Defining Racism for a White Liberal Audience: *Americanah* and *The Sellout*

MA Thesis Literature

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1. Introduction

This thesis explores how two novels lead the white liberal reader to recognize institutional racism in the American context. The main argument is that these novels, *The Sellout* by Paul Beatty (2015) and *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2013), redefine racism and how it functions in society for a white liberal audience. These novels guide the reader to compare two different definitions of racism, and how they operate in American society. Robin DiAngelo shows that one definition focuses on the individual level, and the other sees racism on an institutional level:

> Although mainstream definitions of racism are typically some variation of individual "race prejudice", which anyone of any race can have, Whiteness scholars define racism as encompassing economic, political, social, and cultural structures, actions, and beliefs that systematize and perpetuate an unequal distribution of privileges, resources and power between white people and people of color (56).

DiAngelo (2012) shows that a definition of racism which focuses on individual acts creates an individual binary that judges whether a person is racist or non-racist (23). This individual binary excludes the idea that racism operates on an institutional level. *The Sellout* and *Americanah* have a similar purpose to non-fiction writings which explicitly set out to show readers that racism is institutional. *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* by Reni Eddo-Lodge (2017) and *Hallo Witte Mensen* (2017) by Anouscha Nzume explicitly mention their primary intention of changing white liberals' perspective on racism. Eddo-Lodge notes: "It has been written to counter the lack of the historical knowledge and the political backdrop you need to anchor your opposition to racism. I hope you use it as a tool" (xvii). Similarly, Nzume is motivated to show white people how their dominant position expresses itself in racism (16). These non-fiction writers point out a lack of knowledge or unwillingness on behalf of white people to see the effects of their dominant position. Their writings articulate how race continues to influence minorities in Western society.

The Sellout and *Americanah* are novels with similar outcomes as *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, and *Hallo Witte Mensen*. Eddo-Lodge and Nzume educate the liberal white audience on institutional racism by articulating the issues of race in society. This is needed because a definition of racism in America is often understood as

individual acts of violence instead of the institutional affects. Eddo-Lodge defines the issue and leads the reader to see that race influences all areas of society. "We need to see racism as structural in order to see its insidiousness. We need to see how it seeps, like a noxious gas, into everything" (222). Eddo-Lodge sees that racism is omnipresent within society, as it influences all areas of life. Nzume discusses many people's claims that they cannot see color. Nzume clarifies that race does influence society, and the issue needs to be acknowledged and defined in order to be able to change (20). These books invite a white liberal audience to change their understanding of how racism functions in society, and they challenge the reader to change. As Eddo-Lodge puts it, "If you are disgusted by what you see, and if you feel the fire coursing through your veins, then it's up to you" (223-224). Nzume finishes her book similarly. She ends the book by provoking an individual response from the reader, "What am I going to do? What are you going to do?" (138).

Similar to these non-fiction books, fictional literature can also educate the reader on the subject of racism. Moreover, this thesis claims that *The Sellout* and *Americanah* lead the white liberal reader to see that racism in America functions on an institutional level. They also reveal how an individual perspective sustains white privilege. The introduction provides a detailed definition of racism and I specify the concepts of 'white privilege' and 'white rage'. Subsequently, I introduce the novels that are central to the discussion in this thesis.

1.1 Definition of racism

According to DiAngelo, many white liberal Americans employ a definition of racism that identifies racism as intentional individual acts of violence against people of color (23). This definition creates a binary that separates moral and immoral individuals, as racism is seen as a moral issue. DiAngelo argues that this definition is sustained by most white people in America through a lack of knowledge about the histories of racism in the US (256). This means that this lack of knowledge makes it easier for them not to see that racism functions on an institutional level. Joseph-Salisbury connects white supremacy with not remembering history. White supremacy is the ability to dominate a system through creating structures that uphold racism (64) Joseph-Salisbury refers to the erasure of histories of racism as white amnesia, "White amnesia then, is the denial of the histories of racism and white supremacy (Choudry, 2010). It is, in part, the erasure of the historical context that allows white supremacy to endure, as strongly as ever" (65). This shows that forgetting histories allows many white people in America to miscomprehend how racism functions in society, and this

creates a definition of racism which is reduced to an individual level because the past racial injustice are not remembered. Therefore, whites are able to maintain a positive self-representation.

Bonilla-Silva defines racism as follows: "racism is, above anything, about practices and behaviors that produce a racial structure – a network of social relations at social, political, economic, and ideological levels that shapes the life chances of the various races" (1360). This means that racial structures are created which influence all areas of life based on race. These racial structures are within institutions, in ideas, and behavior in daily social interaction. In America, the racial structures produce inequality where white people benefit from resources in American society.

Racial structures are traditionally associated with slavery and segregation. In these structures, it is easier to see how racism functions in society. Before the 1950s, segregation made the different roles of white and black citizens evident within society. The Civil Rights movement was at a highpoint during 1954-1968, when this movement had its decisive successes. Racial segregation became illegal and racial interaction in public was lawfully accepted. Therefore, the racial structure changed and racism became more covert. Coates discusses how racism operates after the Civil Rights period:

> The success of civil rights activism, laws, and judicial decrees has not only served to decode but also to nullify the more obvious forms of the racial matrix. Today's racial codes are more subtle, more hidden, and less obvious. These subtle, hidden and less obvious racial codes have served to create a new racial matrix which we characterize as covert racism… Covert racism operates as a boundary keeping mechanism whose primary purpose is to maintain social distance between racial majorities and racial minorities (2).

This shows that covert racism sustains a binary between dominant and minority group. Covert racism normalizes the position of dominant and minority groups. Moreover, Coates shows that institutions unintentionally or unconsciously create these groups as a normative standard (2). Therefore, racism after the Civil right period continues to support white privilege, but there is a shift from overt to covert racism. This change makes it harder for white liberals to comprehend how racism functions in society.

However, as Bonilla-Silva argues, the definition of racism that focuses on individual acts of violence is connected to the shifting racial structures in America. Bonilla-Silva argues

that the racial structures of 'new racism' replaced the old racial structures of slavery and segregation. These new racial structures are referred to as New racism, and DiAngelo defines these post-Civil Rights racial structures as "The ways in which racism has adapted over time so that modern norms, policies, and practices result in similar racial outcomes as those in the past, while not appearing to be explicitly racist" (127).

This implies that white privilege continues to exist in American society. However, the understanding has changed how racism is identified and operates in American society post-Civil Right. Bonilla-Silva comments on the new racial structures of the post-Civil Rights period, and outlines five elements that show how 'new racism' has established itself in present-day America.

> By this I mean the system or racial structure characteristic of the post–Civil Rights era comprised the following elements: (1) the increasingly covert nature of racial discourse and practices, (2) the avoidance of direct racial terminology, (3) the elaboration of a racial political agenda that eschews direct racial references, (4) the subtle character of most mechanisms to reproduce racial privilege, and (5) the rearticulation of some racial practices of the past. (1362).

This shows that 'new racism' reveals how white people redefine racial structures that uphold white privilege in society. This is done through changing language and omitting direct engagement with racial conflict, and the ability to retell history without racial conflict. It avoids a discussion about race, and eliminates vocabulary related to race. This does not mean there is no racism, but these new racial structures allow a perspective that ignores racism in American. Racism changed and is thus more subtle. Pettigrew comments on Barack Obama's election: "With Obama's victory, this urge to erase clean the nation's four-century racist slate has become even more irresistible" (2). This example shows that the election of Barack Obama can be interpreted that the histories of racism are forgotten, and racism is no longer an issue in American society.

The amendments established in the Reconstruction after the Civil War changed the racial structure of America. The 13th and 14th Amendments were established between 1865 and 1868. These amendments abolished slavery and proclaimed equal citizenship and protection

by law. After these amendments and the Reconstruction era, white Southern Democrats responded with Jim Crow laws to maintain segregation of black people and white people by law, and despite overt racism against black people, white people did not recognize the influence of race in society. Wise comments: "We have long been in denial about the reality of racism, even back in the day when, in retrospect, it was blatant. Even in the early 1960s, before the passage of civil rights legislation, most of us, according to Gallup polls, failed to see that the nation had a race problem" (36). Wise continues to show the strength of the narrative that supports racial equality, "Even as African Americans were being hosed down and blown up in Birmingham, beaten in Selma, murdered in Mississippi and segregated and isolated up North, two-thirds of us said black people had equal opportunity in employment, education and housing" (36) The civil rights movement fought against segregation and institutional racism, and in 1964, this resulted in the Civil Rights Acts. Moreover, the Voting Rights Act for all American citizens was established in 1965. These two acts claimed the end of segregation and disenfranchisement. The old racial structures changed to new racism, and sustained white privilege and the dominant position of white people in America. This shows that white people do not recognize racism in contemporary America.

1.2 The Sellout

The Sellout was the winner of the Man Booker Prize 2016, and Beatty is the first American to receive this award for best written fiction in the English language. One of the Man Booker judges, Amanda Foreman points out that the novel addresses provocative themes and explores topics which society wants to ignore (65). The novel especially addresses racial structures in America, as the protagonist guides the reader through a quest to segregate his hometown called Dickens. A literary critic, Maus, comments that the novel functions to start a dialogue on race in America, "Beatty has consistently created characters and scenarios that steamroll the safe (read: uncritical) limits within which ostensibly post-racial America has confined its 'national conversation about race.'" (955). The novel evokes a discussion on the existence of 'new racism' in society, as Maus comments on race in a post-racial America. The genre of the novel is the topic of numerous interviews with Beatty, who does not want the novel to be associated with satire. Professor Chris Baldick gives a traditional definition of this literary term, "a mode of writing that exposes the failings of individuals, institutions, or societies to ridicule and scorn" (51). Beatty elaborates why he does not think *The Sellout* is part of this genre:

> When somebody says "satire", you think "Oh, it's funny" and stop there. But you don't ask yourself questions like what you're just asking: "Oh, so what does this mean?" (45)

His response indicates that he considers the labeling of satire as limiting the novel's critique on society. He assumes satire does not take the subject of race seriously, as there is an overly extensive focus on humor. Beatty's definition of satire seems limited to a focus on humoristic features. However, traditional definitions of satire usually include the idea that humor and ridicule expose wrongs a in society (e.g. Abrams). Beatty claims he did not intend to write with humor, but it actually helps the novel to expose racism as ridiculous. Despite Beatty's perspective on satire, literary reviews often label the novel as satire, and connect it with a relevant social commentary. Leland Cheuk writes: "Of Beatty's novels, *The Sellout* is the funniest. His style has always been a blend of a pedagogue's soapboxing, a stand-up comic's chops, and a poet's command of the auditory pleasures of wordplay" (175). The focus of the review is on the humoristic features and the skills of the writer. Cheuk finishes his commentary by connecting the impact of humor and reflection, "If he were to ask 'Who is my audience?' the reply would be: anyone who likes to laugh and think" (176). Humor in *The Sellout* makes the reader think about race in America. Maughan's review says that racial equality is the novel's dominant theme: "*The Sellout* is a compelling act of demonstrative rhetoric, a masterful show of verbal energy that questions just how far equality has come and where it hopes to go". These reviews do not underestimate the theme of the novel and its social commentary. Clearly, these critics do not think satire limits the room for social commentary. Race is clearly visible as a dominant theme in the novel and humor is used to expose this topic. When Tom Donkin from the BBC asked Beatty whether race in America should be discussed more, Beatty responded, "Yeah, sure why not… I think what that passage is getting at is the way that people talk about it … I think there are things people want to say about race that they're afraid to say... There's a phrase in the States which says playing a race card all the time – as if it is not valid". Beatty read a passage from his novel, and he says that a discussion about race is often avoided. This is an example of 'new racism', as Hunt shows: "New racism necessitates subtle, more clandestine strategies that continue to preserve White dominance in society; in other words, undercover forms of racism are replacing traditional and explicit forms" (88). Beatty is aware of this change in racism, and he wants to start a conversation. *The Sellout* does this by showing how a black community responds to institutional racism.

1.3 Americanah

The novel *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie won the National Book Critics Circle Award. Various literary critics have commented on the novel, and how it is a critique on race in US society. Yerima writes:

> *Americanah* is, broadly speaking, a novel of race. The issues in the text, migration, acculturation, and hybridity (which comprise beauty practices such as care of hair, skin, dress, and so forth and social and financial status), can all be linked to race and racism (642).

This commentary claims that all content in the novel is connected to race, and therefore, the novel unpacks how race functions in America for the reader. Another literary critic, Lowdon, comments in *The New Statesman* what Adichie accomplishes towards the reader's experience through her observations on society: "They will challenge the way you think about race and show you a radically de-familiarised version of western society, as seen through African eyes". The novel challenges the reader's perspective on race because it reveals the structures of new racism. Adichie said this about the theme of *Americanah*, during an interview with Synne Rifbjerg for International Authors' Stage in Copenhagen:

> Race is the major organizing principle of American history and American life, really, and it is the one thing that Americans are most uncomfortable about. It is a subject that they circle around. It is a subject that they invent codes to talk about. It is a subject that I think is still very unfinished. It is a subject that many Americans prefer to think that it has to do with the past, but it is very much the present, and I think it is also the most misunderstood, the most pretentiously contentious social subject in America.

Adichie stresses the existence of "new racism" in American society, as she says race is a subject that is avoided. As race is a taboo and mostly misunderstood, it is a necessity to discuss this subject. Adichie says the most common definition of racism is distorted and argues that Americans cannot see how it influences their society. *Americanah* narrates the journey of a young Nigerian woman, Ifemelu, who becomes familiar with the racial structures in America. At the end of the novel, Ifemelu is able to clearly articulate how racism functions in the United States.

Both authors reveal their political intentions through commenting on their novels and awareness of 'new racism'. They comment that racism is often misunderstood and avoided in American society. The current thesis focuses primarily on the content of texts, in order to show how these novels build up a perspective on 'new racism' in American society. In the theoretical framework, the definition of racism by a majority of white people and minorities is explored. This exploration is built upon Gloria Wekker's term 'the cultural archive', which refers to how many white people often have a different definition due the socialization of colorblind racism. Chapter two elaborates the growing racial awareness of the protagonist in *Americanah,* and how she eventually is able to identify and define how white people remain in their dominant position through what DiAngelo calls 'white fragility'. Chapter three shows how the protagonist of *The Sellout* leads the reader to see how white people protect their dominant position in society through what Anderson defines as 'white rage'. The thesis concludes by showing how especially the liberal white reader is led to redefine their definition of racism, and how the focalization of black characters exposes 'white rage' and 'white fragility', and in doing so, they have a similar effect as non-fiction books *Hallo Witte Mensen* (2017) by Anousha Nzume, and *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* (2017) by Reni Eddo-Lodge.

2. Theoretical framework

This thesis explores how the protagonists of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) and Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* (2015) lead the reader towards a definition of racism that supports the perspective of Whiteness scholarship introduced in the previous chapter. This is a perspective that racism is rooted within a great deal of elements in society that influence the lives of black Americans. It shows that racism in American society creates dominant and minority groups, and that racism always sustains the dominant positions of white people for their benefit in society, a phenomenon called white privilege. DiAngelo describes this term: "White privilege is a sociological concept referring to advantages enjoyed and taken for granted by white people that cannot be enjoyed and taken for granted by people of color in the same context (government, community, workplace, schools, etc.)" (108). White people are the dominant group, and they receive benefits due to their racial heritage. These privileges cannot be enjoyed by other racial minority groups because white people maintain their position through racial oppression. The novels expose the existence of white privilege through showing how dominant and minority groups respond to racism in the American context. The theoretical framework explores racial inequality, the inability among white people to recognize racial inequality, and the ways in which white Americans are able to maintain inequality. I do so through two concepts central to this thesis: white fragility and white rage.

Within the American context, statistics of Pager, Western and Sugie's research reveal that institutional racism directly influences key socioeconomic metrics, such as annual income, imprisonment, and employment. It shows that black Americans in all areas are discriminated as a minority group. Firstly, according to their research, black people are imprisoned at a vastly higher percentage than white people: "Black men are about six times more likely than white people to be sent to prison and are likewise overrepresented among released prisoners" (195). These are statistics in the research used from Bureau of Justice Statistics. They show that black men are imprisoned at a higher rate, but this does not mean that black men commit more criminal activities.

Second, research conducted by Quillian on the subject of employment shows that white people are more likely to be invited for an interview, "On average, white applicants receive 36% more callbacks than equally qualified African Americans (95% confidence

interval of 25-47% more), based on random-effects meta-analysis of data since 1987, representing a substantial degree of direct discrimination" (10871). Furthermore, this research mentions an equal education between black people and white people, "What our results point to, however, is that at the initial point of entry – hiring decisions – African Americans remain substantially disadvantaged relative to equally qualified white people, and we see little indication of progress over time" (10874). This means that equally skilled black people and white people apply for employment, but often black people are not hired, for discriminatory reasons. This occurs on a national scale which shows that this pattern is within the hiring process, and that discrimination is normalized through hiring white people instead of black people despite equal qualifications.

Lastly, the annual income between black and white Americans vastly differs. Hanks, Solomon and Weller conducted research for Center for American Progress. Their report contains the data from the Federal Reserve: "In 2016, the median wealth for black and Hispanic families was $17,600 and $20,700, respectively, compared with white families' median wealth of $171,000 (2)". There are vast differences between financial resources. This does not mean that black people are less skilled and should earn less due to their ability. It shows that they earn less because of white privilege. Black people earn less because institutional racism creates structures in which white people receive most resources. Their research concludes with the following statement: "The black-white wealth gap is a product of intentional policy choices. The only way to correct this wrong is to make intentional systematic changes in response" (29). This quote shows that the dominant group has intentionally reinforced policies to maintain their positioning regarding wealth. However, before exploring how a dominant group is able to maintain their position, it is necessary to link racism to the inability or unwillingness of white people to recognize their dominant position in society.

In order to understand how racism functions on an institutional level, it is necessary to recognize that a society has dominant and minority groups. DiAngelo clarifies that the dominant group continually oppresses minority groups through systematic institutional authority. Racism, as DiAngelo defines it, is:

> A form of oppression in which one racial group dominates others. In the United States the dominant group is white, therefore racism is white racial and cultural prejudice

> and discrimination, supported intentionally or unintentionally by institutional power and authority, and used to the advantage of white people and disadvantage of people of color (108).

This specifically defines racism in an American context, and stresses that racial oppression occurs through institutions that support the dominant position of white people. This means that racial oppression is only possible through the institutional power belonging to the dominant group.

Racial oppression is connected to the existence of dominant and minority groups. However, racial discrimination and racial prejudice are not expressed through groups but individuals. This means that racial prejudice and racial discriminations often occur on an individual level. DiAngelo clarifies prejudice: "Learned prejudgment based on stereotypes about a social group that someone belongs to. Prejudice occurs at the individual level" (46). Discrimination also occurs on an individual level, but it is acting upon prejudiced ideas (52). This is often the misunderstanding by whites in America when they define racism. Philosopher Shannon Sullivan comments on the white liberal perspective on race:

> It's true that white supremacists, as well as white trash, sometimes and perhaps often think, say, and do viciously racist things. But so do good middle-class white people, and that is the point. There are no saints to be found. White liberals are just better at pretending that there are. (58)

This claims that white liberals too are in some form racist. They are part of a society where they are part of the dominant group which upholds white privilege. This is more difficult for white liberal Americans to see because they use an individual binary to judge whether people are moral or immoral based on racial prejudice and discrimination. These focus on the actions, words, and thoughts of an individual. This makes it difficult to recognize that they belong to a group that is dominant in society.

2.1 Cultural archive and Racism

According to the Dutch scholar Gloria Wekker, a "cultural archive" is a reference point for the dominant culture that is able to define racism and how it functions in society. As such, Wekker argues that 'the cultural archive' shapes the definition of racism for the dominant

group in society. Wekker's theory is based on racism in the Dutch society, but is also applicable to American or other cultural contexts, and is thus used as a framework to understand racism in this thesis. In *White Innocence*, Gloria Wekker explores how the dominant group in Dutch society functions to control the dominant narrative on race. Her research shows how minority groups are treated in present-day Dutch society, as the Dutch dominant culture oppresses minority groups through controlling the narrative of history. The dominant group is able to justify hundreds of years of colonialism by telling a specific grand narrative that does not address racial oppression. Wekker connects this to 'covert racism' in the Netherlands, and covert racism establishes a false self-representation of the dominant group. The Dutch dominant group is able to create a positive self-representation that reflects the virtue of innocence. In this passage, Wekker shows which grand narratives are being told within Dutch culture:

> Amid the grand narratives that mediate Dutch self-understanding – the perennial struggle against the water, the eighty-year armed resistance against being part of the Spanish Empire, the Golden Age, the struggle for religious freedom and pillarization – i.e. living within a catholic, a protestant, a socialist or a Humanist pillar as a way for people of different religious convictions to live peacefully together, the centrality of a way of negotiating to solve disputes, called *polderen* – none evokes race (20).

Wekker specifically comments on the Dutch context, and how it omits the subject of race. Historical involvement in subjects such as slavery are ignored to create a positive self-representation. Anousha Nzume provides an example how such self-representation functions in society and promotes the virtue of innocence. Dutch school textbooks ignore the subject of slavery during the Dutch Golden Age. The textbooks replace the word slavery with economic property (114), which implies a positive connotation that is in line with a positive outlook on Dutch merchant culture. This specific example reveals how the cultural archive produces a positive self-representation. It portrays a society which ignores historical racial oppression, and promotes a corrupted self-representation. Wekker elaborates on the functioning of a cultural archive:

> The cultural archive is located in many things, in the way we think, do things, and look at the world, in what we find (sexually) attractive, in how our affective and

> rational economies are organized and intertwined. Most important, it is between our ears and in our hearts and souls (19).

Wekker here lists three verbs that show how society operates: by thinking about, behaving within and perceiving society, the normative standard is established in society. The dominant white group is able to create this standard, and their perspective becomes ordinary. By the dominance of such perspectives, the standard can indeed omit a racial profile (59). It is from a white reference point that racism is defined. A cultural archive contains cultural assumptions that all Dutch-acculturated people have access to, and the cultural archive substantiates Dutch people in perceiving their traditions and history as innocent. Wekker argues this innocent dominant narrative is sustained through the process of socialization.

In America, the cultural archive socializes the population to embrace the ideas of 'new racism' which deliberately avoids the influence of race in society. Similar to the Dutch archive, the American cultural archive is thus filled with assumptions about race, and 'color-blind racism' legitimizes the existence of racism. Bonilla-Silva defines color-blind racism as the justification of racial injustices through a liberalist perception. The existence of racial inequality is supposedly not the result of race, but of different factors which are not related to race (1364). Dietrich and Bonilla-Silva give examples of color-blind racism that shows itself in three frames: abstract liberalism, cultural racism and minimization of racism (192). In abstract liberalism, "By framing race-related issues in the language of liberalism, whites can appear 'reasonable' and even 'moral' while opposing all practical approaches to deal with de facto racial inequality" (192). Dietrich and Bonilla-Silva provide an example where a white male allows segregation to exist, as all individuals have an equal opportunity to be successful in society. Therefore, it is an individual's responsibility to earn their place in society. Poverty and segregation by that logic are not due to institutional racism, but due to white people who perform better as their level of education exceeds that of black people. It is easier for companies to employ white people based on their individual level of education. This type of liberalist language assumes equality of opportunity for all, and it does not consider that racism occurs on an institutional level. According to Dietrich and Bonilla-Silva, cultural racism means that "the essence of the frame, as William Ryan (1976) pointed out a long time ago, is 'blaming the victim' – arguing that minorities' standing is the product of their lack of effort, loose family organization, and inappropriate values" (193). Black Americans in this frame are to blame for their position in society, and it is not the result of racial oppression.

The third frame is referred to as minimization of racism: "White people do not believe that minorities' social standing today is the product of discrimination. Instead, they believe it is due to 'their culture', 'class', 'legacies from slavery', 'the culture of segregation', 'lack of social capital', 'poverty', and so forth. In other words, it is anything but racism" (194). This means that institutional racism is replaced by a different element that causes inequality. Thus inequality is acknowledged, and it remains seemingly natural that white people have more resources. However, there is no realization that race is the decisive factor in the unequal distribution of resources. Therefore, segregation and poverty are caused by anything except institutional racism which upholds white privilege. Racial inequality and the existence of dominant and minority groups are contributed to a concept which is not race-related. All three frames omit the possibility that the minority position in society is related to race.

2.2 White Fragility and White Rage

'White fragility' and 'white rage' are defined by DiAngelo and Anderson as instruments that maintain racial inequality in America. White fragility is coined by DiAngelo. In *White Fragility*, she defines this term:

> The smallest amount of racial stress is intolerable- the mere suggestion that being white has meaning often triggers a range of defensive responses. These include emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and withdrawal from stress-inducing situations. These responses work to reinstate white equilibrium as they repel the challenge, return our racial comfort, and maintain our dominance within the racial hierarchy (2).

This means that white fragility is a reaction of white people when they are confronted in a racially stressful situation. These confrontations evokes emotions, and the individual feels an unfair judgment of being labeled an immoral and racist person (2). This response is more typical for white liberals, as they experience such a confrontation as unjust because it contradicts their self-representation of innocence. DiAngelo comments on this liberal position, "whites who position themselves as liberal often opt to protect what we perceive as our moral reputations, rather than to recognize or change our participation in systems of inequity and domination" (248-249). This means that their response comes from the understanding that they are not part of a dominant group which upholds white privilege in America. Therefore, any association with racism produces White fragility. This hostile

response exists because white people often do not comprehend that Western ideology is greatly influenced by individualism and objectivity (9).

Three factors that sustain 'white fragility' are segregation, universalism and individualism. Segregation and living in a mainly white area, does not stimulate a discussion about racism, "Because white people live primarily segregated lives in a white-dominated society, they receive little or no authentic information about racism and are thus unprepared to think about it critically or with complexity" (58). This also shows that a white environment is hardly challenged on their understanding of racism, as the dominant white perspective on race is socialized. Universalism and individualism pertain to the following ideology: "The belief in objectivity, coupled with positioning white people as outside of culture (and thus the norm for humanity), allows white people to view themselves as universal humans who can represent all of human experience" (59). This shows that white people generally do not think of themselves as a specific white culture, but judge other minority groups, because they view themselves as the only racial group to have an objective perspective.

'White rage' is defined by Anderson as follows: "White rage is not about visible violence, but rather it works its way through the courts, the legislatures, and a range of government bureaucracies –Working the halls of power, it can achieve its ends far more effectively, far more destructively" (3). Therefore, white rage functions on an institutional level. Carol Anderson shows how the binary between dominant and minority groups is sustained through a self-representation that reinforces the narrative of white innocence. This concept is not an aggressive form of anger, but it is embedded within government institutions. It functions to uphold the white dominant political position and to tell a narrative that makes white people morally superior to minority groups (4). Furthermore, the trigger for white rage is black advancement (3). The dominant position of white people is threatened by black advancement, as the black minority group can outgrow their minority position in society through gaining political power. This means that white people protect their resources and institutional power through oppressing black people through what Anderson calls white rage. It oppresses a black community when they show advancement; as this minority group gains influence they threaten the dominant position. White rage protects white privilege on an institutional level. Anderson shows how it keeps black Americans in the minority group:

> It is not the mere presence of black people that is the problem; rather, it is blackness with ambition, with drive, with purpose, with aspirations, and with demands for full and equal citizenship. It is blackness that refuses to accept subjugation, to give up. A formidable array of policy assaults and legal contortions has consistently punished black resilience, black resolve. (3-4)

According to Anderson's analysis, white people do not allow black people to change their position in society, and black people are forced to play a minority role in society. Black people are institutionally oppressed to partake in society as unequal American citizens. When black people do not participate in their given minority role, white people respond through white rage. Anderson shows how this is accomplished for instance through the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson in 2014. It reveals how white people dominate the news coverage that supports a morally superior self-representation to black Americans. Ferguson's killing resulted in a nationwide protest by the black American community against police violence, and national media coverage created binaries between black people and white people. Anderson comments on these binaries:

> The operative question seemed to be whether African Americans were justified in their rage, even if that rage manifested itself in the most destructive, nonsensical ways. Again and again, across America's ideological spectrum from Fox News to MSNBC, the issue was framed in terms of black rage. (2)

This incident expressed itself in a dominant narrative that builds a self-representation supportive to uphold the image of white innocence. This narrative suggests that white people should be the dominant group to control institutions, as they are more capable and rational than minority groups. Black Americans have a different place in the grand narrative. Anderson mentions this narrative which is embedded within the cultural archive:

> It's the endless narratives about a culture of black poverty that devalues education, hard work, family, and ambition… all of which have been disproved but remain foundational in American Lore.

White people have the ability to create these narratives, and the power through media and institutions to support and agree with these narratives. Therefore, white rage functions on an institutional level, as it controls the grand narrative which is spread throughout institutions and as such becomes normative. This way, it appears as self-evident that dominant groups are dominant and minority groups are not.

White fragility and white rage sustain white privilege, and they operate in conflict with racial confrontation. On the one hand, white fragility functions on an individual level, as many white people experience the individual binary which judges them as an immoral individual. This confrontation triggers an emotional response that reduces the functioning of racism to a personal level. It expresses itself through face-to-face communication when white people are verbally confronted with being racist. White fragility functions on an individual level because white people respond to racial confrontation on an individual basis from a universalist or individualist perspective. However, white rage functions on an institutional level, as it functions through oppressing black advancement by creating narratives that support white innocence and a narrative that normalizes the minority position of black people. This happens through institutions and media which are able to create a narrative about black Americans.

The next chapter discusses how white rage and white fragility are revealed in the novels by Adichie and Beatty, and how these terms allow the reader to grasp how institutional racism functions in America. The narratives reveal how white people protect their dominant position through white rage and white fragility. Specifically, *Americanah* is a novel that leads a reader to see how white fragility functions in society. The protagonist, Ifemelu, is in dialogue with white liberals about race, and therefore, she experiences their emotional response. The protagonist in *The Sellout* leads the reader towards redefining racism though exposing white rage. He is part of an all-black American community where there is no interaction with white people, but the novel exposes how racism is experienced through white rage.

3. White Fragility in *Americanah*

This chapter shows how Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Americanah* embraces an understanding of racism which operates on an institutional level. This type of definition focuses on the influence racism has on a group of people and how it is normalized that white people are the dominant group in society. The novel revolves around Ifemelu's process of getting to know and adjusting to US society, as she narrates her growing understanding of white fragility. The novel exposes the racial structures of new racism in American society. On her path through college and work in the US, Ifemelu engages with white liberals and is led to see how they find it difficult to recognize their dominant position in society. Through these relationships the reader sees how white privilege is maintained in subtle ways that are nonetheless highly visible to Ifemelu because they disadvantage her. This chapter shows how Ifemelu develops an understanding of white privilege and comes to see how white people respond to racial confrontation with white fragility.

3.1 Ifemelu before migrating to the US

At the beginning of the novel, the reader is introduced to Ifemelu's understanding of minority and dominant groups. Nigeria socializes the importance of language and education, and these are key components that create dominant and minority groups in society. Berning points out a distinction between standard English and Igbo. In the novel, these two languages reveal how individuals reject or accept their culture of origin (3). Rejection or acceptance is in line with the position one holds in society. The standard English language has a strong connotation with a dominant position in Nigeria. Ifemelu's father and her friend Obinze show that the use of standard English belongs within the hierarchy that socializes dominant and minority groups in Nigerian society. Ifemelu is raised in a household with a father who is intelligent but did not have the opportunity to pursue further formal education due to insufficient financial support: "He talked often of how he could not go to university because he had to find a job to support his siblings, and how people he was cleverer than in secondary school now had doctorates" (47). Ifemelu frequently hears her father comment that his level of education has held him back to achieve his full potential in society. This means that Ifemelu is exposed to the idea that education promises success in life. In Nigeria, people who can afford education are able to join the dominant group. Ifemelu reflects how her father uses language to compensate his position in society: "He was haunted by what he did not have – a

postgraduate degree, an upper-middle-class life – and so his affected words became his armour. She preferred it when he spoke Igbo; it was the only time he seemed unconscious of his own anxieties" (48). Her father uses English as a tool to validate his position in society. However, Ifemelu comments that Igbo is the language in which his fears are stripped away. Her father chooses to use English, because he feels it can give him authority.

Obinze reveals how the English language functions socially to create dominant and minority groups in Nigeria. He is a successful business man, and he shows that the dominant group uses education and English to establish their position. At an elite party, he discusses education with the wealthiest people of Nigeria. However, he feels out of place because he disagrees with the social structures that create dominant and minority groups, "Of course he, too, wanted the best for his daughter. Sometimes, like now, he felt like an intruder in his new circle, of people who believed that the latest schools, the latest curriculums, would ensure the wholeness of their children" (29). This shows the promise of education to wealthy Nigerians, and it is the British curriculum which is most admired. This is also reflected in language use and how it creates a hierarchical structure.

> "Yes, Nne," she said, and, turning to Obinze, repeated her daughter's words in an exaggerated British accent. "Mummy, may I have one please? You see how she sounds so posh? Ha! My daughter will go places. That is why all our money is going to Brentwood school" (241)

The daughter of Nne is destined to "go places" (241), and this is possible through the wealth of her parents, who provide her an English education. The British accent is connected to wealth and success, and the promise of "wholeness".

In Nigeria, Ifemelu comprehends that education and speech add to creating dominant and minority positions. On the other hand, in the American context, she does not know that race creates these groups. Before coming to the US, there are two American television shows that she watches, *The Cosby Show* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. These shows are her initial introduction to racial structures in America. The black fathers on these television shows are wealthy and have well-respected occupations. Someone who is not familiar with American society, can watch these tv shows and believe that the wealthy positions of these fathers indicate an absence of white privilege in America. Race does not seem to influence dominant or minority groups. These shows have a considerable effect on Ifemelu, as she

desires to be part of such a family. "And so she began to dream. She saw herself in a house from *The Cosby Show*, in a school with students holding notebooks miraculously free of wear and crease" (99). She is not aware of the complex dynamics between dominant and minority groups in America, and at this stage she imagines herself being part of a black US American family.

3.2 Ifemelu in America

Ifemelu's exposure to institutional racism starts when she moves to America. She becomes acquainted with the racial hierarchy in the US, in which black people are stereotyped and are on the bottom of the hierarchal order. Ifemelu is introduced to this hierarchy when she temporarily lives with Aunty Uju before starting university. A conversation with Jane, Uju's Venezuelan neighbour, elucidates how 'cultural racism' functions through blaming the victim for their minority position. This idea exists even among minority groups. Jane speaks to Ifemelu about raising a child in the United States as an immigrant:

> We pay good money for her to go to private school because the public schools here are useless. Marlon says we'll move to the suburbs soon so they can go to a better school. Otherwise she will start behaving like these black Americans." "What do you mean?" "Don't worry, you will understand with time" (113).

Within the boundaries of these racial structures, black people go to public school, and white people live in the suburbs and go to "better school". As a non-American immigrant, Jane introduces Ifemelu to the racial hierarchy in American. According to Jane, black Americans are the least desirable category in this racial hierarchy. This perspective contrasts starkly with Ifemelu's previous exposure to *The Cosby Show*, and at this moment, Ifemelu is not able to see a racial hierarchy in America.

According to Caroline Levine, Ifemelu is introduced to an American society in which race is the deciding factor in creating a hierarchy in society, in which white people are always dominant, and black people are always the minority (595). The conversation with Jane illustrates this hierarchy where white people are able to create a negative stereotype of black Americans. Amonyeze comments on these stereotypes, "It appears stereotypical images of immigrants largely persist because the dominant White culture perpetuates them to preserve its political, economic, and social structure as diversity threatens the White male majority"

(4). This implies that the reinforcement of negative stereotypes through cultural racism strengthens the dominant position of white people.

Ifemelu is a member of a minority group in America, but she only discovers this at university. She goes to register as an International student on campus, and her interaction with a white woman, Cristina Tomas, makes Ifemelu aware of her Nigerian accent. However, Cristina Tomas chooses to speak slowly to Ifemelu because she assumes that is needed for Ifemelu to comprehend the conversation. This passage illustrates Ifemelu's realization that she is being treated differently because of her speech.

> She realized that Cristina Tomas was speaking like that because of her, her foreign accent, and she felt for a moment like a small child, lazy-limbed and drooling. 'I speak English,' she said. 'I bet you do', Cristina Tomas said. 'I just don't know how well'. (133)

The dominant culture socializes Americans to associate an English Nigerian accent with a minority group that needs to be addressed in simple terms. Cristina adapts her speech in order to communicate with Ifemelu. This adjusted treatment makes Ifemelu feel inferior. Cristina's response could be based on her segregated upbringing, or her conditioning in her job to speak to international students in a dumbed down manner. Cristina associates Ifemelu's accent with poor English, as it differs from the norm of the dominant group. Cristina's response has a negative influence on Ifemelu's confidence:

> She shrank like a dried life. She had spoken English all her life, led the debating society in secondary school, and always thought the American twang inchoate; she should not have cowered and shrunk, but she did. And in the following weeks, as autumn's coolness descended, she began to practice an American accent (133-134).

Ifemelu's native language is English, but, in America, this is not acknowledged. She is not considered of equal status by Cristina. This confrontation with the dominant group's ideology and lens starts Ifemelu's process of getting introduced to the subtle racism of the dominant culture.

Augustine Nwanyanwu comments on the effect migration has on characters in *Americanah*: "Therefore, buying into the American dream comes with a sense of trauma. Migration bring with it loss of identity, depersonalization, and the need self-protectively to submerge oneself in inauthenticity" (398). Nwanyanwu comments that Ifemelu accepts the

American dream by trying to become part of the dominant group through adjusting her speech. He calls this act traumatic, as Ifemelu willingly choses to reject her accent which is part of her identity in order to become perceived as an authentic American.

Ifemelu's migration causes her to adjust to the normalized standards of the dominant group in American culture. After this encounter, she starts studying American culture:

> She hungered to understand everything about America, to wear a new, knowing skin right away: to support a team at the Super Bowl, understand what a Twinkie was and what sports "lockouts" meant, measure in ounces and square feet, order a "muffin" without thinking that it really was a cake, and say " I 'scored' a deal" without feeling silly (135).

She comments on daily rituals, situations and types of speech which are unfamiliar to her. The culture is new to her as an immigrant. However, to comprehend this culture, and her position as a black woman, she starts studying American history.

> But in those weeks when she sat, knees tucked underneath her, on an armchair in the lower level or at a table upstairs with the fluorescent light reflecting off the book's pages, she finally understood… And as she read, America's mythologies began to take on meaning, America's tribalisms – race, ideology and region – became clear (136).

Her engagement in American literature gives her understanding of these traditions. History reveals that minority and dominant groups have always been established through race. She studies America's 'race, ideology and religion'. Through focusing on these themes, she categorizes minority and dominant groups and develops an understanding of America's cultural archive through its history. She also reads a minority black perspective on race, through James Baldwin's critiques of racial structures in America (135). Through this study of and exposure to racial structures in America, she changes her previous understanding that black people are equal, which she learned from the tv shows that she watched as a child in Nigeria. She understands that she is part of a minority group.

When Ifemelu becomes a nanny, and interacts more with white liberals, she sees how white people are not able to see their dominant position. Once she becomes employed for a privileged white American family, Ifemelu sees how white liberals respond to racial

confrontation through white privilege. She comes to understand that white liberals are unable or unwilling to acknowledge their position in society. She resides in the family's expensive house when she opens the door for a carpet cleaner. He is surprised this luxurious house belongs to her. However, he quickly realizes she is the nanny, "It was like a conjuror's trick, the shift disappearance of his hostility. His face sank into a grin. She, too, was the help. The universe was once again arranged as it should be" (166). Ifemelu experiences that race does matter, and there is an expectancy of a racial hierarchy. Her relationship with the family emphasizes how white privilege works in American society. Amonyeze specifically mentions the roles of two white characters from this family, "The crux of the matter is that sympathetic characters Kimberly and Curt, as privileged middle-class White people, are educated not to notice how different social reality is for minorities and the lower class" (4). Amonyeze says that these characters are socialized with a color-blind perspective. However, Ifemelu immediately sees that race matters to a carpenter in every-day life in America.

Ifemelu starts to see the racial structures of new racism and grasps how white fragility functions through her relationship with Kimberly, Laura and Curt. Kimberly is a white liberal who seems to be unaware of her dominant position in American society. She is actively involved with charities fighting poverty in Africa. Ifemelu comments on how poverty is experienced by Kimberly, "Poverty was a gleaming thing; she could not conceive of poor people being vicious or nasty, because poverty had canonized them, and the greatest saints were the foreign poor" (149). Kimberly is attracted to poverty, as the poor represent the virtue of innocence. She helps these people through her charity, and from a white liberal perspective, Kimberly is not a racist because her involvement with the poor gives her the moral high ground. Furthermore, she does not commit intentional acts of violence, but helps people of color in poverty. From a white liberal perspective, Kimberly is a moral woman and not a racist. Kimberly, Ifemelu and her sister Laura have a conversation about Nigeria, and Laura continually focuses on corruption in Nigeria, and how much money Nigerian immigrants in the US send back to their country, "It was an aggressive, unaffectionate interest; strange indeed, to pay so much attention to something you did not like" (163). Ifemelu notices that Laura is focused on the negative aspects of Nigerian culture. This connects Laura to the element of colorblindness of cultural racism, as she dehumanizes Nigerian culture through focusing on its otherness. Kimberly recognizes this as offensive and apologizes to Ifemelu. This is how Ifemelu interprets her apology:

> At first, Ifemelu thought Kimberly's apologizing sweet, even unnecessary, but she had begun to feel a flash of impatience, because Kimberly's repeated apologies were tinged with self-indulgence, as though she believed that she could, with apologies, smooth all the scalloped surfaces of the world" (163).

Kimberly's response offends Ifemelu because she feels that racism is ignored or wiped away through an apology.

Laura cannot see that racism establishes her white privileged position. This means that she does not recognize that racism operates on an institutional level. Laura does recognize that racism functions on an individual level. Her understanding how racism functions becomes clear when Laura meets Ifemelu at Kimberly's house. Laura has a conversation with Ifemelu and tells her that she met a friendly Nigerian doctor**:**

> We get there and it turns out a new doctor has just joined the practice and he's Nigerian and he came by and said hello to us. He reminded me of you, Ifemelu. I read on the Internet that Nigerians are the most educated immigrant group in this country. Of course, it says nothing about the millions who live on less than a dollar a day back in your country, but when I met the doctor I thought of that article and of you and other privileged Africans who are here in this country (167-168).

Laura has stereotypical ideas about Nigeria, and she thinks Ifemelu and the doctor are privileged because they live in America. In this view, the doctor and Ifemelu were able to escape the poverty and corruption of Nigeria, and Ifemelu is privileged that she is allowed to work for a wealthy American family. In this passage, Laura does not mention her own privileged position in American society. Moreover, Laura sees herself as a helper by giving Ifemelu the opportunity to make a living in the US. From this perspective, Laura is a decent and moral person. Laura continues the conversation and she comments on the roles of black Americans. Laura makes a distinction between the attitude of an African student she met during graduate school and a black American, "She was wonderful, and she didn't get along with the African American woman in our class at all. She didn't have all those issues" (168). Ifemelu responds, "Maybe when the African American's father was not allowed to vote because he was black, the Ugandan's father was running for parliament or studying at Oxford" (168).

Ifemelu also connects this to Laura's lack of historical knowledge, "I just think it's a simplistic comparison to make. You need to understand a bit more history" (168). Ifemelu sees that Laura cannot acknowledge that the 'issues' of the black American woman might derive from racism which is institutional and consistent throughout history. This passage shows the reader how a privileged white woman is influenced by 'new racism' through the rearticulating of history. Laura does not connect history with her own privileged position, nor does she see how history affects the attitude of black Americans. Racism has been dealt with and is of the past, and she cannot see why the 'issues' are relevant today.

Curt is Ifemelu's white boyfriend. He shows her how a white liberal uses white fragility to respond to racial confrontation and minimizes the influence of racism. This happens when he does not recognize the importance of race in American context. They have a discussion about race, as he comments on Ifemelu's magazines.

> 'This magazine's kind of racially skewed,' he said. 'What?' 'Come on. Only black women featured?' 'You're serious,' she said. He looked puzzled. 'Yeah.' 'We are going to the bookstore.' 'What?' 'I need to show you something. Don't ask.' (294).

Curt does not see that most beauty magazines are made for white women. Ifemelu is surprised by his observation, and she brings him to a bookstore. There, she exposes the number of white models in the magazines, and Curt unwillingly admits the overwhelming truth that white women are over-represented, "'Okay, babe, okay, I didn't mean for it to be such a big deal,' he said" (295).

Curt has been socialized to see white as the normalized standard of society. Curt thus becomes the personification of white fragility in the novel, as his reaction shows how white fragility is a response to a racially stressful confrontation. In their relationship, he is often oblivious to racism. This surprises Ifemelu, and she has to show Curt that he has been raised within a cultural archive which normalizes whiteness as the norm for society. She comments on his inability to recognize racism, "There were, simply, times he saw and times that he was unable to see" (294).

When Curt invites Ifemelu to meet his aunt, Ifemelu experiences his aunt as over-friendly. Curt comments his aunt would have responded the same to a blonde Russian, and Ifemelu disagrees, "Of course his aunt would not have done the same thing with a blonde Russian. A blonde Russian was white, and his aunt would not feel the need to prove that she

liked people who looked like the blonde Russian" (294). From Ifemelu's perspective, it has become a moral issue. His aunt felt the need to prove herself not to be a racist, as many white liberals perceive the definition of racism is on an individual level not an institutional level. The aunt is over-friendly in order to prove she is not a racist individually, but in doing so, she shows that she is part of an oppressive racial structure. Unlike the aunt or Curt, Ifemelu notices this.

After the discussion in the bookstore about the magazine cover models, Ifemelu sends an email to her friend Wambui, and shares how racism influenced their relationship. This friend encourages her to start a blog on race in America, and Ifemelu becomes motivated to build an audience.

> But telling Wambui what happened was not satisfying enough; she longed for other listeners, and she longed to hear the stories of other. How many other people chose silence? How many other people had become black in America? (296)

Ifemelu wants an audience to hear and share how racism influences lives in America. One way in which it influenced her life was her desire to adjust her speech. Ifemelu decides not to speak with an American accent after ending her relationship with Curt. She has seen how white people define and respond to racism during her time as a nanny. Ifemelu recognizes that racism extends beyond individual morality, and it pressures minority groups to conform to a normalized standard. Amonyeze comments on the implications of this decision, by showing that white people perceive immigrants as a threat to white identity because their language and culture have different values. However, he shows that these fears of white people are irrational, and stem from a lack of interaction with minority group members (4). White anxieties result into assimilation of immigrants to meet the language requirements of white identity. Ifemelu adjusted her accent, and through doing this, she tries to meet white language standards, and this decision makes her feel inauthentic:

> It was convincing, the accent. She had perfected, … but the accent creaked with consciousness, it was an act of will. (175)

It took a conscious effort to speak with an American accent. Furthermore, her ability to speak with an American accent is noticed and complimented by the dominant group. Her decision to stop her unnatural speech happens when a sales marketeer praises her American accent.

During a telephone conversation, he asks Ifemelu where she is from, and he is surprised she answers Nigeria:

> Wow. Cool. You sound totally American." "Thank you." Only after she hung up did she begin to feel the stain of a burgeoning shame spreading all over her, for thanking him … She had won; Cristina Tomas. (175)

The compliment offends Ifemelu, as she connects this remark with Cristina Tomas who has motivated her to assimilate to the dominant standard. Through acknowledging this defeat, Ifemelu reverses the 'trauma' of an immigrant. Nwanyanwu clarifies that this 'trauma' is connected to the loss of identity by immigrants through adapting to a new dominant culture (398). This decision is critical because Ifemelu knows the importance of speech within a society from her upbringing in Nigeria. The compliment makes Ifemelu realize that she has been successful, but in this pursuit, she has lost a part of her identity. Amonyeze says the following, "Eventually Ifemelu discovers that these complimentary remarks are condescending and decides to shed her American accent" (6). The compliment is offensive because it compliments her willingness and ability to adapt to the standards of the dominant white culture. Ifemelu is aware that her assimilation derives from these standards that promise acceptance directly after the conversation ends, and she refers to Cristina Tomas as the standard of the dominant culture. The following passage shows how Ifemelu feels after she stops assimilating her speech.

> She first spoke without the American accent that afternoon at Thirtieth Street Station… This was truly her; this was the voice with which she would speak if she were woken up from a deep sleep during an earthquake (175).

The control which the dominant group has over Ifemelu changes, as this decision makes her cognizant that her speech is associated with a minority group in American society. The dominant group promises that assimilation is connected to success in society, and this process of assimilation is normalized by white standards. Conformity is encouraged because it does not threaten white privilege, as conformity sustains the dominant position by adaption to white standards. This means that her decision shows she has taken agency by choosing her Nigerian accent. She is not dictated how to behave by the dominant culture, and this determination is in contradiction with the expected behavior socialized by the dominant culture.

Her email exchange with her friend Wambui triggers Ifemelu to start the blog 'Raceteenth or Curious Observations by a Non-American Black on the Subject of Blackness in America'. The blog is used as a platform by the black community to express the existence of 'new racism' and how colorblind-racism functions in America. Her blog becomes well-known, and Ifemelu is asked to give corporate presentations about racial relationships in America. Her audience is all-white during her first presentation:

> Her presentation was titled "How to talk about race with colleagues of other races", but who, she wondered, would they be talking to, since they were all white? Perhaps the janitor was black. (304)

This passage shows that Ifemelu is aware that she is speaking to an all-white audience. The segregated audience makes her reflect on the topic of her presentation. The topic of her presentation is about the influence of race in American society, and that racism causes segregation which is exactually what she sees within her audience. The responses which Ifemelu receives after her presentation from the white audience are telling for how white fragility functions in America. Their responses to her racial observations in America are aggressive.

> That evening she received an e-mail: YOUR TALK WAS BALONEY. YOU ARE A RACIST. YOU SHOULD BE GRATEFUL WE LET YOU INTO THIS COUNTRY. That e-mail, written in all capital letters, was a revelation. The point of diversity workshops, or multicultural talks, was not to inspire any real change but to leave people feeling good about themselves. (305)

The individual who wrote this message labels Ifemelu a racist. The writer can make such a claim from a white liberal perspective on racism. This perspective makes a division between 'moral' and 'immoral' people, and Ifemelu belongs to the latter. Clearly, the writer of this email is offended by Ifemelu's diversity workshop. The emotional and aggressive email is effective as Ifemelu changes the intention of her talks to make white people feel "good about themselves" (305). The emotional reaction closes the opportunity for any discourse how racism functions in America, as white individuals think they are confronted with an individual binary that could label them racist. The emotional response shows how white

fragility expresses itself under racial confrontation. Ifemelu now changes her message to reinforce a positive self-representation of white people. Her message on racism depends on the audience.

> And so… she began to say what they wanted to hear, none of which she would ever write on her blog, because she knew that the people who read her blog were not the same people who attended her diversity workshops. During her talks, she said: "America has made great progress for which we should be very proud." In her blog she wrote: Racism should never have happened and so you don't get a cookie for reducing it. (305)

Ifemelu starts to use the elements of 'new racism', as she emphasizes America's racial 'progress' in society. She omits the fact that institutional racism continues to influence lives of non-white people and the oppression of minority groups. This means that Ifemelu does not yet understand completely that softening her message about race for a white audience is in fact a result of white fragility and its pressures. She chooses to communicate a different message on race, and this shows that white fragility is an effective tool to ignore an open discussion with white about race in America.

Years after her relationship with Curt, Ifemelu is able to articulate a definition of racism where white privilege is sustained through instructional power. Furthermore, she is able to recognize white fragility. This is seen at a party for democrats when Obama became the party's candidate. She is in a discussion with another person of color from Haiti who ignores the existence of racism in America. Ifemelu comments on white fragility which she experienced during her relationship with Curt:

> We don't even tell our white partners the small things that piss us off and the things we wish they understood better, because we're worried they will say we're overreacting, or we're being too sensitive… We let it pile up inside our heads and when we come to nice liberal dinners like this, we say race doesn't matter because that's what we're supposed to say, to keep our nice liberal friends comfortable" (291).

Ifemelu understands that white fragility is a reaction from white people when race is discussed. She responds by not telling white people how her minority role influences her life. Ifemelu knows what she is expected to say in order to reduce racial confrontation with white

people, as she does not want her 'nice liberal friends' to feel uncomfortable. She is expected to communicate a narrative that is post-racial, or ignore the influence of race in America. However, in her last months in American, she does respond to white fragility. In a barbershop, a white customer called Kelsey enters, and Ifemelu recognizes what produces white fragility. "She recognized in Kelsey the nationalism of liberal Americans who copiously criticized America but did not like you to do so; they expected you to be silent and grateful, and always reminded you of how much better than wherever you had come from America was" (189). The protagonist sees that Kelsey has a white liberal perspective which becomes clearer once they discuss the interpretation of a novel about Africa. Kelsey explains how much the novel represents life in Africa, whereas Ifemelu strongly disagrees and points out that the book is written from a European perspective (189). Kelsey is surprised at Ifemelu's confrontational reaction:

> Kelsey looked startled; she had not expected a minilecture. Then, she said kindly, "Oh, well, I see why you would read the novel like that." "And I see why you would read it like you did," Ifemelu said… She could have blogged about Kelsey, too, this girl who somehow believed that she was miraculously neutral in how she read books, while other people read emotionally. (190)

Ifemelu is not quiet anymore, but she sees that white people like Kelsey do not see whiteness in racial terms, and this gives Kelsey a perspective she believes is universal. Kelsey considers herself an objective reader, because her white perspective has been normalized throughout society. Ifemelu sees that Kelsey views herself as an objective judge of culture. This means that Kelsey does not see that her white people are also influenced by their own place in society. She is not an objective judge because her reference point is white culture. Ifemelu recognizes this perspective in Kelsey.

3.3 Ifemelu back in Nigeria

When Ifemelu leaves America, she stops writing about race, as race does not influence the lives in Nigerian society. She speaks to Obinze about her writing:

> "So you still blogging?" "Yes." "About race?" "No, just about life. Race doesn't really work here. I feel like I got off the plane in Lagos and stopped being black." (475-476)

Ifemelu shows that race is not part of the every-day life in Nigeria, whereas in America she was constantly confronted as being a member of a racial minority. In America, she has developed an awareness of 'white fragility' and can identify how it sustains white privilege. She comments that back in Nigeria race loses its relevance. The reader is invited to see that race is specifically relevant to American culture.

4. White rage in *The Sellout*

The Sellout begins in the Supreme Court in Washington where the protagonist called Me is on trial for racism. During this trial, two characters, Me and the black Justice, confront each other with a different perspective on how racism functions in America. 'Me' is the label the protagonist is called by, and he remains otherwise nameless throughout the novel, although he is referred to as 'bonbon' by friends from high school. The protagonist is a black American, and he reflects on the reason of accusation against him, "'Well, I've whispered 'Racism' in a post-racial world'" (262). The black Justice says the following to Me, and what he is accused of:

> Racial segregation? Slavery? Why you bitch-made motherfucker, I know goddamn well your parents raised you better than that! (24).

The protagonist reintroduces slavery and racial segregation in a fictional city called Dickens, as he tries to use segregation and slavery to give the minority group agency over their situation:

> I'm a farmer: we segregate in an effort to give every tree, every plant, every poor Mexican, every poor nigger, a chance for equal access to sunlight and water; we make sure every living organism had room to breathe (214)

He takes the idea of segregation from the dominant group which used this racial structure to oppress and control black Americans, and he uses segregation and slavery not to oppress but empower the black population of Dickens.

4.1 Different perspectives on White rage

The protagonist, the Black justice, Hominy Jenkins and Foy Cheshire are all black Americans characters in the novel. Through their reaction to the erasing of Dickens, they lead the reader to see that individuals respond differently to White rage, and the agency is a central element to identify the difference in their responses. Alfred Mele defines agency as follows, "Agency is the property of being an agent. An agent is an entity that acts" (61). The

characters all show a willingness to act against racism in society. This means they want to be an agent who confronts racism in America. However, it is their understanding of racism whether it functions on an individual or institutional level that gives the character agency to respond effectively.

The Black justice cannot see that white rage exists, and he cannot recognize that Me tries to give the Black community of Dickens agency through old racial structures. His response in the Supreme Court shows that he does not understand how Black Americans in Dickens are oppressed. The protagonist, Me, responds through a mission to re-establish Dickens. He implements racial segregation and slavery, as he thinks the whole community gains agency through these old racial structures. Hominy Jenkins responds through using racial oppression for his own benefit. Hominy was a former tv character for a racist television show. Tourists used to visit Dickens to meet Hominy. However, once Dickens disappears, his recognition and fame disappear. Hominy responds by joining Me on the quest to re-establish Dickens so that he regains the recognition he desires. Foy Cheshire is a leader of the black community in Dickens. He responds to white rage by confronting the dominant position of white people. He wants black people to become dominant, but he cannot see that white rage is deeply established within institutions. He is not able to see that white rage disables black people from becoming the dominant group in society. In the conclusion, each character's perspective of racism is linked to an understanding that racism or operates an individual level, or that is sustains white privilege on an institutional level.

4.2 The black Justice

During the trail in the beginning of the novel, Me and the black Justice confront each other with a different understanding of how racism functions in America. The black Justice demonstrates elements of 'new racism' in American context, as he cannot acknowledge the current influence of racism, and he has a positive white self-representation according to Me. The narrator, on the other hand, is aware of the elements of 'new racism', and he knows that racism originates from the cultural archive to produces a positive white self- representation. The narrator refers to himself as 'Me' during his case which is called "Me vs the United States". During the trial, the black Justice accuses Me of violating amendments that uphold racial equality in America, and Me responds through acknowledging that he defines racial equality differently. Me is on trial, and the black Justice clarifies the reason for his accusation in court:

> The black Justice moves in too close to his microphone… our differences are light-years apart. He's demanding to know how it is that in this day and age a black man can violate the hallowed principles of the Thirteenth Amendment by owning a slave. How could I willingly ignore the Fourteenth Amendment and argue that sometimes segregation brings people together. (23)

The black Justice thinks that the thirteenth and fourteenth amendment uphold equality amongst all Americans. He sees that slavery and racial segregation are reintroduced by Me, and this threatens the promise of the amendments. The black Justice is unaware that these amendments sustain the dominant position of white people, as these amendments claim an end to racial inequality. This means that the black justice is influenced by an understanding of racism from a white liberal perspective, as it reflects white amnesia. This concept shows that history is changed through an interpretation that is able to omit racial injustice. The Black justice sees these amendments as a milestone in history that put an end to racial oppression. Therefore, he interrupts history through a perspective that omits racial injustice, and this shows the influence of white amnesia.

Me recognizes that the black Justice is influenced by a positive white self-representation, and that socialization produced a narrative of history that promotes the dominant white position. This is an element of 'new racism', as the interpretation of history omits a negative representation of white people. The following quote shows how Me critiques the black Justice, and how his view of history is influenced by 'the system' and ignores racial injustice:

> Like all people who believe in the system.... He wants to believe Shakespeare wrote all these plays, that Lincoln fought the Civil War to free slaves… But I'm no Panglossian American. (23)

Me comments on 'the system' that produces a narrative which promotes a positive white-self-representation. Me sees that the black Justice is influenced by the 'rearticulating of some racial practice of the past', as the black Justice confronts Me with creating racial inequality through referring to the violation of the amendments. The black Justice believes the narrative

of a positive white self-representation, and Me links this narrative with the interpretation of history. An example is how Abraham Lincoln, a white male, is portrayed as the rescuer of black American slaves. However, Anderson mentions a different narrative which is omitted. This is Lincoln's accusation against black people for starting the war, as he thought that the war only began because of the presence of black slaves in America. Lincoln demanded black people to immediate migrate to Panama (9). The protagonist assumes the black Justice believes the narration about Lincoln which omits racial confrontation.

The black Justice cannot comprehend Me's quest to confront racial inequality in Dickens. The citizens of Dickens are affected by racism, and there is oppression that keeps black people in their minority position. Delmagori emphasizes how black people in Dickens are kept in this minority role, "However, through his protagonist, Beatty satirizes white privilege, and it is clear that whiteness and white supremacy are the main source of the oppression that non-white people in Dickens face" (419). This shows that racial inequality is sustained through institutional racism, and the black Justice cannot comprehend Me's actions as a he seems to view American society post-racial.

4.3 Me

Me's understanding of racism is that it expresses itself on an institutional level. This becomes evident to the reader when he comments on the phrase "Equal Justice Under Law" which is engraved on the building in the United States Supreme Court at Washington D.C.:

> People have fought and died trying to get some of that "Equal Justice Under Law" advertised so blithely on the outside of this building, but innocent or guilty, most offenders never make it this far…And if I believed in such slogans, I'd have to say I've had more than my share of justice, but I don't. (9).

Me sees that the phrase lacks credibility. "Equal Justice Under Law" supports a popular definition of racism, as it claims that the law is created to prevent racism. This means that the law can only produce a verdict that is in agreement with racial equality. Therefore, the law is unable to produce racial prejudice in American society. This view of the law minimizes institutional racism because the law omits the possibility of racial inequality. Furthermore, the phrase eliminates the existence of dominant or minority groups because equality amongst all Americans is proclaimed. However, Me thinks dominant groups have a certain control

over society, and he says the following in court, “Be it ancient Rome or modern-day America, you’re either citizen or slave” (6). He only gives two options, or a group is controlled in society or a group has authority over another group and is able to oppress a population. In Dickens, the narrator sees racial oppression, and he is motivated to increase the agency of black Americans. Me wants to accomplish this through racial segregation and slavery in Dickens, racial structures that white people used for oppression. The protagonist tries to give the community of Dickens agency and the ability to act without racial oppression. Me reflects on the efficiency of reintroducing slavery and segregation, “I did what worked, and since when did a little slavery and segregation ever hurt anybody, and if so, so fucking be it” (23). In his reasoning here, the narrator consciously copies the mindset of former white slave owners.

Me’s father clarifies the concept of White rage for the protagonist. He teaches him that white people remain in their position through a positive self-representation and that black advancement is oppressed. His father is a key figure in the community of Dickens, and he takes on the role of the neighborhood councilor and is referred to as the “Niggerwhisperer”. Me’s father teaches him to be part of the minority group through social experiments. Astrada highlights several of his father’s social experiments that impact Me’s perspective on race:

> Me continues his case with an explanation of his childhood, and how he learned to be black. He recounts how he was raised by a father (the sole practitioner of “liberation psychology”) who utilized techniques to socialize and imprint a Pavlovian sense of black identity on him. His father would put “toy police cars, cold cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon, Richard Nixon campaign buttons, and a copy of The Economist in my bassinet [...] I learned to be afraid of the presented stimuli because they were accompanied by him taking out the family .38 Special and firing several window-rattling rounds into the ceiling, while shouting “N***er, go back to Africa!” Through similar techniques, the narrator’s father inscribes “blackness” into his psyche (113).

His ‘social experiments’ are linked to white rage because his father exposes the role of black people in a dominant white American society. The protagonist is socialized to see ‘white rage’ in Dickens, and the death of his father confirms the lessons of these experiment. His father is shot by police in the back while walking away. There was no threat, but nevertheless, his death is justified by authorities, and this shows that it is possible for

authorities to create a narrative that permits the unjust killing of black man without facing persecution. The authorities are in control of the racial narrative, and that 'equal justice under law' does not include all Americans.

His father is shot and killed in Dickens, and Me believes it is another lesson for him to understand what it means to be black, "I thought his death was a trick. Another one of his elaborate schemes to educate me on the plight of the black race and to inspire me to make something of myself" (43). Me comments that the objectives of the experiments were to be successful in society. This is the trigger for white rage, that black people should not 'make something' of themselves but remain in their minority role. However, Me comprehends his father is dead, and it is not a lesson for self-improvement. His father was shot in the back four times by police, and the police Captain Murray Flores responds to Me, "It was 'accidental… You have to let the system hold the men responsible for this accountable" (50). An authority figure tells the narrator to trust 'the system', and this authority figure shows how strong the positive white self-representation is. He is socialized to believe that 'the system' provides justice. Me responds by questioning this system:

> I asked Captain Flores a question my father had asked me many times: "In the history of the Los Angeles Police Department, do you know how many officers have been convicted of murder while in the line of duty?" "No." "The answer is none, so there is no accountability. I'm taking him" (50-51).

He quotes his father, and this implies that his father's social experiments on white rage have been successful to a certain degree. Me cannot trust 'the system' of the dominant culture, and he understands that the guilty are not held accountable for their actions. The statistics show a significant lack of justice within the LA Police.

Me chooses to become an agent who confronts white rage. He is motivated by the loss of not only his father, but also Dickens, and the lack of 'Equal Justice under Law'. He is forced to rediscover his role as a member of the minorities in America:

> Problem is, they both disappeared from my life, first my dad, and then my hometown, and suddenly I had no idea who I was, and no clue how to become myself (40)

After these losses, Me cannot answer two questions directly linked to his father's role in society. Before his death, his father was the "Niggerwhisperer" of Dickens. This meant that

he helped black people to liberate themselves from oppression. He wanted to give them agency by asking them two questions, "Who am I?" and "And how can I become that person?" (39). The narrator knows the answers to these questions prior to the killing of his father and disappearance from Dickens, but the losses force him to re-examine the questions. The narrator decides to answer these questions by helping Dickens on a larger scale. Hominy says that Me should be motivated by a bigger role in Dickens than a "Niggershisperer".

> "I'd whisper that you're thinking too small. That saving Dickens nigger by nigger with a bullhorn ain't never going to work. That you have to think bigger than your dad did". (79-80)

Me is challenged to act on a larger scale, and the narrator sees segregation as a tool to unite Dickens. Me sees that racism operates on an institutional level, and this influences his choices to use the same racial structures to achieve his goals of a flourishing community.

4.4 Hominy Jenkins

Hominy Jenkins is aware institutional racism, and realizes that it continues to support white privilege. He was used by filmmakers in the television show *The Little Rascals* to portray a negative black American stereotype. He chooses to play this role, and he gains recognition and a short-lived fame on television. Hominy's identity is embedded within this recognition, and once Dickens disappears it drives him to attempt suicide:

> Why, massa? Because when Dickens disappeared, I disappeared. I don't get fan mail anymore… I just want to feel relevant. Is that too much for an old coon to ask, massa?" (77).

Hominy uses the terms 'massa' and 'coon' without negative connotation. The term 'massa' refers to what former white slave owners were called by black slavers. He uses this term to refer to Me. Furthermore, he uses 'coon' to refer to himself. Being a 'coon' has given Hominy recognition for his work in the *Litte Rascals*. This term "coon" is a negative word associated with black clowns used for white entertainment. These two terms show that Hominy chooses Me to become his 'massa', and that he continues to be oppressed. Astrada comments on his choice to be oppressed, "Hominy would simply use his freedom to choose slavery. Here Hominy, unable to resist the Other, or exist outside if it, must, by any means,

have an answer to the question 'Who am I?'" (114). Hominy prefers being oppressed over freedom, as he has lost Dickens and any recognition for his role as a 'coon'. The role has become part of his identity, and Me is the only person that accepts Hominy in his quest to rediscover his identity. Astrada mentions that the community in Dickens does not accept this role, as it is shameful to take pride in this stereotypical role of a 'coon' (114).

Hominy chooses this role because it benefits himself, and taking the role of a slave means something different to Hominy than oppression. Being a slave means submission to the 'massa', but Hominy does not intend to submit. For Hominy, the role of a slave means something different. Me comments on Hominy's role as a slave:

> Hominy couldn't fix a wagon wheel. Hoe a fucking row. Tote barge or lift bale. But he could genuflect his ass off, and from 1:00 p.m. to 1:15 p.m., or whereabout, hat in hand he'd show up for work. Doing whatever he felt like doing (81).

This shows that Hominy is not a slave in the original sense of the word. He chooses what his tasks are and is not dictated his workload. Me sees that Hominy is able to redefine the negative memory of stereotypes stemming from the cultural archive. Me comments on Hominy's understanding of race in American society, and this perspective is disconnected from history:

> Feigned or not, sometimes I'm jealous with Hominy's obliviousness, because he, unlike America, has turned the page. That's the problem with history, we like to think it's a book- that we can turn the page and move the fuck on. But history isn't the paper it's printed on. It's memory, and memory is time, emotions, and song. History is the things that stay with you (115).

This passage shows that memory shapes how history is perceived, and for Me it is not possible to manipulate the memory of history and continue as if racial oppression did not happen. History shapes the present, and changing the memories of history does not mean that an individual can ignore racial oppression. The difference between Me and Hominy is that Hominy is able to manipulate history. He changes the memory of the past, as he ignores racial oppression by ignoring the memories of history. Hominy changes the elements mentioned in this passage that shape a memory, and therefore history is not fixed but changeable to Hominy. This means that he ignores the cultural archive which shapes the

memory of the past, and he only redefines the role of a 'slave' to gain agency by choosing his own tasks. This perspective is in contrast with the agency of the dominant group. This group is able to choose how history is interpreted, and all these elements from the passage influence how memory is shaped.

However, the dominant culture tries to manipulate the memory of history. The cultural archive contains specific memories, and ignores other memories for the benefit of a dominant group, and memories of history are manipulated. This is personified by the character of Hominy, who explicitly choses what he wants to remember for his own benefit. This is shown through his acting career as a child. The *Little Rascals* television show aired short episodes about children in America growing up in an impoverished neighborhood. Hominy was the understudy for the black character Buckwheat. The narrator describes Hominy's role as follows, "Whatever, the case, as the celluloid snippets of censored slapstick racism piled up on the cutting room floor, it became apparent that Hominy was a sort of *Little Rascals* stunt coon" (71). Hominy was portraying stereotypes produced by the cultural archive on television. These stereotypes are visible when Hominy has to dress up as a monkey:

> It was hard to determine if he'd been turned into a real monkey or if Hal Roach Studios… just opened the timeless cookbook of Classic American Stereotyping and turned to the one-step recipe for Negro Monkeyshines: 1. Just add tail" (71).

The racist filmmakers put little effort into his costume, and Buckwheat becomes a stereotype. However, despite that the filmmakers use Buckwheat on national television to project a stereotype of black people, Hominy choses to be this character because it gives him fame and recognition, and therefore he accepts the negative stereotype for personal gain.

Hominy's definition of racism, and his perspective on his role as a minority member becomes more clear during the L.A. Festival of Forbidden Cinema and Unabashedly Racist Animation. The audience watches an old film, and Me is surprised that Hominy withstood all the racism during his role of the *Little Rascals*, "No one could take it like Hominy. It amazed me how he withstood the onslaught of uncensored and unforgiving watermelon and my-daddy-in-jail jokes" (238-239). The festival shows clips from *The Little Rascals* shown on screen, and afterwards, the host invites Hominy on stage to answer questions from the crowd. In the audience, there are white girls from a sorority who have painted their faces black. The

crowd is appalled by this action, and a white man from the audience has to explain to Hominy why this is offensive: “They are non-ironic blackface,” he said defiantly. “That’s not cool” (240). This is an instance where a white man recognizes racism and informs a black man. Hominy responds:

> Hominy shielded his eyes with his hand and peered blindly into the audience and asked, ‘Blackface? What blackface?’ At first the audience laughed. But when Hominy didn’t crack a smile… Oh, we didn’t call it blackface. We called it acting” (240).

This show’s scene shows there is a different perception of defining racist acts by the crowd and Hominy. It is due to a changed cultural archive, as Hominy still remembers the past in which blackface was normalized. He sees blackface as part of the profession. Furthermore, Hominy reasons that white people act black not to reinforce a negative stereotype. From Hominy’s perspective, blackface is done out of the desire to acquire some of the empowerment which only black people possess:

> For Hominy blackface isn’t racism. It’s just common sense. Black skin looks better. Looks healthier. Looks powerful… Because if imitation is indeed the highest form of flattery, then white minstrelsy is a compliment, it’s a reluctant acknowledgement that unless you happen to really be black, being “black” is the closest a person can get to true freedom” (240 - 241).

Being black gives Hominy agency, and therefore the ability to act as an individual. He associates being black with power. For Hominy, it is logical that white actors want to be black. It is not offensive, as it does not feel like a white actor’s reinforcing a negative stereotype of black Americans. He understands the imitation as the reverse of how it was intended, as he does not perceive it as oppression of black people but as respect. Therefore, he changes the memory related to blackface, and by doing this he reappropriates the cultural archive to create his own definition of his role as a minority member in America.

This does not mean Hominy is unaware of the power of institutional racism. A white man comes to Hominy after the festival. In their conversation, the white man thinks he is also oppressed as a minority member. The white man categorizes himself and Hominy as ‘niggers’, “That’s right, both me and you - niggers to the last. Disfranchised equals ready to

fight back against the motherfucking system". (244) A white man uses 'nigger' to include himself as a person oppressed by 'the system', the very system that promotes white privilege, and of which this man profits. Hominy responds, "Except that you'll get half the jail time" (244). This response shows that Hominy knows the power of institutional racism, and that racial inequality is sustained through "the system".

4.5 Foy Cheshire

Foy Cheshire is a black American leader in the Dickens community. The narrator introduces this character after the killing of his father, "The sceptical Dum Dums looking at the heavyset Foy like the nation must have looked to Andrew Johnson after Lincoln had been assassinated" (45). The Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals is a black American community established by Me's father. This local organization educates the black community on institutional racism. The 'Dum Dums' appoint Foy as their new leader after the death of Me's father. Foy's perspective on racism becomes evident through comparing his teaching with Me's father. Both characters educate black Americans in Dickens on the influence of racism, but their teaching differs in two manner. Me's father sees that racism is institutionalized, and that it influences black people on key socioeconomic metrics. Whereas, Foy Cheshire sees that racism functions on an individual matter ignoring dominant and minority groups in American society.

Foy educates the black community in Dickens on racism, and through his teaching it becomes evident that he focuses on the 'individual binary' that divides moral and immoral individuals. His role as a leader of the Dum Dum Donut shows that he tries to reshape stereotypes through using an element of 'new racism' which is the "rearticulation of some racial practices of the past". This approach to confront racism is revealed through contrasting Me's father and Foy's teachings on institutional racism to the black community. The narrator's father started the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals by presenting factual evidence of institutional racism: "Do you know that the average household net worth of white people is $113,149 per year, Hispanics $6,325, and black folks $5,677?" (46). These numbers reveal the overwhelming differences in annual income. His father continues to focus on the influence of race in society, "Next thing the people knew, my father, interspersed with a macroeconomics circulation flowchart there, a sketch of Milton Friedman here, was facilitating an impromptu seminar about the evils of deregulation and institutional racism"

(47). Me's father shows the community how institutional racism operates within communities, and how it directly influences their lives.

This teaching and understanding of racism changes once Foy becomes their leader. He chooses to rewrite the novel of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and introduce his novel to the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals. He clarifies the necessity for this act:

> That's why I took the liberty to rewrite Mark Twain's masterpiece. Where the repugnant 'n-word' occurs, I replaced it with 'warrior' and the word 'slave' with 'dark-skinned volunteer'… I also improved Jim's diction, rejiggered the plotline a bit, and retitled the book" (95).

Foy rewrites history avoiding terms that cause racial confrontation. Thus, he redefines vocabulary within the cultural archive. Me responds to Foy's adaptation:

> Like, why blame Mark Twain because you don't have the patience and courage to explain to your children that the "n-word" exists and that during the course of their sheltered little lives they may one day be called a "nigger." No one will ever refer to them as "little black euphemisms," so welcome to the American lexicon –Nigger! (97).

Me thinks it is an insult to the black community to change the word 'nigger' to 'n-word'. It does not prepare youth for the reality of racism within American society, but this approach tries to ignore the existence of racism through changing vocabulary, and trying to erase the memory of slavery. Foy's novel ignores the subject of race in America through "avoidance of direct terminology" which is an element of "new racism". Therefore, he minimizes the role of racism in America, by writing it out of history. Foy ignores racist terminology, while Me recognizes the importance of explaining such diction to youth, as it provides historical context and awareness of institutionalized racism. Me wants the memory of history to be present, and the meaning of the n-word should not be rearticulated. Me wants children to comprehend the historical connotations of the word 'nigger', as race matters in America. Children should be prepared to live in a country where they are part of the minority group, and the word 'nigger' is part of their exposure to racism.

Foy thinks racism operates on an individual level, as he does not acknowledge minority and dominant groups. He does not empower black locals of Dickens, but his leadership has the opposite effect of his intentions. This character reinforcing the narrative of white innocence through omitting the historical context of racial oppression. Near the end of the novel, Foy loses his position as the leader of the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals. His lack of success brings him to the conclusion that nothing has changed. Me quotes him as saying: "'I do and do for you niggers, and this is the thanks I get' diatribe about how no one was buying his books" (260). Foy mentions all the work he has put into the black community, and he does not get recognition for his book. Furthermore, Foy continues to stress that nothing has changed, "How he was directly responsible for getting a black man elected president and nothing changed. How last week a nigger won $75,000 on Teen Jeopardy and nothing changed" (260). Foy sees that the position of black Americans has not changed. This shows that Foy notices a racism which works on an institutional level, but he cannot comprehend why his efforts to confront racism on an individual level have not made a difference. Foy does not want to identify the existence of dominant and minority groups, and in doing so, he upholds white privilege.

Foy does not comprehend how racism functions, nor that it is sustained through institutions and not on an individual level. He wants to confront racism through changing the black American stereotype in the cultural archive, as he creates a positive image of the minority group. This means that Foy tries to rewrite history through ignoring racial oppression. He is not able to achieve this because the black community of Dickens remembers the history of oppression. He cannot redefine the minority position because he does not acknowledge the importance of the racial oppression of the past for the black community of Dickens.

4.6 Conclusion of *The Sellout*

To conclude this chapter, all black characters lead the reader to see that their lives are affected by white rage, the ability of white people to keep black people in their minority position. The black community cannot escape their minority position, as this position does not give them equal access to key socioeconomic metrics. White rage is institutional and it does not allow black Americans to exceed this position, as institutions regulate resources that support white privilege.

Each character, except the black Justice, recognizes white rage in the community of Dickens. These characters live in a community separated from white people, and they respond to their forced minority position by confronting institutional racism. However, there is a difference in each character's success whether they give the community of Dickens agency over white rage or not. This efficiency is connected to their understanding of racism, and whether it operates on an individual or institutional level. This shows whether they are an effective agent to their community or unintentionally mislead the citizens of Dickens about how racism operates.

Me offers the community of Dickens agency through racial segregation and slavery. The community of Dickens responds enthusiastically to NO WHITES ALLOWED signs. A shop owner mentions "'The customers love it. It's like they belong to a private club that's public!'" (225). This shows that his approach to confront white rage seem sufficient as he uses old racial structures. The inhabitants of Dickens experience a sense of ownership.

Hominy Jenkins sees white rage, but he does not care about the community of Dickens. It is his goal to regain recognition. He can only gain recognition if Dickens is back on the map. This is his main motive to confront white rage, and it is effective because he leads Me to see that racism is institutional and should not be challenged by helping individuals. Hominy sees that this is ineffective, and therefore, he helps Me to conclude that a confrontation with white rage is possible through racial segregation and slavery.

The black Justice cannot see that racism functions within the institutions. The community of Dickens is not helped through his assistance in the Supreme Court. He does not acknowledge that racism functions whiting institution, and he dissociates himself from Me's action. This means that the black Justice has not considered Me's response to white rage. He cannot see that Me tries to confront institutional racism through the exact same racial structures white people used to gain agency over resources. Through confronting Me, he shows his disconnect with the black American community of Dickens.

Foy Cheshire sees that black Americans in Dickens are part of a minority group. He thinks it is possible to confront racism through challenging the memory of black people within the cultural archive. He does this through rewriting *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Foy thinks 'reverse racism' is not possible, as his novel could provide a dominant position for black people in Dickens. Foy assumes that racism can be challenged through changing the definition of racism in a novel. However, DiAngelo argues this approach is ineffective, "People of color may hold prejudices and discriminate against white people, but do not have

the social and institutional power backing their prejudice and discrimination that transforms it into racism; the impact of their prejudice on white people is temporary and contextual" (109). Foy does not have social nor institutional control to make his confrontation with white rage effective.

5. Conclusion

This thesis has explored how two novels explore two different definitions of racism, and how these influence society. One definition acknowledges that racism operates on an institutional level, while the other definition only sees racism as operating on an individual level. The latter definition perceives racism as intentional individual acts of violence against people of color, and this definition is often the perspective of white liberal Americans. This perspective of racism is understood as a binary separating the good from the bad individuals, as racism is reduced to a morality issue. This definition hinges on the assumption that all American racism is something of the past, something that has been overcome, and only some individuals continue to be racist through racial discrimination. This definition focuses on the individual and produces racial structures that ignores the influence of race in society. Moreover, this definition of racism ignores the existence of racial minority groups nor their dominant position. This definition cannot relate to the experience of minorities who experience racism through inequality on key socioeconomic metrics.

The definition that focuses on individuals is part of the racial structures of new racism. These structures ignore that race influences resources in American society. It ignores that white privilege exists, and that black people are a racial minority group in America who are oppressed in present-day society. This understanding of racism is possible through the cultural archive which is used as a frame of reference by the dominant white culture. They are able to normalizes their dominant position through creating a narrative of a positive white self-representation. Within the American cultural archive, the elements of white fragility and white rage support the dominant white position. These concepts show how white people respond to minority groups and maintain their dominant position. In the novels, indeed these perspectives come across through various characters. For Ifemelu and Me, white fragility and white rage, and in the case of Curt, white privilege.

Ifemelu is an outsider of American culture, and through this position she leads the reader to see how 'white fragility' functions in America. She is able to do this, as she originates from Nigeria. This country has no racial structures, therefore, she has a minimal understand how racism functions on arrival. Therefore, the reader makes the same journey as Ifemelu, as she discovers how race influences American society. This is similar to a liberal white perspective of racism which is focused on the individual and ignores the racial structure that influence minorities on a daily basis. Through Ifemelu's journey, the reader sees that racism transcends the individual and that it functions on a larger scale. Her interactions with white liberals in the novel show how white fragility operates and protects a white dominant position in American society. Near the end of the novel, Ifemelu fully comprehends how white people maintain their dominance through white fragility, and she is able to articulate this concept. The reader has made the journey to understand her definition of this hostile response. Moreover, through the comparison with Nigeria the novel leads the white liberal audience to see that institutional racism is specifically located in America. Her ability to recognize and define white fragility challenges the racial structures of 'new racism'. This learning process leads the reader to see how white fragility ignores racial confrontation. Therefore, the white liberal reader perspective on race is identified by Ifemelu when she converses with Laura, Curt, Kimberly and Kelsey.

The protagonist from *The Sellout* is not an outsider of American culture. Me leads the reader to acknowledge 'white rage' through responding to the dominant white culture. From the first page of the novel he sits down in the Supreme Court of the United States, and he identifies an issue, "I sit in a thickly padded chair, that much like this country, isn't quite as comfortable as it looks" (3). The reader is led to see what is 'uncomfortable' in America, and this thesis argues that the novel shows the white reader how black people are kept in their minority position through white rage. It functions to suppresses black advancement on an institutional level. Thus, when Me tries to empower the black community, he is taken to court for a trial. The result of white rage is that black people stay in their impoverished neighborhood and low socioeconomic position through not enabling black people to escape poverty. Therefore, the concept of 'white rage' is a central theme of this novel to keep black people in their minority position.

This thesis argues that *Americanah* and *The Sellout* lead the reader to recognize how institutional racism functions in American society, through the eyes and narratives of black protagonists. They make clear that racism goes beyond individual acts of violence, and leads the white liberal to broaden their definition of racism. While these novels focus on different elements that sustains white privilege, both novels lead the white liberal reader to a definition of racism that functions on an institutional level. Ifemelu exposes how white fragility functions, whereas, Me exposes the structures of white rage on an institutional level. Through their commentary on racism, the white liberal reader is led to see that racial oppression is within American culture, and they are exposed to how racial minorities experience racism.

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