemelu's relationship with Obinze is likely more successful and effortless due to the two's shared history. Ifemelu told Obinze that "'The thing about cross-cultural relationships is that you spend a lot of time explaining. I sometimes wondered whether we would even have anything at all to say to each other if we were from the same place,'" but Ifemelu and Obinze did have much to discuss: "they were from the same place and they still had a lot to say to each other" (*Americanah* 563). Love in *Americanah* cannot be achieved without the authentic overcoming of differences.

## CONCLUSION

In an interview with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie that *The Guardian* released the same day in 2013 that *Americanah* was published, Adichie said this:

Don't we all in the end write about love? All literature is about love. When men do it, it's a political comment on human relations. When women do it, it's just a love story. So, although I wanted to do much more than a love story, a part of me wants to push back against the idea that love stories are not important. I wanted to use a love story to talk about other things. But really in the end, it's just a love story. (Brockes)

If *Americanah* were just a love story—which it isn't because it uses a love story to bring up issues of race, gender, nationality, and much more—it would still be significant. Stories about Black characters experiencing love and heartbreak are just as meaningful as those that bring up issues of race, gender, sexuality, etc.

In *The White Card*, Claudia Rankine criticizes the white obsession with Black death and suffering rendered through art. Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Water Dancer* shows, by contrast, how Black love overcomes institutionalized racism dating back to slavery, the original source of the single story. However, familial and romantic love in *If Beale Street Could Talk* act as forms of resistance to racist structures. Adichie offers similar resistance in *Americanah*, focusing specifically on romantic love and implying that cross-racial love is a solution to solving the problem of race in America, while *If Beale Street Could Talk* primarily focuses on intra-racial love.

Adichie's novel challenges the reader to recognize that commodification and repetition of Black suffering renders too narrowly the fullness of Black human experience. Furthermore, she says in her TED Talk, "Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity" ("The Danger of a Single Story"). Oftentimes journalism's reporting on the Black community can break dignity, but literature has the power to repair that dignity. Audre Lorde's call from the past for intersectionality still speaks to the importance of recognizing the inadequacy of "the master's tools"—in this case, the single story—and the need to overcome difference in order to connect fully.

As a white woman, I may not be in the best position person to write about Black lives, but I do now know that there isn't a single story. As someone who hopes to work in publishing, I recognize the power, or "*nkali*," and responsibility the industry holds to elevate a variety of Black voices and stories. As a person coming of age during the Black Lives Matter movement, I recognize that engaging with literature that presents the complexity of the Black life is another way to say that Black lives matter because their lives include relationships and love, and those things matter, too.

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## AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Jane Horovitz was born in Seattle, Washington, but grew up in Washington, Maine. As an avid reader from a young age, she has always had a love for stories. She graduated from Medomak Valley High School in 2017 as salutatorian of her class. She chose to attend the University of Maine and will graduate in May 2021 with a double major in Journalism and English (with a concentration in technical and professional writing).

At the University of Maine, Jane was involved in a number of organizations on campus. She was an active member of the *Maine Campus*, UMaine's student-run newspaper, where she served as head copy editor, and was involved in UMaine's Writing Center as a writing consultant and coordinator. Jane also served as a course associate for HON 180: *A Cultural Odyssey*. She interned at the Islandport Press, a publishing company in Yarmouth, Maine, and wrote feature news stories about researchers and projects at Maine EPSCoR. Jane is a member of the Phi Beta Kappa, Phi Kappa Phi, and Sigma Tau Delta honors societies.

Upon graduation, Jane intends to work in publishing or journalism to continue telling stories.