UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE SANTA CATARINA
CAMPUS TRINDADE
CENTRO DE COMUNICAÇÃO E EXPRESSÃO
PROGRAMA DE PÓS-GRADUAÇÃO EM INGLÊS

DAYANE EVELLIN DE SOUZA FRANCISCO

BEING BLACK:
RACE, HAIR POLITICS, LOVE AND DIASPORIC IDENTITIES IN *AMERICANAH*

FLORIANÓPOLIS
2020

Dayane Evellin de Souza Francisco

BEING BLACK:
RACE, HAIR POLITICS, LOVE AND DIASPORIC IDENTITIES IN *AMERICANAH*

Tese submetida ao Programa de Pós-graduação em Inglês: Estudos Linguísticos e Literários da Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina para a obtenção do título de Doutora em Inglês: Estudos Linguísticos e Literários.
Orientadora: Prof.ª Dr.ª Maria Lúcia Milléo Martins
Coorientador: Prof. Dr. Matias Corbett Garcez

Florianópolis
2020

Ficha de identificação da obra elaborada pelo autor,
através do Programa de Geração Automática da Biblioteca Universitária da UFSC.

Souza Francisco, Dayane Evellin de
Being Black : Race, Hair Politics, Love and Diasporic Identities in Americanah / Dayane Evellin de Souza Francisco ; orientador, Maria Lúcia Milléo Martins, coorientador, Matias
Corbett Garcez ,
2021.
166 p.

Tese (doutorado) - Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, Centro de Comunicação e Expressão, Programa de Pós Graduação em Inglês: Estudos Linguísticos e Literários, Florianópolis, 2021.

Inclui referências.

1. Inglês: Estudos Linguísticos e Literários. 2. Intersectionality. 3. Hair Politics. 4. Love. 5. Diaspora. I. Milléo Martins, Maria Lúcia . II. Corbett Garcez , Matias
. III. Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina. Programa de Pós-Graduação em Inglês: Estudos Linguísticos e Literários. IV. Título.

Dayane Evellin de Souza Francisco

Being black: race, hair politics, love and diasporic identities in *Americanah*

O presente trabalho em nível de doutorado foi avaliado e aprovado por banca examinadora composta pelos seguintes membros:

Prof.ª Dr.ª Maria Lúcia Milléo Martins
(Orientadora e Presidente) Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina

Prof. Dr. Matias Corbett Garcez
(Coorientador) Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina

Prof.ª Dr.ª Alessandra Soares Brandão
Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina

Prof.ª Dr.ª Maristela Campos
Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina

Prof.ª Dr.ª Susana Bornéo Funck
(Convidada aposentada) Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina

Prof.ª Dr.ª Catherine MacGillivray
University of California at Santa Barbara (UCSB)

Certificamos que esta é a **versão original e final** do trabalho de conclusão que foi julgado adequado para obtenção do título de Doutora em Inglês: Estudos Linguísticos e Literários.

ICP-Edu
Documento assinado digitalmente
Rosane Silveira
Data: 26/02/2021 07:24:57-0300
CPF: 715.936.839-87

_____

Coordenação do Programa de Pós-Graduação

GOV.BR
Documento assinado digitalmente
Maria Lucia Milleo Martins
Data: 25/02/2021 23:27:22-0300
CPF: 258.704.409-04

_____

Prof.ª Dr.ª Maria Lúcia Milléo Martins

Orientadora

Florianópolis, 2020.

Aos amores da minha vida, Selma e Wagner.

PREFACE

One of my friends once told me that her understanding of the world was forever altered after reading *Americanah*, which opened her eyes to issues that she had never thought about before. Unlike her, when I read the novel for the first time, I immediately identified with it. I knew it then and there that I had found the topic of my Doctoral dissertation, and the best thing was that I was not even looking for it! As I read the novel, I kept posting pictures of my favorite passages on my social media because I wanted everyone to read it; but I especially wanted white people to read it. Since I am often the only Black person in the room, I have already been subjected to embarrassing situations and racist encounters many times before. Hence, reading Ifemelu's candid posts about similar situations made me want to laugh, to clap, at times to cry, but, most importantly, to share her ideas with the world. I wanted people to become more aware of the issues Adichie portrays in the novel because they affect me and several other Blacks on a regular basis.

Furthermore, I was irrevocably fascinated by the use of hair imagery in the narrative, and by the deep socio-political implications of hair. In general, the theme of hair is often treated as a trivial matter. Nevertheless, many Black women dedicate a lot of time grooming their hair, and even before drafting this dissertation, I had already given the topic a considerable amount of thought. The truth is, for women, and more specifically for Black women, taking care of their hair is a necessity. One can become quite aware of what one's hair looks like when one is criticized because of it, sometimes denied opportunities because of it, and often interrogated about it.

I became more aware of the relevance of hair when I started trying different hairdos. Having been living far from my family since college, with little money and without anyone to braid my hair, for years I struggled with trying to fix it. There were lots of weird hairstyles, lots of chemically relaxers, some uneven cuts, and too many burns on the ears due to my clumsiness when using my curling iron. After some time, however, I began to notice that people would treat me better depending on the hairstyle I chose to wear that day. Another even greater discovery was learning that people love to give unsolicited opinions about other people's hair, and some of the comments I heard or actions I witnessed seemed absurd to me. Like in *Americanah*, diversity is a common feature of Black hair culture, but change is not necessarily met with such amazement among Black women, as it might be among white people.

At times, living in the south of Brazil as a Black woman has been similar to being a foreigner in your own country. My dark complexion distinguishes me from most people

wherever I go, and when people are not complimenting me for speaking perfect Portuguese, they are asking me about my hair. The experiences are too many to name, from salespeople who hold your hair without permission and do not let go until you explain everything about how you wash your braid extensions and how often you remove them, or students who interrupt your explanation in the middle of a class to ask if the hair is all yours and how you wash it, to complete strangers who stop you in the middle of the street to tell you that your hair would look better straight, or on the rare occasions that you flattened your hair, that curly hair is "so much more beautiful natural", and, again, to ask you how you wash your hair.

But none of these situations come even close to when I was walking down the street wearing my favorite hairdo, feeling confident on my high heels, ready for a girls' night out, when a guy suddenly starts singing *that song*, "nega do cabelo duro, que não gosta de pentear…". I was shocked. He was singing that traumatizing song I had heard all throughout my childhood from the mouths of white children. He was singing it in front of a large group of adults standing in front of the college bar, none of whom made any attempt of reprimanding him, and there must have been at least a hundred people there, a crowd so large that the students flooded the streets, blocking cars from driving by. At least fifteen heads turned towards me as he belted out the song, and some laughed while others turned their attention to their drinks, but for all of them, their life went on. I held my head high as I passed the group and went to the party. It was only when my friend told me that the guy had probably meant it as a compliment that the tears filled my eyes. There are some things that white people just cannot seem to understand, and that is one of the reasons why *Americanah* is so relevant.

Part of a Black girl's discovery of race comes from the realization that our hair is different and has different needs. Hence, if you play too much and mess your hair, you might be made fun of and not be invited to the next birthday party. Even when your hair is not messy, a white teacher might attempt to fix it for you, to make it look like the white girls' hair, and when their attempt fails you are likely to be mocked anyways. You are punished for being different, and this is part of our socialization as Blacks, which results in large numbers of Black women who end up with low-self-esteem, who cannot overcome their feelings of inferiority, who often feel like they are not deserving of respect or love.

Little did I know when I chose to work with *Americanah* during my doctorate, that, in a way, my life would become so similar to that of the protagonist. One of our similarities is falling in love with a white, blond guy, a detail which seems to attract people's attention even more. Being stopped on the street by people who need to tell us that we are a "beautiful couple", having people turn their heads back to look at us when they pass us by, and being ignored as a

couple by people who cannot believe we are together are only a few of the common circumstances you eventually choose to ignore. As a Black woman in an interracial relationship, a number of judgments are made about your Blackness that range from accusations of self-hatred, questions about your commitment to Black feminism, sexual jokes about the nature of your relationship, and even internal conflicts over "sleeping with the colonizer". And this is yet another topic that *Americanah* treats with much care, stressing the importance of communication, of being aware of one's difference, and of critically interrogating your locations. It also emphasizes the importance of self-love and of strengthening your self-esteem.

Additionally, the novel illustrates the importance of community, of being around people with whom you have a shared history, because self-esteem can often be nurtured in contact with others, with shared experiences. For me, being around the Black community is to be with my family, to be at home, which is not necessarily my geographical location, but also being with those whom I love. Nothing says "I love you" more than when my mom asks my sisters and I to lay down on her lap so she can caress our hair. Nothing says "I love you" more than when my grandma could not raise her arms anymore so we combed her hair for her. Nothing says "you are not alone" more than when my sisters offer to braid my hair in beautiful patterns before I travel back to the south. Being around Black women and talking about hair can be comforting, fun, and safe.

The importance of sisterhood among Black women is yet another underlying message of *Americanah*, and in the last months, the importance of the Natural Hair Movement became even clearer to me, personally. When I started my PhD, I decided that I would transition from relaxed hair to my natural hair, so that the day I became a doctor, I could be wearing an Afro. Relaxing my hair was never a matter of hating my afro-textured hair, but there were times when it definitely was about trying to make it as straight as possible. In my adolescence, straightening hair with a flat iron was in fashion, so everyone did it; my white friends straightened theirs; my Black cousins straightened theirs; I straightened my hair at that time, too, and for me it was simply an act of following a trend. In hindsight, however, maintaining a straight hair was much more complicated than simply keeping up with the trends, because even when my hair was super straight, the texture was not so natural and it required an unnecessarily large amount of worries, as well as extra care with rain and with sweat, not to mention the damage caused by excessive heat on the hair strands.

Thankfully, the "ditadura da chapinha" (flat iron dictatorship), as sometimes Brazilians call it, joking about having your hair ruling you, eventually ceased to be so fashionable among my cousins, so we moved on to other hairstyles. Texturized hair, dreadlocks, braid extensions,

and weave extensions are among my family's favorite choices. Yet, once straightened, Black hair takes a long time to return to its natural texture, and this ends up leading many Black women who do not like to deal with different textures in their hair or who do not want to go through the Big Chop, to relax their hair again, on a never-ending loop. As for myself, I decided to transition to my natural hair because I realized that after years of chemically relaxing my hair, I did not know my natural hair texture anymore. Like others in my family, I like to change and do different things with my hair, but wearing an Afro in public is something I had never done. In fact, even at home, as a child, my hair was often in a bun or in braids, and to realize that is to realize that there is a part of you that you do not really know.

Thus, in the past few years I wore braids regularly so that my hair could transition to its natural texture. This year I finally removed my braid extensions, and I have been wearing my Afro ever since. As I walked in public with my Afro standing up like a crown for the first time, I felt thrilled, and even the looks some people gave me could not shake my confidence. It has been an immense pleasure to discover more about how my hair works, to learn that it shrinks with moisture and expands with heat, that it is fluffier and fuller when I pick it with an Afro pick, and curlier and shorter when I apply oils. It has also been an absolute delight to learn about several hairstyles one can do with their natural hair that I did not know were possible.

Like Ifemelu, transitioning to natural hair has also helped me strengthen ties with other Black women. I have received encouragement from my sisters and my cousins, who send me pictures of Afros and links to tutorials made by Black women. I have started to follow more Black female youtubers and bloggers, and even my Instagram feed has become more pluralistic after I changed my engagement patterns on my social media. For Black women, sisterhood is a source of strength and inspiration. *Americanah* stresses the relevance of this bond in a world that often forces women to compete with each other instead.

Unfortunately, as I finish this dissertation, the world as we know it has changed due do the covid-19 pandemic. And as the world began to change, we witnessed another Black man's brutal murder by a white police officer. George Floyd was suffocated by the officer, who knelt on Floyd's neck for over eight minutes while he desperately pleaded that he could not breathe. As I watched the video footage, paralyzed by shock and sobbing, I saw the police officer kneeling on Floyd's neck for minutes even after Floyd was non-responsive, and I could not help but wonder how threatening that officer must have thought an unconscious Black man still was. Pure hatred seemed to me like the only explanation: they hate us. That Black man could have been my father; I thought about my dad, I remember my mom calling me late at night once, deeply distressed because police officers had held my father on the street for almost an hour,

when he was walking to pick up my sister after work. They pinned him to the ground, telling him that there had been a report that someone who matched his description was walking suspiciously around the neighborhood. The explicit demonstration of hatred against Black people, revealed by Floyd's death, was deeply felt by many, who were reminded that as long society sees Blacks as an imminent threat, being Black can be a death sentence. The tragic death of African American George Floyd in May this year proves again that some things remain the same in white supremacist society.

Nevertheless, the reaction of Black people was not the same. Outraged by the traumatizing video recording of Floyd's murder, Black people put their masks on and went protesting in the middle of a pandemic to call for racial justice. These protests for racial equality in the United States have sparked a series of social protests across the globe, demonstrating that, as long as there is oppression, there will be resistance. And in the midst of all the chaos and tragedy that this pandemic has been causing, there are engaged artists and socio-political movements who have produced incredible work calling for justice, demanding an end to inequalities, denouncing the systematic incarceration of the Black population, an end to the system that has allowed racial profiling to become commonplace.

Meanwhile, in Brazil, just a week before Floyd's death, João Pedro, 14, was killed during a police operation, while playing in the yard of his own house. The police officers took his body without authorization and his family was not informed of his death until the next day, when there was already a movement on social media demanding information about his whereabouts. The fact that the police felt authorized to transport João without bothering to warn his family shows how Black bodies are still considered properties of white institutions in Brazil, where Black lives, as well as the pain of Black families, do not seem to matter.

Perhaps, if it were not for the massive repercussions that Floyd's death had had worldwide, people in Brazil would not be as revolted as they were when, a week after Floyd's death, another Black boy was killed, again a victim of centuries of slave heritage and structural racism. In another tragic instance, Miguel Otávio Santana da Silva fell from the ninth floor of the building where his mother, Mirtes, worked as a maid. Mirtes' white employer allowed the five-year-old boy to enter the elevator alone to go looking for his mother, who was at the time walking her employer's dogs while the latter got a manicure. The images of the mother finding her little boy dead on the ground after the fall caused national commotion, although protests were not widespread in the country. Examples like Mirtes, who even during the pandemic had to continue working to support her family, and who, due to the schools being closed because of the pandemic, had to take her son to work, reveal the ways in which domestic workers in Brazil

are connected to the history of slavery in the country. The hierarchical structures imposed in colonial society remain so present in Brazilian society that even the life of a Black boy is not worth more to the "mistress" than keeping her nails impeccably well done, showing that here in Brazil, like in *Americanah*, as stated by Ifemelu on her blog, "race is (also) class".

It is evident that a discussion about intersectionality, about the oppressive force of different categories such as race, gender, and class need to be continually discussed, as there is still much that needs to be done. The (feeble) protests that Floyd's death inspired in Brazil should have been caused much earlier, after the not-yet-solved death of Marielle Franco, Black bisexual councilwoman and civil rights activist, who was assassinated in 2018, or when the car of a Black family was shot by police officers who fired over 80 rifle shots at them, leading to the death of two innocents last year, or when the eight-year-old Ágatha Felix was killed by a shot fired by the police in the same year. However, too many Brazilians think that racially charged incidents are history, arguing that class in Brazil is more important than race, when in fact, their forces are inextricably combined and produce material effects. Floyd's death shed light and amplified our own struggles, reminding my generation that the struggle for racial equality is not yet over and that, unfortunately, representativity does not mean equality, and that it is necessary to actively contest destructive ideologies and produce other discourses. I offer this literary criticism of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* in the hope that research like mine can contribute to raising awareness about social inequalities and the importance of breaking free from oppressive ideologies and seeking forms of resistance.

Dayane Evellin

Florianópolis, October 26, 2020.

AGRADECIMENTOS

I would like to thank CNPQ for the financial support.

I am forever grateful to everyone who contributed in some way or another so that I could develop this research. Among some of them are:

Prof. Eliana de Souza Ávila, who advised me in the first years of my PhD and provided insightful feedback on the first chapters. My advisor Prof. Maria Lúcia Milléo Martins, for having accepted to advise me after Prof. Eliana retired last year, and whose contribution to my academic career began in my very first semester at UFSC, when her classes made me fall in love with poetics of resistance. My co-advisor Prof. Matias Corbett Garcez, who agreed to work in partnership with prof. Milléo and who always had something positive to say about my work, encouraging me to explore my ideas more and more.

I would like to thank the professors who examined my project and my first analytical chapter during the qualifying exam. Prof. Maristela Campos, who shared with me useful bibliography and motivated me to keep writing. Prof. Susana Bornéo Funck, who encouraged me to study literature by (Black) women and advised me during my undergraduate program and Masters. She was also the first person who seemed to believe in my potential as a student of literature, and who, as my mentor in the past, helped me deal with my insecurities and continue working by encouraging me in a constructive way.

In addition, I am grateful for the professors who have accepted to be members of my defense committee. Prof. Alessandra Soares Brandão, whose enthusiasm about my research focus renewed my confidence about the relevance of my research. Prof. Alinne Balduino Pires Fernandes, who interviewed me about this dissertation's project during my entrance exam, and who helped me think more critically about my reasons for choosing to work with *Americanah*. Prof. Catherine MacGillivray, who has known me for eight years, ever since I first became her student at the University of Northern Iowa, and who promptly accepted my invitation to join the defense committee.

I would also like to thank my Boyfriend. I am forever grateful for all the emotional support he offered me these past years. Our relationship started just before my doctoral entrance examinations, and he was with me when I received the news of my approval, and we have been together ever since. I am grateful for the loving hugs, for how he took care of me in the moments when my anxiety reached its peak, and I am even more thankful to him for having carefully read all the chapters of this dissertation.

I am also eternally grateful to my family. I am the luckiest person for being born in their midst. Their faith in me keeps me strong even in the hardest of times. Knowing that, as long as I am a kind person, they will love and be proud of me, and give me freedom to do whatever I want to do. I am thankful for my mom, Selma, who is definitely one of my best friends and who comforts me when times are tough. I am also glad for having a loving father, Wagner, who brings me tea when I am sad or offers to go with me to the supermarket whenever I visit them, so that I know that he loves me. My sisters Nayara and Thaís deserve all my gratitude for having always cared about me and encouraged me to trust myself more.

Finally, I would like to thank my grandmother (in memory), who passed away two years ago, but who will always be in my heart.

Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanise. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity […]. When we reject the single story, when we realise that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise.

(Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, 2009)

RESUMO

O objetivo principal desta pesquisa é examinar o romance *Americanah* da escritora nigeriana Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie por uma perspectiva interseccional, tendo como base as considerações de Kimberlé Crenshaw sobre "interseccionalidade". Considerando os estudos de María Lugones sobre "colonialidade", a análise oferece uma investigação sobre seus efeitos na vida das personagens. A tese examina também o uso de *blogging* como uma ferramenta literária, como meio de compreender o ponto de vista narrativo e a perspectiva teórica de Ifemelu como blogueira. Além disso, esta pesquisa inova ao explorar "políticas de cabelo" (*hair politics*) no romance. A cultura do cabelo crespo representa uma parte significativa da experiência de diáspora negra e é um tema crucial dentro da narrativa. Portanto, proponho que "cabelo" abrange várias dimensões da vida de mulheres negras, uma vez que se entrelaça com categorias como raça, gênero, classe, nacionalidade e sexualidade. Com base em autores como Ingrid Banks, Ayana Byrd, Lori Tharps e Emma Dabiri, a investigação mostra que o "cabelo" em *Americanah* pode ser entendido como uma metáfora para políticas raciais nos Estados Unidos. Este estudo também lida com o tema do amor ao investigar os relacionamentos românticos de Ifemelu. A pesquisa sugere que o amor não pode ser alcançado sem um reconhecimento de diferenças e uma libertação dos sentimentos de inferioridade muitas vezes causados por ideologias patriarcais de supremacia branca. Finalmente, as discussões de Homi K. Bhabha sobre "mimetismo" são abordadas a fim de compreender melhor a experiência de migração e migração de retorno dos personagens africanos.

Palavras-chave: Interseccionalidade. Política de cabelo. Amor. Diáspora. *Americanah*.

ABSTRACT

The general objective of this research is to examine Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* from an intersectional perspective, drawing on Kimberlé Crenshaw's considerations about "intersectionality". In alignment with María Lugones' use of the term, the analysis offers an investigation of the effects of "coloniality" in the characters' lives. It also examines the use of blogging as a literary device to understand the narrative point of view and Ifemelu's theoretical perspective as a blogger. Furthermore, this research innovates by exploring hair politics in the novel. Black hair culture represents a significant part of the experience of Black diaspora and it is a major theme in the narrative. Hence, I propose that hair encompasses several dimensions of Black women's lives, as it intertwines with categories such as race, gender, class, nationality, and sexuality. Drawing from authors such as Ingrid Banks, Ayana D. Byrd, Lori Tharps, and Emma Dabiri, the investigation shows that hair can be understood as a metaphor for race politics in the United States. This study also deals with the theme of love through an examination of Ifemelu's romantic relationships. The research suggests that love cannot be achieved without a recognition of differences and a liberation from feelings of inferiority often caused by patriarchal white supremacist ideologies. Finally, Homi K. Bhabha's discussions on "mimicry", "home", and "unhomeliness" are approached in order to better understand the African characters' experience of migration and return migration.

Keywords: Intersectionality. Hair politics. Love. Diaspora. *Americanah*.

SUMÁRIO

1 Chapter I:
INTRODUCTION

> The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story. (ADICHIE, 2009).

If I could choose one thing to tell the reader what this doctoral dissertation is about, I would say that this dissertation is about hair, for hair is the main reason why I have developed much interest in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*. I would start by drawing the readers' attention to hair due to the lack of studies about hair imagery in literature, which would make my research relevant and possibly more attractive. And while some readers would wonder why I chose to write on the subject, I would reflect upon grooming hair practices among Black people as an ancient African tradition brought by enslaved Blacks to the Americas during the forced Black diaspora. I think about how, after traveling for months and surviving under inhuman conditions, Blacks would climb down from slave ships with their hair, the same hair that in many cases had been forcefully shaved months before as a form of humiliation and erasure of their identities, now disheveled in dreadlocks — which would eventually become a symbol of Black resistance — searching for new ways to care for their hair in the new colonies: the history of hair in Black culture is inevitably entangled with the history of Blacks in the diaspora. The hair that grows upwards crowning the Black skin, spiraling in tight or loose curls, stressed at the time differences between the colonizers and the Other, which is the image I bring to introduce my research. It was a matter of survival for Blacks to adapt during the colonization period, during slavery and even after that, as their legacies continue to impact social relations, the economy, as well as public policies; and straightening one's hair or trying to imitate the hairstyles of white people was assimilation, but also an attempt to access power. Nevertheless, there have always been resistance and diversity of experience in Black communities, and just like the fight for racial equality, the concern with Black hair, the practice of grooming hair, decorating hair, and proudly wearing natural hair remains.

I remember having my hair braided by my mom, my aunts, my older cousins, and my older sister. I remember sitting in the living room, sometimes next to my younger sister who was having her hair braided next to me, neither of us aware of the long tradition from which the practice of grooming one's hair descended. Watching their skilled fingers moving quickly,

twisting threads together, hair strands crossing over each other in special patterns, I was oblivious to the fact that I was immersed in a rich collective experience of what it means to be a Black woman in a white-dominated country. My excitement about the results was only tainted by the slight fear of rejection that might come from the next day at school and the close scrutiny I would have to endure from some white people on the streets.

For years, hearing my mom warning my dad to have his hair cut short to look more professional or someone saying they liked to straighten their hair to look well-groomed, I failed to understand the implications of making different choices about hair care. Never as a child did I reflect upon employment or job opportunities, but I did understand acceptance and exclusion. As I look back at my mom, with her full and glorious afro, her "Black power", as we call this natural hairstyle in Brazil, comforting my younger sister after she arrived from school in tears because someone had made fun of her braids, I realize that from a young age we become conscious of being seen as different and being excluded because of hair. I remember a well-meaning teacher who tied my braids carelessly on top of my head with colorful butterfly hair clips in front of a group of laughing teenagers and the humiliation I felt. In spite of that, swinging my braids from side to side, I gladly recognized in me my own people, my own family, and my own sense of style for choosing my favorite braiding patterns. At parties, the thrill of looking at my braids in the mirror was only matched by my cousins', female and male cousins who had spent days, perhaps months, pondering their own options.

In hindsight, the interlacing strands of hair, inextricably intertwined in braids, is a fitting metaphor for intersectional experiences. The logic of the intersection avoids dividing these oppressive factors into single strands, revealing how engaging interlocking systems of oppression separately create social inequalities. The interweaved strands of hair constitute the braid like intersecting patterns such as race, gender, class, nationality, and other socio-political identities intertwine and produce discrimination and oppression. Furthermore, identity is in constant change, it is never fixed, just as hair is constantly growing. The strands of hair weaved by a hair braider might overlap one another, similar to how, in some literary analyses, certain systems of oppression can stand out over the others. However, the complexity of braiding resides in uniting hair, in tying the strings together in a unique combination, for no hair is like the other. Similarly, the coalition of several modes of oppression at the intersection results in unique subjectivities, being this complex "braiding" what intersectionality seeks to understand.

After painting all of these images, it is evident that the topic of hair goes beyond race, although race is certainly crucial when discussing hair. In her writing, Adichie turns a simple

and overlooked topic such as “hair” into a conversation about the construction of race in the United States and about the political and socio-economic impact of hairstyles. Similarly, my research goes beyond the theme of hair in order to provide an in-depth discussion of the novel. *Americanah* addresses delicate subjects related to issues such as race, gender, hair, and diaspora. This research is significant due to the lack of literary analysis not only of the novel itself, especially if compared to the number of analyses of Adichie’s previous novels, but also of the subject of hair. Although “hair” has been extensively studied in fields such as sociology, psychology, and anthropology, there is little research on hair imagery in literature.

In *Americanah*, when young Ifemelu arrives in the United States, she soon realizes that she is Black, and she begins to understand that her Blackness has acquired different social significations there, and that being Black in the United States means belonging to a group that is constantly discriminated against and stereotyped. W. E. B. Du Bois refers to this process of becoming aware of one’s race and social positioning as “double consciousness”. He reflects: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (DU BOIS, 2008, p. 2). His concept focuses mainly on the experience of African Americans in having to reconcile two conflicting parts of their identities, being Black and being American. For Ifemelu, however, the experience of race differs from the experience of other African Americans because she is a Nigerian woman. Thus, she tries to adapt to her new country and its racial politics while negotiating her identity as an immigrant Black African woman.

Before presenting the outline of this research, I believe it is important to discuss some of the theories and concepts on which this entire research is grounded. In *Hair Matters: Beauty, Power, and Black Women’s Consciousness,* Ingrid Banks (2000) investigates how “hair shapes black women’s ideas about race, gender, class, sexuality, images of beauty and power” (p. 3). Banks argues that “hair” is not only a matter of aesthetics for African American women, but it is also related to several dimensions of their lives. Banks suggests that hair desirability is closely associated with racist standards of beauty because in our society what is perceived as beautiful is usually white. The author discusses:

> For black women in this society, what is considered desirable and undesirable hair is based on one’s hair texture. What is deemed desirable is measured against white standards of beauty, which include long and straight hair (usually blonde), that is, hair that is not kinky or nappy. Consequently, black women’s hair, in general, fits outside of what is considered desirable in mainstream society. (BANKS, 2000, p. 2).

Affected by the history of underrepresentation and lack of privilege, hair remains a sensitive matter to the Black community because they have internalized racist standards of beauty. One of the most interesting discussions Ifemelu highlights is how the binary of kinky hair/straight hair plays an important role in society and influences the experience of Black women in their process of constructing an identity. With that in mind, my research examined the construction of race in the narrative as it relates to hair politics. This internalization of white racist standards of beauty by members of the Black community reveals a form of colonial mentality.

Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* was relevant for widening the scope of my investigation because of his considerations about how feelings of racial and cultural inferiority are internalized due to the history of colonization and to the imposition of racial hierarchies. Fanon (2004) believes that "it is the colonist who *fabricated* and *continues to fabricate* the colonized subject" (p. 2). For Fanon, the colonized subject is formed by the ideas created and spread about them by the colonizer. They are reduced to a homogeneous category, "the colonized", and deprived of any complexity. His work argues that the colonizer's practice of dividing the world into two extreme opposites — such as "white and black", "good and evil", "the colonizer and the colonized" — will continue to inform the colonized even after they are liberated from colonialism. Fanon's discussion is pertinent to an understanding of how hair politics is shaped by the colonial method of producing binaries, one of them being straight hair/kinky hair — a consequence of white hegemonic views of beauty. Fanon (2004) defends that the struggle for liberation will begin when the colonized understands that one is not an animal, "and at the very moment they discover their humanity" (p. 8).

According to Fanon (2004), the colonized is affected psychologically and physiologically by the internalization of the language of the colonizer. Furthermore, the author points out that the legacies of colonialism continue to operate in society and in the minds of the previously colonized people. Fanon's work not only provides a discussion about the superior/inferior binaries that inform most Western societies, but also denounces the homogenization of people who are seen as inferior, condensed into one category, and deprived of their complexities and humanity. In this research, I have established a dialogue with Fanon's considerations so as to deepen my understanding of the inferiority complex some characters appear to have in relation to the white/dominant/foreign culture.

Concerning new forms of colonialism, it is important to introduce the concept of "coloniality" to refer to the legacies that formal colonialism has left in contemporary societies,

a concept with which I have dealt throughout my research. In “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America”, Aníbal Quijano (2000) argues that race is a mental category of modernity; a colonial invention, one could say. According to him, colonial/modern capitalism depended on the “social classification of the world’s population around the idea of race” in order to establish domination over the colonized countries and maintain its hegemonic power (p. 533). One of the basic premises of colonial domination was to naturalize racial differences by placing the formerly colonized people as biologically inferior to the colonizers as a means of justifying and legitimating the colonial enterprise, the genocide of colonized peoples, and the epistemic violence to which colonized countries have been subjected.

Quijano (2000) explains that “[t]he racial axis has a colonial origin and character, but it has proven to be more durable and stable than the colonialism in whose matrix it was established” (p. 533). They instituted a binary of superior/inferior racial classification by codifying the phenotype and the color of the colonized people; “their phenotypic traits as well as their cultural features were considered inferior” (p. 535). Consequently, “race became the fundamental criterion for the distribution of the world population into ranks, places, and roles in the new society’s structure of power” (p. 535). What Quijano emphasizes, then, is that, although race as a phenotypic difference existed before colonization, race, as the modern concept we know, was established as part of the colonial enterprise of domination.

To refer to the legacies of European colonialism and the organizational structures that still pervade society, Quijano (2000) discusses the concept of “coloniality of power”. One of its rationales is Eurocentrism. Because the colonized were seen as “inferior races”, “modernity and rationality” were understood as exclusively European products and experiences. Furthermore, Quijano (2000, p. 542) discusses the issue of alterity. “For underneath that codification of relations between Europeans and non-Europeans, race is, without doubt, the basic category”. From a Eurocentric perspective, only the West was taken as a valid category, while African Black people “were simply primitive” (QUIJANO, 2000, p. 542).

This social classification, as discussed by Quijano, contributed to the dehumanization of the former colonized people and to the perpetuation of oppressive ideologies and forms of knowledge that still discriminate those deemed inferior while privileging white European culture. As María Lugones explains it, coloniality is

> an encompassing phenomenon, since it is one of the axes of the system of power and as such it permeates all control of sexual access, collective authority, labor, subjectivity/inter-subjectivity and the production of knowledge from within these inter-subjective relations (LUGONES, 2010, p. 3).

Thus, coloniality of power also explains how race has been used to rank people into hierarchies and to assign labor accordingly. Lugones expands Quijano's concept of coloniality to emphasize the importance of the colonial/modern gender system in the classification of people in terms of gender as well. According to Lugones (2007, p. 202), "the imposition of this gender system was as constitutive of the coloniality of power as the coloniality of power was constitutive of it".

Considering the impact of racial hierarchies that disadvantage Black people to the benefit of patriarchal white supremacy while sustaining unequal power relations, Du Bois' concept of "double consciousness" enlightens an understanding of the characters' self-perception and Black consciousness. The diasporic characters in *Americanah* are all measured by a world that "looks on in amused contempt and pity" at them (DU BOIS, 2008, p. 3). According to Du Bois, this everlasting "twoness" causes the African American subject to be in a constant struggle to reconcile the two parts of their split self. One of the implications of this struggle is the deeper understanding an African American might have of racial hierarchies and its influence on society. In this manner, Du Bois' discussion was relevant to an analysis of hair matters in the narrative and how Black people end up reproducing their discourses and/or rejecting stereotypes associated with Black hair. The concept of "double consciousness" is also connected with discussions on the practice of hair straightening and the employment of Black women who wear braids. However, most characters in *Americanah* struggle with varied identity categories. Their experiences are not only influenced by their Blackness, but also by the fact that they are Nigerian. Their experiences are also affected by their gender, the social expectations imposed on women, as well as by stereotypes associated with Black women.

Acknowledging that in an effort to better understand the experience of Black women one needs to engage a more inclusive and sensitive perspective, my research explores the concept of "intersectionality". Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term to "describe the location of women of color both within overlapping systems of subordination" and as a way of analyzing the intersection of racism and sexism in constituting the condition of women of color (CRENSHAW, 1991, p. 1265). The characters in the novel come from varied socio-economic and geo-political backgrounds. However, as Lugones (2007) argues, "intersectionality" does not have to do with separating different identity categories: intersectionality exposes "what is missing" (p. 193). Therefore, with the intention of analyzing Ifemelu's experience as a Black woman, I have considered the varied aspects of Ifemelu's ever-changing identity.

Taking into account these previous discussions, the overall objective of this study was to develop an analysis of *Americanah* from an intersectional feminist perspective. My specific objectives were fourfold. Firstly, to examine the construction of race in *Americanah*, including the gendered, socio-economic, geo-political, cultural, and psychological dimensions of racism. In line with this objective, this research analyzed the representation of interracial and intra-racial romantic relationships in the narrative. Secondly, I examined the theme of hair in order to understand what Adichie's articulations of hair politics reveal about the social construction of race in the U.S. Thirdly, this research aimed at analyzing the representation of the experiences of the protagonists as immigrants. In this sense, it was interesting to investigate how the novel responds to stereotypes about and misrepresentations of African people and their history, and, more specifically, how their Nigerian background influences their diasporic experience. Concerning this objective, I was also interested in investigating how gender, race, class, and migration intersect and affect the characters' experiences. Finally, this research also aimed at investigating the themes present in the novel concerning the concept of "return migration". My objective was to analyze if the characters' behaviors indicate any feeling of superiority in relation to their homeland, as well as if there are conflicts that come from having a diasporic identity, altered by the experience of migration.

In order to conduct the analysis of *Americanah*, four research questions were proposed:

1) How can the narrative point of view in *Americanah* be understood in relation to the conceptual framework Ifemelu exposes via her blog?
2) How can hair politics in *Americanah* be understood from an intersectional perspective?
3) How are interracial and intra-racial romantic relationships portrayed in *Americanah*?
4) How are the experiences of migration and return migration portrayed in *Americanah*?

The chapter "Becoming Black in America: Race Matters and Blogging in *Americanah*" analyzes the novel in terms of race and ethnic politics within intersectional contexts of subjectivity constructed in both public and private relations. As Crenshaw (2019) suggests, "[i]ntersectionality is an analytic sensibility, a way of thinking about identity and its relationship to power". The first analytical chapter discusses this concept more extensively. Furthermore, I analyze Ifemelu's positioning and theorizing as a blogger, based on bell hooks' concept of "oppositional gaze". In this chapter, I address the author's discussion on how "there is power in looking", a right many enslaved Blacks were denied and formerly colonized Blacks have

been denied and that culminates in a repressed desire to look (HOOKS, 1991, p. 247). For the author, daring to look can be seen as a form of political resistance, a challenge to the objectification of the Black body, an attempt to oppose the domination of an oppressive racist society. I argue in this chapter that, as a Black woman, Ifemelu constructs an oppositional gaze in her posts, being this gaze a significant expression of her ability to exercise agency even under oppressive power relations. Her blog, then, represents her political awareness of the intersection of race, gender, and class issues as well as of the immigration discourses prevalent in the U.S.

The chapter "Hair as a Race Metaphor: Hair Matters in *Americanah"* investigates the novel in terms of hair matters and in terms of the psychological and physical effects of white racist standards of beauty, as they affect Black women in their domestic and public spheres. Weaving connections with issues such as race, gender, class, and nationality, this chapter argues that hair politics facilitates an understanding of how race and racial politics work in the United States. The novel depicts Ifemelu's initial regret for doing the Big Chop, a radical form of transitioning into natural hair texture that consists of cutting off all the relaxed hair, leaving only the new growth. After the Big Chop, Ifemelu feels masculine and unattractive. With that in mind, this chapter problematizes Adichie's treatment of the themes of self-hatred and natural hair texture, engaging in a dialogue with Banks' discussion on the self-hatred theory in relation to hair alteration.

According to Banks (2000), Black nationalists generally see the practice of straightening one's hair as a form of self-hatred, a reflection of one's race shame. On the other hand, assimilationists consider that straightening one's hair can be seen as positive if it helps the Black community to achieve success in American capitalist and racially biased society (BANKS, 2000). With that in mind, this chapter provides an examination of whether or not the portrayal of the characters' hairstyles in *Americanah* encourages a reading of the practicing of straightening one's hair as a form of self-hatred. This research investigates the extent to which Ifemelu's regret implies any form of veiled self-hatred, and if, because other reasons had led her to straighten her hair, the theory of self-hatred in relation to hair alteration can be dismissed.

In addition, this chapter also discusses the racist view that braids are not professional and how this view affects the characters in the novel, influencing their personal choices. Linked to this discussion, I argue that the portrayal of the characters by Adichie demonstrates an association between different hair styles and the characters' personality traits, their political engagement and/or assimilation to (white) American culture. Finally, the chapter addresses twenty-first century movements that encourage women to use their hair more naturally, and

how Adichie seems to add to that movement, encouraging Black women to love and value their own hair textures.

The chapter "'What's Love Got To Do With All That Ticking?': Romantic Relationships in *Americanah*" takes up the previous discussion on race and hair as a means to analyze the novel's treatment of interracial and intra-racial romantic relationships. Bell hooks argues that love has the potential to free us not only from the very inferiority complexes resulting from the colonization of our minds, but also from the barriers that prevent us from relating well with others. Love then comes as a facilitator. Nevertheless, it can only occur when there is an awareness of the interrelation of systems of oppression, thus leading to the process of self-acceptance and self-love. I argue that Ifemelu experiences this impossibility of loving and being open to relationships with others while there is no mutual recognition of differences in her relationships. This chapter also elaborates on hooks' discussion on the commodification of the other, based on *Black looks* (HOOKS, 1992). I talk about how the interracial relationship between Ifemelu and Curt is problematic precisely because of the lack of dialogue between them about race, for they refuse to look at it critically and question their locations.

The last analytical chapter, "'In America, you're Black, baby': Migration and Return Migration in *Americanah*", presents an analysis of the novel in terms of its responses to the socio-political discourses on immigration in the historical contexts of its production. This chapter also offers an analysis of the novel in terms of its treatment of return migration in contemporary contexts of coloniality. Additionally, it offers a contextualization of the concept of diaspora, being Avtar Brah's definition in *Cartographies of Diaspora* the perspective from which I analyze the novel, as occurring in the interconnection of different factors. Brah argues that the concept of diaspora entails "processes of *multiple-locationality across geographical, cultural and psychic boundaries*" (BRAH, 1997, p. 95), defying "the search for originary absolutes, or genuine and authentic manifestations of a stable, pre-given, unchanging identity" (p. 96). Therefore, her concept of diaspora presupposes an understanding of intersectional and fluid experiences.

This last analytical chapter is divided into two main parts. The first part focuses on Ifemelu's experience of migration. The concepts of "coloniality of power" and "coloniality of gender" are important in this chapter to enlighten the analysis of the racial experience lived by immigrant Black African characters when trying to adapt to the new country. Homi K. Bhabha's (1994; 2017) considerations about "mimicry" are brought up when discussing both the fact that Ifemelu feels compelled to fake an American accent for a long time in an attempt to insert

herself into American society as well as the possible consequences of this attempt at assimilation. This chapter also examines how class plays an important role in the characters' immigration experiences, since Ifemelu, as well as other economically vulnerable characters, end up resorting to illegal activities in an attempt to support themselves financially in the country.

The second part of the chapter focuses on the idea of return migration, investigating how the experience of diaspora impacts the lives and perspectives of the returnees, focusing mainly on Ifemelu's experience. To develop this analysis, Bhabha's and Brah's concepts of "home" are approached, since I argue that the idea of "home" as a fixed and permanent place is deconstructed in the narrative. This chapter also discusses Bhabha's concept of "unhomeliness" to explore the feelings of displacement and alienation that Ifemelu experiences before returning to her country of origin as well as upon her return. This discomfort is intensified by the expectations that Lagos society sets for women to get married and focus on marriage.

2 Chapter II:
"BECOMING BLACK IN AMERICA":
Race Matters and Blogging in *Americanah*

> Admit it — you say "I'm not black" because you know black is at the bottom of America's race ladder. And you want none of that. Don't deny now. What if being black had all the privileges of being white? (ADICHIE, 2014, p. 220).

"You can't write an honest novel about race in this country. […] So, if you're going to write about race, you have to make sure it's so lyrical and subtle that the reader who doesn't read between the lines won't even know it's about race" (ADICHIE, 2014, p. 336-337). The lines from Shan, one of the characters from *Americanah,* call attention to the difficulties one may find when trying to address race in literary productions in the United States. For Shan, "If you write about how people are really affected by race, it'll be too *obvious*" (p. 336). In Shan's view "race", as a thematic subject, cannot be the central aspect of a novel if the author expects to achieve some recognition. For her, a conversation about race needs to be embellished and attenuated, made less explicit. The irony of this sentence lies in the metafictional reference to Chimamanda Adichie's writing of *Americanah*, since there is nothing subtle about the novel's treatment of race issues. In fact, throughout the narrative, Adichie complicates "race" by showing how it is intermingled with other issues such as ethnicity, gender, class, and nationality. Even if race is an uncomfortable subject in the United States, Adichie refuses to ignore it; instead, she brings race to the fore.

Considering the multiple dimensions that constantly constitute the racial experience of the characters in *Americanah*, this chapter approaches race issues in the novel from an intersectional feminist perspective. According to Avtar Brah and Ann Phoenix, "[…] the need for understanding complexities posed by intersections of different axis of differentiation is as pressing today as it has always been." In "Aint' I a woman? revisiting intersectionality", they defend the idea that society would profit much from engaging in an intersectional approach to experience. They believe that intersectionality provides a "more complex and dynamic understanding of experience" (BRAH; PHOENIX, 2004, p. 75). They view

> 'intersectionality' as signifying the complex, irreducible, varied and variable effects which ensue when multiple axis of differentiation — economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential — intersect in historically specific contexts. The concept emphasizes that different dimensions of social life cannot be separated out into discrete pure strands. (BRAH; PHOENIX, 2004, p. 76).

Bearing this discussion in mind, I ground my research on "intersectionality" in order to enlighten my understanding of the characters' experiences, and of the political, historical, and social contexts which constantly shape their identities.

Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) formulated the term intersectionality to "denote[s] the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's employment and experiences" (p. 1244). She coined the term as a provisory "way to articulate the interaction of racism and patriarchy generally", a way to map overlapping systems of subordination and domination (p. 1265-1266). Nowadays, the term has become more inclusive and it is used to emphasize the several encounters that permeate and constantly shape identities. As stated by Crenshaw: "Originally articulated on behalf of black women, the term brought to light the invisibility of many constituents within groups that claim them as members, but often fail to represent them" (CRENSHAW, 2019, p. 5). Her statement points out the works of intersectionality: its exposition of the erasure of individuals or identity groups. In line with this idea, María Lugones (2007; 2014) discusses how intersectionality deals with absence and subtraction. In that sense, if "woman" and "Black" are taken as homogeneous essentialist categories, the intersection of race and gender will expose the exclusion of Black women (LUGONES, 2014). Thus, "intersectionality reveals what is not seen when categories such as gender and race are separate from each other" (LUGONES, 2007, p. 192).

This study considers the inseparability of race, gender, and class, categories that intersect and influence the experience of Black women and other social groups in *Americanah*. Nevertheless, intersectionality has come under criticism by some academic scholars. Authors such as Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Jasbir Puar, and Jennifer C. Nash defend that there are other methods that can provide a more fluid mode of analysis. One of the most common claims they make about intersectionality is related to its focus on identity politics, and the supposed reaffirmation of a view of identity and identity categories as fixed. From their perspective, one of the problems with intersectionality is that it describes and complicates identity without questioning the premise of a construction of subjectivity in itself. (NASH, 2011; PUAR, 2012).

According to Nash (2011), "intersectionality is inextricably linked to the production and maintenance of identity categories", being "its primary intervention […] to add complexity to existing identity categories, not to jettison identity categories altogether" (p. 5). In line with this idea, Puar (2012) argues that: "many of the cherished categories of the intersectional mantra — originally starting with race, class, gender, now including sexuality, nation, religion, age, and disability — are the products of modernist colonial agendas and regimes of epistemic violence"

(p. 54). Nevertheless, the way I understand the concept of "intersectionality", it is not because a subject is caught in the encounter of intersecting patterns that their identity — with its specific historical, socio-economical, and geo-political context — is fixed. In addition, these socially constructed identity categories produce material effects.

Addressing some of the controversies and debates generated around intersectionality, Crenshaw responds:

> Conservatives have painted those who practice intersectionality as obsessed with "identity politics." Of course, […] intersectionality is not just about identities but about the institutions that use identity to exclude and privilege. The better we understand how identities and power work together from one context to another, the less likely our movements for change are to fracture. (CRENSHAW, 2019).

The accusation that intersectionality reinforces exclusionary categories seems to neglect the purpose of intersectional analysis. If these categories are picked out, it is with the objective of making those who are marginalized through their homogenization visible.

Considering the claim that intersectionality reinforces separability, Lugones (2007), for instance, endorses an "understanding [of the] the mutuality of construction of the coloniality of power and the colonial/modern gender system" because "it is only the logic mutuality of construction that yields the inseparability of race and gender" (p. 208). Similarly to Lugones, Leslie McCall (2005) defends that although categories such as race and gender are used as points of departure, they are not static. In fact, when discussing an intersectional method,[1] McCall asserts that for some intersectional researchers, categorizations are avoided and seen as suspect because their use "inevitably leads to demarcation, and demarcation to exclusion, and exclusion to inequality" (p. 1777). Therefore, intersectionality's logic of multiple axes of oppression is generally used in order to deconstruct these overlapping systems of oppression, as well as undermine these systematizations that produce social inequality.

From Puar's perspective, however, intersectionality has become mainstream. For the author, while most feminists acknowledge what she refers to as "the mantra of race, class, gender and sexuality", "its very invocation, it seems, largely substitutes for intersectional analysis itself" (PUAR, 2012, p. 53). When talking about the heuristic use of intersectionality, Patricia Hill Collins (2019, p. 37) agrees that the "use of intersectionality as applied to the topic of identity is commonplace", even though she asserts that "[i]ntersectionality is not a theory of identity." However, she defends that the focus on identity does not imply fixed identities nor

[1] More specifically, the author discusses the development of the "methodology of anticategorical complexity".

does it prevent potential coalitions. Furthermore, while Puar seems to consider what she refers to as "the mantra" of intersectionality ineffective, Collins reinforces the undeniable contributions of this approach to intersectionality; she defends: "Intersectionality has certainly contributed to paradigm shifts in thinking about how mutually constructed power relations shape social phenomena" (COLLINS, 2019, p. 43). With these considerations in mind, in the next sections I will attempt to analyze Adichie's *Americanah* avoiding separability and acknowledging that identity categories are fluid.

2.1 "IS RACE AN INVENTION OR NOT?":[2] BECOMING A NON-AMERICAN BLACK

In *Americanah,* as a Nigerian woman, Ifemelu discovers that from the moment she arrived in the United States she became Black and that "black is at the bottom of America's race ladder" (ADICHIE, 2014, p. 220). She also discovers that in the U.S. "whiteness is the thing to aspire to" (p. 205) because it grants you privileges and better opportunities. Ifemelu's affirmation that she did not think of herself as Black and that she only became Black when she came to America (p. 209) brings into question the construction of race itself, since it positions race as a category that is socially constructed, an invention that privileges white society (LUGONES, 2010; QUIJANO, 2000).

Initially, Ifemelu is surprised by the information she receives from her aunt and friends. For instance, because Ifemelu goes to the U.S. with a student visa, Aunty Uju lends her someone else's Social Security card and driver's license so she can work. For Ifemelu, the Nigerian Black woman who lent her the card does not look like her and is at least ten years older. Aunty Uju's response to Ifemelu's observation is, "All of us look alike to white people" (p. 120). This simple statement is the beginning of Ifemelu's experience and observations about the codifications of race in the U.S. There, Ifemelu begins to realize that her experience is often marked and homogenized by the color of her skin. As part of this heterogeneous group — Black people living in the United States — she will experience attempts to erase parts of her identity, such as her experience of gender, class, nationality, and ethnicity. Furthermore, Ifemelu will learn that

[2] The title of this section makes reference to one of Ifemelu's blog's entries in which she addresses some scientific discussions about race and genetics, and she questions the "doctors in the house": "Is race an invention or not?" (p. 302). In this section, the question about the construction of race takes another significance, for here I challenge Ifemelu's premise that race did not matter in Nigeria. In order to undertake this task, I will discuss how colonial structures of power imposed historical, socio-political, and racial hierarchies that continue to inform postcolonial societies.

some people also assign characteristics to her and other Black people around her based on their color. In addition, she will discover that there are certain expectations and codes of behavior that people associate with Black people in the U.S., including other African Americans and Africans.

Although Ifemelu only perceives the impact of race when she is in the United States, *Americanah* indicates that there were already hierarchical racial relations in Nigeria. Although racial politics there might differ from the politics in the United States, in Nigeria, whiteness and its characteristics are also privileged and seen as superior. When Ifemelu meets her old high school friend Ginika in the United States, Ginika remembers when she was voted the prettiest girl in school just because she was biracial. She had told her American friends about "how all the boys were chasing [her] because [she] was a half-caste, and they said [she] was dissing "[her]self" (p. 123). She adds

> So now I say biracial, and I'm supposed to be offended when somebody says half-caste. I've met a lot of people here with white mothers and they are so full of issues, eh. I didn't know I was even supposed to have issues until I came to America. (p. 123).

As one can see, on the one hand, Ginika is aware that there is a hegemonic view of beauty in Nigeria. On the other hand, Ginika seems to ignore that the maintenance of the belief in white purity and superiority reinforces discrimination against Black people while relegating strong Black features and darker complexions as inferior.

Ifemelu and Ginika's interaction also relates to a discussion on "colorism", which is defined by Alice Walker (2003, p. 200) as "the prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color". Colorism would then be the reiteration and internalization of these racist hierarchies that are perpetuated even within Black communities. From this perspective, there is a predilection for light-skinned girls such as Ginika. In relation to "colorism", Emma Dabiri (2020, p. 16) stresses that "Colorism is undoubtedly about proximity to racial whiteness, but proximity is determined by far more than just complexion". That is, being Black is not only about skin color, but there are also other features of blackness which are just as important. Additionally, Dabiri (2020, p. 166) points out the need for interrogating the gendered construction of "colorism", once "the light-skin and good-hair gang is undoubtedly associated with femininity".

Ginika's previous statement also suggests that the term "half-caste" goes unquestioned, which indicates that the meanings assigned to it are taken for granted as well. More than the non-existence of race, there is a lack of conversation about race issues, even among Black

people. Ginika continues by saying that "if anybody wants to raise biracial kids, do it in Nigeria", to which Ifemelu ironically replies: "Of course. Where all the boys chase the half-caste girls" (p. 124). That is, in a context which values whiteness, namely Nigeria, biracial kids are at a relative advantage. One of these biracial women is Kosi, Obinze's wife. People ask her if she is "half-caste" because "she [is] so fair-skinned", and Obinze notices that Kosi seems to take pleasure "in being mistaken for mixed-race" (p. 22). In addition, Ginika[3] and Ifemelu's conversation also implies that (heterosexual) women with darker skin might have more difficulties in finding a male partner than those with lighter skin and physical features associated to whiteness. One of the consequences of these white standards of beauty is that some women in the novel try to achieve this whiteness by straightening their hair or whitening their skins with bleaching creams, for instance. Therefore, it is clear that race also matters in Nigeria.

One of the reasons for these hierarchical racial relations of inferiority and superiority is that they are consequences of colonialism and Eurocentric capitalism. Like other former European colonies, Nigeria is still impacted by the legacies of colonialism, which begs a needed discussion about coloniality. As discussed in the previous chapter, coloniality is a hegemonic power that makes the development of former colonies more difficult. Thus, Nigeria, as a historically new Republic is still affected by the damages caused by the exploitation of the country by the British Empire. The novel *Americanah* addresses some of these public issues — such as corruption in the Nigerian government, the Nigerian Civil war, the lack of educational funding, and the constant university strikes.

Ifemelu, for instance, thinks about her father as "a man full of blanched longings, a middlebrow civil servant who wanted a life different from what he had, who had longed for more education than he was able to get" (p. 47). As a form of protecting himself, he would use big and complicated words to sound more sophisticated. As Ifemelu gets older, she resents her father's "mannered English […] because it was costume, his shield against insecurity" (p. 47). The narrator describes how "[s]ometimes Ifemelu imagined him in a classroom in the fifties, an overzealous colonial subject wearing an ill-fitting school uniform of cheap cotton, jostling to impress his missionary teachers" (p. 47). This description reveals how her father has been subdued by his anxieties and by his inferiority complex.

---

[3] Ginika went to high school with Ifemelu in Nigeria. Her father was a college professor, and they moved to the U.S. in search for a better education system.

The description of Ifemelu's father is that of a colonized mind. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) addresses how in order to take economic and socio-political control over another people, it is first necessary to control their minds, to colonize their minds. This colonization happens in the cultural field by controlling "their tools of self-definition in relationships to others." Thus, by "the destruction or the deliberate undervaluing of a people's culture, […] and the conscious elevation of the language of the coloniser" one can dominate the mind of the colonized (THIONG'O, 1986, p. 16). Ifemelu's father has learned to see the English culture as superior and he cannot develop his identity from outside of Western oppressive thinking.

Furthermore, the reference to missionary teachers brings to the narrative the role of Christian missions in the colonial enterprise and domination of Nigeria. As Lugones states:[4]

> The civilizing transformation justified the colonization of memory, and thus of people's sense of self, of intersubjective relation, of their relation to the spirit world, to land, to the very fabric of their concept of reality, identity, and social, ecological and cosmological organization. (2010, p. 745).

For the author, Christianity was one of the most powerful elements that facilitated colonization. One of the ways in which the civilizing mission attempted to convert and educate the colonized people according to the colonizer's norms was through the imposition of the English language, which Ifemelu's father proudly mimics. Ifemelu prefers it when her father speaks in Igbo because she thinks that it is "the only time he seemed unconscious of his own anxieties" (p. 47-48). Such observation is significant because it suggests that his mannered English is an effort he has to make to present himself to the world while Igbo is the familiar, affective language in which he can talk without over-rationalization. If one considers that the imposition of the English language in Nigerian culture has also imposed English culture and the modern gender system, it is particularly interesting that he cannot be completely vulnerable in a language (culture) that represses any signs of male fragility and demands constant strength from men.

Within a context where Eurocentric knowledges are still privileged when compared to non-European knowledges, it is not surprising that, in *Americanah*, a group of friends suggests that Obinze and Kosi should send Buchi, their daughter, to a school with a British curriculum,

---

[4] According to Lugones (2010, p. 744), the "civilizing mission" permitted several atrocities to be perpetrated on the colonized people. For her, "the colonial 'civilizing mission' was the euphemistic mask of brutal access to people's bodies through unimaginable exploitation, violent sexual violation, control of reproduction and systematic terror" (p. 744). The author highlights the role of gender in the civilizing missions. Lugones argues that the implementation of a gender system (and of hierarchical gender dichotomies) contributed to the dehumanization of colonized people and the consequent erasure of several aspects of their culture and identities.

instead of "disadvantage his child by sending her to one of these schools with half-baked Nigerian teachers" (p. 29). Having internalized hegemonic perspectives about Nigeria, some Nigerian characters reinforce the belief in Nigerian inferiority. Moreover, in calling Nigerian teachers "half-baked", there is a positioning of them as less competent, less intelligent, and a suspicion in regard to these teachers' academic formation. In that context, people with "moneyed childhoods and foreign accents" (p. 29) are usually admired. Obinze, however, eventually begins to "sense an unvoiced yearning in them, a sad search for something they could never find" (p. 29). This yearning is one of the consequences of the dehumanization formerly colonized people might still experience, as if they are lacking something, as if their culture is not good enough. Therefore, Obinze decides that "[h]e did not want a well-educated child enmeshed in insecurities" (p. 29). Hence, he does not send Buchi to a British school.

In "The coloniality of gender", Lugones (2008) addresses and complicates Anibal Quijano's conceptualization of "coloniality of power". She affirms that although his model does not imply a separation of race and gender, "the axis of coloniality [of power] is not sufficient to pick out all aspects of gender" (p. 4). In addition, the author stresses that, because the racialization of the population is necessary for the creation of the colonial/modern gender system, this gender system cannot exist without coloniality of power (LUGONES, 2007, p. 202). Nevertheless, according to Lugones, coloniality of power and the colonial/modern gender system are "mutually constitutive." As mentioned previously, "the imposition of this gender system was as constitutive of the coloniality of power as coloniality of power was constitutive of it" (p. 202). For Lugones, "coloniality" means

> not just a classification of people in terms of the coloniality of power and gender, but also the process of active reduction of people, the dehumanization that fits them for the classification, the process of subjectification, the attempt to turn the colonized into less than human beings. (LUGONES, 2010, p. 745).

This notion of coloniality is germane to my analysis of the novel because it affects the characters' lives as they traverse between Nigeria, England, and the United States.

In the final chapter of *Americanah*, Ifemelu has a phone conversation with her ex-boyfriend Curt, and he asks her if she is still writing about race, to which she replies that her new blog is "just about life." She adds that "[r]ace doesn't really work here. I feel like I got off the plane and stopped being black" (p. 476). In this section, I have tried to analyze the ideological agendas related to racial issues in Nigeria present in *Americanah* in order to demonstrate that Ifemelu's affirmation that "race" is not an issue in Nigeria is inaccurate. It is curious that she maintains this position after her immersion in racial politics in the U.S. Even

though she has become more aware of the social construction of racism, she is still somehow unaware of the impact of race in Nigerian social structure. While Ifemelu's speech neglects coloniality, her observations about Nigeria complicate race, encouraging a reading of the effects of coloniality there. Living in a place where the majority of people are Black, it is easier for her not to think about race so often. In the United States, however, Ifemelu is inserted in a place where Black people are seen as a so-called minority and discriminated against. Her consciousness about her Blackness is raised by a sense of otherness, a sense of being looked at by patriarchal racist society, of being reduced to her color. It is in the contact with "white America" and the experience of racial oppression that she becomes aware of the positioning of Black people there.

2.2 AMERICA'S RACE LADDER

In the beginning of Ifemelu's journey in Philadelphia, where she would attend college, her friend Ginika tries to help her adapt to American culture and its racial politics. Surprised by some attitudes Ifemelu observes in relation to race, Ginika warns her that in the U.S. "[y]ou're supposed to pretend that you don't notice certain things" (p. 127). Nevertheless, for a Black person, it is impossible not to notice "certain things" because they become part of their life. Eventually, Ifemelu would begin to write a blog about race where she would share her perceptions of race in the United States. In this section, I will investigate how the novel explores racial issues, including the historical, socio-economic, political, and psychological effects of racism in the U.S. Moreover, I am also interested in analyzing whether Ifemelu, as a blogger, dissects stereotypical representations of African American and African people. Therefore, this section also includes an overview of some of the main subjects related to race studies as present in *Americanah* in order to enlighten an understanding of the narrative point of view.

2.2.1 Blogging as a literary device

"There is power in looking", argues bell hooks in her essay "The Oppositional Gaze" (1992, p. 115). For hooks, because Black people have been historically oppressed by racialized hierarchical power dynamics and denied their right to gaze, they have developed an "overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze" (p. 115-116). This gaze allows spaces for agency, from which Black people can not only gaze, but also "name

what they see" (p. 116). By daring to gaze back, one refuses to be positioned as the object to be looked. Instead, one can construct one's own representation, resist oppressive discourses, and produce other narratives. Although hooks focuses on Black female representations in white films and on their roles as spectators, her ideas are relevant to a literary discussion of Ifemelu's blog on race. Instead of just accepting the racial politics of which she becomes aware, Ifemelu refuses to accept the white dominant view of Black people. Her consciousness about her own experience and her lack of identification with the stereotypes about Black people and impositions of white society lead her to break with dehumanizing ideologies and to reinterpret her social interactions in her own words.

As the narrator explains, the idea for the blog comes from her friend Wambui. Ifemelu had just had an argument with her white boyfriend Curt, who accused Ifemelu's *Essence* magazine of being "kind of racially skewed" (p. 294).[5] After the incident, she sends a long email to Wambui, filled with "the things she didn't tell Curt, things unsaid and unfinished", "a long e-mail, digging, questioning, unearthing" (p. 295). Her friend replied by saying: "This is so raw and true. More people should read this. You should start a blog" (p. 295). At that moment of her journey, Ifemelu had recently started following some blogs about Black women's natural hair, but she had never considered writing a blog herself. The following passage from the novel reveals the reasons behind her decision to write a blog about race:

> Blogs were new, unfamiliar to her. But telling Wambui what happened was not satisfying enough; she longed for other listeners, and she longed to hear the stories of others. How many other people chose silence? How many other people had become black in America? How many had felt as though their world was wrapped in gauze? (p. 296).

It is possible to observe that, by deciding to write a blog, Ifemelu is consciously refusing to choose silence. She had chosen silence many times before and her blog is her way of speaking out and "unwrapping the wound". One could even say that, metaphorically, for Ifemelu, writing a blog is therapeutic because on it she shares what is on her mind and hears other views about it, other stories, and learns that she is not alone, which gives her a sense of community.

---

[5] I will deepen my discussion of their conversation in Chapter 4, where I will discuss Ifemelu's relationship with Curt. *Essence* magazine is a magazine for African American women. Therefore, Curt's comment is problematic because it disregards the fact that many magazines focus mostly on white women, ignoring the needs and interests of Black women, which is why featuring only Black women is not "racially skewed", but a political act of resistance to racist erasure and underrepresentation.

Ifemelu entitles her anonymous blog "Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black".[6] Her positioning as a Non-American Black is relevant as that of an outsider but who is also immersed in racial politics. Thus, she distances herself (as a cultural critic) from a subject that affects her personally, being a Black person. Still, Ifemelu experiences race differently from other African Americans, which makes her sometimes feel disconnected from some of her friends (and her African American boyfriend, Blaine). In addition, the title suggests that she is observing American Blacks, but in fact, her blog discusses Blackness in general — as it intersects with other identity categories —, which means that she also focuses on whiteness. Blunt and outspoken, her cultural criticism and racial comments attract many readers, a fact that makes some people question her positioning.

Shan, Blaine's sister, for instance, tells Ifemelu that the reason why her blog is a success is that she is not affected by race as African Americans are. Consequently, people accept her criticisms on race more easily. Shan affirms:

> "You know why Ifemelu can write that blog, by the way?" Shan said. "Because she's African. She's writing from the outside. She doesn't really feel all the stuff she's writing about. It's all quaint and curious to her. So she can write it and get all these accolades and get invited to give talks. If she were African-American, she'd just be labelled angry and shunned. (p. 336).

Although Shan's comment denounces racist tendencies to end conversations about race and racism in the U.S. as well as their tendency to associate Black people with anger, Shan somehow neglects the fact that Ifemelu also struggles with racism and does indeed feel "the stuff she is writing about." After all, as Brah and Phoenix (2014, p. 76) have postulated, it is impossible to separate "the different dimensions of social life". Ifemelu's body is also sexualized, racialized, exoticized, and discriminated against.[7] Still, Shan's comment also points out Ifemelu's somewhat privileged position as an outsider. Because Ifemelu is an African immigrant Black woman, her perspective and writings are better accepted by white American repressive society.

---

[6] Ifemelu first named her blog "Raceteenth or Curious Observations by a Non-American Black on the Subjects of Blackness in America". She changed the title after her father asked her why she was dating "an American Negro" (instead of a Nigerian man) and she corrected him by saying that nobody uses the word "Negro" anymore.

[7] Interestingly, although upset with Shan, Ifemelu does not give her an appropriate answer. She just says that Shan's comment is "fair enough." For her, "It was true that race was not embroidered in the fabric of her story; it had not been etched on her soul". Nonetheless, after the comment and the silence that fills the room, Ifemelu feels "an embittered knot, like bereavement, in her soul" (p. 337).

Still in relation to Ifemelu's positioning as a blogger, it is important to refer back to Gĩchingiri Ndĩgĩrĩgĩ's consideration on James Clifford's concept of "reverse appropriation". For Ndĩgĩrĩgĩ (2017, p. 200), "as writer/inscriber, [Ifemelu] inverts the localizing moves of travel writing that position non-Western people as 'natives', but she, too, cannot avoid being seen and equally frozen". I find Ndĩgĩrĩgĩ analysis appropriate because it highlights the fact that Ifemelu is in a position from which she can observe, comment, and analyze American society by blogging about racial politics in the United States, while also being marked by her own Blackness, and for being an African immigrant. Thus, Ifemelu shifts the role of being observed and explained from a Western hegemonic perspective to that of being an observer of the West, now scrutinized from a contemporary non-Western perspective, describing and commenting about Western society. Moreover, her witty and straightforward voice as a blogger transforms the United States (not Africa) into the exotic place filled with subjects and traditions that are foreign, somewhat strange, to her, and that, therefore, need to be studied. Furthermore, I would affirm that, in the novel, reverse appropriation happens by means of constructing an oppositional gaze. In her blog, Ifemelu questions not only stereotypical images created about African people, but she also produces narratives of resistance by interrogating phallocentric and racist gazes.

When Ifemelu returns to Nigeria and starts to work for a magazine, she is asked why she had decided to write a blog about race. She replies by saying that "[she] discovered race in America and it fascinated [her]" (p. 405). Not only is race fascinating, but it is also a complex subject which is explored in depth by Adichie in *Americanah*, where she depicts several social interactions in which race plays a major role. Throughout the novel, Adichie inserts posts from Ifemelu's blog on race. The use of a blog as literary device gives Adichie the chance to experiment with intertextuality and change the tone of her conversation about race. Because Ifemelu assumes a strong and honest voice as a blogger, sometimes the conversation about race in the novel is somewhat didactic.[8] Furthermore, as an anonymous blogger, Ifemelu can dare say things that in other contexts she would not, while Adichie, as a writer, can also experiment with different types of narrative genres because of her insertion of blog posts in the narrative. Serena Guarracino (2014, p. 14) points out the relevance of "blogging as a hybrid form that brings together storytelling, reportage, and emotional value". The use of the blog also arouses

[8] Ifemelu uses some of her posts to explain relevant concepts from race studies. For instance, in some of the blog's entries, Ifemelu explains concepts such as "the magic negro" and "white privilege". In another entry, Ifemelu even includes Peggy McIntosh's "white privilege test".

an interesting reflection about the importance of social media and digital platforms in providing a space for dialogue. Although eventually Ifemelu becomes a Princeton researcher fellow, she seems a bit suspicious of academia and academic language. In her blog, she tries to discuss those subjects in a way that an average reader would understand; the success of her blog shows that the subjects discussed by her affect and interest thousands of people (although they also upset many, who respond to her posts negatively).

2.2.2 Observations on blackness by a non-American black

It is possible to notice that *Americanah* portrays how sometimes white people might unintentionally behave in condescending ways towards people of color. This type of behavior is occasionally displayed by characters such as Curt and his cousin Kimberly, with whom Ifemelu develops romantic and platonic relationships, respectively. Curt assumes at times a patronizing attitude when he tries to attenuate certain racist incidents — though he usually tries to be considerate towards Ifemelu's feelings. Kimberly, on the other hand, tries to compensate for other people's racist behavior and is often excessively apologetic. She is a wealthy charitable white woman, who travels to poor countries that need financial aid.

Ifemelu works for Kimberly as a babysitter, and they become friends when Ifemelu tells her that "[n]ot every black person is beautiful" (p. 147). Ifemelu had noticed that Kimberly uses the word "beautiful" "in a peculiar way":

> "We're working with this beautiful woman on the inner-city project", and always, the women she referred to would turn out to be quite ordinary-looking, but always black. One day […] Kimberly said, "Oh, look at this beautiful woman", and pointed at a plain model in a magazine whose only distinguishing feature was her very dark skin. "Isn't she just stunning?"
> No, she isn't." Ifemelu paused. "You know, you can just say 'black.' (p. 146).

Kimberly is not a racist person. Far from it, she seems to display a type of "white guilt" for the existence of racism and classicism, for which she tries to overcompensate. The previous passage demonstrates how "race" is avoided in the U.S. and how codes are created to refer to something that is undeniable, such as someone's skin color. Perhaps because Black women are not usually considered the standard of beauty, Kimberly tries to demonstrate her "acceptance" and appreciation of Black people by calling every Black woman "beautiful", even though this is not always the case. Still, her attitude is also a consequence of racist ideology because her behavior seems to turn the focus to herself as an open-minded and charitable person. Instead of

normalizing equal relations between herself and Black people, Kimberly's excessive praising of Black people's quality and her exteriorization of her own work alongside them call attention to the fact that she is an exception to the norm.

Similarly, Kimberly has some liberal "upper-middle-class American" friends who use "wonderful too often" (p. 169). At a party Kimberly throws, they talk about the "wonderful tour guide" they met in Tanzania, "the wonderful charity in Malawi", "a wonderful orphanage in Botswana", "a wonderful […] cooperative in Kenya" (p. 169). In a way, their charitable acts seem to be a form of white guilt mixed with self-indulgence. A position that looks at socio-economically disadvantaged people with pity, which exposes a veiled belief in their superiority. One of the male guests compliments Ifemelu on her beauty and adds, "with his teeth jarringly white", that "African women are gorgeous" (p. 169). His compliment can be read as a form of microaggression, as his jarringly smile seems to exoticize Ifemelu and other African women, making her uncomfortable.

There are many cases of microaggression in the narrative, which is one of the ways the narration exposes how racism happens on a daily basis One of these incidents happens at Kimberly's house. Laura, Kimberly's sister, seems to demonstrate an obsessive interest in Nigeria after Ifemelu is hired. One day, Laura shows a picture of a thin model surrounded by skinny African children and tells her about the "good work" this stunning model seems to be doing. Ifemelu replies to Laura's comment by saying that "she's just as skinny as the kids, only that her skinniness is by choice and theirs is not by choice" (p. 162). Laughing, Laura tells Ifemelu "she loves how sassy she is" (p. 162). Knowing that sassy is a pejorative racist stereotype that associates Black women with angry, sexual, and rude behavior, Kimberly apologizes for Laura: "It's the kind of word that's used for certain people and not for others" (p 163).[9] Besides the fact that Laura always tries to establish her status of superiority by constantly positioning Ifemelu as an immigrant from a poor and economically dependent continent, Laura also reproduces racialized sexist attitudes and stereotypes. In her blog, Ifemelu discusses many of these microaggressions regularly experienced by Black people.

Another subject that is approached on Ifemelu's blog is the belief in white superiority and the consequent racial hierarchies. Because American society has perpetuated the belief in white superiority, Black people are seen as inherently inferior to white people. For Ifemelu,

[9] Eventually, Ifemelu would come to feel impatient with Kimberly's apologies because she feels that they "were tinged with self-indulgence, as though Kimberly believed that she could, with apologies, smooth all the scalloped surfaces of the world" (p. 163).

"There's a ladder of racial hierarchy in America. White is always on top […] and American black is always on the bottom, and what's in the middle depends on time and place" (p. 184). Ifemelu's observation indicates that this belief in inborn white superiority produces unequal power relations in society because the distribution of power in it is linked with the gendered construction of race. In this context, dominant white society constantly reproduces systematic discriminatory practices in order to maintain hegemonic power. By institutionalizing racism in spheres such as politics, education, law, and employment, Black people are usually disadvantaged and discriminated, their achievements ignored. Ifemelu's post interrogates the naturalization of this belief while exposing the unfair consequences of racial hierarchies, displaying her oppositional gaze towards U.S. racial politics.

In another one of her blog's entries,[10] Ifemelu posts that these racial hierarchies arouse in racial minorities the desire for whiteness. She acknowledges that these minorities are all differently oppressed by white society. Nevertheless, for Ifemelu, "Each secretly believes that it gets the worst shit" and although "there is no United League of the Oppressed", all of them "think they're better than blacks because, well, they're not black" (p. 205). Her statement reveals that even among racial minorities there are power struggles and the spreading of the belief in Black people's inferiority. Ifemelu continues:

> So whiteness is the thing to aspire to. Not everyone does, of course (please, commenters, don't state the obvious) but many minorities have a conflicted longing for WASP whiteness or, more accurately, for the privileges of WASP whiteness. They probably don't really like pale skin but they certainly like walking into a store without some security dude following them. (p. 205).

Thus, the aspiration for whiteness is, in fact, a desire for white people's privilege, a desire that is grounded in the historical, socio-economic, and political discrimination of people of color. By discussing whiteness from her perspective as a Black woman, Ifemelu is denouncing the oppression of racial minorities in the United States. In addition, Ifemelu's post includes one more example of every day racism. Being followed by a security guard might be just an extraordinary event for a white person, but for a person of color it is just a common psychologically draining experience of racism.

The ideas of white superiority and desire for whiteness are connected with another important subject discussed in the novel: hair. In *Americanah*, some Black women are compelled to relax their hair in order to be considered more professional. Some of them have

---

[10] This entry is entitled "Understanding America for the Non-American Black: What do WASP [White Anglo-Saxon Protestant] Aspire To?" (p. 205).

also internalized racist conceptualizations of beauty and learned to see their natural hair texture as ugly, dirty, and unprofessional. One of the consequences is that many Black women subject their hair to intense, sometimes destructive, chemical alterations, so that their hair might look more similar to a white woman's hair. Such decision is related to topics like desirability and Black women's employment, a discussion that will be analyzed at length in Chapter 3.

Another case of every day racism is shared in one of Ifemelu's posts entitled "Sometimes in America, Race is Class." In this entry, she emphasizes how race and class are interconnected. Her post is inspired by an encounter she had with a carpet cleaner when she was working as Kimberly's babysitter. The cleaner assumes that she is the owner of that "grand house with the white pillars" and seems uncomfortable and resentful of having to serve her. His face is first marked by surprise and later "ossified into hostility" (p. 166). When Ifemelu notices his demeanor, she informs him that she is working for Mrs. Turner. Ifemelu resents him when she notices, as "a conjuror's trick, the swift disappearance of his hostility. His face into a grin. She, too, was the help. The universe was once again arranged as it should be" (p. 166). As one can see, for the cleaner, a Black immigrant woman cannot be in a position of supposed superiority. The change in his behavior not only suggests his happiness in learning that she is also "the help" — for in their "equal position" as servers he is historically seen as the superior person, for being male and white —, but also that, for him, people like her should not own such properties or be in a position of power.

In her entry, Ifemelu writes about how "[i]n America's public discourse, 'Blacks' as a whole are often lumped with 'Poor Whites.' Not Poor Blacks and Poor Whites. But Blacks and Poor Whites. A curious thing indeed" (p. 166). Thus, Ifemelu responds to the imbrication of categories such as gender and class, which suggests that the narrative point of view is constructed from an intersectional perspective. I would say that if these groups are lumped together it is because racist discourse already establishes the inborn inferiority of Black people. It is this belief in white supremacy[11] that produces many stereotypes about Black people, for instance, that they are lazy, less competent, and less intelligent than white people. In Aunty Uju's medical residency program in Massachusetts, for example, there are patients "who [think] they [are] doing her a [favor] by seeing her" (p. 172). Thus, it is not sufficient that Aunty Uju

[11] I am using "supremacy" in agreement with bell hooks' use of the term, who prefers to "use the term white supremacy, over racism because racism in and of itself did not really allow for a discourse of colonization and decolonization, the recognition of the internalized racism within people of color […]" (hooks, 2005, p. 7). That is, to shift the focus from white people to a wider understanding of interlocking systems of oppression.

has to straighten her hair in order to be respected, she also has to deal with the ordinary practice of having to prove her knowledge and medical skills to patients who associate her skin color with a lack of potential.

Linked with this discussion on microaggressions and every day racism is a discussion on white privilege. One of the ways in which racist society privileges white people is by naturalizing racism, thus, allowing white people not to have to think about race while people of color are constantly reminded of their race and the social impositions assigned to it. In another post of her blog,[12] Ifemelu addresses the concept of "white privilege". Her African American boyfriend Blaine (who is referred to in her blog as "Professor Hunk") is questioned about the concept of "white privilege". Blaine's student refuses to acknowledge the relevance of the term because he is also poor:

> Why must we always talk about race anyway? Can't we just be human beings? And Professor Hunk replied — that is exactly what white privilege is, that you can say that. Race doesn't really exist for you because it has never been a barrier. Black folks don't have that choice. (p. 346).

The student's attempt to "humanize" Black people denies the fact that a racist society constantly tries to undermine and dehumanize them, which perpetuates hegemonic racist practices and discourses. Ifemelu exhibits her oppositional gaze not only by discussing the concept of "white privilege", but also by including a list so that her readers can check their (white) privileges. By inserting this post in the novel, Adichie is also ensuring that the readers of *Americanah* will have checked their privileges as well.

In the post entitled "Understanding America for the Non-American Black: Thoughts on the Special White Friend", Ifemelu addresses "The White Friend Who Gets It" (p. 361), and she suggests some things that this friend might explain to other people, without running the risk of being accused of "playing the race card" or "reverse racism". In this important entry from her blog, Ifemelu gives examples about how race matters in the United States, as well as in other countries, by showing how whites have been historically privileged at the expense of Black people's equal jobs and opportunities. She says:

> So there is, in much of America, a stealthy little notion lying in the hearts of many: that white people earned their place at jobs and school while black people got in because they were black. But in fact, since the beginning of America, white people have been getting jobs because they are white. Many whites with the same qualifications but Negro skin would not have the jobs they have. But don't ever say this publicly. Let your white friend say it. If you make the mistake of saying this, you

[12] This entry is entitled "What Academics Mean by White Privilege, or Yes It Sucks to Be Poor and White but Try Being Poor and Non-White" (p. 346).

> will be accused of a curiosity called "playing the race card." Nobody quite knows what this means. (p. 361).

Ifemelu's lines indicate that for Black people it is difficult to address certain racial subjects because they might be accused of using their race to have advantages. Moreover, her post reveals Ifemelu's defiant political views and rejection of white American tendency to deny white privilege and to patronize Black people.

Later in Ifemelu's post, she also mentions another "curiosity called 'reverse racism'" (p. 361). Her text suggests that when people talk about forms of repairing years of oppression and inequality they are accused of "reverse racism". Nonetheless, Ifemelu points out that Black people have been systematically denied their rights, making the accusation of reverse racism implausible. Ifemelu stresses that Black people are still affected by the legacies of slavery. She says, "lots of white folks are still inheriting money that their families made a hundred years ago. So if that legacy lives, why not the legacy of slavery?" (p. 362). One of these legacies is racism, which many believe to have ended with slavery. In her post, Ifemelu suggests that the readers ask their "white friends who get it" to talk about "how funny it is, that American pollsters ask white and Black people if racism is over. White people in general say it is over and Black people in general say it is not. Funny indeed" (p. 362). Thus, those who experience racism are the ones who more promptly reveal its existence while those who are benefited by it deny its existence.

Similarly, in another post,[13] Ifemelu affirms: "In America, racism exists but racists are all gone. Racists belong to the past. Racists are the thin-lipped mean white people in the movies about the civil rights era. Here's the thing: the manifestation of racism has changed but the language has not" (p. 315). What her post implies is that people associate the word "racism" with overt expressions of racist discrimination and segregation when in fact there are other more subtle or institutionalized forms of racism. Thus, "if you haven't lynched somebody then you can't be called a racist" (p. 315). In this post, Ifemelu suggests a job position for someone to decide who is racist or not, for "somebody has to be able to say that racists are not monsters" (p. 315). Ifemelu ironically suggests the creation of a term, "Racial Disorder Syndrome"[14] (p. 315), to describe people who "suffer from this syndrome". Ifemelu's post points out white

---

[13] This entry is entitled "Job Vacancy in America – National Arbiter in Chief of 'Who is Racist" (p. 315).

[14] Her suggestion of a syndrome is also interesting because, in some moments of the narrative, Ifemelu and other Nigerian characters discuss how Nigeria and the United States deal differently with mental issues. While in Nigeria it seems that some mental conditions are usually ignored and seen as foreign behavior, some characters seem to believe that in the U.S. there is a tendency to turn everything into a medical condition.

society's limitation in understanding that someone can be an average white citizen (not a monster) and still discriminate or perpetuate racist practices, since they are inserted in a context that systematically privileges them. Furthermore, she criticizes white society's tendency to undermine claims of racism and to justify racist practices.

In Ifemelu's blog, there are some posts dedicated to the former president of the United States, Barack Obama. One of these posts provides a discussion about love among Black people by celebrating the fact that Obama married a dark-skinned Black woman. As mentioned previously, the belief in white superiority is internalized by Black people as well, which makes some of them aspire for whiteness. As Ifemelu writes, "[…] light skin is [also] valued in the community of American Blacks" (p. 214). For her, "American black men like their black women to have some exotic quota, like half-Chinese or splash of Cherokee. They like their women light" (p. 213). That is, Ifemelu's post argues that colorism remains a problem within Black communities, for dark-skinned Black women are often deprecated and rejected by Black men.

In her post, Ifemelu explains that one of the reasons why Black women love Barack Obama is because he challenges this racist tradition. She affirms:

> Many successful American black men have white wives. Those who deign to have black wives have light (otherwise known as high yellow) wives. And this is the reason dark women love Barack Obama. He broke the mold! He married one of their own. He knows what the world doesn't seem to know: that dark black women totally rock. (p. 214).

Ifemelu's post indicates that Black women appreciate Obama not only for valuing Black women's beauty, but also for making them feel well represented, like someone who is worthy of attention and respect. Ifemelu's oppositional gaze is evident because she speaks from her perspective as a Black woman questioning racialized sexist desires and interrogating the relegation of Black women in the U.S. Furthermore, the passage points out how many important Black men engage in relationships with white women, which is a consequence of racist ideologies. By marrying a white woman, they can adapt more easily and be better accepted in economically privileged spaces. Hence, the connection between race, class, and gender here is undeniable, because, as these Black men ascend, they engage in relationships with white women, who become commodities that might facilitate their occupation of these mostly white spaces (FANON, 2008).

For Ifemelu, Black women "want Obama to win because maybe finally somebody will cast a beautiful chocolate babe in a big-budget rom-com that opens in theaters all over the

country" (p. 214). In this entry, she also discusses how "in American pop culture, beautiful dark women are invisible", being usually assigned the roles of "fat nice mammy, or the strong, sassy, sometimes scary sidekick", never getting the chance of being "the hot woman, beautiful and desired and all" in movies. Instead, "they get to dish out wisdom and attitude while the white women find love" (p. 214). In fact, when Black women are represented as desirable, they tend to be hypersexualized and dehumanized by overtly racialized sexist portrayals. Ifemelu's post is honest and ironic. It is not that she really believes that the only reason they love Obama is because he married a Black woman.[15] Nevertheless, she is calling attention to a discussion about Black women and loneliness; she is telling her readers that dark Black women also deserve love.

Still in relation to Obama, in another entry,[16] Ifemelu discusses the possibility of him winning the presidential campaign. For Ifemelu, Obama only has a chance of winning if he remains a "magic negro." She defines the "magic negro" as "the black man who is eternally wise and kind. He never reacts under great suffering, never gets angry, is never threatening" (p. 321). Thus, contrary to the common association of Black men with irrational and violent behavior, the "magic negro" is the one that manages to disassociate from these racist negative stereotypes, but who is stereotyped nonetheless as a caricatured amiable intellectualized Black person whose main function is to aid white people. According to Ifemelu, the "magic negro" "always forgives all kinds of racist shit. He teaches the white person how to break down the sad but understandable prejudice in his heart" (p. 321). Ifemelu's post implies that if Obama displays signs of a deeper engagement with racial politics, he might be seen as a threat to the hegemony of white society and to the structures that sustain their power.

2.2.3 Honest conversations about race?

When Ifemelu's blog begins to attract readers from different parts of the world, she feels both thrilled and scared of her fame. Although she feels accomplished with the recognition, she

---

[15] Ifemelu ends her posts with "Oh, and dark women are also for cleaning up Washington and getting out of Iraq and whatnot" (p. 214).

[16] This entry is called "Obama Can Win Only If He Remains the Magic Negro" (p. 321). In this entry, Ifemelu refers to Obama's former pastor's controversial speeches. In her entry, she outlines what she considers one of the pastor's basic points: "that American blacks […] know a harsher, uglier America" (p. 321). The unnamed pastor in question was Jeremiah Wright, and his sermons received national attention and were severely criticized in 2008. In her blog, Ifemelu says that the pastor's comments are threatening to American society because it suggests that perhaps Obama is not "a magic negro" after all.

did not have big aspirations for her blog. With thousands of readers, emails begin to arrive from people offering financial support for the blog; and she includes a PayPal account on her blog where many credits are deposited to her monthly. With these offers for support, Ifemelu begins to feel alienated from her own blog, as if it were "a separate thing that could thrive or not, sometimes without her and sometimes with her" (p. 303). She also begins to advertise some products in her blog. Soon Ifemelu receives invitations to give talks about race, which makes her insecure about herself. She feels like a fraud and "a part of her [is] always stiffened with apprehension, expecting the person on the other end to realize that she was play-acting professional" (p. 304). However, she continues to travel and to give talks with all expenses paid and with varied payment fees. Eventually, because of her blog, Ifemelu saves enough money to afford a small apartment in a condominium in Baltimore, which she buys. In addition, she hires an intern to help her with the blog, doing research and deleting inappropriate comments.

In a talk she gives at a company in Ohio, entitled "How to talk about race with colleagues of other races", she watches the frozen faces of her audience as she finishes her speech and feels deflated by their "leaden clapping" (p. 305). That night, she receives an aggressive email: "YOUR TALK WAS BALONEY. YOU ARE A RACIST. YOU SHOULD BE GRATEFUL WE LET YOU INTO THIS COUNTRY". After this email, Ifemelu realizes that she had been tokenized. She describes:

> 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. They did not want the content of her ideas; they merely wanted the gesture of her presence. They had not read her blog but they had heard that she was a "leading blogger" about race. (p. 305).

Deepika Bahri (2013) addresses this process of tokenization, and she argues that the spaces given to individuals or identity groups because they "represent" some essential[ized] category also serves, in a certain manner, as a way of silencing those people by turning them into [fixed] tokens (p. 669-670).

For Ifemelu, this critique is certainly appropriate because the realization that she had been used as a token, a representative of people of her color, prevents Ifemelu from sharing her true observations about race. After that, in other events she participates as a speaker, she would "say what they wanted to hear" (p. 305). Thus, in a way, she silences herself from those racial discussions. Nevertheless, in her blog, she continues to speak more openly about her perceptions of race "because she knew that the people who read her blog were not the same people who attended her diversity workshops". In a way, she begins to develop different

personas. “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*” (p. 305). Therefore, her blog continues to be the platform she uses to express her inner thoughts, while outside the blogosphere she saves her most provocative comments to herself. Moreover, the email she receives is also xenophobic, which points out how Ifemelu’s experience is not only marked by race, but by her nationality as well.

In the same chapter where the narrator describes how the blog completely altered Ifemelu’s life for the better, the narrator also shows how Ifemelu begins to avoid her own straightforward comments about race in her appearances in events as a blogger. Interestingly, the final page of this chapter includes an entry from her blog entitled “Open Thread: For All the Zipped-Up Negroes.” In this thread, Ifemelu encourages all the so-called “zipped-up negroes”, the ones that avoid discussing “Life Experience That Have to Do Exclusively with Being Black” in order to “keep everyone comfortable” to unzip themselves, for the blog is “a safe space” (p. 307). One could say that, somehow, Ifemelu is one of these “zipped-up” people who avoids discussing race in social contexts but who uses her blog as a space to voice her opinions. After Ifemelu decides to close her blog,[17] one of the readers of her blog writes to Ifemelu that she has “used [her] irreverent, hectoring, funny and thought-provoking voice to create a space for real conversation about an important subject” (p. 5), which is a good description of the posts I have included in this chapter.

As expected, Ifemelu’s blog attracted both positive and negative comments, and she could not easily predict which posts would attract more comments and which ones would be almost ignored. She continues to be invited to speak at different kinds of events and places, “always identified as The Blogger”, which makes her feel “subsumed by her blog.” “She had become her blog” (p. 306). Sometimes she would think about the reader of her blog as “a judgmental angry mob waiting for her, biding their time until they could attack her, unmask her” (p. 306). For Guarracino (2014, p. 17), Ifemelu’s insecurities and feelings toward her readers’ comments illustrate the relevance “of blog as a place of social commentary and — not always polite — cultural debate, thus suggesting that the blog becomes more and more a shared space where the blogger has only limited agency”. What Guarracino seems to suggest is that

[17] Ifemelu closes her blog when she decides to move back to Nigeria. Because her blog is supposed to make observations about American Blacks, her choice makes sense.

the blog is a collective space that depends on social interaction and feedback, hence, not really belonging solely to Ifemelu.

I would add that Ifemelu's fear of being "unmasked by her readers", of being called a "fraud", as well as her constant anxiety reflect inner conflicts and the damages of her immersion in racial politics in the U.S., and an unconscious internalization of Western stereotypes of Africa. In *Rock my soul: Black people and self-esteem*, bell hooks (2003) addresses the legacies of slavery and the colonization of Black minds and their effects on Black people's self-esteem. The author urges Black people to recognize the fact that "crippling low self-esteem has reached epidemic proportions in our lives" (p. xxi). According to bell hooks (2003), the traumatic experience of white supremacist assaults on Black people, which began during slavery, has found other forms to operate in society, resulting in a "racially based anxiety" that affects several dimensions of Black people's lives. She affirms: "Racism and the fear of racist assault leads many black people to live in a state of chronic anxiety and dread" (147).

Similar to hooks' observations on discourses of Black people she has spoken to, Ifemelu's words unveil "a profound lack of self-esteem" (p. x), harboring "deep feelings of inadequacy, of not being 'enough,' […]" (hook, 2003, p. x-xi). Although hooks focuses mainly on the experience of African Americans, her discussion on Black people's low self-esteem is relevant to understand Ifemelu's feelings towards her readers. From the moment when Ifemelu arrived in the U.S., she has experienced and witnessed racism and discrimination for being an immigrant African woman in a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, to use hooks terms. The struggle to achieve success in such world can be emotionally draining and psychologically harmful.

It is important to point out that Ifemelu wrote an anonymous blog. Her readers did not know who she was and where she was from and she made sure her nationality would remain a mystery to her readers. By concealing her identity she creates for herself a supposedly "safe space" to voice her criticism on racial politics in the United States. Nevertheless, the illusion of safety is broken when she has to face audiences in the round-tables, workshops, radio programs, and other events she attends. Furthermore, Ifemelu knows that race for her, as for others, is complicated by categories such as gender, ethnicity, and nationality. Perhaps Shan's affirmation that Ifemelu can only write her blog because she is not African American and she speaks from the outside is not completely mistaken. Both Ifemelu, as a blogger, and Adichie, as the author, use strategies to include their cultural and racial commentaries. For Ifemelu, this can be seen as the way she has to position herself as an outsider, while also suffering from racist oppression

inside the United States. For Adichie, this includes using blog as a literary device in her narrative in order to include blunt, sometimes didactic, discussions about racial politics in the United States.

One could say that Ifemelu's blog reveals a clear Black feminist agenda. Her posts approach several concepts and discussions from race studies that enlighten an understanding of the social construction of race, such as institutionalized racism, white privilege, white (male) gaze, and white supremacy, to mention but a few. Moreover, Ifemelu's blog attempts to deconstruct stereotypes associated with Black people, and encourages an understanding of Black people's potential for intellectual and creative works. Furthermore, as a digital influencer, Ifemelu not only raises people's awareness about the intersection of race with issues such as class, gender, and nationality, but her blog also functions as a collective space for sharing life experiences, providing a sense of community. Considering the conceptual framework Ifemelu exposes via her blog, it is possible to affirm that Ifemelu develops an oppositional gaze, and it is in this light that the narrative point of view can be understood. According to hooks (1992, p. 128) when Black women are critical spectators, they "participate in a broad range of looking relations, contest, resist, revision, interrogate, and invent on multiple levels". Therefore, Ifemelu was not only aware of racial politics, she was actively engaging in contesting racist discourses by blogging.

Bearing in mind the relevance of questioning our positioning and the intertwined systems of domination that constantly alter our experience, by blogging about race, Ifemelu is raising awareness about gendered racial politics. Furthermore, by inserting posts from Ifemelu's blog throughout the narrative, Adichie is not only theorizing about race, but also offering her readers a theoretical framework on race and conceptual tools that might help them to develop an oppositional gaze as well, contesting and interrogating the characters' affirmations and behaviors. In this chapter, I have discussed how the narrative exposes the pervasive construction of race mostly in the United States and in Nigeria. While Ifemelu affirms that race is not an issue for her in Nigeria, her point of view as narrator says otherwise, revealing that in Nigeria, comparably to the United States, race as a category is a complex subject that intersects with several other issues such as gender, class, and nationality. One could say that the use of the blog as a literary device effectively facilitates the process of raising awareness to the psychological, cultural, economic, and even geographical effects of racism, as they affect the collective history and individual experience of the characters in the narrative. Still, an analysis of racial construction in *Americanah* is not complete without an analysis of the role of "hair" in the

narrative. Hair is not just a symbol used in the novel, nor is it just a trope tackled in Adichie's works; hair is a site of cultural agency for many Black people, and it needs to be discussed at length. The next chapter approaches hair politics in relation to analytical categories such as gender, race, class, and migration.

3 Chapter III:
HAIR AS A RACE METAPHOR:
Hair Matters in *Americanah*

> On an unremarkable day in early spring — the day was not bronzed with special light, nothing of any significance happened, and it was perhaps merely that time, as it often does, had transfigured her doubts — she looked in the mirror, sank her fingers into her hair, dense and spongy and glorious, and could not imagine it any other way. That simply, she fell in love with her hair. (ADICHIE, 2014, p. 213).

The story of *Americanah* begins with Ifemelu standing on a train station wondering "why there *was* no place where she could braid her hair" in Princeton (p. 3). Ifemelu is about to return to Nigeria but first she goes to Trenton to have her hair braided. In the hair salon, Ifemelu reflects about her journey in the United States while also interacting with the female African immigrant hairdressers who work on her hair. A large part of her narration happens while she is at this salon. Throughout *Americanah*, a parade of hairstyles is displayed, showing the varied aesthetics used by African descendants. Box braids, cornrows, Afros, dreadlocks, corkscrew twists, ponytails, weave extensions, and twistouts are only some of the styles that form the rich culture that is Black hair, as portrayed in the novel. As a Nigerian Black woman, Ifemelu learns to understand hair as culturally specific. Her journey in the U.S. is also her journey of self-discovery and self-acceptance, and her hair plays an important part in the development of her diasporic identity.

The subject of hair has been researched extensively in several academic fields, such as psychology, anthropology, and cultural studies. These studies on hair reveal that hair is connected to broader social issues and it means different things for men and women depending on their historical, political, geographical, and socio-economic context. For instance, according to Banks, "hair shapes black women's idea about race, gender, class, sexuality, images of beauty and power" (p. 3). It also leads to an examination of hegemonic standards of beauty that position straight hair as beautiful while deeming tightly coiled hair as inferior and ugly. As discussed in Chapter II, with the colonial/modern gender system came an imposition of European culture and norms; and among them a hierarchical structure in relation to beauty that benefited only those who could fit into the standards of beauty appreciated by Western European societies.

For Black Africans and people of African descent, hair becomes "the physical marker that distinguishes us from all other racial groups" (p. 11). In fact, authors like Emma Dabiri, Ayana Byrd, Lori L. Tharps, and Orlando Patterson argue that hair is as important a characterizing feature of Blackness as skin color. Dabiri (2020, p. 17) argues that the focus on color undermines the relevance of other characteristics since being black is "a historically loaded ideology". For Orland Patterson (1982 *apud* DABIRI, 2020, p. 13), hair was the determining factor in classifying "Africans specifically as degenerate". Similarly, in *Hair Story*, Byrd and Tharps (2014, p. 17) affirm that more than skin color, "hair acted as the true test of Blackness", a feature that could determine whether or not someone could pass as white or be seen as a member of an European privileged class. Because of former slaves who had been granted freedom during the nineteenth century, "lighter skin and loosely curled hair would often signify free status" (BYRD; THARPS, 2014, p. 17). Thus, many enslaved Blacks shaved their heads or attempted to alter their hair textures in order to try to escape. One of the devastating effects of the legacies of slavery and colonialism is that Black people in different parts of the world are still discriminated against because of their natural hair. As Dabiri (2020, p. 31) argues, this discrimination is a worldwide problem: "Wherever people of African descent exist, we continue to be discriminated against because of our hair". Such discrimination and devaluation of African hair culture is portrayed and then challenged in *Americanah*.

With slavery, enslaved people were not only displaced from their home countries but also stripped of an important part of their varied ethnic culture: the rich (African) Black hair culture and its artifacts. Thus, these diasporic peoples looked for ways of adapting to their new environment, and to their lack of African combs while also inventing new hairstyling techniques. In order to continue doing their hair, people of African descent in the U.S., for instance, had to learn from indigenous groups how to creatively create new tools, while also having to develop techniques to make their hair more similar to those of the white colonizers (BANKS, 2000; BYRD; THARPS, 2014; DABIRI, 2020). Since then, for Black people, hair has come to symbolize a site of contestation, a site for resistance and for assimilation (BANKS, 2000; BYRD; THARPS, 2014; DABIRI, 2020; KELLEY, 1997).

This complex, yet seemingly trifle, subject impacts several aspects of a black person's life, and such is the focus of this chapter. Having analyzed what race reveals about the intersection of identity categories such as gender, class, and nationality in *Americanah*, this chapter expands this discussion by incorporating an analysis of the role of hair in the novel. Considering that hair occupies a central space in the narrative, I argue that hair and Black hair

culture connect with several issues such as gender, class, diaspora, sexuality, beauty, immigration, and politics. Thus, this chapter offers a discussion of the meanings imposed upon hair, particularly Black women's hair, throughout the novel. Although someone's hair can be a reflection of personal choice or aesthetic preference, hair is inevitably linked to historical (mis)representations and conceptualizations. That is, hair can also be seen as a reflection of someone's political views and certain hairstyles are associated with certain behaviors, producing expectations. Hence, I am compelled to investigate how the narrative addresses this fascinating subject. My main argument in this chapter is that hair enlightens an understanding of the social construction of race as portrayed in *Americanah*.

3.1 BLACK HAIR IN LITERATURE BY BLACK AUTHORS

It is not surprising that the literature written by Black authors reflects the relevance of hair for Black people worldwide. Some of the themes brought by the following authors are also present in Adichie's narrative. In Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Byrd Sings* (2014), little Marguerite stands in front of a Black church on Easter Day, imagining herself white. She thinks that "a cruel fairy stepmother, […] understandingly jealous of [her] beauty" has "turned her into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair" (p. 5). She reflects, "[w]ouldn't they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn't let me straighten?" (p. 4). For little Marguerite, her hair, as much as her skin and the color of her eyes, is a marker of gendered racial oppression. Similar to many other Blacks in the 1930s, Marguerite believes that her hair is ugly, inferior, and needs improving. Thus, she fantasizes it to be long, blond, and straight. As one can see, since her childhood, Marguerite has internalized these racial hierarchies and hegemonic beauty ideals of femininity, which affect her self-esteem and her relationships with other people.

In Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1994), little Claudia destroys white baby dolls because she wants "to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability" that make all agree that "a blue-eyed, yellow-haired" doll "was what every girl child treasured" (p. 20). Claudia questions the racist conceptualization of beauty that deems her Black features as ugly and undesirable, being hair linked with racist notions of femininity. Differently, Pecola has embraced these conceptualizations and conformed to her own "ugliness". She eats Mary Jane candies, fascinated by her "blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking out of a world of

clean comfort" (p. 50). Pecola also wishes to become Mary Jane, to have that beauty that she thinks will open a world of possibilities for her, giving her a chance to be respected and recognized as a human being.

In Alice Walker's *The color purple* (1985), Celie tells Shug that Nettie has read in the bible that "Jesus's hair was like lamb's wool", to which Shug replies: "[w]ell, […], if he came to any of these churches we talking bout he'd have to have it conked[18] before anybody paid him any attention. The last thing niggers want to think about they God is that his hair kinky" (p. 202). Shug's response reveals the higher status conferred to straightened hair in that period. Furthermore, her statement exposes Black people's internalized racism and intra-racial racism. If, because of his hair texture, Jesus would not receive any attention, then, for the people in the church, power and goodness are related to whiteness. Furthermore, when Nettie tells Celie this information, she stresses that "wool is not straight" nor curly (WALKER, 1985, p. 141), which means that Jesus' hair texture would be what they call kinky or nappy. As one can see, Walker portrays different hair textures, and her narrative demonstrates how even among Black people there are certain racial hair hierarchies that place certain hair textures (like curly) as "good hair", but other styles (like kinky/nappy/Afro/natural hair) as "bad hair".

When discussing the subject of hair during slavery in the United States, Byrd and Tharps (2014) address how many white people used the derogatory term "wool" to refer to Black hair. The authors mention how the slave markets used this classification to describe enslaved people's hair, as if "likening the hair to an animal's, Whites would be validated in their inhumane treatment of Blacks" (p. 13-14). According to Byrd and Tharps, the slave owners attempted to subjugate Black people, to break their spirit, by pathologizing and dehumanizing them. In this context in which "the scientific community […] had officially relegated dark-skinned, 'woolly'-haired people to the bottom of the evolutionary ladder, the slave owners "brainwashing took root" and was eventually internalized by Black people, who passed it from generation to generation (p. 14). In *Americanah*, you will notice that the link between Black hair and wool is also used by Ifemelu to describe tightly coiled Black hair negatively, until she finally embraces her hair texture and celebrates her kinky/nappy/wooly hair, reappropriating the term and resignifying it.

---

[18] "The conk" was a popular hairstyle among black men from the 1940s until the early 1960s. The conked hair was a hair straightened with a relaxer (usually lye) to alter the "naturally" "kinky"/"nappy" hair into a straight one (See Craig (1997), Banks (2000) and Byrd and Tharps (2014). In order to achieve this style, one would usually comb the hair "into a world of waves atop the forehead" (CRAIG, 1997, p. 404). Famous artists such as James Brown and Nat King Cole were adepts to this hairstyle.

Certainly, it is not only African American literature that reflects the social relevance of hair. In West African society, prior to colonization, hair had long conveyed several messages as it was "used to indicate a person's marital status, age, religion, ethnic identity, wealth, and rank within the community" (BYRD; THARPS, 2014, p. 2). According to Dabiri (2020, p. 32), "Hairstyles were an integral part of ritual, constituting a visual form of language in oral societies", which means that hairstyles conveyed meanings and were highly informative in Yoruba culture and African cultures in general. Braids, more specifically, were connected to several significances as well, such as religious rites, ethnicity, and power. In Chinua Achebe's *Things fall apart* (1995), the African tradition of women plaiting their hair is portrayed; he also depicts the custom of shaving the head in regular arrangements. It is not by chance that in one festival, children had adorned themselves, "especially their hair, which was shaved in beautiful patterns" (ACHEBE, 1995, p. 11). Achebe's narrative reveals the power of hair in African communities.

Hair is an important manifestation of Nigerian cultural creativity, rituals, and beliefs. In Achebe's novel, the tribes' outcasts were forbidden to take care of their hair. Thus, their "long, tangled and dirty hair" was "the mark of [their] forbidden caste." When Christian priests order the outcasts to "shave off their long, tangled hair", the outcasts fear for their life (ACHEBE, 1995, p. 51). In their culture, hair is linked with the divine and with spirituality. Their punishment was to be unable to do their hair, it was a mark of shame, which the priests, by encouraging them to shave and converting their faith to Christianity, supposedly removed. On the other hand, when Okonkwo and the other elders are imprisoned by the white Commissioner, they have their heads shaved as a form of physical and psychological humiliation, showing how colonial violence was also inflicted upon the colonized peoples' hair and hair traditions.[19]

In recent Nigerian literature, other writers have approached the discussion on hair. In Sefi Atta's *A bit of difference* (2013), for instance, the protagonist Deola remembers when as a teenager, she was laughed at by a classmate when she was combing her Afro with an Afro pick. As an adult woman, she remembers having to chemically "relax" her hair for interviews because her braids were seen as unprofessional. Despite the irony of using the term "relax" to refer to

[19] In *Hair story*, Byrd and Tharps (2014, p. 10) discuss how "[t]he shaved head was the first step the Europeans took to erase the enslaved people's culture and alter the relationship between the African and his or her hair". In *Things fall apart* (ACHEBE, 1995), the shaved hair is also linked to this attempt to erase the colonized people's culture and subjugate them.

the process of chemically altering the texture of Afro or curly hair to straight, Deola's story exposes how hair connects to issues such as employment and racist ideas about professionalism.

In *Afro: the girl with magical hair*,[20] Okechukwu Ofili and Sharee Miller (2015) tell the story of Afro, a girl who is imprisoned by a cruel queen obsessed with straight hair. The Queen of Yackiland establishes a straight hair fashion, which is followed by the inhabitants of the kingdom, who fear the consequences of displeasing their queen. The Queen imports hair from another realm, Kanek. When the kingdom of Kanek runs out of straight hair weaves, the people of Yackiland are left with the "difficult" task of having to deal with their natural textures. Afro is the only person in the kingdom who still knows how to groom her natural hair, a knowledge that she begins to share with the community. Because of Afro's influence, people in Yackiland begin to see beauty in their natural hair textures and to learn more about the rich tradition of Black hair. The evil Queen then locks Afro away because she is jealous of the attention Afro receives. Eventually, Afro manages to escape from her prison by using the powers of her magical hair.

This fairy-tale refers to the traditions of straightening one's hair, which for many is a choice, but that descends from a tradition rooted in the racist devaluation of Black people's culture and bodies. In this context, the queen seems to stand for the patriarchal racist desire to police Black people's hair. The people of Yackiland reflect how Black people, when immersed in a culture that values straight hair and that have straightened their hair for years, might not even know what their real hair texture is or how to do their own hair. Differently, Afro symbolizes the link between past and present, showing how spirituality and tradition relate with the practice of styling Black hair.

Adichie's previous works have also foreshadowed discussions on Black hair culture that are deepened in *Americanah*. In *Purple hibiscus* (2017), the protagonist Kambili describes sitting in the kitchen while her mom braids her hair and how the scent of the spices is absorbed by her braids that later emanate the aroma of "egusi soup, utazi, curry" (p. 10). The domestic space of the kitchen can be the setting in which mothers and daughters renovate their bonds, exchanging conversations, and perpetuating the African tradition of Black women braiding each other's hair. Hair is also significant in *Half of a yellow sun* (2007), where the houseboy Ugwu observes the female guests that attend his Master's parties, picturing academic women as

[20] *Afro* seems as though it is a revision of the classical Rapunzel fairy-tale. In this novel, however, instead of a blond-haired white girl, we have a Black protagonist named Afro, who has a tall and full Afro hair, and who is trying to escape her imprisonment with the power of her natural hair.

refined, delicate women with "noses that stood up", women who wore straight weaves and "used hot combs to straighten their hair, his aunty had said, because they wanted to look like white people, although the combs ended up burning their hair off" (p. 23).

In his naivete, Ugwu internalizes racist standards of beauty and associates elegance and beauty with whiteness. Furthermore, his aunt's description approaches a theme that will be addressed in this chapter more explicitly, which is the belief that for Black women, straightening their hair is an expression of self-hatred and desire to be like white women. Moreover, it briefly points out the extent to which Black women damage their hair in their search for a straight texture.

Adichie's collection of short stories, *The thing around your neck* (2009), also presents several narratives where Black hair is significant. In "Imitation", for instance, Nkem, who has always styled her hair to please her husband, cuts it off after finding out her husband is having an affair. When her husband returns from Nigeria, he comments that she should let it grow back because "[l]ong hair is more graceful on a Big Man's wife" (p. 40). In his statement, one can see that from his patriarchal point of view, his wife is a commodity whose hair does not belong to her, but to him. Furthermore, his comment reveals the patriarchal association of long hair and femininity.

In *The thing around your neck*, Akunna immigrates to the United States, and she is bombarded by stereotyped questions and views of Africa and African people. Some of those frequent questions are about hair. She describes: "They gawped at your hair. Does it stand up or fall down when you take out the braids? They wanted to know. All of it stands up? How? Why? Do you use a comb? (p. 116). White people's lack of information about Black hair results in this invasion of privacy and constant surveillance, making it quite common for Black people to be interrogated in the most inappropriate places and contexts.

3.2 "PROFESSIONAL MEANS STRAIGHT":[21] THE CONTROVERSIAL STRAIGHTENED VS "NATURAL" HAIR BINARY

One of the things that fascinate me the most about *Americanah* is that Adichie uses domestic spaces associated with (Black) women and private spheres of their lives to continue a conversation about the social relevance of hair for (Black) women, as it affects several

[21] Reference to Ifemelu's line in *Americanah* (p. 204).

dimensions of their lives. Watching our mothers doing their hair, having our hair fixed — usually by a woman in the family, such as our mom, aunts, cousins, or sisters —, the closeness that doing one's hair requires, are part of our experience as Black women. These memories can be as traumatizing as they are affectionate. Furthermore, as a child, one might not be conscious of the implications of hair practices, though, as shown previously, children might already understand their social positionality and the social discrimination that afflicts them. Ifemelu remembers growing up "in the shadow of her mother's hair":

> It was black-black, so thick it drank two containers of relaxer at the salon, so full it took hours under the hooded dryer, and, when finally released from pink plastic rollers, sprang free and full, flowing down her back like a celebration. Her father called it a crown of glory. "Is it your real hair?" strangers would ask, and then reach out to touch it reverently. (ADICHIE, 2014, p. 40).

As a child, she admires her mother's "bounteous hair." She would "look in the mirror and pull at her own hair, separate the coils" wondering if it would "become like her mother's", though "it remained bristly and grew reluctantly; braiders said it cut them like a knife" (p. 40). Her mother's fuller and longer hair makes her feel inadequate and insecure about her shorter and more tightly coiled hair.

According to Dabiri (2020), "The desire to conform to an aesthetic that values light skin and straight hair is the result of a propaganda campaign that has lasted more than five hundred years. It is the imposition of a system that denigrates anything that is perceived as 'too African'." (p. 54-55). Therefore, racial hierarchies regarding hair stem from the history of colonization of Africa and the slave trade. In this context, it is not surprising that the hair that is deemed beautiful in racist societies is a hair that displays European features, because from a colonial/modern perspective "The only way Afro hair can fulfill the criterion of 'beautiful' is if it is transformed and made to resemble European hair in some way" (p. 55). Sylvia Boone (1990 *apud* DABIRI, 2020) explains how for indigenous peoples in Africa before colonization, the words used to appreciate Black hair were related to the quantity and volume of hair. According to Boone: "Beautiful hair is celebrated as *kpotongo*, which means "it is much, abundant, plentiful" while "undesirable hair is *kpendengo*: hair that is "stunted, not growing robustly" (1990 *apud* DABIRI, 2020, p. 55). Therefore, pejorative words used to describe Black hair, such as "nappy", "hard", "kinky", and "coarse" reflect Western notions of beauty. As one can see, Ifemelu's mother's hair is described as *kpotongo*, as full, bounteous, and thick. Nevertheless, the beauty attributed to it is also linked with the fact that is flows down her back.

Before Ifemelu moves to the United States, she is advised to braid her hair in small braids that last longer because of the high cost of braiding one's hair there. In Ifemelu's first months in the United States, Aunty Uju tells her that she will take her braids out and "relax" her hair for interviews because a friend has told her she "shouldn't wear braids to the interview" because "[i]f you have braids, they will think you are unprofessional." Ifemelu mocks her aunt, asking her if "there are no doctors with braided hair in America." In response, Aunty Uju tells her: "[y]ou are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do if you want to succeed". Observing how much Aunty Uju had changed since she left Nigeria, Ifemelu believes that "Aunty Uju had deliberately left behind something of herself, something essential, in a distant and forgotten place" (p. 119). For Aunty Uju, straightening her hair is the means for achieving her professional goals and a matter of adapting to American culture and hair politics. Newly arrived in the country, Ifemelu cannot understand the association between unprofessionalism and braids.

Years after this conversation, however, Ifemelu can better understand her aunt's "choice" when the latter is advised by a friend to "lose the braids and straighten [her] hair" (p. 202) for an interview in Baltimore. From the moment Ifemelu arrives in the country until a little before she graduates from college, she has her hair braided in long hair extensions, wearing the same braids for three to four months or "until her scalp itched unbearably and the braids sprouted fuzzily from a bed of new growth" (p. 203). This passage describes how Ifemelu avoids braiding her hair with much frequency, and the reason behind it is how expensive the process is. Her grown out braids denounce her economic status. Thus, "class" is also an important issue when discussing Black women's hair, given that their finances affect what they can consume and what they can do with their hair. Now, however, her friend is suggesting that she should straighten her hair because although "[n]obody says this kind of stuff […] it matters" (p. 202). Ifemelu remembers when Aunty Uju had told her something similar, and her years in the U.S. have taught her to take this piece of advice seriously. She really wants to get that job, for not only might it give her a chance to improve her financial situation, but the company is also willing to start the process for her green card. Thus, Ifemelu decides to straighten her hair.

As discussed previously, Byrd and Tharps (2014) explain that the search for the white's straight hair has been present in American society since slavery. This search was a consequence of not merely aesthetical reasons, but also of the translation of "[s]traight hair […] to economic opportunity and social advantage." (p. 17). During slavery, "lighter-skinned Blacks with straighter hair worked inside the plantation houses performing less backbreaking labor than the

slaves relegated to the fields" (p. 18). In the dehumanizing context of slavery, these enslaved people had better chances of improving their living conditions and they were granted some small "advantages".[22] Thus, many enslaved people aspired to have these characteristics and looked for creative ways of straightening their hair because by doing so they were striving to improve their conditions.

Because the roots of straightening one's hair are closely connected with a desire to emulate white people's appearance, many authors have linked straightening one's hair with self-hatred and racial shame. According to bell hooks, for instance, taking into consideration the "context in which the custom of black folks straightening our hair emerges, it represents an imitation of the dominant white group's appearance and often indicates internalized racism, self-hatred and/or low self-esteem" (HOOKS, 2001, p. 112). Similarly, Craig (1997, p. 403) argues that "the technique of hair processing was born in response to a hostile culture and created a new set of meanings and styles that were used to perform gender and express class distinctions". Thus, these techniques strengthened the hegemonic patriarchal racist view of beauty, class, and femininity.

Still, both authors discuss other factors that have led Black people to straighten their hair (other than self-hatred and the desire for whiteness). For hooks, for instance, it was almost a rite of passage, a family tradition, which meant that she was a woman.[23] For Craig (1997), gender, class, and race interweave, mutually influencing the decision to straighten one's hair. He argues that the pervasive message about hair was that femininity and beauty were associated with long straight hair (p. 400-401). Therefore, Craig defends that the interpretation of the technique of straightening one's hair as an imitation of white aesthetics is reductionist. As one can see, despite the origin of the culture of straightening Black hair, there are other factors that might lead someone to straighten their hair other than self-hatred or a desire to imitate white people's hairstyles, as it is portrayed in *Americanah*.

---

[22] Such as "access to hand-me-down clothes, better food, education, and sometimes even the promise of freedom upon the master's death." (BYRD; THARPS, 2014, p. 17). The authors also mention how many of these light-skinned Blacks were often the children of their masters, which contributed to their ranking as house slaves. Thus, this discussion is connected with the history of rape of female enslaved women by their white owners. In addition, whites' identification with their lighter black features made some more comfortable in being served by them. Moreover, their exoticization was also explored as a good quality in the slave market (p. 17).

[23] The author longed for the day in which she could have her hair hot combed in the kitchen because it meant that she could be part of that group of women. Nevertheless, hooks thinks that just as this tradition was passed from generation to generation, perhaps the unconscious feelings of inferiority and inadequacy might have also been passed on, since the roots of the history of straightening one's hair are problematic.

For Ifemelu and Aunty Uju, relaxing their hair is a decision they make because they want to increase their chances of securing a job. It is a conscious choice they make, but a choice based on their fear of the possible consequences of not straightening their hair. Thus, a capitalist racist patriarchal society is what pushes them to take their braids out for the interviews. Furthermore, relaxing their hair seems like another step towards their immersion in American capitalist structure. When Ifemelu first heard her Aunty explain her decision to relax her hair, she had just arrived in the country; at that time, she rejected the idea. After living there for years, though, Ifemelu becomes aware of racial politics in the U.S. and she learns that she might be denied a job because of her hair. Ifemelu knows that even in the twentieth century, "the dominant view that a beautiful woman had long straightened hair, hair that moved, prevailed" (CRAIG, 1997, p. 401). Therefore, Ifemelu's and Aunty Uju's characterizations as immigrants connect with hair matters, showing how race, gender, and migration intermingle.

In relation to the view of braids as unprofessional, Byrd and Tharps address how during the 1980s and 1990s there were several women who filed lawsuits against their employers for having been fired after wearing braids. While the plaintiffs claimed they had been fired on the basis of their racial identity and denied the right to keep their African heritage, other people, including some Black women, defended that braids were just a ("radical") hairstyle, undermining the social and historical significance of braids. For Dabiri (2020), "Braiding operates as a bridge spanning the distance between the past, present, and future. It creates a tangible, material thread connecting people often separated by thousands of miles and hundreds of years" (p. 51). That is, braiding is a technique and an art form that has been preserved in spite of the violent force of colonization, adapting in the face of restrictions imposed by the Black diaspora and slavery.[24] Surviving in the diaspora, "Centuries of accumulated meaning are weaved into braid" (p. 40), which certainly shows how discrimination against Black people who wear braids in the workplace not only ignores the importance of braiding for Blacks in the diaspora, but is also a symbol of Western rejection of African cultural heritage. In the social context critiqued within the novel, wearing braids in the workplace continues to be a controversial topic. Thus, by bringing women suggesting to each that they should give up wearing braids in *Americanah*, Adichie is referring to this history of gendered racist discrimination. Aunty Uju's and Ifemelu's friends might be basing their discourse on the

[24] Centuries-old African hairstyles like *Irun didi*, better known in the West as cornrows and canerows (the name varied based on a region's major crops), are closely linked to the history of slavery, being used even as an escape route for enslaved people who used braids as maps for freedom (DABIRI, 2020, p. 50).

American history of firing, penalizing, or refusing to hire a woman for "not fitting into the image of the company", an excuse that has been used to justify firing Black women who wear braids at the workplace.

Still, because Ifemelu is used to braiding her hair, the idea of relaxing it sounds like "a new adventure" to her. She goes into a drugstore and observes the wide number of products for straightening Black women's hair. Before Ifemelu can observe the "faces of smiling black women with impossibly straight and shiny hair", as well as products advertised as more natural, "that promised gentleness", she has already removed her braids and been "careful to leave her scalp unscratched, to leave undisturbed the dirt that would protect it" (p. 203). Therefore, although patriarchy and the hair industry encourage her to chemically straighten her hair, Ifemelu is aware that her hair and her scalp can be harmed in the process. Although the novel seems to reject the self-hatred theory in relation to hair alteration — that is, the understanding that Black women who relax their hair hate themselves —, by showing how there are several reasons that lead Black women to relax their hair, it does describe the process as harmful and possibly dangerous. From this perspective, a woman who decides to relax her hair is exposing herself to pain and inflicting upon herself dangerous chemicals.

Ifemelu visits a professional hair salon to relax her hair. When the hairdresser applies the relaxer, Ifemelu initially feels "a slight burning" sensation. However, as the process finishes, Ifemelu feels "needles of stinging pain shot up from different parts of her scalp, down to different parts of her body, back up to her head" (p. 203). Her entire body is assailed by an acute pain. The hairdresser tells her it was "[j]ust a little burn", adding, "[b]ut look how pretty it is. Wow, girl, you've got the white-girl swing!" (p. 203). For the hairdresser, pain is compensated by achieving the "perfect look", the desired straight-swinging hair, displaying a somewhat masochist undertone. Thus, Ifemelu's pain is normalized.

Although Ifemelu is expected to like her new straightened hair, she seems to feel as if an important aspect of her identity has died during the process. She describes:

> Her hair was hanging down rather than standing up, straight and sleek, parted at the side and curving to a slight bob at her chin. The verve was gone. She did not recognize herself. She left the salon almost mournfully; while the hairdresser had flat-ironed the ends, the smell of burning, of something organic dying which should not have died, had made her feel a sense of loss. (ADICHIE, 2014, p. 203).

As one can see, straightening her hair is linked to death and loss. The implication of such association is that relaxing one's hair is seen as going against the nature of one's own hair, a forced measure to eliminate part of one's identity. Furthermore, maintaining chemically

straight hair is a constant process, for in order to achieve a "straighter" look, the hair needs to be flat-ironed (or blow-dried) frequently. Nevertheless, Adichie portrays in the narrative bounteous full hair, freely hanging down "like a celebration" — such as the description of Ifemelu's mother's hair —, which indicates that chemically straightened hair can be seen positively as well. As such, one of the differences here might be the intent that leads Ifemelu to straighten her hair. In Ifemelu's case, she wants to ensure that she will not be refused a job because of her hair. It is her social context and the fear of being unemployed that propel Ifemelu to have her hair straightened.

Ifemelu was still dating Curt when she relaxed her hair. She tells him she has "a bit of a relaxer burn" and he is horrified when he checks her scalp. Ifemelu, on the other hand, understates her pain, by saying "[i]t's not too bad" and that she "used to get it all the time in Nigeria" (p. 204). She, then, shows him a keloid "she got after Aunty Uju straightened her hair with a hot comb in secondary school" (p. 204). She remembers feeling "tense and unbreathing, terrified that the red-hot comb from the stove would burn her but also excited by the prospect of straight, swingy hair" (p. 204). Thus, Ifemelu associates having her hair hot combed with family tradition. The domestic space of the kitchen becomes the place where these social interactions and hair practices happen. In addition, as a teenager, Ifemelu enjoys the prospect of having straight hair. Consequently, in the search for the hair that is deemed beautiful, Ifemelu learns to naturalize her pain and suffering. Curt's seriousness about her burn is what causes her to be more concerned about it, and she thinks she was never closer to him than when he was examining her scalp. Still, when her scalp is covered with scabs and starts to produce pus, she just laughs at Curt's preoccupation because she knows her scalp will eventually heal (p. 204).

Curt asks her why she had to relax her hair when her "hair was gorgeous braided" and "even more gorgeous" when she "took out the braids the last time and just kind of let it be" because it was "so full and cool" (p. 204). His perception of Ifemelu's hair places it as something beautiful and somewhat exotic. Curt's statement suggests that doing one's hair is a matter of aesthetic appeal, and he assures Ifemelu that he likes her natural hair. As a rich white man, he seems oblivious to the socio-political implications of hair and the possible interrogations and associations made about Black people as a response to their hair textures or hairstyles. Certainly, as a result of his social status, he is also expected to maintain an appearance considered appropriate and appreciated by white society. However, both his class privilege and white privilege allow him not to have to deal with discrimination in the same way Black women do. For Ifemelu, nevertheless, hair has other social implications:

> My full and cool hair would work if I were interviewing to be a backup singer in a jazz band, but I need to look professional for this interview, and professional means straight is best but if it's going to be curly then it has to be the white kind of curly, loose curls or, at worst, spiral curls but never kinky. (ADICHIE, 2014, p. 204).

Her response implies that while certain hairstyles are accepted in certain professions, other hairstyles face rules and restrictions. In political terms, the fact that naturally curly or kinky hair can be accepted in art-related professions, such as the musical industry, demonstrates how Black hair is exoticized. It is also one of the reasons why a Black person wishing to thrive in other spheres of society is expected to hide or reduce strong traits of Blackness in order to be considered professional. In addition, the previous passage also reveals a hierarchy between loosely curled hair and kinkier hair textures, a notion which certainly originated as a consequence of the Western view of straight hair as superior. This hierarchy has been internalized by Black communities,[25] who usually assume "that loose, curly hair is the ideal, while tightly coiled hair demands serious intervention" (DABIRI, 2020, p. 20). In relation to hair, the novel suggests that for Black people, particularly women, achieving economic success and social respectability is connected with one's hair, thus revealing how U.S. hair politics can be understood from an intersectional perspective.

When informed that people could interpret her braids as lack of professionalism, Ifemelu becomes aware of the racial discrimination she might suffer if she chooses to challenge the status quo. In this context, Du Bois' (2008) concept of double consciousness is pertinent, because it refers to the feeling of being aware of how white society interprets and tries to control Black bodies. Furthermore, if straight hair is considered more professional, it is also due to the misconception that naturally curly or kinky hair is unkempt and dirty, a result of what DABIRI (2020, p. 132) calls "the nonsensical Eurocentric association of straight hair with cleanliness and health". In saying that in her geo-political context "professional means straight", Ifemelu is looking at Black hair through the "contemptuous eyes of a racist white society". Moreover, her affirmation also indicates that the term professional is racialized in the sense that it is equated with white and with looking "whiter". Thus, by deciding to straighten her hair, she is conforming to the repressive social norms in order to achieve her goals. When Ifemelu gets the job, after the interview, she wonders if she would have been considered "a wonderful fit in the

---

[25] Dabiri discusses how, similarly to the brown paper bag parties in New Orleans in the twentieth century, where people with darker complexion could not participate and/or were refused certain privileges, there were also Black churches where only those with considered "smooth hair", i.e. the comb had to slide through the hair without interference, could become members. The pencil test in South Africa had a similar purpose, which was to determine a child's race based on whether the hair would be able to hold a pencil or not (DABIRI, 2020, p. 15).

company" if she "had walked into that office wearing her thick, kinky, God-given halo of hair, the Afro" (p. 204). Her description invokes a positive image of Black natural hair, connecting it with the divine, placing her hair as a gift from God.

3.3 IFEMELU'S BIG CHOP: "GOING NATURAL" AND THE NATURAL HAIR MOVEMENT

Ifemelu's hair begins "to fall out at the temples" (p. 208), which leads her to transition from relaxed hair to natural hair. Her friend Wambui is the one who convinces her to cut her hair. She tells Ifemelu that the chemicals are causing her hair to fall. She asks Ifemelu if she knows what goes into a relaxer, and continues: "[t]hat stuff can kill you. You need to cut your hair and go natural." Wambui reassures her that "there's a lot [one] can do with natural hair", like wearing an Afro or going back to the braids (p. 208). It is Wambui's certainty that finally convinces Ifemelu to do the "Big Chop",[26] that is, to cut all (or almost all) the relaxed hair leaving only the new growth. Wambui says:

> Relaxing your hair is like being in prison. You're caged in. Your hair rules you. You didn't go running with Curt today because you don't want to sweat out this straightness. That picture you sent me, you had your hair covered on the boat. You're always battling to make your hair do what it wasn't meant to do. If you go natural and take good care of your hair, it won't fall off like it's doing now. I can help you cut it right now. No need to think about it too much. (ADICHIE, 2014, p. 208).

Wambui's words emphasize the difficulties in maintaining straightened hair. The relaxed hair needs constant work, and it comes with restrictions. For instance, Ifemelu avoids situations in which her hair would be in contact with any moisture otherwise her hair would "go back".[27] For many women with straightened hair, water is seen as an enemy because it can damage in an instant the result of hours spent on hairstyling. Moreover, when around white people "there is always a sense of insecurity" triggered by not knowing how they might "react when the hair reverts back to its naturally puffy condition" (BYRD; THARPS, 2014, p. 154).

Convinced by her friend Wambui, Ifemelu is left with only two inches of her natural hair. When Ifemelu looks in the mirror, she thinks that "[a]t best, she look[s] like a boy, at worst, like an insect" (ADICHIE, 2014, p. 208). For Ifemelu, then, she has lost not only hair

---

[26] The "Big Chop" refers to "the new millennium phrase for cutting off all of her relaxed hair" (BYRD; THARPS, 2014, p. 181).

[27] "Go Back/Turn Back" is an expression used to refer to when hair that has been straightened with heat returns to its "natural" state (BYRD; THARPS, 2014, p. 132).

length, but also her femininity. Western society has produced narratives that position femininity as "intricately bound up in hair", being "flowing, long hair […] one of the most powerful markers of being a woman" (DABIRI, 2020, p. 10). However, such associations are harmful because they ignore the fact that Black women's hair usually grows upward instead of flowing down, which means that the beauty assigned to straight hair is unobtainable for most Black women, also because straightening one's hair does not generally guarantee the same results. In fact, the passage stresses the negative associations made about tightly coiled Black hair and the dehumanization of Black people, shown when Ifemelu thinks she resembles an insect. Her self-esteem diminishes as she apprehends the grandiosity of her impulsive act. Ifemelu is left with her "God-given halo of hair" (ADICHIE, 2014, p. 204) and, still, the supposed "ugliness" of it repels her. She tells Wambui: "I look so ugly I'm scared of myself" (p. 208). Wambui's affirmation that she looks beautiful is not enough to comfort Ifemelu.

As one can see, Ifemelu immediately regrets the Big Chop. She looks at her "short and stubby" hair as if it is "asking for attention, for something to be done to it, for *more*" (ADICHIE, 2014, p. 208, original italics). "The message drilled into our heads is that [Black hair] must be managed, hidden, or disguised", and as one can see, Ifemelu has certainly internalized such beliefs (DABIRI, 2020, p. 189). This idea that natural hair is unkempt and needs to be tamed is not only a sad legacy of centuries of socio-economic disadvantages, but also a flawed logic "perpetuated by the discriminatory practices and policies of neoliberal market logic" (DABIRI, 2020, p. 189). Even with the movement towards the valorization of Black hair in the twenty-first century, the capitalist tendency is to commercialize products for natural hair, to alter the texture of Black hair, to enhance the curls in order to adapt them to European standards of beauty. Then, she covers her head and goes to a drugstore to buy several products to apply to it, "willing an unknown miracle to happen" (ADICHIE, 2014, p. 208). When the miracle does not occur, Ifemelu considers other possibilities of hiding her "kinky" hair:

> She thought of buying a wig, but wigs brought anxiety, the always-present possibility of flying off your head. She thought of a texturizer to loosen her hair's springy coils, stretch out the kinkiness a little, but a texturizer was really a relaxer, only milder, and she would still have to avoid the rain. (208-9)

As one can see, Ifemelu cannot accept her own natural texture, especially now that the short non-braided hair highlights its own "kinkiness".

When Ifemelu keeps pressing her hair, Curt tells her to stop doing that because "it's a really cool and brave look" (p. 209), but Ifemelu does not want her hair to be brave. When Curt tells her that her hair is "stylish, chic" and that she looks beautiful, Ifemelu cannot believe him.

Her self-esteem is shaken because she has internalized the hegemonic view of beauty. By keeping her short natural hair, Ifemelu is unintentionally breaking with the predominant norm of femininity. Her natural hair, however, makes her feel ugly (and scared of herself). Furthermore, she still thinks she looks like a boy, which shows how hair is linked to gender performativity. On the next day, Ifemelu looks in the mirror and her hair startles her, "dull and shrunken from sleep, like a mop of wool sitting on her head" (p. 209). She calls in sick, before texting Wambui saying "I hate my hair. I couldn't go to work today" (p. 209). Self-hatred has been woven into her existence as a Black woman, and although, at the time, she is unaware of the power of the white supremacist patriarchal ideologies, the Big Chop reveals how uncomfortable and lost she feels in the face of her natural texture.

It is possible to see that, at this point in her journey, Ifemelu displays what Fanon (2004) refers to as "colonial mentality". By colonial mentality I mean her assimilation and internalization of racist norms of (American) white supremacy. She is inserted in a context that favors white society and constructs racial hierarchies that not only divide people in terms of class by positioning Black people in the lowest spheres of the economy, but also undermines Black people's cultural practices and traditions, deeming most things associated with Blackness inferior, including Black hair. Ifemelu's colonial mentality makes her hate herself. While straightening her hair causes her physical damage, the Big Chop unveils the psychological effects of coloniality.

Fanon's discussion on the desire to be white is relevant as well. In *Black skin, white masks* (2008), the author addresses how the encounter with a white (deemed superior) Other comes with a recognition of one's positionality as the inferior. When Ifemelu looks at herself in the mirror, she is looking at herself through the eyes of patriarchal racist society, which exposes her internalization of hegemonic oppressive discourses (DU BOIS, 2008). Her immediate reaction is to look for ways of straightening her hair, which unveils a certain "desire to be white". Namely, here, the desire to have "all the beauty and privileges" that are given to white women with long straight hair (FANON, 2008). Therefore, although self-hatred is not what leads Ifemelu to straighten her hair, she hates herself when her Blackness is made evident in her hair, which indicates that her hair alteration is related to self-hatred. As one can see, Ifemelu's regret reveals the intersection of race and gender in the sense that her Blackness is increased when she loses part of what society constitutes as feminine: the straight texture and the length of her hair.

Ifemelu's Big Chop happens at the same time when she finds out that Curt has been texting another woman, "who liked her hair and thought that Curt would too" (p. 210). In this passage, the novel deals with yet another relevant topic in terms of the choices and decisions some Black women make in relation to straightening their hair or wearing straight weaves, which is the fear of male rejection.[28] Ifemelu is clearly uncertain about whether or not Curt likes her hair texture. Her feelings of insecurity and her inferiority complex in relation to Curt are heightened by the fact that he is white and "all [his] girlfriends had long flowing hair" (p. 210). Although Ifemelu does not find the woman particularly pretty, the fact that she has "long straight hair" makes Ifemelu feel "small and ugly" (p. 211). Her short kinky natural hair is not deemed beautiful by Eurocentric standards, and after the Big Chop Ifemelu seems to have placed her hair as the locus of her identity. Thus, she feels unattractive and shrunk.

It would take Ifemelu three days to return to work. When she returns, she is assailed with questions about the reasons that had led her to have her hair cut. One of her coworkers asks her if she had had her hair cut for political reasons. An African American woman, Miss Margaret, asks her if she is a lesbian[29] (p. 211-212). Miss Margaret's discrepant hypotheses reveal heterosexist racialized hair hierarchies and tendencies. On the one hand, because femininity is traditionally associated with long hair, a woman who opts to wear short hair might be seen by many as masculine, which in a heterosexist society is associated with being a lesbian. On the other hand, a Black woman who chooses to wear her hair naturally might be seen as rebellious, which in a racist society can be cause for rejection. Miss Margaret's assumptions, therefore, point out the need for an intersectional understanding of hair politics.

By portraying Ifemelu's insecurity and self-hatred, Adichie addresses the psychological impact of coloniality. Ifemelu's experience is marked profoundly by the social construction of racialized gender. Furthermore, her depiction reveals the internal conflicts a Black woman might initially experience when doing the Big Chop or when transitioning. Although the Big Chop can be liberating for some women, because it removes all the chemicals from their hair, it can also be a long process of learning self-acceptance and self-love, given that, unfortunately,

---

[28] Additionally, the fear of male rejection is also common for Black women in relationships with Black men. According to Prince (2014), many Black women feel compelled to straighten their hair or wear weaves to fulfill societal expectations and have the approval of Black men. Byrd and Tharps (2014) also describe how some Black women feared rejection and shared that some Black men do not seem to like to touch a Black woman's natural hair.

[29] A few years later, when Ifemelu quits her job, the same woman assumes that it was because of racial discrimination, asking her if it had been because of her hair.

the inferiority complex and the insecurities are not necessarily removed along with the relaxed hair.

Ifemelu begins to overcome this feeling of insecurity and loss when she visits a website her friend Wambui had suggested, informing her that "*It's this natural hair community. You'll find inspiratio*n" (p. 209, original italics). In *HappilyKinkyNappy.com*, she finds a community of Black women with several different hair textures, lengths, and hairstyles. There, she learns a name for "[w]omen with hair as short as hers", "TWA, Teeny Weeny Afro" (p. 212). More importantly, she finds women who are helping each other to value their own beauty and to overcome the oppressive pressure imposed on them to straighten their hair, which illustrates the importance of Black sisterhood as a tool for resistance. She reflects on the influence of this natural hair community:

> They were done with pretending that their hair was what it was not, done with running from the rain and flinching from sweat. They complimented each other's photos and ended comments with "hugs." They complained about black magazines never having natural-haired women in their pages, […]. They traded recipes. They sculpted for themselves a virtual world where their coily, kinky, nappy, woolly hair was normal. And Ifemelu fell into this world with a tumbling gratitude. (p. 212).

This "movement of black women", as Curt fascinatedly calls this community, provides Ifemelu with a space for learning about the texture of her own hair by identifying with other women's stories, and for learning how to overcome her own hair-related conflicts. This community celebrates natural hair and reappropriates discourses that were used to diminish Black people, such as the terms kinky, nappy, and woolly.

Byrd and Tharps (2014) discuss the relevance of Black women using the internet as a "beauty tool" and as a means of communication in the beginning of the twenty-first century:

> A substantial 70 percent of Black women were online, with a sizable number watching instructional videos on YouTube, buying hair products, reading blogs with product reviews, and posting photos on Instagram of other women with amazing hair. In sum, Black women had incorporated the Internet into their arsenal of beauty tools. (BYRD; THARPS, 2014, p. 178).

Thus, as one can see, the widespread use of online networks is an important contribution to the socialization of Black women. Thanks to the Internet, Black women have begun to produce knowledge and to open space for dialogue within the Black community about their different hair textures. From these online communities a new culture emerged. Under the hashtag *#teamnatural*, the Natural Hair Movement has spread conversations about natural hair, sharing information about how to groom it, inspiring women to get in touch with their natural hair, learning with and from each other and collectively resisting.

Despite these social advances, on one occasion Ifemelu is walking in a market with Curt when a Black man tells her: "[y]ou ever wonder why he likes you looking all jungle like that?" (p. 211). The offensive behavior of this man reveals the pervasive intra-racial discrimination within the Black community. Furthermore, another implication of his comment is that Curt, as a white handsome rich man, is not supposed to like Ifemelu, a Black woman. In fact, the man's hateful words associate Blackness with wilderness and disorganization, which is also problematic because he is a Black man reproducing racist ideologies. In addition, it reveals how gender and race intermingle in pressuring Ifemelu to conform to white feminine standards of beauty. Ifemelu, influenced by the comment, goes to a beauty supply and browses for straight weaves that very night.

Due to the support of the online community, however, Ifemelu now has a space where she can share these stories and learn to appreciate herself better. In this context, finding comfort in one's community can be empowering. Because Ifemelu remembers a post from a woman in the natural hair community, she changes her mind and decides against buying any hair products. She later writes to the group saying that "nothing is more beautiful than what God gave [her]" (p. 213). When women write responses, liking her post, telling her "how much they like the photo she had put up", she feels strengthened, for "[p]osting on the website was like giving a testimony in church: the echoing roar of approval revived her" (p. 213). Instead of internalizing the hateful words she heard from the man, she begins to internalize the voices of the Black women in her online community. Eventually, "on an unremarkable day in early spring", "she look[s] in the mirror, [sinks] her hand into her hair" and realizes that she has simply "[fallen] in love with her hair" (p. 213).

Besides the feeling of dissatisfaction she had felt towards the new haircut, Ifemelu also has to deal with the questions and reactions from other people. In this particular case, even Black people show either surprise or contempt for her hair because she chooses a short haircut. The Black man at the market, for example, wants to offend her because she is wearing her natural hair, which he seems to associate with a wild, unmanageable mess. Aunty Uju also disapproves of Ifemelu's non-straightened hair, telling Ifemelu that Curt must really like her "even with [Ifemelu's] hair like that", looking like a jute (p. 216). Over time, having to explain or clear people's doubts about her hair becomes routine. Later, when Ifemelu creates her blog, she uses it to celebrate Black hair and to spread more information about it. In one of her posts, Ifemelu talks about the reasons that had led her to stop relaxing her hair, and she includes several examples of ways in which she was interpellated to opt for the natural hairstyle.

Before ending this discussion on Ifemelu's Big Chop, it is important to address Ifemelu's encounter with a white senior lady at a grocery store, which happens later in the narrative. After telling Ifemelu that her hair is "so beautiful", the woman asks if she can touch Ifemelu's Afro. Ifemelu allows the woman to touch her hair, which angers Blaine, her boyfriend at the time, who is offended that Ifemelu has let herself be used as a guinea pig (p. 313). For Ifemelu, however, she is only helping the woman to understand more about her texture, since she probably does not know many Black people (p. 313). In "Black Hair Culture, Politics and Change", Paul Dash (2006) discusses how Black hair is usually seen "as specimens on display" and the Black subject is objectified through the examination of the gazer. From this perspective "Black hair is seen as alluring yet threatening, something they seek to touch, as a result of a fascination with difference, or maybe because it symbolizes a distant other world, and the perceived lower 'racial' status of the black subject" (DASH, 2006, p. 34-35). Drawing on Foucault's concept of "power-knowledge", what Dash suggests is that "the acting of touching" one's hair, of acquiring knowledge by touching Black hair can be seen as a form of obtaining power (DASH, 2006, p. 35). Banks (2000) also mentions how this "fascination of many nonblacks" usually leads to an invasion of personal space, "and a reluctance to permit such invasion is read by nonblacks as blacks' attempt to be mysterious" (p. 80). Blaine seems to share the opinion of these authors on the issue of invasion of privacy and objectification of the Black body through touching the hair.

Certainly, people of African descent are aware of this invasion, as many of us experience incidents like Ifemelu's, when a simple trip to the market becomes an uncomfortable interrogation.[30] As Dabiri (2020) examines, beyond this awareness of the invasion of privacy, Black people are also more aware of the fact that styling Black hair can be time-consuming. Thus, one does not simply touch another's hair. Byrd and Tharps (2014) also comment on how Black children are often the object of this undesired attention from white teachers and classmates, who, unfamiliar with their hair texture and its needs, put these Black students in embarrassing situations, forcing them to explain their hair, defend themselves, or have to refuse or accept having their hair touched. They assert: "Even with the best intentions, the constant questioning and uninformed commentary by White people can lead to frustration, hostility, and

[30] Interestingly, in *You can't touch my hair*, Phoebe Robinson (2016) expresses her frustration with having people approach her to comment on her hair and ask if they can touch it. Discussing this common situation for Black women, she explains, "a quick trip to the supermarket can turn into an impromptu seminar about the history of black hair, during which I'm supposed to clarify where I stand in the #TeamNatural vs. #TeamRelaxer debate" (p. xxviii).

hurt" (BYRD; THARPS, 2014, p. 142). The fact that Ifemelu is not bothered by having the white woman sink her fingers into her Afro, might also have to do with the fact that she comes from Nigeria, a mostly Black country, where the sight of Black hair textures does not cause such a commotion. Unlike Ifemelu, Blaine has been raised in the U.S., and such situations make latent racial tension explicit.

3.4 THE POLITICAL POWER OF HAIR

In one of Ifemelu's posts in her blog,[31] she introduces the following thought: "[i]magine if Michelle Obama got tired of all the heat and decided to go natural and appeared on TV with lots of woolly hair, or tight spiral curls."[32] She guesses: "[s]he would totally rock but poor Obama would certainly lose the independent vote, even the undecided Democrat vote" (p. 297). What is explicit in Ifemelu's statement is the political potential of hair. According to Ifemelu, hair is an issue of extreme importance that can be a decisive factor in either securing Obama's victory or guaranteeing his defeat. That is, if Michelle Obama decided to wear her natural texture, people would make assumptions about it and about her personality.

Historically, the meaning of certain hairstyles has varied over time. Nevertheless, certain meanings still remain in society or are resurrected when the hegemony of those in power are threatened. Hence, if Michelle Obama decided to stop straightening her hair, people could assume that she is dangerous, overtly politically engaged, and perhaps a woman with strong personality. They might suspect, for instance, that racial politics are more important to her (and to Barack Obama) than Obama's political speeches reveal, and that would pose a risk to patriarchal white American supremacy. The inevitable consequence is that Obama's election would be put in check, and his policies would most probably be questioned. Therefore, maintaining a straightened hair might be a personal choice, but it also has political implications.

I have said before that hair is considered a language in African culture. This notion is relevant to understand Ifemelu's comment on Michelle Obama's hair because for Black women, choosing to wear their hair naturally can have serious implications and convey certain messages in Western society. On the subject of Obama's hair, Prince (2014) discusses how Black women in general devoted a lot of attention to it, evaluating it. On the inauguration day, they had a

---

[31] This entry is entitled "A Michelle Obama Shout-Out Plus Hair as Race Metaphor" (p. 296-297).

[32] She emphasizes that it is not possible to know the natural hair texture of a Black woman just by looking at her straightened hair, since some women might even have more than one texture.

veridic “most agreed she’d done the sisters proud […] with her roots nicely cleaned-up (straightened)” (p. 140). Such statement indicates not only the pressure to conform to Western standards of beauty, but also the pressure imposed on Obama to represent all Black women. Prince continues “she had allowed her roots to show on occasion, and that did not go down well with the sisters” (p. 140). That is, even among Black women, wearing natural hair is not so easily accepted.

Prince shares Ifemelu’s opinion that there could have been a political problem if Michelle Obama had not straightened her hair. Moreover, Prince interviewed Black women in Canada and in the U.S. and some of them affirmed that Obama’s choice was correct because “for the First Lady, natural hair would be too black, too ‘out there,’ too strong”, and “as the president’s wife, she cannot afford to have ‘political hair’” (PRINCE, 2014, p. 141). Thus, from this perspective, natural hair is equated with “political hair” and the Black women who dare to wear them are often associated with aggressiveness and a strong personality, characteristics that oppose racialized patriarchal expectations of women. A well-educated Black woman like Obama is herself a symbol of resistance. Therefore, as she intends to accept the role of “wife of the president”, she has to comply with racist patriarchal expectations of femininity in regard to hair if she wants her husband to win the election. Ifemelu’s post unveils these ideologies and associations made about Black women’s natural hair.

In this same post, Ifemelu discusses how many Black women avoid at all costs people seeing them with their natural hair. For Ifemelu, the reason for that is that their texture is seen as abnormal, as unprofessional, as unsophisticated. In fact, the lack of knowledge about curly and Afro hair is so great that when some (white) people come across natural hair, they think something has been done to the hair (p. 297). In this context, Ifemelu mentions the singer Beyoncé, suggesting that people should ask her what procedures she has done in her hair. She comments: “We all love Bey, but how about she shows us, just once, what her hair looks like when it grows from her scalp” (p. 297). Byrd and Tharps (2014) discuss how in the twenty-first century different approaches to Black hair contrast. At the same time when the beginning of the century represents “an era of great pride in natural hair textures” (p. 178), there are also many Black women proudly wearing weaves, for example.

In addition, due to the power of the internet and the diverse information that has been constantly produced about Black hair, there is also a tendency to impose what is adequate or inadequate in relation to haircare, to police grooming practices, and to dictate what is deemed appropriate or not (p. 178). Ifemelu’s post, although celebrating natural hair, indicates this

tendency to police other Black women's hair as well. Moreover, people make assumptions about Beyoncé and her political positions due to her hair, just as they do about Michelle Obama. The singer has used various hairstyles throughout her career, and many controversies have appeared in relation to the texture, length, and the natural color of her hair.[33]

Still in the aforementioned entry, Ifemelu tells her readers that she wears her natural hair because she refuses to use relaxers, since "there are enough sources of cancer in [her] life as it is." She tells them: "No, it's not political. No, I'm not an artist or poet or singer. Not an earth mother either" (p. 297). What Ifemelu seems to object is the imposition of any fixed identity. For Dabiri (2020), the fact that many Black women have to keep affirming that their choice to wear their natural hair is not political is proof of "how far from the norm black hair is still considered to be" (p. 41-42). That is, Ifemelu's affirmation seems to reject having to give explanations for wearing her hair the way it grows from her scalp. However, although Ifemelu says that her hair is not political, her narrative indicates that hair is also a political subject. Evidently, for Ifemelu, not relaxing her hair becomes a political choice. When she goes to an African hair salon to braid her hair before returning to Nigeria, for instance, the hairdresser asks her why she does not relax her hair once she considers it "hard to comb" (p. 12). Ifemelu tells the hairdresser she likes her natural hair the way it is. When the woman asks how she combs it, she shows it to her:

> Ifemelu had brought her own comb. She gently combed her hair, dense, soft, and tightly coiled, until it framed her head like a halo. "It's not hard to comb if you moisturize it properly", she said, slipping into the coaxing tone of the proselytizer that she used whenever she was trying to convince other black women about the merits of wearing their hair natural. (p. 12).

---

[33] In 2014, one year after the publication of *Americanah*, an online petition was created asking Beyoncé to comb Blue Ivy Carter's hair <https://www.change.org/p/blue-ivy-comb-her-hair> Web. 30 Aug. 2018. After some pictures of her daughter had been released to the Press, many people questioned the fact that Beyoncé wears her "impeccable hair" but leaves her daughter's hair "uncared for". The artist addressed the racist petition in her controversial "Formation" video (2016). In the video, Blue Ivy appears with a confident smile and posture, wearing an Afro, next to two other black girls wearing their natural hair, while Beyoncé sings "I like my baby hair with baby hair and Afros". In 2018, Beyoncé released a video clip she recorded with her husband Jay-Z at the Louvre Museum. In one of the most remarkable scenes, a Black woman combs a Black man's big Afro with an Afro pick in front of the Portrait of Mona Lisa while she sings "I Can't Believe We Made It". This year, Beyoncé released the single titled "Brown Skin Girl" along with the video clip, celebrating Brown skin girls all around the world, and the video features not only women with different complexions, but also several Black hairstyles, drawing from traditional African hairstyles, Afro-futuristic Black hairstyles, to straight weaves, braided extensions, and relaxed hair, showing the versatility of Black hair culture. Beyoncé herself is shown wearing several Black hairstyles, in a beautiful celebration of Black women and their hair. "Brown Skin Girl" is part of Beyoncé's visual album *Black is King*, in which the richness of Black hair culture is portrayed throughout the film.

As one can see, the Ifemelu who is returning to Nigeria has not only learned to love her black hair, but she is also trying to persuade other black women to go natural as well. Moreover, she is sharing with other black women what she has learned about grooming natural hair, rejecting the argument that straightened hair is easier to manage.

In relation to hairstyles and the assumptions people make about them, it is possible to say that Adichie uses hairstyles to characterize not only the personality of her female characters, but also to relate to other dimensions of their lives, such as economic power, political engagement, and assimilation. It is not by chance that Ifemelu mentions that she cannot even imagine the few "light-skinned and lank-haired" Blacks in Princeton wearing braids (p. 3). That is, there are certain associations and expectations about hair that complicate a simple understanding of hair as merely an aesthetic matter. In line with this idea, one can read into Adichie's portrayal of some characters.

For instance, when Ifemelu first describes her friend Ginika in Nigeria, she mentions how she has "caramel skin and wavy hair that, when unbraided, fell down to her neck instead of standing Afro-like" (p. 55-56). Nevertheless, when Ifemelu meets Ginika again in the United States, she notices Ginika's "straight-straight hair that she kept tucking behind her ears, blonde streaks shiny in the sunlight" (p. 123). As mentioned previously, Ginika was considered the prettiest girl in school because of her biracial features. However, I believe that Ifemelu's description of Ginika's hair is also part of her characterization as a sweet and traditionally feminine Black girl, a girl who is deemed attractive within her community. Moreover, although Ginika has always had what they consider "good hair", naturally wavy hair, in the United States her hair is even straighter (and blonder), which represents her adaptation to white racist American culture. When Ginika talks to Ifemelu, she uses a Nigerian accent that Ifemelu understands as Ginika's attempt to demonstrate "how unchanged she was" (p. 123). Nonetheless, when she is with her American friends, Ifemelu realizes "how like her American friends Ginika had become", with "her American-accented words sailing out of her mouth" (p. 124). Thus, one can say that hair is an indication of Ginika's adaptation to U.S. hair politics, which for Ginika implies an assimilation of whiteness and racist standards of beauty.

Another character whose hair description reflects her situation in the new country is Aunty Uju. In Nigeria, she would go to expensive hair salons and get "silk hair extensions that fell to her shoulders: Chinese weave-on, the latest version, shiny and straight, as straight could

be; it never tangled"[34] (p. 77). When the General who supported her financially dies in a suspicious plane crash, she has to go to the United States and start over. When Ifemelu sees her, she notices Aunty Uju's hair and thinks that "the old Aunty Uju would never have worn her hair in such scruffy braids" (p. 109). Aunty Uju's hair, then, reflects her current financial situation (because braiding her hair in the U.S. is expensive) and her mental fatigue. She is studying and working a lot to finish her studies and provide a better life for Dike, her son.

For Ifemelu, however, Aunty Uju's appearance is a sign that "America had subdued her" (p. 110). Another reason why one could say that Aunty Uju's worn-out braids reflect her experience as a poor Black immigrant comes from the fact that, as Dabiri argues, "'shabbiness' in general does not feature within African aesthetics" (p. 27). That is, African hair culture values neatness and looking good. However, due to the high cost of braiding her hair in the U.S., Aunty Uju has had to neglect the appearance of her hair. Later, she has to straighten her hair in order to compete in America's racially biased job market. Hence, her hairstyle choices are impacted by class as well as her positionality as an immigrant.

Another passage that exposes the ways in which Adichie's depiction of hairstyles conveys certain messages about the characters' personalities is given through the description of Wambui's hair, which seems to be connected with how Ifemelu sees Wambui's political engagement. Ifemelu notices Wambui for the first time in class. They had watched the film *Roots* and Wambui questions why the word "Nigger" had been bleeped out, raising a discussion about a controversial subject to the class. Wambui's voice is a remarkable feature for Ifemelu, who describes it as "a firm voice", "a voice unafraid" (p. 138). They talk after class and Ifemelu thinks that Wambui has "a formidable air", that Wambui was "a person who went about setting everyone and everything right" (p. 138). Ifemelu describes how her "natural hair was cut as low as a boy's" and her pretty face reminded her of East African runners (p. 117). In the novel, Wambui, who is described as an independent, strong Black woman, wears a short natural hairstyle.

In the previous passage, the idea of masculinization is also present, since Ifemelu has internalized the association between femininity and long hair. It is interesting that, later in the novel, when Wambui is trying to convince Ifemelu to chop her hair, Ifemelu observes

---

[34] Needless to say, the desire for a straighter hairstyle is present in Ifemelu's description of Nigerian hair salons as well. According to Dabiri, "In most black cultures the frequent and radical transformation of hair is typical, and the wearing of artificial hair, including wigs, is not traditionally stigmatized in the same way it is in mainstream […] "white" — culture" (p. 8). Thus, in Nigeria, her aunt could afford such luxuries; but now, in the U.S., her scruffy braids represent her lower status as an immigrant Black woman.

Wambui's new hairstyle: "now in short locks, which Ifemelu did not like; she thought them sparse and dull, unflattering to Wambui's pretty face" (p. 208). Wambui's dreadlocks are seen as unattractive to Ifemelu, who fears that she might have to wear them herself if she chooses to do the Big Chop. According to hooks (2001, p. 115), who has also worn dreadlocks, "they are seen and rightly so as the total antithesis of straightening one's hair, as political statement", yet Ifemelu rejects them, which is significant if one considers their political relevance.[35]

Robin G. Kelley (1997) defends that although Black hair "had long been a site of contestation" both inside and outside the Black community, "the Afro, unlike any other style, put the issue of hair squarely on a political agenda" (p. 339-340). Therefore, it is significant that Adichie chooses to portray Wambui with a low Afro, and that eventually Ifemelu herself begins to proudly wear an Afro. Kelley discusses how the meanings of the Afro have changed over time. Although the Afro is still associated with the Black Power Movement, the use of the Afro has become depoliticized, its political and sociological relevance reduced.[36] During the heyday of the Movement, though, natural hair was valued within the Black community as beautiful and powerful while "straightening one's hair in the image of white beauty was seen as blasphemy" (BYRD; THARPS, 2014, p. 55). During that period, the Afro was seen as a symbol of defiance to prejudice and discrimination, a symbol of resistance, of pride in the Black race, thus, threatening the stabilization of the hegemonic power in place. When the Movement began to lose its momentum, the meanings of the Afro were disassociated from the Black Power movement, becoming "just another hairstyle". Nevertheless, as stated by Kelley (1997, p. 348), "what the Afro represented, the debates it engendered, still lay at the heart of the politics of black hair" because "the Afro was deeply embedded in a larger racial and gendered discourse

---

[35] According to Byrd and Tharps (2014), the origin of the word "dreadlocks" is linked to slavery. Due to the deprivation of basic hygiene care, slaves who were forcibly brought from Africa arrived in the U. S. with their hair disheveled and dirty due to the inhuman conditions to which they had been subjected aboard slave ships. White people considered their hair to be "dreadful", which shows how the word comes from a racist and negative connotation. Because of this origin, many currently use "dredlock" instead of "dreadlock". The authors also explain that the Rastafarian religion adhered to the hairstyle "out of admiration and reverence for the fearless resistance of the Kikuyu soldiers of the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya" (p. 121). With the popularization of reggae music around the globe, the hairstyle also became popular in the eighties, although even among Black Americans, dreadlocks were initially seen as "unhygienic, militant, and aggressive" (p. 121). However, for the Rastafarian community, the style is considered a solely racial trait, because, for them, Black people's hair texture is the only one that can naturally form dreadlocks. In Yoruba culture, the word for dreadlocks, *irun were* translates to "insane person's hairdo" (DABIRI, 2020, p. 36). Dabiri explains: "This spiritual head, or *ori inu*, is responsible for an individual's fate", and it resides in the "physical head, or *ori ode*." Therefore, "the maintenance and grooming of hair are seen as acts of spiritual significance" (p. 36).

[36] See Byrd and Tharps (2014, ch. 3); Craig (1997, p. 404, 414-416); Davis (1994, p. 37-45); and Kelley (1997, p. 339-351).

about the black body under racism and sexism". Therefore, the significance of the Afro cannot be easily erased because it relates to several systems of oppression which are still operating in society.

For women, more specifically, wearing an Afro meant contesting hegemonic discourses of femininity and beauty upheld even within the Black Power Movement (KELLEY, 1997, p. 348). Discussing her association with the Afro and her persecution as "a criminal fugitive" for being a revolutionary leader, Angela Davis (1994, p. 42) asserts that the "broader and more subtle effect was the way they served as generic images of Black women who wore their hair 'natural'". For Davis, the veiled effect of her continued association with the Afro is that the pervasive image of Black women with natural hair as dangerous and defiant remains, even if obscured. However, one could say that there is also a potential power in these independent women, which might justify Adichie's portrayal of Wambui wearing natural hair. Furthermore, Ifemelu's embracing of natural hair indicates her psychological development throughout the narrative and her final characterization as a strong independent Black Nigerian woman.

The fact that Ifemelu changes from one hair style to another, from hot combing her hair in secondary school, from wearing braids, from chemically straightening her hair, from wearing an Afro, and eventually alternating from one natural hairstyle to the other is essential to Adichie's characterization of Ifemelu's journey of transformation. On the one hand, the variety of hairstyles reflects the versatility of Black hair and the characteristic dynamism of African hair culture. On the other hand, according to Dabiri (2020), associating the Afro with an authentically African aesthetic is a misinterpretation since hair in African culture is often manipulated or styled in different ways. The lack of manipulation in the Afros from the 60s and 70s, a distinguishing feature if compared with the natural movement of this century, and one meant as a reaction to capitalist society and consumerism, is far from West African contexts in which, as Dabiri points out, "hair is rarely left unmolded or unbraided" (p. 34) For her, "The Afro is a symbol of diasporic resistance, a rejection to an imposed value system that denigrated us", (p. 34), a "Western reaction" to "Western realities" (p. 148). Perhaps this is another reason why Aunty Uju tells Ifemelu that "There is something scruffy and untidy about natural hair" (p. 216), because she is not only reacting as an immigrant trying to adapt to U.S. racial politics, but she is also an African. Ifemelu, nevertheless, begins to question these conceptualizations and embraces not only change, but herself, in an expression of pride and self-love.

After embracing the Afro in the U.S., Ifemelu continues to wear braids from time to time, which is also emblematic of Black hair culture. For Dabiri (2020), wearing natural hair is

"[o]ne of the easiest ways to demonstrate our nascent freedom […] demonstrating our engagement with the history and the knowledge encoded and transmitted via braided hairstyles" (p. 91). Therefore, the fact that Adichie portrays Ifemelu wearing Afros and braids is politically significant. Dabiri continues: "These hairstyles emerged out of a cultural and material world in which black people were central, a world that was open and accommodating of difference" (p. 91). In relation to braids, more specifically, braiding appears in *Americanah* as a connection between Ifemelu's past, present, and future, working as a bridge, as Dabiri suggests. Ifemelu braids her hair before she moves to the U.S., she wears braid extensions throughout her college years, and she is having her hair braided before her return to Nigeria, as she reflects on her past, present, and future. Thus, hair braiding is an atemporal connection she carries with herself during the diaspora.

3.5 THE HAIR SALON AS A POLITICAL SPACE

"It was here, at a Lagos salon, that the different ranks of imperial femaleness were best understood" (p. 77). This line from the novel reflects Ifemelu's impression, as a teenager, of the power hierarchies in place at a hair salon in Nigeria. Addressing the importance of African women in Africa and in the Diaspora, Nyamnjoh and Fuh (2014) say that for "African women, hair has played a symbolic role, especially as a channel and vehicle to perform different subjectivities and position their selves across different hierarchies" (p. 53). For the authors, "hair is a platform from which African women seek to participate in and contribute to the global economy of meanings and things" (p. 54). Their argument is that African women's participation in the consumption of hair[37] and their important role in the hair industry enable them to have agency and to create narratives for their lives in their own terms. Corroborating this discussion, Ewa Glapka (2016) argues that African women's successful enterprises and their capacity to manage themselves and their financial establishments (as hairdressers) suggest a postfeminist characteristic. That is, although the consumption of beauty is usually seen as a traditional feminine activity, a postfeminist reading of their consumption of beauty reveals their agency as consumers and entrepreneurs.

[37] The authors argue that "Africans are united by a determined freedom to consume hair – natural and artificial or enhanced, raw and cooked or domesticated" (NYAMNJOH; FUH, 2014, p. 52). This adaptability of African hair is a traditional characteristic of African hairstyles.

Addressing the importance of beauty salons for communities in the American context, Banks (2000) says that the "rich tradition of beauty shops is a cultural phenomenon that black people want to preserve as a black cultural 'institution,' a place within black communities that has served to socialize black girls"[38] (p. 132). Beyond socialization, Dabiri (2020) praises Black hair salons as "a site where we can observe a microcosm of national issues" (p. 136). Similarly, hooks (2001) discusses the significance of beauty parlors for Black women. For hooks, "[t]he beauty parlor was a space of consciousness raising, a space where black women shared life stories — hardship, trials, gossip; a place where one could be comforted and one's spirit renewed" (p. 112). It is in this private sphere of their lives, doing their hair, that women of different backgrounds would meet and listen to one another and have fun with each other in a predominantly feminine space. Thus, this space allows women to exercise their agency and creativity while also giving some women a rest from their daily routine. Therefore, although hooks problematizes the tradition of straightening one's hair as she connects it with self-hatred and low self-esteem, as previously discussed, she also sees the beauty parlor as an empowering place for Black women.

Banks (2000) also mentions that, over time, Black business women have had less and less time to spend in the hair salon, while in the past some would spend the entire day at the salons having their hair done or simply socializing. Still, there are salons which have kept the tradition that requires women to spend long hours in them, but this has caused salons to lose customers.[39] With regard to this specific discussion, Dabiri (2020) offers a criticism to capitalist societies' tendency to think of time as a commodity. She explains that in traditional African time, "time has to be created or produced." Therefore, "not possessing the time to do your hair […] would be oxymoronic" (p. 72). After living in the U.S. for several years, Ifemelu is forced to confront Western and African concepts of time when, for instance, she stopped making appointments before going to African salons because the owners would always tell her she could come, but when she arrived, she would have to wait a long time in line to have her hair

[38] Byrd and Tharps (2014) discuss the importance of beauty parlors and barbershops for African Americans. Choosing a good place to have one's hair groomed is extremely important for the Black community. Furthermore, many people have longer relationships with their hairdressers than marriages. According to the authors, "[t]he camaraderie women experience at the salon also occurs at the barbershop among Black men" (p. 145). In this way, barbershops and the hair industry are also relevant for Black American men, as part of their socialization and interaction with other Black men happens in the shops. In relation to Black women, this space for socialization can be even more intense since some there are procedures that could take an entire day to finish.

[39] Nevertheless, for Banks (2000), the industry continues going strong because many Black people have maintained the tradition of frequenting these beauty salons, so the profits have also kept coming.

braided. Thus, she eventually conformed to the idea that when she needed to have her hair braided, she could not “control time”. Doing Black hair can be time-consuming depending on how one decides to style it, because some braiding patterns can take long hours or even days to finish, and Western society discourages people to “waste time”. Dabiri (2020, p. 74) believes that Black “hair continues to be a space in which the fault lines between an imposed European system and black bodies’ resistance to that system are exposed and played out in real time”. For the author, since slavery, the time Black women need to do their hair has been disregarded.

In the hostile context of capitalist society, Black hair can be seen as a burden, especially for Black women who want to achieve economic success in a patriarchal society. In fact, this supposed lack of time even leads some women to relax their hair, claiming that natural hair is harder to manage and more time-consuming. Nevertheless, Dabiri (2020, p. 64) defends that “reclaiming the time” to take care of your hair is “in itself an act of rebellion”. Hence, for Ifemelu, reclaiming the time to do her hair implies a dislocation from Princeton. She likes Princeton and the fact that there “she could pretend to be someone else, someone specially admitted into a hallowed American club” (ADICHIE, 2014, p. 3), but there was no place there to do her hair. Thus, she could only “rebel” against Western logic of time by going somewhere else.

Furthermore, it is possible to notice that Ifemelu’s observations about African hair braiding salons reveal the intersection of issues of gender, class, and nationality. First, the location of these salons “in the part of the city that had graffiti, dank buildings, and no white people” (p. 9) indicates that these salons are located in predominantly Black neighborhoods, usually in a part of the city that is deemed unpleasant and poorer than the rest. In addition, the names of these African hair salons, named after their owners, also reveal the protagonism of immigrant Black women as the owners. Aisha and Fatima African Hair Braiding and Mariama African Hair Braiding are the examples Ifemelu gives of the common names of these businesses. That is, the owners are usually female, which is empowering in the sense that they can work under their own terms; and naming their business after themselves is a political statement. Interestingly, Ifemelu mentions that the hair braiders are usually Francophone, but the owners “speak the best English and answer the phone and [are] deferred to by the others” (p. 9). Furthermore, as reported by Ifemelu, frequently “there [is] a baby tied to someone’s back with a piece of cloth. Or a toddler asleep on a wrapper spread over a battered sofa” and even older children are seen occasionally (p. 9). Therefore, these women support each other, and the

owner allows their braiders flexibility to balance doing their job while also taking care of their family.

These women are also immigrants, some of them even undocumented immigrants, like Aisha, the one who braids Ifemelu's hair, so their situation makes it even harder for them to find good jobs. As such, these African braiding hair salons offer these immigrant women the conditions they need to support their families. Traditionally, in African societies prior to colonization, women usually learned how to braid their own hair, although in Yoruba societies there were esteemed skilled professional hairdressers, known as *onidiri.* With colonization came constant alterations in African culture forcing African peoples to dislocate. However, "hairdressing was a trade that women on the move could practice in any new town" (p. 79). Similarly, in *Americanah* the immigrant characters find in hairdressing an opportunity to practice their skills and support themselves financially. In general, Black women grow up having their hair braided by a close family member and some end up learning the skill themselves. Therefore, it is not surprising that many African hair salons are owned by African immigrant women, as it is portrayed in the novel.

In "Are We All Feminists?", Julie Iromuanya (2018, p. 173) discusses how "[h]air braiding has historically provided African immigrant women like the fictional Aisha and Mariama a means for income in an economy that is often hostile or indifferent to black women". In this context, "the enterprise of black hair has historically provided a pathway to financial sustenance for black women the world over" (p. 173). Therefore, the insertion of Black women in the global market of hair industry is a form of resistance against the system of patriarchal racist and capitalist oppression, which is another reason why the hair salon can be seen as a political space.

Furthermore, one can understand the hair salon as a political space also because it influences Black women's image about themselves and others. Although it is extremely problematic when socializing women in salons reject their natural beauty, there is also power embedded in the Black hair culture dealt within these salons. According to Nyamnjoh and Fuh (2014, p. 55), "[a]cross the world, especially amongst diasporic African communities, barbershops and hair saloons constitute integral and specific cultural sites for social interaction and exchange, and political activism". A lot can be done if these social interactions are grounded on a valorization of Black culture and a celebration of Black hair.

3.6 BLACK HAIR AS A RACE METAPHOR

In her post entitled “A Michelle Obama Shout-Out Plus Hair as a Race Metaphor”, Ifemelu describes how her white friend is not aware of the fact that Michelle Obama’s hair is not naturally straight and asks Ifemelu if Obama’s hair does not grow that way. Ifemelu writes on her blog: “is it me or is that the perfect metaphor for race in America right there? Hair” (ADICHIE, 2014, p. 296-297). Despite their conversation showing the lack of knowledge white people have about Black people, Ifemelu’s statement suggests that Adichie uses hair as a metaphor for the social construction of race in the United States. Thus, by examining the theme of hair, one can also better understand the complex category that is race.

The history of people of African descent in the diaspora begins with a history of violence and oppression. With colonization and slavery, there were impositions of codes and behaviors and several attempts to erase Black people’s links to their African heritage, being the tradition of African Black hairstyling part of this heritage. Moreover, the colonization of Black hair occurred similarly to the colonization of the Black body, through violence and the imposition of oppressive ideologies and discriminatory practices. In a context where the more associated with whiteness the better, many sought to adapt, rejecting part of their identity as Blacks in exchange for financial success. Furthermore, one can read hair as a metaphor if one considers the ways in which, due to the spread of negative stereotypes about hair and the Black body, many Blacks have felt (and still feel) inferior to whites, for they have internalized conceptions of beauty that devalue the Black community, failing to perceive that there is beauty and power in them. Likewise, just as the history of hair politics in the Americas involves oppression, repression, and agency, so is the history of Black people in the Diaspora marked by struggles and alternative forms of resistance.

It is also possible to identify hair as a metaphor for the construction of race by considering the mutual constitution of issues such as gender and class in Black people’s experiences. For example, women who choose to do the Big Chop may suffer for both being unaccustomed to the natural texture of their hair, and for breaking with preconceived notions about femininity. Furthermore, just as some people are denied job positions because of their hairstyle, others are discriminated against because of their race. The reason for that is that society, including the Black community, continues to reproduce oppressive discourses and to perpetuate negative associations and assumptions about Black people. The question of white privilege is important when examining the validity of hair as a race metaphor. While a Black

person needs to reflect about whether a certain natural hairstyle (such as wearing an Afro or braid) can affect how people see them or whether they will achieve their goals, the same does not necessarily happen with a white woman wearing long, naturally straight hair.[40] After all, racist society forces Black people to shrink, to change, to prepare in advance for trying to avoid being racially discriminated. Furthermore, just like its relation to hair and its politics, one can see the effects of coloniality of gender in the way the bodies of Black people are seen as objects of study, open to constant scrutiny.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, Ifemelu's decision to straighten her hair to facilitate her acceptance into the job market reveals her double consciousness. She is aware of the racist and repressive stereotypes associated with natural Black hair in the U.S., and she makes a decision based on this knowledge. Her decision does not necessarily reinforce the self-hatred theory or a desire to imitate whiteness at first. However, after the Big Chop, her insecurity reveals an inferiority complex and her internalization of racist standards of beauty. The concept of "double consciousness" is arguable because it implies a somewhat dualistic meaning or understanding of the experience of African Americans (as "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings" (DU BOIS, 2008, p. 3). Therefore, intersectionality expands this discussion to include the relevance of gender, class, and of heterosexist conceptualizations of beauty.

In this chapter, I have tried to examine how the issue of hair is portrayed in the novel, as it celebrates Black hair culture by sharing knowledge and information about it, and by portraying Ifemelu's path towards self-love and self-discovery. More specifically, I have tried to analyze how hair politics in *Americanah* can be understood from an intersectional perspective. Evidently, the novel emphasizes how hair relates to issues such as race, gender, class, and migration, to mention but a few. The narrative unveils the psychological effects of

---

[40] This affirmation does not mean that other groups are not under social pressure to adhere to some hairstyles. Nor do I mean that hair does not affect white women. For example, women (Black or not) who choose to shave their head or wear their hair short can be stigmatized. Similarly, men with naturally straight hair who choose to wear it long can also suffer gendered prejudice and social pressure. Men and women can lose job opportunities for dyeing their hair in unusual colors. Certainly, gender is a crucial factor when talking about hair politics. However, it is undeniable that for Black people, the social implication of hair is tougher. There is no cultural association of straight hair as something that represents danger, aggressiveness, and poor hygiene, for example. If a blond man with straight hair like Curt decides to wear his hair in dreadlocks, he can be perceived as eccentric, perhaps uglier for being associated with black hairstyling practices, but hardly anyone will see him as dangerous or dirty for this. Surely, class is also relevant; because Curt is extremely wealthy, he enjoys privileges that a blond working-class man would not have, although he is also expected to have a "standard" appearance. A less economically privileged man who needs the money, however, might need to have his hair cut if his boss considers his long hair to be inappropriate for the workplace. Evidently, the discussion on hair politics is quite complex since hair (or even the lack of it) affects everyone differently.

the internalization of negative images about standards of beauty, race, and femininity. In addition, although the novel shows a traumatizing experience of chemically straightening one's hair, it also presents how some women are happy with their choice.

Americanah discourages the focus on solely the self-hatred theory of hair alteration by showing that women straighten their hair for several reasons, including the fear of not being hired, or even because it is (a Black) tradition that they might want to engage themselves. Nevertheless, the idea of assimilation and the desire to succeed in a racist capitalist world is linked to the practice of hair straightening, given that the more economic power one gets, the more this person is expected to "whiten" themselves. Thankfully, this expectation has recently been changing since movements such as the Natural Hair Movement have encouraged Black people to embrace their natural hair texture and more and more Black people have been proudly wearing their natural hair. Furthermore, by showing in *Americanah* the importance of shared experience and having a sense of community in which women can share stories and learn from each other, Adichie raises a reflection about the power of so-called minorities as a group. It is undeniable, therefore, that one of the political agendas of *Americanah* is to celebrate Black hair, spread information about the subject, and encourage Black women to go natural.

4 Chapter IV:
"WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH ALL THAT TICKING?":[41]
Romantic Relationships in *Americanah*

> The simplest solution to the problem of race in America? Romantic love. Not friendship. […] But real deep romantic love, the kind that twists you and wrings you out and makes you breathe through the nostrils of your beloved. And because that real deep romantic love is so rare, and because American society is set up to make it even rarer between American Black and American White, the problem of race in America will never be solved. (ADICHIE, 2014, p. 296)

The previous lines from the blogger Ifemelu suggest that love, although rare, has the potential to solve the problem of race in America. Nevertheless, Ifemelu believes that romantic love is a rarity, leaving the "the problem of race" unsolvable. With these ideas in mind, this chapter addresses the issue of love in the novel, for *Americanah* is, after all, a love story between Ifemelu and her high school boyfriend Obinze Maduewesi. The narrative plot moves in flashbacks and flashforwards, beginning with Ifemelu braiding her hair, and thinking about her return to Nigeria, which is also in some ways her return to Obinze. The third person narrator follows the protagonists Ifemelu and Obinze as they express their feelings about the possibility of their reunion. After years living in the United States, she will return to Nigeria and eventually rekindle their romance. Before that, however, there are obstacles and experiences that they need to live in order to meet again as more experienced people. In their journey back to each other, Ifemelu has two other significant relationships, one with Curt and another with Blaine.

One of Ifemelu's posts that drew a lot of attention and received comments for months was about trying online dating (as a Black woman). The post was entitled "What's Love Got to Do With It?". In the entry, she shares with her readers her attempt to online date after her breakup with Curt. She notices a pattern in the profiles she observes:

> In that category where you choose the ethnicity you are interested in? White men tick white women, and the braver ones tick Asian and Hispanic. Hispanic men tick white and Hispanic. Black men are the only men likely to tick "all", but some don't even tick Black. They tick White, Asian, Hispanic. I wasn't feeling the love. But what's love got to do with all that ticking anyway? (p. 306).

Websites for online dating as the one Ifemelu describes make explicit a tendency to commodify relationships and women. In this context, people choose ethnicity just as someone

---

[41] Reference to a post on Ifemelu's blog entitled "What's Love Got to Do With It?".

chooses the color of a shirt. Furthermore, her description implies that in a racist society, Black women are deemed undesirable, which in turn makes them feel unloved. Ticking here also implies a choice, a choice that is moved by attractiveness, for sure, but attractiveness is influenced by white supremacist views of beauty. Nevertheless, feeling attracted to someone can be a random event in someone's life given that "[y]ou could walk into a grocery store and bump into someone and fall in love and that someone would not be the race you tick online" (p. 306). I would say, though, that continuing in love with that person and harboring a romantic relationship with this person takes an effort, a choice to love despite the differences. Ifemelu would rather walk "around blindly in the grocery store instead" (p. 306), perhaps because online dating has revealed itself as an eye-opener about how romantic relationships are constructed through a myriad of intersecting social structures.

In "Love as a Practice of Freedom", bell hooks (2006, p. 243) argues that we are often prevented from moving away from domination because we are usually guided by our own struggles. She believes that we end up aligning ourselves with systems of domination, such as classicism, racism, and imperialism, and that we only feel the need for change when we are directly affected by these systems. With that in mind, the author defends that "we desperately need an ethic of love." According to hooks, "[u]ntil we are able to accept interlocking, interdependent nature of systems of domination and recognize specific ways each system is maintained, we will continue to act in ways that undermine our individual quest for freedom and collective liberation struggle" (HOOKS, 2006", p. 244). For hooks, by developing an ethics of love one can expand their ability to acknowledge how other people are oppressed, dominated, and exploited. Thus, an ethnic of love makes it possible to become aware of our own blind spots. Therefore, through an understanding of intersectionality, of the interconnection of multiple dimensions of experience, one can begin to liberate oneself and others, and hooks asserts that this can happen through love. In line with this discussion, this chapter analyzes Ifemelu's romantic relationships. I argue here that the narrative indicates that "the problem of race" cannot be solved solely through love because love intermingles with issues such as gender, race, hair, class, nationality, and ethnicity. Hence, without solving these conflicts, Ifemelu cannot really share true intimacy and love.

4.1 INTERRACIAL RELATIONSHIPS: RELATIONSHIP WITH CURT

Curt is Ifemelu's first boyfriend in the United States. She meets him when she is working for his cousin Kimberly as a babysitter, after struggling a lot to support herself financially. When they meet, she is becoming emotionally and financially more stable than when she had arrived in the country. Curt is a kind boyfriend and an optimist person. Ifemelu initially describes their relationship as something that makes her feel lighter. However, later in the narrative, Ifemelu reveals the small things that she ignored during their relationship, the thoughts she kept to herself, which might have contributed to the end of their relationship. Although at first, they seem good together, a close investigation of their relationship reveals that it was always somewhat problematic.

One of the aspects that initially called my attention was that Curt's love for Ifemelu begins as a sexual attraction that is on the verge of racial fetishism. I say that because after getting together, he confides to Ifemelu that her laugh was what made him attracted to her. He had observed her laughing and thought "[i]f she laughs like that, I wonder how she does other things" (p. 191). Thus, his curiosity for her sexual performance is aroused just by watching her laugh. As a couple, Curt tells her "he had never been so attracted to a woman before, had never seen a body so beautiful, her perfect breasts, her perfect butt" (p. 195). His attraction, therefore, seems to be merely physical as his description focuses on her body alone, and not even on her face, but her breasts and butt, which are hypersexualized parts of the female body. Although Ifemelu does not agree with Curt's compliments (she thinks her breasts are "ordinary big breasts, with a downward slope" and she remembers Obinze teasing her for having "a flat ass"), "his words pleased her, like an unnecessary lavish gift" (p. 195).

Furthermore, after Ifemelu and Curt have their first sexual encounter, he tells her he "had never been with a black woman" before, "with a self-mocking toss of his head, as if this were something he should have done long ago but had somehow neglected" (p. 195). It seems to me that Curt considers Ifemelu as a prototype for all Black women, which just perpetuates the racist and sexist stereotype that Black women are inherently good in bed. In addition, Curt also asks Ifemelu to impersonate Foxy Brown.[42] While she humors him, "pleased by his

[42] Foxy Brown was a heroine in a 1974 blaxploitation film with the same title starred by Pam Grier, who sported an Afro and helped popularize it on mainstream, becoming "one of the biggest sex symbols of American popular culture" (BYRD; THARPS, 2014, p. 64). On the one hand, the movie is criticized for its stereotypical portrayal

pleasure […] it puzzle[s] her that this could be so exciting to him" (p. 195). These aforementioned interactions indicate that his excitement and attraction for Ifemelu are shaped by their racial difference.

In "Eating the Other", bell hooks (1992, p. 21) addresses the ways in which mass culture has openly encouraged what she refers to as "the commodification of Otherness", supporting the understanding that "there is pleasure to be found in the acknowledgment and enjoyment of racial difference". As reported by hooks, the advance of this commodification of Otherness is due to its presentation as "a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling" (p. 21). For Curt, his relationship with Ifemelu is a transformative experience that brings him incomparable pleasure and excitement. Nevertheless, his racialized desire for her seems to originate from the same root that hypersexualizes, dehumanizes, exploits, and violates the female Black body. Not surprisingly, he turns these obscure origins into excessive admiration.

Hooks believes that the perpetuation of this commodification of the other is related to the belief that "'[t]he real fun' is to be had by bringing to the surface all those 'nasty' unconscious fantasies and longings about contact with the Other embedded in the secret (not so secret) deep structure of white supremacy" (HOOKS, 1992, p. 21-22). Still, hooks acknowledges the possibility of challenging patriarchal white supremacy by contacting the Other. However, it is necessary to investigate how this desire for the Other is "expressed, manipulated and transformed by the encounter with racial differences" (p. 22). Curt, for instance, makes sure to tell Ifemelu after their first time that he had never been with a Black woman, which I do not think is narrated by chance. Thus, to "claim the body of the colored Other instrumentally, as unexplored terrain, a symbolic frontier that will be fertile ground for their reconstruction of the masculine norm", is a way of "asserting themselves as transgressive desiring subjects" (HOOKS, 1992, p. 24). In this perspective, Curt is seen by white society as the "transgressive desiring subject" for loving someone he is not supposed to love. Certainly,

---

of hypersexualized, aggressive, and "castrating Black women" (quite literally in the film, once Foxy, with the help of her Black Panther brothers, exact revenge on her boyfriend's murderers by castrating one of them and killing the others), contributing to the objectification of Black woman and the spread of negative conceptualizations of Black womanhood. On the other hand, some feminists praise Pam Grier's role in portraying Black women as fierce and independent, celebrating female power. Collins (2004, p. 124) discusses the ways in which Foxy gets "revenge on the loan sharks and drug dealers that preyed upon poor and working-class African Americans". In light of this discussion, it is significant that Curt is sexually aroused by Ifemelu's impersonation of Foxy Brown. Furthermore, the fact that Ifemelu is puzzled by it suggests that something is unclear to her, and it might be that the lines between a white male sexual fetishization of Black women and sexual admiration can seem blurred in interracial relationships.

this re-establishment of the norm occurs in the subconscious, in a mild and obscure way. Perhaps for this very reason the literary criticisms of Ifemelu and Curt focus in general on their lack of dialogue about racial issues, and not so much on the interactions they have. For hooks (1992, p. 24), this "exploration into the world of difference, into the body of the Other" is grounded on the belief that the experience "will provide a greater, more intense pleasure than any that exists in the ordinary world of one's familiar racial group". For Curt, Ifemelu's body is a new territory that he would venture to explore, and the result is immensely pleasurable.

In line with this discussion, it is possible to say that, although Curt is not a domineering racist, his approach to their racial difference demonstrates his denial that part of his desire for Ifemelu is connected to the history of domination of Black female bodies by white owners during slavery. Therefore, unintentionally, Curt objectifies Ifemelu while maintaining the status quo, and his positioning as the male gazer.[43] In a context in which commodification of Others is encouraged, "ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (HOOKS, 1992, p. 21). To further this statement, hooks affirms that "cultural, ethnic, and racial differences will be continually commodified and offered up as new dishes to enhance the white palate — that the Other will be eaten, consumed, and forgotten" (p. 28). The author's discussion brings to mind the passage in which Ifemelu describes Curt's attraction for her. She says: "[h]e wanted to suck her finger, to lick honey from her nipple, to smear ice cream on her belly, as though it was not enough simply to lie bare skin to bare skin" (ADICHIE, 2014, p. 195). For Curt, it is not enough to be with Ifemelu, he needs to metaphorically eat her, the Other, as he reinstates his manhood and his economic power in other spheres of her life.

When Ifemelu meets Curt's mother, she describes the woman as a mother who worships her "blinding golden-haired" beloved son, "the charmer, the one whose manipulations she always gave in to" (p. 198). The narrator observes: "He was her adventurer who would bring back exotic species — he had dated a Japanese girl, a Venezuelan girl — but would, with time, settle down properly. She would tolerate anybody he liked, but she felt no obligation for affection" (p. 198). His mother observes the procession of different ethnic girls as her son's youthful indiscretions. According to hooks, collective cultures and individual bodies can become "playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their

[43] On the subject of objectification, in Ifemelu's blog, Ifemelu refers to Curt as "The Hot White Ex". She shifts his patriarchal gaze and develops her own observations about him and their relationship.

power-over in intimate relations with the Other" when one commodifies race and ethnicity (HOOKS, 1992, p. 23). This commodification of the Other has been naturalized by patriarchal white supremacy, which is why for his conservative mother, Curt's previous relationships were in some way a form of conquering something from his excursions, a form of "tasting the local flavor", one could say.

Because of that, Curt's mother does not feel the need to connect with these girlfriends because Curt's relationships with them are transitory, for when he settles, he will surely do that with a more "appropriate" (hopefully white Republican?) woman. In their first encounter, she shares:

> I'm Republican, our whole family is. We are very anti-welfare but we did very much support civil rights. I just want you to know the kind of Republicans we are", she told Ifemelu when they first met, as though it was the most important thing to get out of the way. (p. 198).

As one can see, Curt's mother wants to make sure that Ifemelu understands that Curt and she are more than racially different; they also have different cultural backgrounds. She positions herself as anti-welfare, which suggests that she believes in meritocracy, which is ironic considering that Curt's life is much easier because of his family's fortune. Still, when telling Ifemelu that their family supported the civil rights movement, she seems to want to point out that although a Republican, she is not a racist person.

Very much like his mother's behavior, during Ifemelu and Curt's first official date, Curt describes himself:

> So, I'm a rich white guy from Potomac, but I'm not nearly as much of an asshole as I'm supposed to be", he said, in a way that made her feel he had said that before, and that it had been received well when he did. "Laura always says my mom is richer than God, but I'm not sure she is." (p. 192).

Because Curt talks "about himself with such gusto", Ifemelu has the impression that Curt wants to share with her from the beginning "everything there was to know" about him (p. 192). It makes one wonder why he thinks that this is a relevant first-date information — he might as well have shown her his bank statement. His self-description, although probably meant as a funny remark, implies that, similarly to many rich white men, he believes that they are entitled to be "assholes". However, it seems that Curt wants to reassure Ifemelu that, although he comes from an extremely wealthy family, he is not a patriarchal classist racist white man. Still, he should not have to be celebrated for not being an "asshole".

Ifemelu and Curt are mutually attracted to each other. She remembers her friend Wambui telling her she could never be with a white man because she would be "scared to see him naked" with "all that paleness" (p. 195). Ifemelu, on the other hand, looks at "Curt's pale hair and pale skin, the rust-coloured moles on his back, the fine sprinkle of golden hair" and thinks about "how strongly" she disagrees with Wambui (p. 195). She finds him sexy. Moreover, she begins "to like him because he liked her" (p. 192). And "how glorious it was, to be so wanted, and by this man with […] the clef-chinned handsomeness of models in department stores" (p. 192). One cannot deny that Ifemelu enjoys being desired by a standard of white beauty, with white skin and blond hair. Furthermore, Curt is really kind and protective, with him she feels "breakable, precious", and "proud — to be with him, and of him" (p. 219). As one can see, instead of seeing herself as someone strong and independent, their relationship makes Ifemelu think of herself as a fragile and treasured thing, as Curt's possession, and she is proud of that.

Later in their relationship she would fleetingly think about marrying him, and "their life engraved in comfort" (p. 199). By analyzing Ifemelu and Curt's relationship, it is possible to think about Frantz Fanon's discussions on interracial relationship. When talking about Black men's desire for white women, he affirms, "I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness" (FANON, 2008, p. 45). Similarly, by picturing a life of comfort through a possible marriage with Curt, Ifemelu acknowledges the advantages of marrying a wealthy white man that has the socio-economic power to effect positive changes in her life. Nevertheless, Ifemelu does not seem to want to whiten herself or her race through marriage, which is what Fanon argues about Mayotte Capécia in *I am a Martinican Woman*.[44] Although Ifemelu presents, at certain moments in the narrative, an inferiority complex, she does not show the desire to belong to another race or to lighten her skin. Neither would Ifemelu accept being in a relationship knowing that the white man sees her as inferior.

In fact, in this chapter, I discuss how she subconsciously rebels against her partners in the U.S. because she does not openly negotiate her feelings of inferiority. However, she knows that Curt's life is easier because of his white beauty and wealth. Hence, when Ifemelu pictures herself married to Curt, "comfort" is the word that she uses to summarize it, not love. She does

[44] According to Fanon, Mayotte abdicates all control of her life and surrenders to the needs and control of André, a white man. Having internalized the idea that if one is white then "[one] posses[es] beauty and virtue, which have never been black", and being uncapable of "negrify[ing] the world", Mayotte tries to whiten herself (FANON, 2008, p. 45).

not think about it for too long, though, which can be an indication that she knows that their marriage would still not change her positioning as an immigrant Black woman, though his money could certainly open some doors for her.

As Curt's girlfriend, Ifemelu is already benefited by the comfort and luxury he brings to her life. With him, "in her mind, [she is] a woman free of knots and cares":

> "A drink" became a part of the architecture of her life, mojitos and martinis, dry whites and fruity reds. She went hiking with him, kayaking, camping near his family's vacation home, all things she would never have imagined herself doing before. She was lighter and leaner; she was Curt's Girlfriend, a role she slipped into as into a favorite, flattering dress. She laughed more because he laughed so much. His optimism blinded her. (p. 196).

As one can see, their relationship is usually easy because his money allows them not to worry so much about things; they can just enjoy each other's company. Nevertheless, Curt is a genuine positive person because he does not have to fear what might happen if his plans do not work. Ifemelu, on the other hand, has experienced the difficulties of being economically vulnerable, of working illegally with her student visa, of subjecting herself to situations that made her feel tainted and depressed. Thus, by being with Curt, she can just be at ease, at least financially, she can occupy spaces that otherwise would be shut for her.

An illustration of how easy it is for Curt to achieve his plans is given when he decides that he wants to show Paris to Ifemelu (although he considers the idea "totally unoriginal"). Ifemelu tells him that because she has a Nigerian passport, she needs to provide documentation that she can support her trip to Europe. For him, having to apply for a visa, provide a bank statement, and a health insurance is simple. He replies with "Okay, we'll go next weekend. We'll get the visa stuff done this week. I'll get a copy of my bank statement tomorrow" (p. 196). Although Ifemelu tries to bring some reason to him "standing there looking down at the city from so high up, she was already caught in the whirl of his excitement" (p. 196). After a while, however, Ifemelu observes that Curt is always planning something different, as if he is constantly avoiding boredom. They travel to places such as Cozumel, London, and Paris; and it is common for her to meet him at the airport after work on Friday (p. 207).

By dating Curt, Ifemelu can finally send some money to her parents because she can begin to save money. Curt takes care of her financially by buying "her groceries and textbooks, [sending] her gift certificates for department stores, [taking] her shopping himself" (p. 200). He even asks her to stop working for Kimberly as a babysitter because "they could spend more time together if she didn't have to work every day" (p. 200). Although Curt means well, he

neglects that her job is an important achievement for her. Because Ifemelu was working for Kimberly, she could afford renting an apartment for herself and begin to deal with her depression. Moreover, his wanting her to quit her job just so she can spend more time with him reveals a patriarchal thinking that, if accepted, would prevent Ifemelu from having financial and psychological independence.

Moving to an important discussion about Ifemelu and Curt's relationship, it is necessary to discuss how interracial relationships are still seen as a taboo in the United States. Although Ifemelu is initially amused by the clouded looks of surprise on white women's faces when they realize that Ifemelu is Curt's girlfriend, these looks eventually begin "to pierce her skin" (p. 292-293). For Ifemelu, theirs is a "look of people confronting a great tribal loss" (p. 292): "It was not merely because Curt was white, it was the kind of white he was, the untamed golden hair and handsome face, the athlete's body, the sunny charm and the smell, around him, of money" (p. 292). Classist patriarchal racist society has programed these women to desire his privilege; hence, they do not think that Ifemelu is worthy the love of a man like Curt because of what he represents. Curt is at the "top of the racial ladder" while Ifemelu, as a Black poor immigrant woman is supposed to be at the bottom. Ifemelu thinks that "[i]f he were fat, older, poor, plain, eccentric, or dreadlocked, then it would be less remarkable, and the guardians of the tribe would be mollified" (p. 292). It is possible to observe that physical appearance is extremely important. Curt is not only white, he has blond hair, though untamed; if he were to wear dreadlocks, people would see him as eccentric and his charm would be reduced, and his relationship with Ifemelu better understood.

In addition, Ifemelu thinks that white women have a harder time accepting their relationship because "she was not the kind of black that they could, with an effort, imagine him with: she was not light-skinned, she was not biracial" (p. 292). Therefore, colorism also nurtures these women's contempt towards Ifemelu, for her dark skin complexion is seen as an affront. Unfortunately, Ifemelu internalizes their judgment and she begins to feel inferior to him. Having to deal with all these disapproving looks becomes exhaustive to her, and she begins to resent his protection and her feelings of needing to be protected by him (p. 293).

Curt also seems to be affected by an inferiority complex in relation to sex. According to the narrator, Curt is anxious in bed. Because of that, Ifemelu has to reassure him constantly, saying that she enjoys him and their sex. For Ifemelu "[t]here was something in him, lighter than ego but darker than insecurity, that needed constant buffing, polishing, waxing" (p. 207). Considering that Black women are hypersexualized and often thought of as having a lot of

sexual experience and appetite, one might wonder if Curt's insecurity in relation to their sexual intercourse is not a consequence of the stereotypes created about Black women. Moreover, Black men are also hypersexualized, which might make Curt wonder if he is able to satisfy her sexually as a Black man supposedly would. Thus, what seems to need constant polishing, therefore, is his "manhood", his sense of self.

Ifemelu's feelings of inferiority are worsened when she discovers that Curt is exchanging flirtatious emails with another woman. At that moment, Ifemelu had just had her hair cut and was having a hard time adapting to her natural texture. She looks at the picture of the woman, and tells Curt, as an accusation, that "all [his] girlfriends had long flowing hair" (p. 210). Ifemelu remembers the

> [p]ictures she had seen of his ex-girlfriends [that now] goaded her, the slender Japanese with straight hair dyed red, the olive-skinned Venezuelan with corkscrew hair that fell to her shoulders, the white girl with waves and waves of russet hair. And now this woman, whose looks she did not care for, but who had long straight hair". (p. 210-211).

Next to them, she feels "small and ugly" (p. 211). Considering the passage, it is possible to see that Ifemelu's reaction is not only about her own hair, but also about her beauty and repressed power. Her new short natural hair cannot swing like a white girl's long hair, and she feels powerless, shrunk, ugly, and inferior. She leaves his apartment with her hair covered under a baseball cap, hiding that which symbolizes her own insecurities. It is important to note that it was Curt's baseball hat she wore, which symbolically represents that even in these circumstances Ifemelu is still under his protection, her security still provided by him, and he has the power to free her from humiliation and emotional pain.

This feeling of inferiority is cultivated by a racist society, by the looks that other women give her, letting her know that she is seen as inferior, as ugly, as underserving of love. As discussed in the previous chapter, this complex is perpetuated by the racist belief that straight hair is beautiful, and that the natural Afro hair needs to be tamed to achieve this level of beauty. Nevertheless, other circumstances had already bothered her, made her uncomfortable in the relationship. The fact that Curt would fail to acknowledge some incidents related to race issues, for instance, was weighing on her already. Therefore, it is possible that that his texting another woman makes her acknowledge the problematic aspects of their relationship, which brings her inferiority complex to the fore. Addressing the notion of inferiority complex, Fanon asserts that "true, authentic love […] entails the mobilization of psychic drives basically freed of unconscious conflicts" (FANON, 2008, p. 28). Therefore, "authentic love will become

unattainable before one purges of that feeling of inferiority" (p. 28). Similarly important for Fanon is that the other partner frees herself or himself from the tendency to overcompensate or exalt the other (p. 28-29). In Ifemelu and Curt's dynamic, however, they would not deal with these issues openly. They would just pretend that they were not important parts of their relation.

Another inner conflict that begins to afflict Ifemelu is their different socio-economic status. For Ifemelu, Curt "was upbeat, relentlessly so, in a way that only an American of his kind could be, and there was an infantile quality to that that she found admirable and repulsive" (p. 196). It seems that after some time she realizes that Curt's optimism is a result of his privileged position as a white wealthy man. Ifemelu thinks of Curt as a "true believer" in happiness, good signs, and positive vibes. Nevertheless, eventually, "when his ebullience became a temptation to Ifemelu, an unrelieved sunniness", she would feel a desire to "crush and strike" at it (p. 197). These lines suggest that although she feels immersed in his world and allured by the comfort it gives her, she is aware that it is unrealistic to live like him, especially as a Black poor immigrant woman. For instance, in the last year of college, Ifemelu is looking for a new job and she has some difficulties with it because employers seem reluctant to hire an immigrant because of the paperwork required. However, Curt finds someone to interview her. If hired, this company is willing to get a work visa for her as well as to start the process so she can have a green card.

Although happy with the opportunity, Ifemelu feels uncomfortable in having things so easy for her when some friends, like Wambui, have been struggling to obtain a green card or to find a job. Thus, "[i]t was good news, and yet a soberness wrapped itself around her." Because of his powerful influence, Ifemelu thinks of herself as "a pink balloon, weightless, floating to the top, propelled by things outside of herself" (p. 202). That is, Ifemelu feels she has lost control of her life. In a way, his economic power makes her feel dependent on him, as if she has no agency anymore. It was through Curt's influence that she would achieve those things so easily. Consequently, "[s]he felt, in the midst of her gratitude, a small resentment: that Curt could, with a few calls, rearrange the world, have things slide into the spaces that he wanted them to" (p. 202). He was powerful, but she was not, and this feeling of powerlessness increases her inferiority complex.

Furthermore, there are moments in the narrative when Ifemelu wishes Curt were more aware of racial issues. She knows that he can understand overt expressions of racism, but other times he simply cannot notice them. When Ifemelu goes to a salon in his childhood

neighborhood to do her eyebrows and the attendant tells her that they "do not do curly",[45] for instance, he storms into the salon with "his blue eyes bluer", and demands that they do her eyebrow or he will close the place, his economic power as intensified as the blue in his eyes. Ifemelu, nevertheless, feels terrified, "worried that the woman might scald her, rip her skin off, pinch her, but Curt was too outraged on her behalf, his anger smoldering in the closed air of the spa, and so she sat, tensely, as the woman waxed her eyebrows" (p. 292). Still, because it was an explicitly racist situation, he does not have any problems seeing how race played a role in the situation.

On the other hand, when his aunt is trying to engage with Ifemelu by exaggeratedly trying to prove to Ifemelu that she likes Black people, Curt just denies that his aunt's overcompensation has to do with race. When the hosts in fancy restaurants or hotels refuse to acknowledge her presence, focusing only on Curt, he would shrug the incident off. As a result, Ifemelu sometimes avoids telling him how she feels about these situations because she does not want him to say that it is a misunderstanding or that she is overreacting. Her silence is an uncomfortable presence in their relationship. Ifemelu "knew that she should tell him these thoughts, that not telling him cast a shadow over them both. Still, she chose silence" (p. 294).

Ifemelu refuses to choose silence, however, when Curt affirms that the *Essence* was "racially skewed" because it featured only Black women. After his affirmation, Ifemelu takes him to a bookstore and shows him a pile of magazines in which he finds only three Black women (all of them biracial). She talks to him about the underrepresentation of Black women in those magazines and how these magazines assume a universality that is white oriented (by suggesting products for "all women" that could not be used by some Black women, for instance). She explains to him why a magazine like *Essence* exists. Because of this argument, Ifemelu writes to her friend Wambui, sharing with her all the things she concealed from Curt.

Years after the end of their relationship, Ifemelu would reflect about their relationship saying that Curt and herself did not avoid the issue of race, but that they would discuss it "in the slippery way that admitted nothing and engaged nothing" (p. 291). They would make jokes

---

[45] When the Asian attendant says that they "do not do curly", she is explicitly refusing to attend Ifemelu, a Black woman. Surprised, "Ifemelu [gives] the woman a long look; [thinking that] it was not worth an argument. If they did not do curly, then they did not do curly, whatever curly was" (p. 292). "Curly" here seems to be a code for "Blacks." Therefore, by saying that "they do not do curly" the attendant is saying that they do not serve Black people. Furthermore, Ifemelu and her race are being reduced to her hair texture. Still, Ifemelu tries to justify the woman's behavior by telling Curt that maybe the attendant was confused because she might have "never done a Black woman's eyebrow, because our hair *is* different after all" and that after attending her the woman might have learned that "the eyebrows are not that different" (p. 292, original italics).

about race and discuss how crazy it was that it was an issue, but they would not openly discuss how race was always a relevant factor in their relationship.[46] According to bell hooks, "[m]utual recognition of racism, its impact both on those who are dominated and those who dominate, is the only standpoint that makes possible an encounter between races that is not based on denial and fantasy" (HOOKS, 1992, p. 28). Thus, in their relationship, denial, silence, and avoidance are obstacles in the growth of their love and intimacy.

Ifemelu and Curt's relationship eventually ends,[47] when Ifemelu sleeps with someone else. She tells Curt about it and asks for his forgiveness. They stay for hours together without talking to each other, until Curt finally asks Ifemelu for information about the person. She tells him his name is Rob, which leads Curt to ask if the man is white. Surprised by how fast he asks her this piece of information, Ifemelu confirms that Rob is indeed white. Then, about Rob, Curt tells her that "[she] gave him what he wanted", as someone "who thought of sex as something a woman gave to a man at a loss to herself" (p. 288). Impulsively, Ifemelu tells him: "I took what I wanted. If I gave him anything, then it was incidental" (p. 288). Curt asks how she could do this to him when he had been so good to her. Then, Ifemelu begs him for forgiveness again, and he calls her a "bitch". Tears come to Ifemelu's eyes after her realization that "she had turned him into a man who could say 'bitch' so coldly, and wishing he was a man who would not have said "bitch" no matter what" (p. 289).

In *Black sexual politics*, Patricia Hill Collins (2004) addresses the offensive term "bitch". The author explains that the term has been historically "designed to put women in their place" (p. 123). Thus, by calling Ifemelu a "bitch", Curt is attempting to reestablish his power as the wealthy white male, because Ifemelu's infidelity hurts his pride and his sense of manhood. In addition, according to Collins, the term also has racist connotations, since it "depicts Black women as aggressive, loud, rude, and pushy." She continues:

---

[46]Curt would joke that he would go to Nigeria to pay her bride price, but that he would argue to take her for free. And Ifemelu would joke that on the day of their wedding, people would be shocked to see "the help wearing the bride's dress" (p. 199). These "jokes" are deeply influenced by their different race, ethnicity, and class. The fact that Curt would mock her cultural traditions and would joke about taking her for free, as if she has no value, is a reflection of his entitlement and white privilege. The fact that Ifemelu imagines all his relatives rejecting her and thinking that she should be "the help" reveals her repressed insecurities, her awareness of their racialized class differences. Ifemelu would still reflect about interracial relationships and remember that sometimes their jokes would make her feel uncomfortable, but that she never admitted that to him.

[47] Ifemelu still tries to contact Curt and get back together. Curt, however, rejects her calls and refuses to speak to her. Eventually, Ifemelu accepts that their relationship is over. Not so long after their breakup, she quits her job and starts her blog. It is interesting that after she becomes single, she finds the courage to free herself from the things that do not make her happy, like her job.

> Increasingly applied to poor and/or working-class Black women, the representation of the "bitch" constitutes a reworking of the image of the mule of chattel slavery. Whereas the mule was simply stubborn (passive aggressive) and needed prodding and supervision, the bitch is confrontational and actively aggressive. (p. 123).

That is, "bitch" has also been used to refer to women who contradict the norm and do not do what they are expected to do, just like Ifemelu contradicts Curt's expectations by cheating on him, and with a white man, of all people. His lack of control over her body angers him, so he calls Ifemelu a "bitch" in order to affirm his supposed superiority.[48]

It seems to me that Ifemelu's cheating on Curt is a consequence of their inability to communicate their differences. Although Ifemelu believes that she had slept with Rob because she was curious, the fact is that she wanted to crush "Curt's sunniness", his positive attitude towards life. Moreover, her unresolved feelings of inferiority propel her to act in a way that not only will hurt him, but also culminate in the end of their relationship. Furthermore, Curt's interest in knowing whether the man was white, and his cold attitude after learning that he was, reveal a racialized sexist understanding of female sexuality. That is, Ifemelu not only cheats on him, but she does it with another white man. One could say that, in his view, Ifemelu lets another white man colonize her body (since for him, "she gave Rob what he wanted"), which for Curt seems to be unforgivable. After all, he had been so good to her, and that should grant him the right to be the only owner of her body. Furthermore, although his outrage is justified, his calling her a "bitch" is not, since it reflects the patriarchal desire to diminish her as woman, to disrespect her, to control her body and sexual desires.

4.2 RACE AS A HETEROGENEOUS CATEGORY: RELATIONSHIP WITH BLAINE

Ifemelu meets Blaine for the first time on a train going to Baltimore (before she meets Curt). They talk and he invites her for a coffee. She gives him her phone number, but he never calls her. Nonetheless, "arrested by Blaine", Ifemelu idealizes him as "the perfect American partner that she would never have" (p. 191), a person made of "little crystals of perfection"

---

[48] Collins (2004) also discusses how there have been attempts to reappropriate the term "bitch" under a more positive light. She mentions how for some African American undergraduate students, "only African American women can be 'Bitches' with a capital 'B.' Bitches with a capital 'B' or in their language, 'Black Bitches,' are super-tough, super-strong women who are often celebrated" (p. 123). Still, the term is a controversial one because it relates to the historical categorization of Black women as promiscuous and wild. In this sense, Collins argues that "the question of who controls Black women's sexuality is paramount" since an important "sign of a 'Bitch's' power is her manipulation of her own sexuality for her own gain" (p. 126). Hence, it is important that Ifemelu stated that sleeping with Rob was her choice because she is asserting her own agency, by informing him that she is in control of her sexuality.

(p. 308). Ifemelu and Blaine only see each other again in a convention in Washington D.C., *Blogging While Brown*. Blaine tells her he loves her blog, and she learns about his blog on the "intersection of academia and popular culture" (p. 308). Soon they begin a serious and passionate relationship, as if their encounter eight years ago had given them a new level of intimacy. Blaine is an assistant professor at Yale, and she goes to New Haven with him after his first visit. After a short time together, she moves to New Haven to live with him. Although Ifemelu had not told her parents about Curt, Ifemelu tells them about Blaine, possibly because he is Black, which could be better received by her parents than the news of her dating a white man. Moreover, it also suggests she feels more comfortable with being in a relationship with Blaine than she did with Curt, as, initially, they seem to share common interests.

Delighted by their reunion, Ifemelu and Blaine start exchanging comments on each other's blogs, openly flirting on the phone at night, until the first time Blaine visits her, and they spend the night together. While Ifemelu cooks coconut rice, "Nina Simone [plays] loudly on her CD",[49] leading them "across the bridge from flirting friends to lovers" (p. 309). Their first date foreshadows the future of their relationship and stresses their differences. While Ifemelu tells him she finds cooking boring, she watches him and imagines them with "ginger on their lips, yellow curry licked of their body, bay leaves crushed beneath them… But instead they had been so responsible, kissing in the living room and then her leading him to her bedroom" (p. 309). She wants him to show an impetuous passion, and she has to take the initiative. She tells him that they should have done things a little less improbably and he tells her that there will be other opportunities for that. However, she recalls "his slipping on of the condom with such slow and clinical concentration", and thinks that "he was not the sort of person to do things improbably" (p. 309). This description contrasts with Ifemelu's sexual encounters with Obinze, which are a little more inconsequential.[50]

---

[49] Another possible foreshadowing present in their first meeting is the mention of Nina Simone's rendition of *Don't let me be misunderstood*, a song that talks about "a soul whose intentions are good". The persona reflects Ifemelu's emotional turmoil. The lyrics say "Baby, sometimes I'm so carefree / With a joy that's hard to hide", which mirrors Ifemelu's pleasure in being in love with Blaine, with whom she thought "she could only inhabit a higher level of goodness" (p. 311). Then, the lyrics go on to say that "[…] sometimes it seems that, all I have to do is worry", which can be seen as Ifemelu's constant feeling of displacement and insecurity. Finally, the lyrics continue: "and then you're bound to see my other side", which can be seen as a foreshadowing of Blaine's disappointment with Ifemelu's stand on racial politics as well as their fight, an analysis I will introduce later in this chapter.

[50] Her first time is with Obinze, during college. They have unprotected sex, and she worries about getting pregnant. Later, after her return to Nigeria, she sleeps with him while he is still married.

Living with Blaine, Ifemelu begins to eat more healthily, to go to the gym and to take better care of herself because of his influence. She thinks of him as a man full of disciplines, a man that would be a good father one day, a man who genuinely cares about others, and she admires him for that. Blaine often tries to make her feel "transported" by the music of John Coltrane, or by abstract paints and sculptures that bore her. He also encourages her to read novels that "push boundaries", though to his surprise, she does not share his passions and views. Although Ifemelu feels "a step removed from the things he believed, and the things he knew", she is also "eager to play catch-up, fascinated by his sense of rightness" (p. 313). However, there are moments in which she feels like his apprentice, and this eventually begins to bother her. Furthermore, their different backgrounds would begin to affect their relationship.

On the day they first meet, she had already expressed her hesitancy about going to grad school and becoming one of those academic people "speaking academese instead of English", not "really knowing what's happening in the real world" (p. 179). Thus, it is not surprising that she feels "vaguely lost" among his close friends. For Ifemelu, "[t]hey were youngish and well-dressed and righteous" (p. 313). She often finds their explanations too abstract for her, and themselves, too self-righteous and hypercritical. As for Blaine, one of their most striking differences is their take on race. Because they are both Black, Blaine often expects that they will have the same opinion about racial politics or similar reactions to racist events. He homogenizes race and the experiences of African people and their descendants, ignoring that, as a Nigerian, Ifemelu has a different personal and collective experience of race. Ifemelu's cultural perception is influenced by factors such as Nigeria's history of colonization, as well as by the different cultures, languages, the several ethnic groups of her country of origin, and the fact that Nigeria is a predominantly Black country. Therefore, she sometimes feels disconnected from some situations involving race because she does not see race as a historically significant part of her identity.

As discussed in the previous chapter, when a woman asks to touch Ifemelu's Afro, for instance, Blaine is shocked that Ifemelu allows the woman to "[sink] her fingers into her Afro", but for Ifemelu, the woman was just curious about the texture of her hair (p. 313). Blaine, however, does not think that Ifemelu should be her "guinea pig." This incident makes Ifemelu reflect about how different they are, as Blaine "expected her to feel what she did not know how to feel. There were things that existed for him that she could not penetrate" (p. 313). The fact is that Ifemelu is not a Black American and cannot feel fully represented or afflicted by the same pains and dilemmas. So, between them there always seems to be a veil that separates

them, undeniably the result of their different nationalities, and at the same time a thread that pushes and ties them together. Although she has been living in the country for years and has also been discriminated against multiple times, there are still times when historically significant acts do not have the same weight for her.

Still, their relationship affects her view of the world, and sometimes she "[hears] in her voice the echo of his" (p. 343). Blaine's influence reaches Ifemelu's blog. Initially, because she feels "thrilled by his interest, graced by his intelligence", she allows Blaine to read her entries before she posts them. With time, however, she realizes that "slowly she [had begun] to make changes, to add and remove, because of what he said." Soon she begins to resent his unrequested edits because "[h]er posts sounded too academic, too much like him" (p. 312). It is possible to notice that Ifemelu struggles between her admiration for Blaine's intelligence and her fear of losing her own voice as a blogger. Furthermore, Ifemelu's rejection of academic language reflects how conflicted she is about Blaine, for at the same time that she admires him, she also desires to make something of her own and not to lose herself within his perspective of the world.

In one of her posts, "Why are the Dankest, Drabbest Parts of American Cities Full of American Blacks", Blaine suggests that Ifemelu includes information about "government policy and redistricting", which she does. Later, however, she takes down the post, telling him that she does not want to explain things, just observe (p. 312). It is interesting that Ifemelu believes that her blogs are just observations, as if they are exempt from being subjective. Her statement implies that her examinations of race in American society are just that, a mere description of facts, unaffected by her own positioning, which is certainly untrue.

Blaine, then, tells her that she has to be more aware of her social responsibility as a blogger — because her readers see her as cultural commentary, and not as entertainment. Blaine thinks that she should deepen her discussions, which does not mean that she has "to be academic or boring." Although Ifemelu feels irritated by his comment, she has "a niggling thought that he was right" (p. 312). As one can see, although she does not agree with his suggestions, she thinks that his criticism is pertinent. Still, she tells him that her blog has enough depth, which shows her refusal to let him dictate the contents of her writings. Blaine replies that she is being "lazy", the word that he uses "for his students who did not hand in work on time, black celebrities who were not politically active, [and] ideas that did not match his own" (p. 312). By calling Ifemelu "lazy", Blaine assumes a patronizing position, from which he looks down on Ifemelu as a less committed and suited intellectual.

Considering Ifemelu's resistance to academicism, it is not surprising that Ifemelu's friendship with a Senegalese professor, Boubacar, arouses Blaine's jealousy. For Ifemelu, "Blaine resented this mutuality, something primally African from which he felt excluded" (p. 340). Ifemelu's interpretation of Blaine's jealousy unveils the psychological displacement resulting from the Atlantic slave trade. As a descendant of African slaves, Blaine is at the same time connected with African history and separated from it. Ifemelu, however, feels fortified after her encounters with Boubacar. With him, she feels "the affinities of something shared", though her interest in him is only platonic. It is Boubacar who tells Ifemelu about a research fellowship at Princeton and encourages her to apply, telling her "they" need to get into those places "to change the conversation" (p. 340). As one can see, their shared experience as African immigrants and their knowledge of African culture unites them.

Although Ifemelu tries to distance herself from academic language when Blaine tries to influence her writing, Ifemelu is more welcoming of Boubacar's influence on her and shows her interest in academia by attending some of his classes on African issues. Moreover, Boubacar's comment on the need to "change the conversation" is significant as it points out the need for producing new epistemologies as a form of resistance. Wa Thiong'o (1986) reflects on how, despite all the damage and violence of imperialist domination that continues to operate in Africa, there have always been "ceaseless struggles of African people to liberate their economy, politics and culture from that Euro-American-based stranglehold to usher an era of true communal self-regulation and self-determination" (p. 4). Hence, the fact that Ifemelu follows Boubacar's suggestion and applies to the fellowship reveals her desire to be part of the conversation.

Blaine's and Ifemelu's conflicting points of view are made more explicit after they disagree on the relevance of a racial protest. At one point, Blaine texts her about Mr. White, an old security guard who works at the university library, and who is mistaken for a drug dealer and taken in by the police for questioning.[51] When Ifemelu receives Blaine's texts about the incident, Ifemelu had just agreed to go to a farewell lunch offered to one of Boubacar's friend

[51] Mr. White was denounced by a white employee who saw him exchanging money and a car key with a Black friend and assumed that they were drug dealing. Blaine had befriended him years ago and he would often talk to Mr. White, exchanging his mannered American English that "made pollsters on the telephone assume that you were white and educated" (p. 177) to Ebonics. Ifemelu holds a grudge over Mr. White because of sexist comments he has made to her, making her feel uncomfortable. Nevertheless, she has never told Blaine about that because she feels guilty about resenting him. For, despite everything, Mr. White was "an old black man beaten down by life" (p. 342). Mr. White is released and goes back to work the next day. However, the university's dismissal of the incident as racially biased angers Blaine, leading him to plan a protest in front of the university library.

she had met a few times. Blaine meets her later and talks about his plans of arranging a protest. Ifemelu, who already had lunch plans, prefers to go to the lunch than "standing in front of the university library holding a placard" (p. 344). Blaine, who had assumed that she would be present, texts her asking about her whereabouts, so she goes home feeling guilty, and texts him back, lying that she had overslept. On the next day, nevertheless, Blaine finds out about her lie and they have a huge fight. Ifemelu and Blaine's relationship is forever changed after this event.

Ifemelu's apparent indifference to Mr. White's situation exposes the intersection of issues such as gender, race, class, and nationality. First, the fact that Blaine does not realize that Ifemelu dislikes Mr. White because of his sexist comments reveals the ways in which gender is naturalized. As a Black woman, she is vulnerable to the inappropriate comments and looks Mr. White gives her. Still, Ifemelu feels embarrassed for resenting him because of their class and age difference. Blaine, on the other hand, can see racialized class oppression more easily than gender, because as a male he is privileged. Furthermore, when Ifemelu does not go to the protest, she unconsciously makes Blaine aware of their different standpoints in relation to racial politics. Because she skips the protest for something somewhat frivolous, Blaine understands that she does not feel so angered about this type of "incident", that she does not feel so passionately about racial politics as he does.

Hence, Blaine tells Ifemelu "it's not just about writing a blog, you have to live like you believe it", implying that, for Ifemelu, her "blog is a game that [she doesn't] really take seriously" (p. 345). Ifemelu notices "in his tone, a subtle accusation, not merely about her laziness, her lack of zeal and conviction, but also about her Africanness; she was not sufficiently furious because she was African, not African American" (p. 345). Thus, Blaine's illusion that their experience of race unified them is shattered by the reality of her diasporic identity as an immigrant Nigerian woman, which differs from his experience of African diaspora. In fact, as a descendant of enslaved Africans in the U.S., his experience of race is marked by the legacies of slavery, by the collective memories of Jim Crow laws, by the traumatizing assassination of Black leaders, and the mass incarceration of racial and ethnic minorities. His collective experience as an African American is also marked by struggles for freedom, awareness of racism, and resistance to white supremacy. Ifemelu, on the other hand, has experienced the effects of coloniality differently.

Blaine's comment has some validity, though, because Ifemelu writes about racial discrimination and advocates for the end of racial, gender, and class prejudices, but she does not seem to understand the importance of protests like the one Blaine arranged. By thinking

about the protest as "standing in front of the university holding a placard", she empties the significance of such public manifestations. It also shows her disbelief in the political power of such efforts to expose overt displays of racist discrimination. By protesting against racial profiling and calling attention to the systematization of race discrimination, Blaine is trying to show resistance and to prevent it from happening again. Nevertheless, Blaine's comment is also unfair because it undermines the importance of blogs (such as Ifemelu's) as tools for resistance and contesting misrepresentation of Black people. Although Blaine does recognize the social relevance of her work as a blogger, her lack of enthusiasm for the protest is read by him as a lack of commitment. While Blaine goes home after the protest feeling hopeful for having given Mr. White, "some real dignity back", Ifemelu tells him during their fight that she does not understand "why this matters so much" (p. 345). Blaine replies by questioning, "How can you not understand? It's the principle of it" (p. 345). After that, he becomes a stranger to her eyes.

Although Ifemelu seems confused about Blaine's reaction, I would argue that her not going to the protest organized by Blaine reveals her tendency to sabotage her relationships, as she did when she cheated on Curt. Ifemelu was never a submissive woman. On the contrary, in Nigeria, Ifemelu was seen by her friends as strong-willed and confident. Her relationship with Blaine again seems to make her feel inferior, lost, as if she has to prove herself to him all the time. Ifemelu knew that Blaine thought she was going to the protest. Still, she chose not to tell him she already had plans. By not going to the protest, then, I believe that she is subconsciously stating her positioning and letting Blaine know that he cannot dictate her life or her beliefs.

They had been together for three years, and although his influence affects her life, there are things that she does not want to change for him. After their fight, however, their relationship is permanently altered. Blaine becomes colder and Ifemelu's feelings for him change. Although she admires Blaine, "his moral fiber, his life of clean lines", it becomes an "admiration for a person separate from her, a person far away" (p. 352). Even her desire for him diminishes. She does not look for him in bed so often, she feels like avoiding his touch, and even when they kiss "her lips [are] firmly pursed" because "she [does] not want his tongue in her mouth". After their fight, they remain together "mostly because of Barack Obama, bonding anew over their shared passion" (p. 7).

Their love for Obama keeps them together. Initially, Ifemelu thought that Hillary Clinton had more chances of becoming the president and she admired her. Her feelings change when she finds Blaine's copy of *Dreams from my father*. Because Blaine had not asked her to read it, she reads it, and falls in love with Obama. It is clear that, over time, Ifemelu needs to

assert herself and keep track of Blaine's influence on her, which is why she only reads Obama's book because Blaine had not suggested it. After reading it, Ifemelu tells Blaine how wonderful it would be if "the man who wrote [that] book could be the president of America" (p. 353). Blaine is mesmerized by it, knowing they have a similar belief, and Ifemelu feels "the first pulse of a shared passion" (p. 353). Obama's campaign keeping them together reveals how their differences and lack of shared history had distanced them. Now, however, they we are witnessing history in the making together and their admiration for Obama unites them:

> Their union was leached of passion, but there was a new passion, outside of themselves, that united them in an intimacy they had never had before, an unfixed, unspoken, intuitive intimacy: Barack Obama. They agreed, without any prodding, without the shadows of obligation or compromise, on Barack Obama. (p. 352).

They cling together in front of the television to watch his speeches and debates. They worry together that someone might take his life. They fear that people will dig scandals about him. They resent racist comments about him. While Blaine volunteers to work in Obama's campaign, Ifemelu writes posts about him. As one can see, they are both committed and working towards a common goal: having Obama as the first Black president of the United States. Even among his friends, Ifemelu feels she is no longer left out. When they finally make love for the first time after their fight, the night Obama became the candidate for the Democratic Party, "Obama [is] there with them, like an unspoken prayer, an emotional presence" (p. 356). That is, their love for Obama rekindles the desire between them, as if their common faith in him allowed them to hope for reconciliation.

By including their support for Obama in *Americanah*, Adichie is showing the impact of his election not only in the United States but worldwide. Ifemelu, Blaine, and their friends are united in this optimistic collective atmosphere of hope in racial equality and progress. It is also an important conversation about race, for they know that Obama cannot speak bluntly about racism if he wants to become president. Blaine is disappointed, for instance, when Obama speaks about race (after his pastor is criticized) and compares "black grievance with white fear" (p. 357). Although Ifemelu considers it more practically (Obama first needs to get into the office, and then he can start making changes), for Blaine his speech was immoral, closing the conversation about race instead of opening it. Furthermore, talking about Obama's election is also talking about intersectionality. The group discusses the claims that "blacks want Obama" and "women want Hillary", asking "what about black women?" (p. 355). They mention how some argue that Clinton is benefitted for being a (white) woman and Obama for being a (black) man, but they know that if Obama is elected it's "because he's a different kind of black" (p. 355-

356). That is, he has a white mother, he was raised by white grandparents, and he has a history of diaspora in his family.

During Obama's campaign, Ifemelu receives the Princeton fellowship, which means that she would become an academic herself. She decides not to move before the election. Obama's campaign also arouses in Ifemelu the feeling of belonging to the United States. Although her citizenship has already been approved, she has not sworn her oath yet; thus, she cannot vote. Still, when Obama wins the election, she feels like at that moment "nothing […] [is] more beautiful to her than America" (p. 361). A crying Blaine kisses her and holds her close "as though Obama's victory was also their personal victory" (p. 7). Their reaction can be interpreted as their immersion into the state of euphoria that followed Obama's election, and into the spirit of hope for change.

After the election, she moves to Princeton to begin her fellowship, and after the fellowship, she breaks up with Blaine, telling him that she is moving back to Nigeria. When an astonished Blaine asks her for the reason, she reflects, "that layer after layer of discontent had settled in her, and formed a mass that now propelled her." For Ifemelu, "she had felt that way for a while, that her relationship with him was like being content in a house but always sitting by the window and looking out" (p. 7). Ifemelu's description indicates that she had not been satisfied with their relationship for some time. Furthermore, when she imagines herself as a woman "looking out the window", she evokes a classic trope in women's literature.[52] She is positioned as someone who is reflecting about her own feelings, who wishes for freedom, who is contemplating a future different from her current situation. Although Ifemelu feels lonely and sad about her decision, she also believes that "Blaine needed what she was unable to give and she needed what he was unable to give" (p. 8). Thus, at the same time that by ending her relationship Ifemelu refuses to have less than she deserves, she also thinks that she cannot give Blaine what he deserves.

As one can see, the differences between them influenced her decision to leave Blaine and return to Nigeria. It should be noted that once again, one of the reasons Ifemelu's relationship comes to an end is her difficulty in connecting with her partners as equals. The differences between her and Blaine exist, but a major problem is that for a long time she tries to deny who she is and what she wants in order to please him. Again, she feels inferior to him,

---

[52] Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The yellow wallpaper" (1982), and Kate Chopin's "Story of an hour" (1894) are among some of the literary works in which windows are significant, symbolizing at times women's desire for freedom, lack of freedom, emotional conflicts, and/or hopelessness.

be it because he is an assertive academic with very clear and formed ideas about what justice is and with a desire to resist, or because he is African American and she is not. The fact is that she resembles bell hooks' Ivy League students, who "were beset by deep feelings of unworthiness, of ugliness inside and outside. They were overwhelmed by all the choices before them and unable to assert meaningful agency" (HOOKS, 2003, p. x). Her inferiority complex had been an issue in her previous relationship, and it becomes one in her relationship with Blaine as well.

4.3 THE INTIMACY OF SHARED HISTORY: RELATIONSHIP WITH OBINZE

When Obinze sees Ifemelu in high school, she attracts his attention, not because she looked fine (which he thought she did), but because she seemed the "the kind of person who will do something because [she] want[s] to, and not because everyone else is doing it" (p. 61). One of his friends tells Obinze that Ifemelu is "too much trouble" (p. 60), a woman who can talk and who never agrees. Raised by a feminist mother, who was a professor, Obinze has learned to respect and value women's independency. Hence, he informs his friend that he is "not interested in girls that are too nice" (p. 60).[53] Despite the expectations of his friends, who want Obinze to start a romance with sweet light-skinned Ginika, Obinze chases after Ifemelu. Ifemelu, who "liked this image of herself as too much trouble, as different, and she sometimes thought of it as a carapace that kept her safe" (p. 61), feels flattered not only for being desired by the intelligent and good-looking Obinze, but for being loved for whom she truly is. Obinze awakens self-love in her, which is why when "[s]he [rests] her head against his", she feels "for the first time, what she would often feel with him: a self-affection. He made her like herself. With him, she was at ease" (p. 61). Ifemelu likes to be seen as strong, independent, and intelligent, and Obinze's fascination with her awakens in Ifemelu self-love.

Differently from her relationship with Curt and Blaine, where she would feel shrunk and inferior, be it because of race issues, class issues, nationality, or formal education, with Obinze she could be herself. Their love is grounded on immediate shared intimacy. They feel comfortable with each other to talk about several subjects. As teenagers, Obinze tries to share with Ifemelu his love for American culture and books, encouraging her to read what he calls "proper books", and Ifemelu feels comfortable enough to disagree, and to mock him for his

[53] Ironically, Obinze ends up marrying Kochi, a nice woman who feels the need to agree with everyone.

definitions. While with Blaine Ifemelu feels somewhat ashamed for not sharing the same interests, with Obinze she feels at ease to tease.

After high school, Ifemelu and Obinze go to university in Nsukka. However, in her third year of college, because of the endless strikes, Aunty Uju, who is already living in the United States, suggests that Ifemelu should take the SATs and apply for a scholarship. Ifemelu would not have even considered the possibility if it were not for Obinze's support. When she receives the acceptance letters and gets her student visa, they plan that she will be the first to go to the United States, while Obinze finishes college in Nsukka. He will apply for graduate schools later and join her. In the U.S., she communicates with Obinze over the phone, by emails, and letters. She shares with him her reactions to American culture and customs, her financial struggles, and fears. Obinze tries to calm her down and he even sends her some money when she is having financial problems. Talking to Obinze comforts her because she does not have to pretend to be well as she does with her parents and others. Nevertheless, their relationship ends suddenly when Ifemelu cuts off communications with him.

Ifemelu was having a hard time finding a job, the bills were accumulating, and her roommates were pressuring her to pay the rent. Thus, desperate for money and avoiding bothering Obinze, she accepts working for a tennis coach who "needs help to relax".[54] She masturbates the man in exchange for money. After the encounter with the coach, Ifemelu sinks into a deep depression. Although Obinze tries to reach out to her, she cannot gather enough strength to talk to him and tell him what had happened. She does not answer his phone calls, she deletes his emails, and, eventually, she changes her number and cancels her email account. When Obinze sends her a letter, she hides it under a pile of books, unopened. And "[w]ith each month of silence that passed between them, she felt the silence itself calcify, and become a hard and hulking statue, impossible to defeat" (p. 196). She thinks about writing to him, and she even drafts some emails, but she can never send them, and as time passes, it becomes too late. Ifemelu emails him five years later. She had met one of Obinze's friends from Nigeria, though at this point she is with Curt, and guilt assails her. She apologizes for the silence and tells him that she will explain what happened.

At that moment, Obinze is struggling in England as an undocumented immigrant and he has had a particular bad day. He reads Ifemelu's email and it angers him. He wonders why she had decided to cut him from her life while keeping in touch with other people. He has changed

---

[54] The next chapter discusses this passage in depth.

because of her, become “more inwardly into himself.” Throughout those years, “[h]e was, by turns, inflamed by anger, twisted by confusion, withered by sadness” because he could not understand the sudden “silence from her, a silence so brutal and complete” when “[t]hey had not fought, [and] their love was as sparkling as always” (p. 237). Therefore, when Obinze finally receives her email, with no explanation, as if nothing had happened, he impulsively deletes it. It would take years for them to resume their communication.

One could argue that the fact that Ifemelu and Obinze never really had closure influenced Ifemelu’s future relationships. With Curt, “[o]ften, naked beside him, she found herself thinking of Obinze” (p. 195). With Blaine, although content, she was “always looking out” (p. 7). With Obinze, on the other hand, her focus was on the present, in their being together. During high school, Ifemelu used to call “their warm entanglements” in bed “ceiling”, because when lying in bed with him, for the first time, “[her] eyes were open but [she] did not see the ceiling” (p. 20). And Ceiling became the affectionate way Ifemelu called Obinze.

In “Love, limb-loosener: encounters in Chimamanda Adichie’s *Americanah*”, Jennifer Leetsch (2017) considers love as “inherently transformative” (p. 1). Connecting love with issues such as “spatiality, corporeality and textuality”, the author investigates “[h]ow intimate sexual acts of love may break previously erected barriers” (p. 1), that is, how love can be a way of breaking with hegemonic norms of society. Leetsch argues that *Americanah* illustrates the ways in which love can disturb “boundaries and cross borders” (p. 2). For the author, this fluidity, this active mobility renders love the potential to “[undermine] hierarchies and normative orders” (p. 2-3). Furthermore, love’s ability to “make things loose” enables an understanding of how relationships are constructed within hierarchical power structures. I would argue, however, that in *Americanah*, love cannot happen before one frees oneself from the normative and psychological restrictions of patriarchal, racist, classist society. If for Leetsch, the narrative indicates that *Americanah*’s “romantic trajectory ultimately escapes its conventional boundaries — geographically, digitally, and meta-textually” (p. 1), for me, Ifemelu’s romantic relationships cannot develop effortlessly because the differences between herself and her partners — and Ifemelu’s feelings of inferiority resulting from these relationships — prevent Ifemelu from truly connecting with her American lovers. With Obinze, after her return to Nigeria, Ifemelu connects more easily because she does not feel intimidated by him nor does she need him to improve her life conditions or financial stability. They talk as equals, bound by their shared perspectives rather than separated by their differences.

Although Leetsch (2017) focuses on Ifemelu and Obinze's relationship, her argument of love as "inherently transformative", in a way, neglects the hegemonic powers from which romantic relations happen, as well as the social constructions that allow and prevent material bodies from engaging and developing intimacy with each other. For Ifemelu, sleeping with Curt did not reduce her feelings of inferiority. Instead, as discussed previously, some racialized sexist preconceptions are reinscribed through their sexual encounters. Similarly, Ifemelu's relationship with Blaine is also marked by their different nationality, educational background, and racial experience, as well as by Blaine's unconscious attempt to homogenize their experience as Blacks, and by Ifemelu's conflicting diasporic identity. Even with Obinze, although they eventually speak again, after she tells him she is going back to Nigeria, it takes them thirteen years to recover from the silence that had grown between them. Therefore, although Leetsch's discussion on love's potential to break with hegemonic normativity is insightful, I think that Ifemelu's avoidance and silence prevents her from engaging in honest relationships with her partners.

Discussing the period when Ifemelu and Obinze exchange emails, right before she moves to Nigeria, Leetsch (2017, p. 11) affirms that the "[d]esire for the other produces action, language, creation" and that "[l]ove becomes a story to be told, a narrative". It is interesting that, for Leestch, love acts by facilitating communication, because Ifemelu's difficulty to openly confront Curt and Blaine leads her to act in somewhat passive-aggressive ways. Furthermore, Leetsch argues that "[a] story begins with love entering; it initiates the process of creation and production of story, flows of narrative and textuality are induced by the advent of eros" (p. 11). The idea of Ifemelu's blog, however, appears when she texts her friend Wambui about all the things she had hidden from Curt. Thus, the end of their relationship propels her to start her blog. One could also argue that Ifemelu never truly loved Curt and Blaine, which is why it was easier to communicate with Obinze, but not with them.

It takes Ifemelu some time to contact Obinze after she returns to Nigeria. Influenced by Western notions of beauty, she hopes to lose some weight before she saw him, but she begins to see him everywhere, in every random person on the street, until and she finally calls him. They meet at a library of her choice. They talk about how their lives have changed throughout the years they spent apart and about how good it is to see each other again. On the next day, Obinze goes to Ifemelu's house, where they kiss near a bookshelf. Finally, he asks her about what happened in the United States, and, for the first time, Ifemelu tells him about the tennis coach and about what she had done. Ifemelu tells him about hating herself after that. After a

long silence, Obinze tells her that he cannot even image “how bad [she] must have felt”, and that he wishes she had told him (p. 439). The sound of his words moves her, and she cannot hold her tears anymore. She cries silently as he holds her hand, “and between them silence [grows], an ancient silence that they both knew. She was inside this silence and it was safe” (p. 440). This passage from the novel represents the moment in which they finally reconnect and begin to heal from the pain of their separation. The distant silence that they knew, a silence that before meant shame and distanced them, now turns into a silence of comfort and safety.

When they first have sex after their reencounter, Ifemelu thinks about how the expression “making love” finally seems appropriate. She tells him that she “always saw the ceiling with other men”, and Obinze replies by saying that he has felt as if he “was waiting to be happy” (p. 447). Their confessions reveal that their separation has prevented them from truly connecting with other people and being completely happy. At that moment “they lay entwined, naked, in a full circle of completeness” (p. 447). Regarding the narrative, Ifemelu and Obinze’s reunion can be seen as this full circle, because as protagonists, their paths separate at the moment their love was strong and flourishing, both leave their country of origin and suffer the harsh reality of poor immigrant life, both are also able to reestablish themselves, and at the end of the narrative they are at their country of origin to resume their love story.

Ifemelu describes the next days as “her heady days full of cliché: she felt fully alive, her heart beat faster when he arrived at her door, and she viewed each morning like the unwrapping of a gift” (p. 449). Her feelings for him are more intense than they ever were. With Obinze, Ifemelu feels understood, listened to, and this is something new to her, something she cherishes. Furthermore, she has now had more romantic experiences, which makes her better appreciate her relationship with Obinze. The narrator describes:

> He remembered everything she told him. She had never had this before, to be listened to, to be truly heard, and so he became newly precious; each time he said bye at the end of a telephone call, she felt a sinking panic. It was truly absurd. Their teenage love had been less melodramatic. (ADICHIE, 2014, p. 450).

Unlike Ifemelu’s previous relationships, where she did not feel comfortable in sharing how she felt, with Obinze she feels valued and heard. However, his marriage is inevitably a constant presence, and it “hung above them, unspoken, unprobed” (p. 451).

Leetsch (2017) also talks about how in Nigeria Ifemelu uses her new blog (*The Small Redemptions of Lagos*) as a form of communication with Obinze. The reason for that is that after they get together in Nigeria, they avoid talking about the fact that Obinze is married now. Their denial eventually causes them to fight and Ifemelu to demand a position from him. They

spend months without talking to each other, and when she writes on her blog, she often has him in mind, wondering what he would think of her posts. Nevertheless, she is consumed by sadness during this time, and by the lack of news from him, which weakens the argument that love facilitates communication. It is only after Obinze finally knocks on her door to honestly discuss his feelings and inform her that he is ending his marriage that Ifemelu invites Obinze to enter her house, which is how the novel ends.

In the beginning of the novel, Ifemelu reflects about her upcoming return to Nigeria, and she refers to Obinze as "[h]er first love, her first lover, the only person with whom she had never felt the need to explain herself" (p. 6). Later, in Nigeria, she reflects upon her previous relationships. For Ifemelu, "The thing about cross-cultural relationships is that you spend so much time explaining" (p. 457). She tells Obinze:

> My ex-boyfriends and I spent a lot of time explaining. I sometimes wondered whether we would even have anything at all to say to each other if we were from the same place", and it pleased him to hear that, because it gave his relationship with her a depth, a lack of trifling novelty. They were from the same place and they still had a lot to say to each other. (ADICHIE, 2014, p. 457)

Perhaps, then, what facilitates their communication is not only love, but also their shared history as Nigerians. Furthermore, with Curt and Blaine there were other hierarchies in place that made her uncomfortable, but that she kept to herself. She could not love them because they also made her not love herself so much. She had bought into the racist tales that made her feel unloved and undesirable, she had internalized the negative stereotypes that deemed Africans inferior, and she was often subconsciously putting herself on the inferior side of destructive binaries.

In this chapter, I have tried to argue that Ifemelu's romantic relationships are affected by difference and prevented from growing due to a lack of honest communication about the different social and geo-political structures at play. In *Black looks*, bell hooks discusses how, in order to begin decolonizing her mind, she had to become aware of the hegemonic systems of domination operating in society. According to her,

> Awareness is central to the process of love as the practice of freedom. Whenever those of us who are members of exploited and oppressed groups dare to critically interrogate our locations, the identities and allegiances that inform how we live our lives, we begin the process of decolonization. If we discover in ourselves self-hatred, low self-esteem, or internalized white supremacist thinking and we face it, we can begin to heal. (HOOKS, 1992, p. 248).

For hooks, by acknowledging and confronting what afflicts us, we can develop politically and personally, however arduous the process is. Still, hooks believes that it is through

love that we can overcome this pain and rejoice in “the freedom of spirit that a love ethic brings” (HOOKS, 1992, p. 248). In line with her discussion, one could say that Ifemelu’s relationships with Curt and Blaine were doomed to fail because they refused to confront and interrogate their locations. Thus, instead of cultivating love, they ended up harboring feelings of inferiority, resentment, and insecurity. Ifemelu and Obinze also silence some conversations, and it is only when they confront each other and deal with their denial that they can finally be together.

For hooks,

> [d]ecolonization is the necessary groundwork for the development of self-love”, and it can be achieved through “the recognition of equality among humans, coupled with the understanding that racial categories which negatively stigmatize blackness were created as a political tool of imperialist white domination (HOOKS, 2016, p. 73).

Ifemelu cannot connect with Curt and Blaine as equals. With them, she is constantly struggling with her own insecurities, resenting them for arousing feelings of inferiority in her, which are a consequence of their privileges, Curt for being rich and white, Blaine for being male and from the West. Nurturing love amidst such negative feelings is hard. Obinze’s openness and admiration for Ifemelu’s independence allows space for love to exist. Thus, by portraying Ifemelu and Obinze’s relationship, Adichie highlights the importance of self-love and commonality.

5 Chapter V:
"IN AMERICA YOU'RE BLACK, BABY":[55]
Migration and Return Migration in *Americanah*

> Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop arguing. Stop saying I'm Jamaican or I'm Ghanaian. America doesn't care. So what if you weren't "black" in your country? You're in America now. (ADICHIE, 2014, p. 220).

In *Routes*, James Clifford (1997) addresses the difficult task of defining terms such as "diaspora". In order to do so, he believes one needs to be careful when affirming an "ideal type" of diaspora in which "groups become identified as less or more diasporic." In addition, Clifford points out that a society's understanding of diaspora might vary throughout history (p. 249). Originally used to refer to the experience of displacement of Jewish communities, the term "diaspora" has also been used to refer to the experiences of people of African descent. For centuries, African people were forced out of their countries and shipped to the Americas to be enslaved, dehumanized, and/or killed. This compulsory movement is often referred to as Black diaspora (also known as African diaspora), for, as Stuart Hall (1990, p. 224) argues, "dispersal and fragmentation is the history of all enforced diaspora". Although formal slavery has ended, the legacies of such a system of oppression are rooted in the ideology of societies involved in the slave trade, where being Black is to be constantly subjected to racial politics and gendered structural racism.

When Dionne Brand (2001) discusses Black diaspora, she is often referring to the experiences of Blacks who descend from enslaved Africans and whose lives are still impacted by this abrupt rupture with the past and their home. Her discussion defends that to live in the diaspora is to live in between worlds, and it is also in this sense of in-betweenness that I refer to the experience of African characters in *Americanah* as diasporic. However, Ifemelu lives a new kind of diaspora: a voluntary migration. Still, her experience as an immigrant is marked by the Black diaspora. After all, as Brand (2001, p. 37) postulates, "the Black body is one of the most regulated bodies in the Diaspora. Perhaps the most regulated body is the female body, any female body, but the Black body is a close and symbolic second". Thus, an intersectional

---

[55] Reference to an entry on Ifemelu's blog (p. 220).

analysis of her diasporic experience will reveal the marginalization she faces as a Black African woman.

In the last century, several Africans have decided to immigrate to countries such as the United States and England, in a contemporary phenomenon often referred to as new diasporas, or contemporary diasporas. Hall (2018, p. 208) states: “Poverty, underdevelopment, the lack of opportunities — the legacies of empire everywhere — may force people to migrate, bringing about the scattering: the dispersal”. African immigrants are often forced to confront Western conceptualizations of “Africa” as a homogeneous place and are discriminated against. Their diasporic experience is also inevitably linked with factors such as race, gender, and class. According to Clifford (1997, p. 250), minority groups have used diasporic discourses to describe “a shared, ongoing history of displacement, suffering, adaptation, or resistance”, and their shared history “may be as important as the projection of a specific origin”. This chapter tackles the subject of Diaspora by analyzing common experiences of exclusion and prejudice, as they relate to the African characters of *Americanah*

Drawing from Du Bois’ “double consciousness”, Clifford argues that for African Blacks and other people of color, being an immigrant can have particular implications. As a consequence, they develop what Clifford refers to as “diaspora consciousness”. On the one hand, they are often undermined and positioned in lower ranks because of systematic discrimination against them. On the other hand, they also develop skills that ensure their adaptation and survival. As I understand it, “diaspora consciousness” comes from an awareness of exclusion and rejection, but also as potential for resistance through the fluidity that results from inhabiting an in-between space.

In relation to the concept of migration, Avtar Brah (1997, p. 24) affirms that there “is a sense of return in migrations — a sense of continuities, remembered homes — as with birds or butterflies or deer or fish”. The idea of return in diasporic discourses is linked with the Jewish communities’ original use of diaspora, as it evokes the image of the Promised Land. Nevertheless, in the Black diaspora and in contemporary diasporas, the idea of an ideal, romanticized, fixed “home” is shattered by the reality of constant historical, cultural, and socio-political changes. About how the return of Caribbean immigrants to their homeland was met with strangeness, Hall (2018) explains that many could not so easily reconnect to life back in their country, and “miss[ed] the cosmopolitan rhythms of life to which they [had] become acclimatized.” For them, home had become unrecognizable and their “natural and spontaneous

chains of connection [had been] disturbed by their diasporic experiences" (HALL, 2018, p. 207-208).

In *Cartography of diaspora*, Brah (1997, p. 183) refers to "diaspora" as signifying the "economic, political and cultural specificities linking these components". For the author, diasporic journeys are in constant transformation, since they are repeated and adapted by individuals who compose what she calls a "confluence of narratives." Brah's discussion suggests that diasporic communities come into being through this "confluence of narratives." Thus, individual histories relate to collective history and collective memory, being these "diasporic communities" never fixed and differently understood based on their historical context (BRAH, 1997, p. 183).

If diaspora "specifies a matrix of economic, political and cultural inter-relationships which construct the commonalty between the various components of a dispersed group", as Brah (1997, p. 196) affirms, the term "defies the search for originary absolutes, or genuine or authentic manifestations of a stable, pre-given, unchanging identity". Similarly, Hall (1990) argues that diasporic experience entails a "recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity." He defends that "[d]iaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (HALL, 1990, p. 235). Hence, fluidity and difference are primordial to Brah's and Hall's understanding of diaspora, and it is in this sense that I refer to diasporic experiences, as intersectional, conflicting, and fluid.

In my analysis, I use Brah's definition of diaspora because it implies a notion of intersectionality, since one can better understand the concept by going beyond the idea of geographical location. Furthermore, it questions the supposed fixity of the place of origin, because "home" is made in coalition with other factors, such as race, gender, and class, and is constantly altered by axes of differentiation. Thus, "home" is a fluid space. My take on diaspora in this research aligns with Brah's interests, which lie in understanding the regimes of power that impact the experience of diaspora. In line with this discussion, this chapter analyzes the characters' experience of diaspora and their negotiation of "home". This chapter is divided in two main parts. Firstly, it focuses on the characters' lives as immigrants, arguing that gendered racism and classicism hinder their efforts to succeed in the new country. Secondly, it explores the theme of return migration, analyzing the conflicts Ifemelu's journey brings to the fore.

5.1 MIGRATION AND THE EXPERIENCE OF AFRICAN IMMIGRANTS

5.1.1 Faking an American accent: the apologetic immigrant persona

The American Dream was never something to which Ifemelu aspired. It had been Obinze's dream to live in the United States. It was him who had tried to raise her interest in American culture, but his American dream was deferred. She was the one who had her U.S. visa approved and embarked upon a journey of self-discovery. Due to the increasing brain drain in Nigeria and the constant strikes in her university, Ifemelu moves to "the land of opportunities", oblivious to the conflicts and difficulties she would face.

Coming from a country where most people are Black and where racist discrimination occurs in more subtle ways, Ifemelu becomes aware of her Blackness when she arrives in the United States, as discussed in the previous chapters. She realizes that being a Black African immigrant there is to be constantly subjected to negative Western stereotypes about Africa while also being impacted by racial politics resulting from a history of slavery, and racial politics that differ from her collective experience of race as a Black Nigerian woman.

One could affirm that Ifemelu's experience of diaspora is marked by what Aníbal Quijano (2000, p. 533) refers to as "coloniality of power", signifying the legacies of colonialism that continue to inform capitalist societies. He defends that colonization depended upon the invention of race as a means of classification of the population into hierarchical relations, being race "a way of granting legitimacy to the relations of domination imposed by the conquest" (p. 534), a way of justifying unequal distribution of wealth, and a way of controlling labor.

In order to successfully establish the European empire as the center of modernity, it was necessary to think of "modernity and rationality as exclusively European products and experiences" (QUIJANO, 2000, p. 542). As a consequence, the rest of the world was placed in the negative side of the binary, as irrational and uncivilized. In this model of power, African people were seen as naturally inferior and "simply primitive" (p. 542). Even after colonization has ended, Western societies continue to be informed by coloniality, European epistemologies have been naturalized as superior, and race continues to divide people into binaries of superiority and inferiority. Thus, the lives of African immigrants in Western societies are impacted by these ideologies.

In line with his discussion, María Lugones (2007, p. 202) argues that "coloniality of power" and "coloniality of gender" were mutually constituted because one cannot exist without

the other. Thus, Lugones stresses the need for understanding experience and coloniality from an intersectional perspective. According to Lugones (2007, p. 193: "Though everyone in capitalist Eurocentered modernity is both raced and gendered, not everyone is dominated or victimized in terms of their race or gender". She stresses that separating these categories is to contribute to the marginalization of women of color. Lugones proposes a discussion about the "coloniality of gender" because the modern gender system was also an imposition of colonization.

This section aims at analyzing the impacts of coloniality of gender in the characters' experience of migration in *Americanah*, focusing mainly on Ifemelu. I argue here that, the African immigrant characters' search for better opportunities in the U.S. is complicated by coloniality. If in Nigeria Ifemelu experiences the impacts of coloniality unknowingly, in the United States the social discourses, the racial politics, and racism make it explicit. Furthermore, drawing on Homi Bhabha's concept of "mimicry", this chapter analyzes the characters' engagement with mimicry, its possible reasons, and its social and personal implications.

In "Americanity as a concept, or the Americas in the modern world-system", Quijano and Wallerstein (1992) argue that coloniality and racism were at the root of the colonization of the Americas. The authors defend that since colonization, the formerly "British colonies [in America] constituted themselves initially as European-societies-outside-of-Europe", (p. 552) but differently from other (non-British) colonies in the Americas, "British-American colonial society […] shaped itself, from the outset, as a capitalist society" (p. 555). Thus, one could say that British-American society was never really seen as inferior to Europe, unlike other former colonies of the British empire, such as Nigeria. In addition, the authors believe that the development of the country and its hegemonic power reinforce the utopic discourse on equal opportunities and freedom, burying the evident hierarchies and inequalities that imperialism has created (QUIJANO; WALLERSTEIN, 1992, p. 556).

One of Ifemelu's first discoveries as an immigrant was that she was African, which is not to say that being African was not part of her identity, but that in the U.S. her experience as a Nigerian was neglected and homogenized. She also realized that people had what Adichie has called "a single story of Africa", "a single story of catastrophe" (ADICHIE, 2009). In her talk "The Danger of a Single Story", Adichie (2009) discusses how the popular image of Africa in the United States is that of "a place of beautiful landscapes, beautiful animals, and incomprehensible people, fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves, and waiting to be saved by a kind, white foreigner" (transcript from ADICHIE,

2009). Due to this reductionist view of Africa, a result of coloniality, Ifemelu struggles to understand and negotiate not only the American culture, but also her idea of home when faced with the stereotypes she encounters.

She did not feel as the Other among other African students of the African Students Association, a group she joins after she becomes friends with Wambui, the president of the group. When assembled, they would mimic Americans and laugh at their stereotypical views of Africa. They would mock Africa too, "trading stories", "their different accents [forming] meshes of solacing sounds", with a "mockery born of longing, and of the heartbroken desire to see a place made whole again" (ADICHIE, 2014, p. 139). Among them, Ifemelu feels at ease. Their imitation of Americans is defiant, their mocking of Africa is nostalgic and comforting whilst the image of home seems shattered by the contact with the United States. With them "Ifemelu felt a gentle, swaying sense of renewal. [There] she did not have to explain herself" (p. 139).

In a meeting with the African Students Association, one of the members sarcastically delivers his welcome talk to new members saying that they would eventually "adopt an American accent" in order to avoid miscommunication, and that they would "start to admire Africans who have perfect American accents" (p. 140). His speech indicates that adopting an American accent is a common strategy among African immigrants. As he predicted, Ifemelu starts faking an American accent after she encounters a receptionist at the international student's office. The receptionist speaks to her as if Ifemelu cannot understand her directions, not certain of how fluent in English Ifemelu is, and Ifemelu "[feels] for a moment like a small child, lazy-limbed and drooling" (p. 133).

Her accent exposes her origins and immediately places her as a foreigner. The narrator describes:

> Ifemelu shrank. In that strained, still second when her eyes met Cristina Tomas's before she took the forms, she shrank. She shrank like a dried leaf. 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. (ADICHIE, 2014, p. 133).

Although English is the official language of Nigeria, her fluency is questioned and she feels humiliated, suddenly positioned as someone who does not know how to communicate. She shrinks, her feelings of inferiority intensified by the overwhelming power of the dominant culture. Had a British white person spoken, the receptionist would probably not have spoken

with them as if they were stupid, given that Europeans are usually seen as superior, intellectual, and civilized.

When Ifemelu decides to fake an American accent, she is subconsciously engaging in "mimicry". In his essay "Of mimicry and the man", Bhabha addresses the ambivalence surrounding this strategy:

> Mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriates' the other as it visualizes power. (BHABHA, 1984, p. 126).

Thus, the result of mimicry is a subject who is *almost* like the colonizer, but who is different, nonetheless. By imitating the language and the codes of behavior of American society, Ifemelu reveals her desire to access the power and privileges of the dominant culture. However, as Bhabha discusses, the use of mimicry as a way of obtaining and maintaining hegemonic power is ambivalent. On the one hand, when the African immigrants in the narrative fake an American accent, they legitimate the discourse on the supposed superiority of American English over, for instance, Nigerian English. On the other hand, because the repetition and resemblance are not exact, mimicry produces something different and this difference can be seen as a threat to the supposed fixed structures imposed by coloniality.

There are several reasons that might have led Ifemelu to feel the need to adopt an American accent. Firstly, in her process of integration into American society, she feels dislocated. Ifemelu does not know how to discern what is considered appropriate and what is considered offensive in the new country, which is something that makes her feel insecure. In addition, she struggles to stabilize herself financially as she has difficulties finding a job. She also suffers prejudice from her roommate who, drawing from an image of Africa and its inhabitants as dangerous, fears Ifemelu will "kill [her] dog with voodoo". The accusation also exposes the corrosive force of negative stereotypes about African religious practices. Moreover, Ifemelu is not versed in American cultural references, which could otherwise facilitate her adaptation to the new country. Ifemelu eagers to adapt to the United States; "She hunger[s] to understand everything about America, to wear a new, knowing skin right away" (p. 135). Thus, she buries herself into American books until "American's mythologies began to take on meaning. American's tribalism — race, ideology and region — became clear. And she was consoled by her new knowledge" (p. 136). Still, she continues to be the Other. Faking an American accent seems to be her attempt to adapt, or at least her attempt to have an equal opportunity to be heard.

When Ifemelu moved to the United States, she heard her aunt faking an American accent. She noticed “the nasal sliding accent [Aunty Uju] put on when she spoke to white Americans, in the presence of white Americans, in the hearing of white Americans”, and observed that “with the accent emerged a new persona, apologetic and self-abasing.” (p. 108). Here, Ifemelu judges her aunt for abasing herself and adopting an American accent in front of white people, unaware that she would later feel shrunk and do the same. It is also relevant that this apologetic immigrant persona is present when she speaks to white Americans, which means that race is a crucial factor here.

In Ifemelu’s first years in the U.S., Aunty Uju takes her braids out for job interviews because they are considered unprofessional there. Ifemelu mocks her aunt and scoffs at her, who replies: “You are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do if you want to succeed” (p. 119). Her aunt’s statement justifies the reasoning behind her use of mimicry, and it also reveals Aunty Uju’s “diaspora consciousness”. By speaking with an American accent and removing her braids, Aunty Uju is striving to ensure that she has better chances of achieving her goals in a capitalist society. Ifemelu would eventually undo her own braids and straighten her hair in order to look more professional for a job interview.

Considering that hair impacts several dimensions of Black women’s lives as well as its relation to African cultural history, it is possible to say that in order to integrate into American society, Ifemelu and Aunty Uju need to distance themselves from their native cultures, giving up part of their identity, as discussed in Chapter III. Aunty Uju’s previous response made Ifemelu think that “Aunty Uju had deliberately left behind something of herself, something essential, in a distant and forgotten place” (p. 119). Ifemelu’s impression is a consequence of her aunt’s use of mimicry. Aunty Uju contains herself in order to fit into American society, reinforcing the idea that as an African immigrant she has to comply with the rules of the new society, even when they are oppressive, even when adapting implies making herself seem less important and less deserving of respect.

Throughout the narrative, Ifemelu witnesses several cases of xenophobic and racist discrimination, a fact which exposes the effects of coloniality. Halima’s son, for instance, is beaten up by other Black boys in school, and they only stop after he hides his African accent (p. 187). Hence, the Black African characters seem to experience oppression even from African Americans, although race is a crucial factor in their experience. Furthermore, Aunty Uju is often disrespected even after attending medical school for years. Some patients act as though “they [are] doing her a [favor] by seeing her” (p. 172). One patient once told her “to go back where

[she] came from", and a pharmacist once told her that "[her] accent was incomprehensible" (p. 218). Ifemelu and Aunty Uju are Black African immigrant women and race is evidently a crucial aspect of their experience as immigrants, though not the only aspect. Nevertheless, their color inevitably connects them with Africa and evokes pervasive misconstrued racial stereotypes created about Africa and Black people in general.

Perhaps one of the main reasons why Ifemelu uses mimicry is best expressed by the narrator who describes her feelings when encountering a group of people who do charity work in African countries. Some people would be condescending, talking about how fortunate African immigrants were for living in the U.S. For Ifemelu, "to take 'charity' for granted, to revel in this charity towards people from whom one did not know" was perhaps a consequence of "having had yesterday and having today and expecting to have tomorrow. She envied them this" (p. 169). Thus, Ifemelu envied their privilege and the certainty that comes from not having to strive constantly to meet basic needs, like paying rent, finding a job, being able to move freely, doing their hair however they wanted to, which were all worries she often had. After her interaction with this group, "Ifemelu wanted, suddenly and desperately, to be from the country who gave and not those who received", which means that she did not want to be pitied or rescued. She wanted to be privileged enough to feel "copious pity and empathy" (p. 170). In other words, she desired their power.

By using mimicry, though, Ifemelu is never fully "at home". She perfects her American accent, but faking it is a constant effort and therefore a reminder that she continues to be an outsider. After all, "the accent creaked with consciousness, it was an act of will. It took an effort, the twisting of lip, the curling of tongue. If she were in a panic, or terrified, or jerked awake during a fire, she would not remember how to produce those American sounds" (p. 173). For Ifemelu, the accent was a performance, but it did not change her experience of otherness because it was not natural to her. According to Bhabha (1984, p. 126): "The discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference". For the dominant culture mimicry is useful as a way of regulating and policing the Other while keeping hegemonic power.

Ifemelu decides to stop faking the accent when a telemarketer says that she "sounds totally American" and she thanks him. She questions herself why it was "a compliment, an accomplishment, to Sound American." She realizes:

> She had won; Cristina Tomas, pallid-faced Cristina Tomas under whose gaze she had shrunk like a small, defeated animal, would speak to her normally now. She had won,

> indeed, but her triumph was full of air. Her fleeting victory had left in its wake a vast, echoing space, because she had taken on, for too long, a pitch of voice and a way of being that was not hers. (ADICHIE, 2014, p. 175).

As one can see, faking an American accent is related to more than just language itself. It relates to an entirely new set of codes of behavior foreign to an immigrant. Ifemelu's integration into American society reveals a suppression of her own identity and an internalization of colonial discourses that view Africa as culturally and intellectually inferior. Thus, her "triumph" in perfecting an American accent, in not needing to shrink anymore when she speaks, "is full of air", her victory is superficial because winning there also implied losing.

Ifemelu goes back to her true accent feeling that "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." She imagined that if people spoke to her "slowly as though to an idiot" that "she would put on her Mr. Agbo Voice, the mannered, overcareful pronunciations that she had learned in debate meetings in secondary school" (p. 175), prepared to give them her best impression of a "naughty foreigner position" (p. 176). Therefore, what changed as the time passed until Ifemelu stopped faking her American accent was her self-acceptance. She was then proud to be recognized as African, she was prepared to be judged by others and even losing status among other African immigrants who viewed the use of an American accent as a sign of adaptation to American society and financial stability.

One of the ways in which racist ideologies prevail in the U.S. even after formal segregation has ended is through the discourse on meritocracy, which blames the Black and poorer people for a failure that is the goal of capitalist society. The American Dream, "the land of the free", "the land of opportunities" are recurrent images associated with the Unities States, but historically inaccurate ones for the struggle towards equal opportunities and financial independence does not rest on the shoulders of people who have been historically oppressed. For Ifemelu and other African immigrants in the narrative, immersing into American culture is inevitably linked with dealing and understanding American racial politics. At times, their integration implies distancing themselves from African culture; at other times, whitening or basing themselves.

In *Americanah*, the portrayal of "mimicry" can be seen as potentially subversive because it reveals some of the concept's negative consequences and it exposes the flawed logic of the dominant culture. As Bhabha (1984, p. 129) affirms, "[t]he *menace* of *mimicry* is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority"

(original italics). Furthermore, it is through mimicry and the social response that Ifemelu receives from having perfected an American accent that she finally awakens to the dangers of giving up pieces of her identity as she attempts to fully integrate into American society. Eventually, Ifemelu would go on to create a blog to discuss race and being a non-American Black in the United States, where she discloses some of the conflicts involved in her experience of diaspora. In this sense, analyzing the intersection of gendered racism with class is imperative, since the narrative points out that immigrating in a position of economic vulnerability proves to be even more arduous.

5.1.2 Class and migration

When Obinze is living as an undocumented immigrant in England, he meets a group of people who discuss race, migration, and class in the country. One of them, an English woman, acknowledges the importance of allowing war refugees to live in the country. Their stories differ from the stories of the protagonists of *Americanah*. Neither Ifemelu nor Obinze were starving in Nigeria. They were not running from war. They were not being politically persecuted. What they shared was a desire for a better life and their decision to take their chances in other countries. *Americanah* narrates their journey, their encounters, dis-encounters, and re-encounters. Their journeys illustrate some of the conflicts many African immigrants endure as they strive to succeed in countries where race, class, and gender intermingle and constantly oppress them, often determining and preventing their success. In line with this idea, this subsection addresses class, as it impacts the lives of the immigrant characters portrayed in the narrative. In addition, I argue here that the improvement in the financial situation of some of the characters changes their diasporic experiences, altering their social interactions and perceptions of the host country.

In England, Obinze realizes his story seems unusual for most people. He did not have a tragic story that forced him to move to another country.[56] At a dinner party in England, he realizes that people "understood the fleeing from war, from the kind of poverty that crushed human souls, but they would not understand the need to escape from the oppressive lethargy of

[56] It was a choice, an effort made to change his life. He was stuck in Nigeria: no good job opportunities, living in hopes of traveling to the U.S., which was "the place where he was destined to be" (p. 233), but having his dream constantly crushed by immigration officers who refused to give him a visa at a time where the fear of terrorism had been intensified in the country.

choicelessness" (p. 275). In Ifemelu's case, she moved to the U.S. due to the constant strikes in her university, a consequence of the devaluation of education and professors in Nigeria, where she had nothing to do but wait; she was choiceless.

It is relevant that Adichie decides to portray the two protagonists in this manner because their portrayal enlightens an understanding of some of the many reasons that have led people to immigrate. Furthermore, the novel illustrates some common conflicts many immigrants have to face. Still, while in England, Obinze feels alienated:

> They would not understand why people like him, who were raised well fed and watered but mired in dissatisfaction, conditioned from birth to look towards somewhere else, eternally convinced that real lives happened in that somewhere else, were now resolved to do dangerous things, illegal things, so as to leave, none of them starving, or raped, or from burned villages, but merely hungry for choice and certainty. (ADICHIE, 2014, p. 275).

As one can see, Obinze believes that, as other Africans, he was socialized to think of their existence in Africa as meaningless, conditioned to aspire to a life in other places, which is certainly a consequence of coloniality. In order to achieve success in the new metropole many resort to illegal and potentially dangerous activities.

One of the difficulties experienced by some immigrants in the novel is having to work under someone else's identification document. Ifemelu travels to the U.S. with a student visa, but she has a partial scholarship, which means that she still needs to work to pay her tuitions and accommodations. Obinze travels to England with a six-month visa, which he only gets because his mother assigns him as her research assistant. At first, neither Ifemelu nor Obinze could legally work in their respective countries. Therefore, they worked under other IDs. At work, Ifemelu becomes Ngozi Okonkwo, a woman she thinks looks nothing like her, but her aunt guarantees she will find no problems because for white people all Black people look the same. She is warned to remember her new name in order to avoid raising suspicion. In England, Obinze becomes Vincent Obi, a Nigerian man who initially charges him thirty-five percent of his earnings to let Obinze use his name. The psychological impact of assuming another identity is that they are often in fear of being discovered. They need to assume another life, which implies hiding their own story.

As mentioned previously, the story starts with Ifemelu getting ready to return to Nigeria. She takes a cab, wishing the driver were not a Nigerian because they would usually either resent having to drive her, or they would talk about their degrees and tell her that driving was just a second job. Ifemelu seems judgmental of them. She thinks that "Nigerian taxi drivers in

America were all convinced that they really were not taxi drivers", commenting that "Nigerians took on all sorts of names in the U.S." (p. 8). Then, she reminds herself that "[e]ven she had once been somebody else". Not only that, but she had been instructed, years earlier, to delete from her resumé the three years of college she had done in Nigeria in order to find a job more easily. She had been struggling to find a job, so a friend had assured her that omitting this information could increase her chances of securing one, because "American employers did not like lower-level employees to be too educated" (p. 139). Such affirmation says a lot about power in the U.S. Considering that having an academic education can contribute to a group's socio-economic ascendance, it makes sense that educated lower-level employees constitute a danger to the organization and power structures in place.

Near the end of her undergraduate program, when Ifemelu's student visa is about to expire, she struggles yet again to find a job. She is sent to job counselors, she goes to career fairs, but the recruiters would all become "noncommittal when they realized she was not an American citizen, that they would, if they hired her, have to descend into the dark tunnel of immigration paperwork" (p. 202). Thus, one can see that for immigrants, finding a job to support themselves can be a difficult task even after having acquired their academic degrees. Notwithstanding, her father assures her that "America is an organized place, and job opportunities are rife there" (p. 201), which shows his faith in the capitalist system. However, it is because of Curt's contacts that Ifemelu finds a good job interview for a company that eventually not only guarantees her work visa, but also begins the process for her green card.

During this first year, Ifemelu gets into an argument with one of her American roommates whose dog eats her slice of bacon. This incident triggers her off, "all the frustrations of her life boiled up in her head": "A dog eating her bacon, a dog eating her bacon while she was jobless" (p. 151). Implied in her correlation is the idea that she feels less privileged than her roommate's dog. Hence, the heaviness of being a foreigner seems to weigh on her, the insecurities accumulated in those first months making her feel alone and oppressed. Then, her roommate tells her she "better not kill [her] dog with voodoo" (p. 152) and Ifemelu almost slaps her roommate "not because a slobbering dog had eaten her bacon but because she was at war with the world, and woke up each day feeling bruised, imagining a horde of faceless people who were all against her" (p. 152). Her feelings uncover her displacement and loneliness. Furthermore, as a poor Black African woman, she is constantly oppressed. Thus, it is not surprising that she feels attacked and "at war with the world".

Even though some people immigrate, as Obinze believes, in search of "choice and certainty", immigrating with little money and no guarantees of financial stability can be a source of anguish. In Ifemelu's case, she is studying but she cannot even afford her textbooks, having to ask other classmates to lend their books to her, while also struggling to find a job and pay rent. She would observe people on campus: "they all seemed to have their lives in the shape that they wanted, they could have jobs if they wanted to have jobs, and above them, small flags fluttered serenely from lampposts" (p. 135). As one can see, Ifemelu feels isolated and disadvantaged for being an immigrant. For Ifemelu, it was terrifying "to be unable to visualize tomorrow", for "living abroad, not knowing when she could go home again, was to watch love become anxiety" (p. 152). Her description uncovers deep feelings of displacement and emotional exhaustion. Evidently, Ifemelu's lack of money severely impacts her experience of migration because she has no prospect of a good life ahead. This impacts her academic life, her relationship with her roommates, and her emotional and psychological state. She feels so overwhelmed that a small incident with a dog is enough to distress her. To make matters worse, later that day, one of her roommates pressures her to pay her part of the rent, and she had already heard them talking about her in the kitchen. It was on that very day that she decided to call the tennis coach.

Desperate for money and avoiding bothering Obinze, she accepts work from a tennis coach. When she first visited the man to inquire about a position as assistant, he told her that the opening had already been filled, but that he needed someone to "help him relax". The man did not specify what such job would entail during her first visit — he mentioned a massage, but his manners carried unpleasant undertones —, so she decided to leave. However, on the day the dog eats her bacon, Ifemelu decides to go back to his house hoping that he would not want more than a massage. She tells the coach she cannot have sex with him, and he informs her he does not expect sex. One can see that she attempts to dictate the rules of their encounter, to retain some power and control, but her attempt is to no effect for she knows he has the power to hurt her now. The coach explains that he will touch her in a way that she will not feel uncomfortable, and he emphasizes that he just needs "human contact to relax" (p. 153).

It is important to note that the encounter between Ifemelu and the coach reveals the dangers some immigrant women are exposed to in their search for a better life in the country of immigration. Moreover, it portrays some of the adversities faced by immigrants, who sometimes resort to extreme measures in order to work in their host country, to be able to live permanently there, or simply to make ends meet. In fact, the narrative indicates that at some

point Ifemelu fears that the man may have locked the room or may even have a weapon stored there. That is, by meeting him, she is exposed to the risk of being raped or killed. Ifemelu notices his absolute certainty that she would stay to complete the job, since her return to his house is a sign of her despair. In a way, his financial power, the money he had and which she lacked is as imperative there to establish a power relationship between them as gender. As an economically oppressed woman, she is vulnerable and she feels "already tainted" by climbing into his bed: "she did not want to be [there], she did not want his active finger between her legs, did not want his sigh-moans in her ear, and yet she felt her body rousing to a sickening wetness" (p. 154). This passage demonstrates her visible discomfort with the situation, the feeling of invasion she feels for being touched by him. The fact that her genitalia naturally lubricates certainly heightens her guilt and self-hatred.

They touch each other, and after he is done, she lies "still, coiled and deadened": "He had not forced her. She had come here on her own. She had lain on his bed, and when he placed her hand between his legs, she had curled and moved her fingers" (p. 154). Although Ifemelu has chosen to visit the man, her choice is a result of her financial vulnerability and hopelessness, a consequence of the inequities in a capitalist society. Her desperation is what drives her to accept the coach's offer. After he finishes, he pays her a hundred dollars, which helps to cover her already-late rent for the month. The guilt that assails makes her disgusted by her own body, "holding the crisp, slender hundred-dollar bill he had given her, her fingers still felt sticky; they no longer belonged to her" (p. 154). As one can see, Ifemelu feels she does not own her own body anymore, which can be seen as a metaphor for her sense of powerlessness before the oppressive social constructs in which she is inserted.

Back at her apartment, she scalds her hands, "a small soft welt [flowering] on her thumb", which is her torturous attempt to purify herself from her feeling of dirtiness. Emotionally drained by the event, Ifemelu feels "like a small ball, adrift and alone. The world was a big, big place and she was so tiny, so insignificant, rattling around emptily" (p. 154). Her description exposes how the experience of migration forces Ifemelu to expand her perception of the world, and with a new understanding comes the realization of several conflicts, several cultural differences, and several different forms of oppression that continually inform society and oppress her. Hence, feeling small, insignificant, and alone she feels lost, moved out of control by forces other and greater than herself. As a consequence of this traumatizing experience, Ifemelu sinks into a deep depression.

Another important topic the novel addresses is false marriages. In order to circumvent immigration laws and be able to stay in the host country, some immigrants have their marriage arranged. Upon arriving in England, Obinze's cousin warns him: "the first thing to look for is not food or water, it is an NI number so you can work. Take all the jobs you can. Spend nothing. Marry an EU citizen and get your papers. Then your life can begin" (p. 239). Thinking about his future, Obinze pays two Angolans who arrange his marriage to Cleo, a European citizen. The wedding would take place in two years, and until then, he was instructed not to draw attention to himself. When Obinze and Cleo meet to begin the process of the marriage papers, a woman observes how crowded the place is and exclaims "It's all sham marriages, all of them" (p. 231). Obinze talks to Cleo to make sure she is certain about the marriage, and they file the papers; he does so with a sinking heart, panicking at the thought of someone finding out that theirs will also be a fake marriage. In the narrative, it is made clear that the practice is common among immigrants. In the United States, Wambui was also working three jobs to be able to afford the costs of an arranged green-card marriage with an African American. Her marriage would cost her five thousand dollars. In portraying this topic, Adichie once again brings up an important discussion that relates to the topic of immigration.

Despite some similarities, such as the financial difficulties and institutionalized racism witnessed by both as immigrants, Ifemelu's and Obinze's experiences are quite different. It is particularly interesting that Adichie decides to represent Obinze as the son of an academic professor, as an intellectual man who grew up with the comfort of a middle-class life living the hardships of the invisible life of an immigrant with scarce possibilities of improvement.

After trading jobs regularly, Obinze manages to settle in a job in which he earns a little more per hour. Still, he cannot feel safe because he works under someone else's name. One day, he arrives at his job there and realizes that the people around him are acting strange, so he immediately imagines that they had discovered the truth and reported him; but then, he is surprised with a birthday celebration. It was Vincent's birthday, the man who had lent him his name. The celebration was for him, so in that moment, he felt safe. Nevertheless, Obinze receives a call from the real Vincent that same night, saying he wants to raise his fee to forty-five percent. When Obinze rejects the demand, hoping that Vincent would give up on the idea, Vincent does report him to his superiors at work, so he is forced to leave the job. As one can see, his life as an undocumented immigrant worker is arduous because it is done underground, and anxiety is an inevitable consequence. As an immigrant, he lives a life full of ups and downs, but where the ups are not frequent.

There is a particular passage in the narrative that illustrates Obinze's perception of the shifts in his life. He thinks ironically about the fact that he is now one of those immigrants "[e]veryone joked about who went abroad to clean toilets" (p. 236). However, it does not bother him so much to have to clean toilets until the day he finds "a mound of shit on the toilet lid, solid, tapering, centered as though it had been carefully arranged and the exact spot had been measured. It looked like a puppy curled on a mat. It was a performance" (p. 263-267). Obinze is shocked at his discovery and he thinks about "the famed repression of the English" (p. 237), wondering if the person was angry, perhaps at being fired or being denied a job promotion, and decided to act on it. Then, "Obinze stared at that mound of shit for a long time, feeling smaller and smaller as he did so, until it became a personal affront, a punch on his jaw" (p. 237). The mound becomes a symbol of his predicament. As one can see, there is a repetition of the image of feeling small and shrunk, which seems to reflect the feelings of powerlessness aroused by the irrefutable evidence of social inequality.

Whatever reason the person might have had to do this, Obinze was the one who had to clean the toilet, which shows how unfair capitalist societies are. He feels shrunk by his condition as a toilet cleaner and, after placing his glove next to the mound, he quits, in an act of defiance to class oppression. On the same day, Ifemelu contacts him for the first time after five years in silence, but he deletes her email, for "what was there to tell her, that he cleaned toilets and had only just today encountered a curled turd?" (p. 237). That is, he feels like he has not achieved anything of significance in his life, so the incident makes him confront his current situation.

On the day that Obinze is about to marry Cleo, he is arrested, handcuffed, and taken by a police car to the detention center where he is held until the day of his deportation. It is not as if he had never imagined that this could happen, on the contrary "he had feared that this would happen, so many moments that had become one single blur of panic, and now it felt like the dull echo of an aftermath" (p. 278). After being interrogated by the immigration agent, Obinze speaks to an attorney appointed to him who tells him that his deportation is imminent, though there are actions he can take to delay it. However, Obinze says he is willing to return to Nigeria, "[t]he last shard of his dignity was like a wrapper slipping off that he was desperate to retie" (p. 279). When Obinze thinks of the lawyer, filling out a form stating his willingness to be removed, he feels dehumanized and objectified: "'Removed' That word made Obinze feel inanimate. A thing to be removed. A thing without breath and mind" (p. 279). As Obinze walks handcuffed through Manchester Airport, he feels the eyes turned to him, "wondering what evil

he had done" (p. 280). As one can see, Obinze tries to see himself through their eyes, as an immigrant who is about to be deported, he is treated as a nuisance.

In the detention center, Obinze is forced to confront his circumstances. Although he comes from a slightly more privileged context than some of the other people there, like them, he is there to be deported. In the center, he receives visits from a few friends who try to comfort him, as well as calls from his mother who reminds him of the permanence of her love for him, but the fact remains that he is deported, handcuffed like a criminal, and judged by the eyes of others. When he tries to get something to read, the derisive overtone of surprise from the immigration agent, who informs him that he could entertain himself at lunchtime with the television at the TV room, veils a belief that people in Obinze's situation are not supposed to be intellectuals. In fact, African people and Black people in general have been historically associated with irrationality, not with bookishness. In the detention center, he hears stories from people who had been deported before. He "envied them for what they were, men who casually changed names and passports, who would plan and come back and do it over again because they had nothing to lose" (p. 281). His feelings towards them indicate that although they are in the same situation, they have distinct life experiences, and deportation would not stop them from trying their luck again.

Unlike them, Obinze "was soft, a boy who had grown up eating corn flakes and reading books, raised by a mother during a time when truth telling was not yet a luxury. He was ashamed to be with them, among them. They did not have his shame and even this, too, he envied" (p. 281). It is possible to see that Obinze feels superior to the people in the center, which reveals his class privilege. Obinze's experience of migration seems to hurt his self-respect. It had altered his relationship with his mother because she had lied for him, something she had always refused to do. She wanted to give him a chance of turning his life around and getting better opportunities in England. He had left Nigeria feeling like a failure for needing her to lie for him. They barely spoke during the years he lived there because he did not have anything good to share with her, and after all his struggles and efforts to improve his financial situation, he returns to Nigeria feeling humiliated. After his deportation, he is engulfed by sadness and hopelessness.

Adichie portrays characters like Ifemelu and Obinze who, despite their academic background and qualifications, have to work as babysitters and cleaners, jobs that are often low-paid and given low social status, despite their relevance to society. By the end of the narrative of Ifemelu's and Obinze's journey, both had managed to ascend socially and improve their

financial circumstances. Back in Nigeria, Obinze becomes a successful businessman, so wealthy that he can afford to "pay school fees for a hundred students in [his] village and [his] mum's village" (p. 438), as he is socially expected to do. When he encounters Ifemelu after her return to Nigeria, she asks him what he thought about finally visiting his dream country. He replies by reminding her of her own reaction to being in Manhattan for the first time "it's wonderful but it's not heaven" (p. 434). She also asks him if he "fell out of love" for the country, and he replies "I realized I could buy America, and it lost its shine. When all I had was my passion for America, they didn't give me a visa, but with my new bank account, getting a visa was very easy. I've visited a few times" (p. 434). His answer uncovers the truth about the American dream: not everybody can prosper and achieve success, but having money can certainly facilitate that. Regarding immigration, financial stability can clearly alter the experience of an immigrant, starting with the fact that you are no longer seen as a possible financial burden for the country.

As mentioned earlier, Ifemelu becomes a famous blogger, and, before leaving for Nigeria, she lives comfortably as an immigrant. The narrative demonstrates how money alters her treatment of people who are in less privileged positions. In the salon in Trenton, the hairdresser Aisha is sometimes a little rude and intrusive. However, this does not justify Ifemelu's condescension towards her. When Aisha asks her how long she had been in the country, Ifemelu lies and says she had been there for fifteen years; an unnecessary lie, as she had been in the country for thirteen years, long enough to earn the respect of other immigrants, but her lie exposes her desire to assert her superiority over the hairdresser. When Aisha asks if she is a student at Princeton, Ifemelu replies that she had just finished a fellowship there, aware that she probably did not even know the meaning of that word, "and in the rare moment that Aisha looked intimidated, Ifemelu felt a perverse pleasure" (p. 16). Evidently, she purposely tries to impress and intimidate Aisha, which unveils a desire of placing herself in a position of power and "putting Aisha in her place".

Later, when Aisha finds out that Ifemelu is Igbo, she tries to convince her to talk one of her two Igbo boyfriends into marrying her. Aisha's insistence makes Ifemelu think that if she were still writing her blog, she would have entitled her post on Aisha "A Peculiar Case of a Non-American Black, or How the Pressures of Immigrant Life Can Make You Act Crazy" (p. 18). Hence, although Ifemelu's hypothetical title suggests that Aisha's behavior might be a result of the pressures of being an immigrant in the U.S., something she had felt herself, at that moment she could feel empathy for the other woman.

Despite their initial awkward interaction, towards the final part of the novel, the narrator further describes their encounter and shows a moment where a certain reconciliation between the two happens. After spending the day in the hair salon, a nauseated Ifemelu eagerly wishes to leave the premises, wondering "why couldn't *these African women* keep their salon clean and ventilated" (p. 363, my emphasis). Right then, Aisha asks her how she got her immigration papers. Initially offended, she considers: "[a] sacrilege, that question; immigrants did not ask other immigrants how they got their papers, did not burrow into those layered, private places" (p. 363). For her, that was an intimate question, which makes sense if one considers how some people have to resort to illegal means in order to get their papers.

However, Aisha's question works as a reminder that she is a female African immigrant, too. Because of that, Ifemelu realizes that Aisha just felt comfortable enough to ask her that question. Therefore, "Ifemelu's irritation dissolved, and in its place, a gossamered sense of kinship grew" (p. 363). Aisha tells her that she tried to marry an American, but he extorted her for money, and she had a hard time finding a job. As one can see, Aisha's words remind Ifemelu that they are somewhat connected and have similar stories, despite being in different social positions at this point in their lives. In fact, perhaps at a subconscious level, Aisha reminds Ifemelu that she had also struggled to ensure her livelihood and stability in the U.S. In addition, it must not be forgotten that it was Curt who helped Ifemelu to find a good job that facilitated her green card process; most of the time, other people struggle much more to get this benefit.

Finally, what seems to strengthen the bond between the two women is Aisha's tragic story. She tells Ifemelu that because she did not have the papers, she could not go to her father's funeral the year before. On top of that, her mother is ill, and although she is helping her financially, she is not sure if she will be able to see her mom again. Thus, she begs Ifemelu to talk to her boyfriends. They have green cards, and as the spouse of a green card holder she would be able to visit her mother. As Ifemelu watches Aisha cry, her eyes melting and her face "[collapsing] into despair", she notes: "she kept twisting Ifemelu's hair, her hand movements unchanged, while her face, as though it did not belong to her body, continued to crumple, tears running from her eyes, her chest heaving" (p. 364). The image of Aisha braiding Ifemelu's hair as she sheds tears is that of someone who is forced to continue fighting for her livelihood despite adversity.

Moved by Aisha's story, Ifemelu realizes her own privilege: "She was about to go back home to Nigeria, and she would see her parents, and she could come back to America if she wished, and here was Aisha, hoping but not really believing that she would ever see her mother

again" (p. 364). Ifemelu had already been in a situation of helplessness, a life full of uncertainty; she had wondered whether she would hear her family's voices again, but all of that was behind her now. Impelled and in a clear attempt to do something to help Aisha, Ifemelu promises to contact her boyfriend. One could say that it is not by chance that Adichie portrays this conversation in the last part of the novel. After learning more about Ifemelu's story and her financial struggles, the reader is brought back to the salon where Ifemelu braids her hair, now as a middle-class woman. Aisha's experience dissipates Ifemelu's feeling of self-righteousness, leading her to confront her class privilege. Furthermore, it is quite significant that this "reconciliation" between Aisha and Ifemelu happens after hours in the hair salon. That is, although hair braiding is a time-consuming activity, the time spent there can be meaningful. While the braids are being made, Black women from different backgrounds or views can interact and learn from each other.

When discussing diaspora in *Americanah* one needs to be aware of the fact that Ifemelu's experience of migration differs from Obinze's, not only because of their geographical locations, but also because of racialized gender and class. Furthermore, although Obinze talks about immigrants who come to the new country in search of security and to have choices, it is harder for economically oppressed immigrants to thrive, which indicates that capital is a crucial factor in boosting immigrants towards success. This is illustrated by the fact that Ifemelu's and Obinze's experience of migration changes as they ascend socio-economically. Nevertheless, as previously analyzed, money is no guarantee, because classism intersects with other forms of oppression.

5.2 RETURN MIGRATION AND HOME AS A FLUID SPACE

5.2.1 The cement in her soul: return migration and the *Americanah*

Financial independence, her own apartment, an American passport, and a romantic relationship with an intelligent man who loves her: after thirteen years living in the United States, Ifemelu achieved several personal victories. Had Ifemelu been in search for the American dream, her search would be over for her life was much better now than when she arrived in the country. Still, when the novel starts, Ifemelu had already decided to return to Nigeria, a surprising decision to most people with whom she shares the news. The reason for her choice is not simple. She reflects:

> Her blog was doing well, with thousands of unique visitors each month, and she was earning good speaking fees, and she had a fellowship at Princeton and a relationship with Blaine — "You are the absolute love of my life", he'd written in her last birthday card — and yet there was cement in her soul. (ADICHIE, 2014, p. 6).

Ifemelu's reflections show how her decision to return to Nigeria is more emotional than rational. Although she has overcome poverty, depression, and she has managed to adapt to American society somewhat according to her own terms, she still feels "a cement in her soul". One could understand this image as if she feels that she is not truly herself, as if there is something alien in her.

Thus, although she has sources of contentment, Ifemelu still feels the need for a change, a desire for a return to what is familiar to her:

> It had been there for a while, an early morning disease of fatigue, a bleakness and borderlessness. It brought with it amorphous longings, shapeless desires, brief imaginary glints of other lives she could be living, that over the months melded into a piercing homesickness. (p. 6).

She imagines the ways in which her life could be different if she had stayed in Nigeria and she longs for a past that she cannot have anymore. The fact is that her displacement awakens in her the desire for some supposed stability and fixity.

As Ifemelu begins to consider the idea of moving back home, she looks into different media related with Nigeria, and she reads about people who have moved back to Nigeria with their academic degrees to start different projects and businesses there. Their stories make her feel "the dull ache of loss, as though they had prised open her hand and taken something of hers. They were living her life" (p. 6). As one can see, her homesickness leads her to imagine different possibilities for her life in her homeland. She had once moved to the U.S. hoping that she could get a better academic education, and after succeeding on that, she now desires to use her academic background as a lever to boost her success in Nigeria.

For Ifemelu, "Nigeria became where she was supposed to be, the only place she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil" (p. 6). Ifemelu's description reveals her inner conflicts. Although she has sunk her roots in American soil, she constantly feels compelled to "tug them out and shake off the soil". This urge can represent Ifemelu's internal conflict and struggle to settle in the U.S. as well as the ways in which American society constantly forces her to feel displaced as a consequence of her positionality as the Other, as a Black African immigrant woman. In a context where Ifemelu feels rootlessness in the U.S., Nigeria represents safety and familiarity.

As a response to her identity crisis, Ifemelu decides to return to the place she used to call home, a place that in many ways still feels like home to her. Bhabha asserts that there are two different conceptualizations of "home". The first one considers "the normalized, the naturalized, the inevitable, the original" place. It is in this first sense that Nigeria is home for Ifemelu. Home for her relates to recognition and stability: "It is always there; this is my home. I understand this landscape. I know these people. I know the language, and so on" (BHABHA, 2017). It also represents safety, a place where she can sink her roots. The second concept of "home" implies the idea of home as being a place to which one can return. For Bhabha, "emergence and return are complicit with the concept of home" (BHABHA, 2017). In line with this idea, Ifemelu also considers Nigeria home because it is the place to which she can picture herself returning.

Nevertheless, Ifemelu's desire to return to Nigeria is based on a romanticized idea of "home" as an unaltered, stable place. On this issue, Bhabha addresses Fanon's considerations on the dangers of presupposing fixed identities. According to Bhabha (1994), Fanon acknowledges that for some subordinated groups "asserting their indigenous cultural traditions and retrieving their repressed histories" is significant. However, Fanon "is far too aware of the fixity and fetishism of identities within the calcification of colonial cultures to recommend that 'roots' be struck in the celebratory romance of the past or by homogenizing the history of the present" (BABHA, 1994, p. 9). Hence, by thinking of Nigeria as the place she where is destined to be and where she can "sink her roots", Ifemelu runs the risk of freezing Nigeria in time, setting herself up for disappointment by fantasizing about a place she does not know anymore.

Ifemelu's feelings of borderlessness can be associated with Bhabha's discussion on "unhomeliness" and "unhomely moments". According to Bhabha: "To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the 'unhomely' be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres" (BHABHA, 1994, p. 9). Thus, the lines between the world and the self are blurred as Ifemelu's experience of migration makes her feel uncomfortable within herself, aware of the "cement in her soul". As a consequence, she decides to return to a place where she feels she belongs.

For Ifemelu, moving to the United States was not a decision she made because she wanted to make a home in America, although she eventually felt at home there, just like Nigeria continued to be linked with a sense of home to her. Bhabha believes that "there are very distinct forms of narrativity, choices, judgments, which evaluate certain locations, which create a home around certain locations" (BHABHA, 2017). Thus, one could say that "home" does not

necessarily entail a fixity or origin because what home means can continuously change. From this perspective, home goes beyond geographical location in order to refer to a fluid and in-between space.

It is important to note, however, that Ifemelu's voluntary return to Nigeria is a sign of her acquired privilege and well-established life. Some characters in the narrative question whether she will be able to adapt to Nigeria after having lived in the U.S. for so many years. Aisha shares this disbelief that Ifemelu will remain in Nigeria., and so does Aunty Uju, who doubts her, saying: "Will you be able to cope? — and the suggestion, that she was somehow irrevocably altered by America, had grown thorns on her skin. Her parents, too, seemed to think that she might not be able to 'cope' with Nigeria" (p. 7). What is implied in their doubt is the idea that Ifemelu's return migration entails abdicating privilege, which also reinforces the idea that living in the U.S. is perceived as better than living in Nigeria. Furthermore, Ifemelu seems to reject the hypothesis that she has changed, which she evidently has. This chapter also argues that Ifemelu's feelings of "unhomeliness" cannot be immediately solved through her return to Nigeria until she learns to embrace that she has been affected by her experience of migration.

At times, before the journey back, Ifemelu wonders if she is making the right decision. Being able to permanently live in the U.S. is the aspiration of many Africans. When she sees an overweight woman with a short skirt, she admires her conviction, thinking that it was "a conviction that one shared only with oneself". She thinks that her decision to return to Nigeria is similar to her perception of the overweight woman's (supposed) courage, "a sense of rightness that others failed to see" (p. 8). That is, for her, to return to Nigeria was the right thing to do, even if for most people her decision was rash and nonsense. However, as an act of reassurance, "whenever she felt besieged by doubts, she would think of herself as standing valiantly alone, as almost heroic, so as to squash her uncertainty" (p. 9). As one can see, in order to feel confident about her choice, Ifemelu needs to think of herself as a brave heroine, one who chooses to return to Nigeria when she does not have to go back. Embedded in this image is a negative view of Nigeria as a place that could represent possible dangers, social instability, and suffering, a place only a hero would voluntarily go.

Nevertheless, *Americanah* is a love story, and just as Ifemelu considers Nigeria the only place where she can sink her roots, she thinks of Obinze as the only one with whom she can be truly herself: "of course, there was also Obinze. Her first love, her first lover, the only person with whom she had never felt the need to explain herself" (p. 6). Ifemelu thinks of him as if the years they spent apart from each other had not changed their relationship and the way she feels.

However, many things have changed, because now he has a family; and "yet she could not pretend that he was not a part of her homesickness" (p. 6). It is only after she sends an email to Obinze, telling him that she is moving back to Nigeria, that she feels that her decision is truly final. Ifemelu's connection to Obinze is an important part of her connection to Nigeria, so she deals with her notions of permanence, change, and belonging in similar ways.

As mentioned previously, Ifemelu's experience in the diaspora intermingles with factors such as race, gender, love, and class. It is possible to notice the impact of Ifemelu's internalization of gender expectations when she lies to people about moving back to Nigeria to be by herself. Ifemelu's parents are hopeful that Ifemelu will marry Blaine and she thinks that they might already have imaginary wedding plans. She does not tell them that she has ended things with Blaine, which shows her fear of disappointing societal expectations for her as a woman. When they ask her if he is moving to Nigeria with her, "their question heavy with hope" (p. 7), she lies to them saying they had agreed that Blaine will join her some weeks later. As the narrator, Ifemelu describes that her parents were happy and full of hope, and that she prefers not to spoil their happiness.

In the hair salon, Aisha inquires about Ifemelu's love life by asking her if she is in a relationship or perhaps married to someone, and Ifemelu pretends that she is going to Nigeria for a man: "'I'm also going back to Nigeria to see my man,' Ifemelu said, surprising herself. *My man.*" She reflects on "[h]ow easy it was to lie to strangers, to create with strangers the versions of our lives that we have imagined" (p. 17). Although Ifemelu says that it is easy to lie to strangers, she has also lied to her family. The difference is that she told her parents that she was returning to Nigeria with the (good) man with whom she had been in a relationship for three years, which from a patriarchal point of view would be the right thing to do.

With Aisha, however, although she does not mention Obinze's name, one can infer that she is fantasizing about a return to him, to a version of her life that, at that moment, was only a figment of her imagination. In both cases, she is performing gender by complying to patriarchal expectations. That is, she is drawing information from cultural gender norms and behaving accordingly, and her lies are part of her performance. Her father thinks the piece of news that Blaine is going with her to be splendid, and Aisha seems excited, satisfied with Ifemelu's answer, as if "Ifemelu had finally given her a comprehensible reason for wanting to move back" (p. 17). Despite the fact that Ifemelu does challenge their expectations by returning to Nigeria alone, she first reassures them that she has a man.

Ifemelu's friend Ranyinudo is the only one not to question her decision to return. She lives in Lagos where she has seen several American returnees and she thinks Ifemelu should join them. She mocks the ways in which they have gotten used to always carrying a bottle of water around, "as if they will die of heat if they are not drinking water every minute" (p. 14). Her comment relates to the word Americanah, which gives the novel its title. The reader is introduced to the word "Americanah" before Ifemelu moves to the United States. Here, Ginika is leaving Nigeria and Ranyinudo tells her that she will return to the country as a "serious Americanah". The narrator describes:

> They roared with laughter, at that word "Americanah", wreathed in glee, the fourth syllable extended, and at the thought of Bisi, a girl in the form below them, who had come back from a short trip to America with odd affectations, pretending she no longer understood Yoruba, adding a slurred r to every English word she spoke. (p. 65).

The word Americanah is used as a mockery to refer to people who have traveled to the United States and returned changed from the experience. The word also relates to the concept of "mimicry", which, as discussed before, implies an abdication of one's sense of identity and an imitation of the culture seen as superior. Hence, Americanah exposes the irony of mimicry, for the imitation does not produce exact results, and it is noticeable by others, resulting in this mockery of mimicry. By entitling the novel *Americanah*, Adichie evokes this mockery, positioning Ifemelu as a possible Americanah. Here, the term is based on an external perception of someone's diasporic identity.

Back in the salon, Ifemelu listens to the conversations of other African women there. They discuss corruption in Nigeria and Nigerian men. One of them says that some Nigerian men kill for money, another tells them that Nigeria is "the most corrupt country in Africa" (p. 187). After hearing these women, Ifemelu wonders whether she made the right decision, wishing "she could turn back time and postpone this move back home" (p. 188). These women's discussion on Nigeria seems to force Ifemelu to consider the possibility that living in Nigeria can be difficult, and that home cannot be as safe as she had been trying to (re)imagine. She thinks: "[p]erhaps she had been hasty. […] What if she got back to Lagos and realized what a mistake it was to move back? Even the thought that she could always return to America did not comfort her as much as she wished it to" (p. 188).

Ifemelu's doubts and mixed feelings about Nigeria relates to Brah's discussion on the ambivalence of "home". The author defends that under specific circumstances "the same geographical space comes to articulate different histories and meanings, such that 'home' can simultaneously be a place of safety and terror" (BRAH, 1997, p. 207). Although Ifemelu desires

to return, she fears the conflicts she might face there. Her statements also indicate how both Nigeria and the U.S. can be considered in some ways as home to her, places she can inhabit and to which she can return.

When Ifemelu finally returns to Nigeria, she feels overwhelmed by the city of Lagos: the heat, the sweaty workers, the garbage on the streets, the news of a dead man found on a boat, a flood, and even the air "dense with exaggerations, conversations full of over-protestation" (p. 385). This idea of Nigeria as a place of excess is a recurrent image Ifemelu has about her people after her return. As one can see, her first impression of the city is altogether negative. She feels as though "anything could happen" there, "a ripe tomato could ripe out of solid stone" (p. 385). Her description reveals her astonishment and displacement. It exposes her realization that she does not know how things work in the city anymore. She feels a "dizzying sensation of falling, falling into the new person she had become, falling into the strange familiar. Had it always been like this or had it changed so much in her absence?" (p. 385). "Home" has changed, and what was familiar seems different now, which leads her to reflect on the changes within herself.

Her feelings of absurdity towards Nigerian events, that is, her impression that "anything could happen" in the city, are similar to Bhabha's description of "unhomeliness": "the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting" (BHABHA, 1994, p. 9). Ifemelu is disoriented because of her reduced recognition of home and her diaspora consciousness. Ifemelu has returned to Nigeria because she missed home, because she wanted to settle down there. Instead, she experiences "unhomeliness" because she does not feel at home anymore. The unhomely moment upon her arrival is due to her cultural shock. Furthermore, her idea of home is contested by the changes she notices in Lagos whilst her perception of home has also been altered by her renewed world knowledge after having lived thirteen years abroad.

After living for over a decade in the United States, Ifemelu seems to have internalized some sort of Western's society view of African societies, which involves an American understanding of custom service, codes of behavior, and organizational structures, to mention but a few.

> She had grown up knowing all the bus stops and the side streets, understanding the cryptic codes of conductors and the body language of street hawkers. Now, she struggled to grasp the unspoken. When had shopkeepers become so rude? Had buildings in Lagos always had this patina of decay? And when did it become a city of people quick to beg and too enamored of free things? (p. 385).

Ifemelu seems to lack the knowledge of how to communicate and understand her people, and even their body language seems incomprehensible to her. In addition, Ifemelu is surprised by the fact that now even her hairdresser and "the plantain seller tending a blackened grill had a mobile phone" (p. 385). She seems to have imagined Nigeria as a place stuck in time.

Furthermore, the previous passage evidences Ifemelu's perception of the workers in Lagos as incomprehensible and rude. Moreover, she describes them as people who are "quick to beg", "too enamored of free things", which exposes her condescending view. Ranyinudo teases her by calling her an "Americanah", and says that Ifemelu is "looking at things with American eyes" (p. 385). Ranyinudo uncovers Ifemelu's affectations, her internalization of American codes of behavior and sometimes-patronizing perspective. Implied in Ranyinudo's words is a confrontation of Ifemelu's belief that she had not been changed by the U.S. She has certainly embraced aspects of American culture, which culminates in a loss of part of her own Nigerian culture, and now she is perceived as an Americanah. In her first years in the U.S., Ifemelu had harbored the desire of being "from the country who gave and not those who received" (p. 174). Now, returning to her country, she observes them as people who yearn to receive things for free, which might be an indication of her altered perspective as an American citizen.

The narrative's portrayal of Ifemelu's discomfort with the weather in Lagos also reflects her emotional state of displacement in Nigeria. For instance, when Ranyinudo turns off the generator at night, letting the air flow through the open windows, Ifemelu feels bothered:

> The coolness dissipated quickly. Warm, humid air gagged the room, and soon Ifemelu was tossing in the wetness of her own sweat. A painful throbbing had started behind her eyes and a mosquito was buzzing nearby and she felt suddenly, guiltily grateful that she had a blue American passport in her bag. It shielded her from choicelessness. She could always leave; she did not have to stay. (p. 390).

As one can see, she seems uncomfortable within her own body as it interacts with the heat of the new/original environment. Her feeling of gratitude for being an American citizen reveals her perception of herself as a privileged person, her perception of the U.S. as a place with better opportunities. When she tells Ranyinudo that she cannot breathe because of the humidity, Ranyinudo mimics her, "her voice laughter-filled", calling her an Americanah (p. 390). Her sensation of being suffocated seems to be mirroring her initial feeling of being overwhelmed by her return to Lagos, the changes within herself, as well as the changes in the city.

At first, Ifemelu may seem like a “serious Americanah”, but even Ranyinudo realizes that she does not fit completely into this image. Ranyinudo tells Ifemelu about her American perspective on Nigeria and jokes: “the problem is that you are not even a real Americanah. At least if you had an American accent we would tolerate your complaining!” (p. 385). Hence, language is an important sign of what it means to be an Americanah. Despite the fact that Ifemelu seems to fit the description because of her complaints and sense of estrangement towards her own culture, she has not embraced the American accent. This seemingly small detail indicates her connection with her own culture and her refusal to surrender completely to American culture. After perfecting an American accent, she consciously chooses to use her Nigerian accent as a sign of resistance. Therefore, one could say that although she can be seen as Americanah, she is a different kind of Americanah. As one can see, the beginning of Ifemelu’s adaptation to Nigeria is difficult, and one of the conflicts Ifemelu experiences after her return is due to the issue of gender.

5.2.2 Gender issues in Nigeria

Although gender is an important factor in several parts of the world, after returning to Nigeria Ifemelu is more critical in relation to its patriarchal expectation towards women and more alert to the ways in which Nigerian society encourages women to place man as the focus of their adult life and marriage as their ultimate goal. On her first day back in Nigeria she seems already surprised at Ranyinudo’s comments that she had to wait outside church with other bridesmaids during a wedding Mass because they were wearing spaghetti strap dresses. Ifemelu is unsure about whether these situations had always been common in Nigeria or whether she was the one who had changed and found it unusual now: “Before she left, were bridesmaids banished from church services because their dresses had spaghetti straps? She did not think so, but she was no longer sure. She was no longer sure what was new in Lagos and what was new in herself” (p. 387). That is, on the one hand, her return home pushes Ifemelu to confront her idealization of home and it shatters the fantasy of “home” as an unaltered place. On the other hand, it forces her to realize that perhaps she has also been changed by her diaspora. Independently, before her return she had learned not to naturalize the patriarchal treatment of women, which indicates that living in the U.S. changed her perception of sexism, widening her understanding of gender issues.

Ifemelu's feelings of uncertainty remind me of Brah's discussion on "home". First, Brah (1997, p. 192) sees home as a "mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination", thus being "a place of no return". According to her, this place is inaccessible, for it does not refer to the geographical place considered the "origin", but to a myth, a desire, which is why Ifemelu's return disorients her. She is back to a home she does not easily recognize. Second, Brah sees home as the "lived experience of a locality." Hence, it involves the sensorial, emotional, and psychological feelings aroused in the experience of living the home culture. Her emphasis is in the mediation of these experiences according to "historically specific everyday of social relation." For Brah, the experience of home is inevitably connected with power structures and the subject position one occupies in them because the question of home "is centrally about our political and personal struggles over the social regulations of 'belonging'" (BRAH, 1997, p. 192). From this perspective, Ifemelu's reinterpretation of home and her conflict towards gender expectation in Nigeria is a result of her own subjectivity and socio-political position as an American returnee.

Ifemelu meets several old friends from school and she is surprised by their constant mention of the topic of marriage, which seems to be the favorite subject among adult women in Lagos. She observes a "waspish tone in the voices of the unmarried, a smugness in those of the married" (p. 398), which indicates that marriage is seen as something to aspire to, something that confers status to those women who marry while also pushing women to compete with each other. Thus, the novel shows how in Lagos, women end up becoming competitive because of the pressure surrounding marriage, some resenting or envying others seeing it as being married is equated with being successful. In her talk entitled "We Should All Be Feminists", Adichie (2012) addresses how Nigerian society is taught to consider "a woman at a certain age who is unmarried" as "a deep, personal failure." In this context, the author affirms that she is expected to desire marriage and "to make [her] life choices always keeping in mind that marriage is the most important" (transcript from ADICHIE, 2012). Hence, in order to be taken seriously and to be appreciated as successful people, women need to have a man to validate them, which leads many Nigerian women to set marriage as their goal, as illustrated in the novel.

Meanwhile, Ifemelu decides to lie to her friends and tells them that she is still in a serious relationship with Blaine. Although Ifemelu is judgmental of her friends for focusing on marriage so much, she is apparently oblivious to the fact that she herself cannot escape patriarchal ideology. Because she notices that marriage is a current topic in her circle of friends, she decides to use "Blaine as an armor": "If they knew of Blaine, then the married friends would

not tell her 'Don't worry, your own will come, just pray about it,' and the unmarried friends would not assume that she was a member of the self-pity party of the single" (p. 398). It is evident that she does not want to be pitied for not being in a relationship. She seems to be trying to convince herself that her use of "Blaine as an armor" has nothing to do with her own fear of being seen as a failure despite all her personal achievements. She lies to her family and friends in order to fit into patriarchal expectations assigned to women. Her criticism of Nigerian women's focus on marriage neglects the fact that even though she had lived in the U.S. for most of her adult life, she is also impacted by gender. She may be more aware of gender inequalities, perhaps, but some of her actions show a whiff of her own internalization of gender roles because she deliberately decides to lie about having a man in her life in order to avoid being treated condescendingly.

In the novel, Ifemelu's friends discuss how the presence of governors in weddings represents prestige and seriousness, even when they are not acquaintances of the bride or the groom. Because they have a lot of power and their presence means you have good connections, many aspire to have several governors at their wedding, which would reflect their rank in society. When a friend offers to plan Blaine and Ifemelu's wedding, Ifemelu replies that Blaine would probably rather have "a governor-free wedding", which not only serves as a reminder of Blaine's high integrity and engagement with politics of resistance, but also seems like Ifemelu's way of saying that she is above the shallow preoccupations of her Nigerian friends. Ironically, she tells her friends that they will probably have a small beach wedding, thinking that "[s]ometimes she believed her own lies" (p. 399). As one can see, she fails to recognize in herself signs of her own gendered socialization.

Such restrictive ideas towards marriage and female success unveil the pervasiveness of heteronormativity since society presupposes the engagement of a man and a woman. Furthermore, it uncovers the intersection of gender and class because, as Adichie discusses, "the language of marriage is often the language of ownership rather than the language of partnership" (transcript from ADICHIE, 2012). In *Americanah*, this connection is made evident when Ifemelu's friends Priye and Ranyinudo talk about a friend who is hosting a small-budget wedding. Priye says: "That girl never understood the first rule of life in this Lagos. You do not marry the man you love. You marry the man who can best maintain you" (p. 399). Therefore, it is not only about getting married, but also about who you marry since the exchange of goods and services in the institution of marriage is traditional. From this perspective, men are expected to be the breadwinners of the family, the providers, which is also a lot of pressure put on them

to provide and be successful. Furthermore, in her talk, Adichie refers to some "young women who are under so much pressure from family, from friends, even from work to get married" that "they're pushed to make terrible choices" (transcript from ADICHIE, 2012). As an example of these bad choices, some characters in the novel also prioritize money in detriment of love, which might be an indication that to be provided for is the most important thing in a marriage.

Ifemelu's financial stability allowed her to pay for the first two years of rent in advance, which signals her financial independence. When she visits the flat, she notices some problems with the job she had hired someone to do on the kitchen and bathroom tiles. She threatens the man who did the job by telling him she will not pay him unless he fixes it. At that time, Ifemelu had not contacted Obinze yet, and Ranyinudo tells her that he could have made things easier for her. She asserts:

> Ifem, you should have called Obinze. He would have sorted everything out for you. This is what he does, after all. He must have all kinds of contacts. You should have called him before you even started looking for a flat. He could have given you reduced rent in one of his properties, even a free flat *sef*. (p. 395).

As one can see, Ranyinudo is comfortable at a position of dependence on men. As traditionally expected from women, she has internalized the role of man as the protector of fragile and helpless women, a role Ifemelu is not eager to slip into after acquiring her independence. For Ranyinudo, being under the protection of a powerful man is natural, which could explain why she does not seem to care about the fact that Obinze is married and has a child. When Ifemelu thinks that "she could not imagine calling Obinze to ask him for reduced rent in one of his properties" (p. 396), she is refusing to alter the power dynamics in a possible relationship with Obinze, as she did with Curt. Although she knows that Obinze is rich now, she is not interested in being dependent on him.

As an independent woman, Ifemelu is judgmental about Ranyinudo's relationship choices and her proneness to depend financially on men. For Ifemelu, Ranyinudo was a woman "for whom men existed only as sources of things" (p. 395). She externalizes her opinion towards her friend in a hypercritical post she writes on her new blog, addressing women in Lagos who, according to her, have "Unknown Sources of Wealth". She writes:

> They live lives they can't afford. They have only ever traveled business class to Europe but have jobs that can't even afford them a regular flight ticket. One of them is my friend, a beautiful, brilliant woman who works in advertising. She lives on The Island and is dating a big man banker. (p. 422).

Ifemelu's post is problematic. First, her sarcastic remarks about the mysterious sources of money raises suspicion towards these women's lives, the implicit critique being that these women's behaviors border on prostitution. In addition, instead of criticizing more openly the gender system that forces women to rely so much on men, she seems to ignore the cause and focuses instead on the manifestation of the problem. Finally, Ifemelu exposes one of her best friends without thinking about the consequences for her friend's life.

Despite her patronizing tone, Ifemelu criticizes the naturalization of this culture of dependence on men. She ends the post by saying that she worries Ranyinudo "will end up like many women in Lagos who define their lives by men they can never truly have, crippled by their culture of dependence, with desperation in their eyes and designer handbags on their wrists" (p. 422). When Ranyinudo calls Ifemelu to express her indignation at her post, Ifemelu tells her that Ranyinudo's story was commonplace in Nigeria. She says that she was thinking about how Aunty Uju had depended on the General and how she fell apart when he died. Although her words are harsh, she is calling attention to the ways in which patriarchal ideology encourages women to depend on men in detriment of their own financial independence and sense of individuality. As the result of this prevailing image of women as helpless is the maintenance of men as the most important and productive members of society, which is used to justify their privilege. As one can see, her post also criticizes consumerism and the ways in which, in order to have some luxury, women put themselves in a position of dependence and vulnerability. It is nonetheless ironic that Ifemelu refers to these women fantasizing about "men they can never have" while she is also thinking about contacting Obinze, a married man.

Ifemelu's condescending post hurts Ranyinudo, who calls her out on her hypocrisy. She says in anger: "And who are you to pass judgment? How is it different from you and the rich white guy in America? Would you have your U.S. citizenship today if not for him? How did you get your job in America? You need to stop this nonsense. Stop feeling so superior!" (p. 422-423). Ranyinudo's words are important because it uncovers Ifemelu's hypocrisy and feelings of superiority towards Nigerian women. She positions herself as an observer as if she had not been influenced by social pressure and oppressed by gender. Ranyinudo's words remind her that she had allowed Curt to provide a lot of comfort to her life. It was because of his connections that she was able to find a good job, which began the process for her green card, and his influence opened doors for her. However, this is not to say that all her accomplishments were because of him. The success of her blog was responsible for her current financial independence. Nevertheless, his help was certainly important for her. Therefore, one could say

that her perception of gender issues is not only shaped by her experience of migration in the U.S., but also because of her own positionality now in relation to class.

It is interesting that Adichie presents Ifemelu's hypocrisy in relation to gender. On the one hand, Ifemelu's harsh criticism of Nigerian gender politics can be seen as a form of resistance and consciousness raising towards gender oppression there. On the other hand, it also seems to reflect a Western society's tendency to patronize African societies and focus only on victimization. Instead of reproducing Western patriarchal views, Adichie reveals Ifemelu's hypocrisy, in what seems like an attempt to criticize the view of African societies as less developed in terms of gender, while also offering legitimate criticism on gender politics in Nigeria, without failing to apprehend the power structures present there. In the narrative, it is possible to observe that gender politics becomes one of the most important factors upon Ifemelu's return to Nigeria, whereas race politics becomes more blurred and subtle there.

5.2.3 The American returnees and feelings of superiority

When Ifemelu starts working for a magazine, she is invited by her co-worker Doris to join the Nigerpolitan Club, an exclusive club where (mostly) American returnees and England returnees would meet and network. The members of this group would share their experience of migration and return to the homeland, often drinking while comparing the two places, complaining about Nigeria, "laughing and listing the things they missed about America." There, Ifemelu feels that they are "all encircled by a familiarity, because they could reach so easily for the same references" (p. 408). The fact that Ifemelu decides to join this club reflects her feeling of "homelessness". In the U.S., she had joined the African Students Association in order to share stories about Africa and be united in a sense of commonality. Now, in Nigeria, she also finds a group that shares the experience of diaspora. As an American returnee, Ifemelu's home becomes more than a geographical space, meshing the U.S. and Nigeria, as well as intermingling with other aspects of her life.

Her meetings at the club reveal the way in which, despite her refusal to speak with an American accent, Ifemelu is kind of an Americanah. In the club and at other moments of the narrative, one can see Ifemelu's feelings of superiority towards other "native" Nigerians. For instance, before Ifemelu returns to Nigeria, she had learned to value her natural hair, and she looks down on the hairdressers there. In a meeting of the club, some members discuss hair salons in Nigeria, "where the hairdressers struggled and fumbled to comb natural hair, as though

it were an alien eruption, as though their own hair was not the same way before it was defeated by chemicals." They also mention how some hairdressers try to convince them to use chemical relaxers. When Yagazie exclaims that she finds it "ridiculous that Africans don't value our natural hair" (p. 407), Ifemelu agrees fervently, sensing "the righteousness in her voice, in all their voices. They were the sanctified, the returnees, back home with an extra gleaming layer" (p. 408). As one can see, these passages demonstrate the elevated status conferred upon the returnees, as well as Ifemelu's own perception of their feelings of superiority.

Concerning hair, it is possible to notice that the experience of migration has changed some of the returnees' perception of their own hair. For Ifemelu, it means that she has become aware of preconceived notions of superiority of straight hair. Moreover, she learned to embrace and groom her afro in the U.S., and she tries to encourage other women to do the same. On the one hand, their reaction to Nigerian hairdressers' insistence that they chemically straighten their hair is a positive sign that they are resisting racist pressure to alter their hair texture. On the other hand, their feelings of superiority towards other Nigerians is problematic because it generalizes Africans as a group of people who do not appreciate their own hair, ignoring the importance of hair for all African peoples and its cultural heritage.

One of Ifemelu's post in her blog *The Small Redemptions of Lagos* addresses the Nigerpolitan Club's tendency to complain about Nigeria and their feelings of superiority. In this post, Ifemelu mentions the reasons behind the returnee's decision to return to their home country: some return with money to start new businesses, others aspiring to make real changes in Nigeria. However, after their arrival they "gather every week to moan about the many ways that Lagos is not like New York", neglecting that "Lagos has always been undisputably itself" (p. 421). That is, these returnees expect Nigeria to become something that Nigeria never was. Ifemelu does not disclaim the returnees' complaints, but she pictures herself "as an outsider saying: Go back where you came from!" (p. 421). Interestingly, the place "where they came from" here is not Nigeria, but the land where they had immigrated. Now, in their native land, they are positioned as displaced "foreigners" again.

Ifemelu's post also addresses food and the returnees' relation to their employees. She writes: "If your cook cannot make the perfect panini, it is not because he is stupid. It is because Nigeria is not a nation of sandwich-eating people and his last oga[57] did not eat bread in the

[57] The term *oga* is defined by the *Lexico* dictionary as "a chief, employer, or superior; (frequently as a form of address) sir, master".

afternoon. So he needs training and practice" (p. 421). That is, she calls attention to the returnees' tendency to consider other Nigerian's lack of knowledge about other cultures as stupidity. For Ifemelu, these returnees — and she makes sure to place herself among them — ignore the fact that Nigeria is just different, and that being different does not mean to be inferior. She compares the two cultures:

> […] Nigeria is not a nation of people with food allergies, not a nation of picky eaters for whom food is about distinctions and separations. It is a nation of people who eat beef and chicken and cow skin and intestines and dried fish in a single bowl of soup, and it is called assorted, and so get over yourselves and realize that the way of life here is just that, assorted. (p. 421).

In relation to food, Ifemelu mentions how it is common in Nigeria to have dishes made from several animal parts, referring to its cuisine. However, Ifemelu's statements go beyond the topic of food in order to addresses cultural distinctions. When she mentions the "distinctions and separations" in the U.S., one can also make a connection with racial politics. Although there is no apartheid anymore, there are racialized socio-economic hierarchies. When discussing Nigeria, she focuses on how "life is assorted" in Nigeria, which could be understood as a focus on Nigerian ethnical diversity.

Brah (1997, p. 207) asserts that "[d]iasporic and border positionality does not in itself assure a vantage point of privileged insight into and an understanding of relations of power". This is certainly true for Ifemelu. After struggling to support herself in the U.S., after being oppressed because of her gender and race, Ifemelu returns to Nigeria more aware of relations of power, but also somewhat oblivious to her own privilege as a financially independent American returnee. Her post on the Nigerpolitan Club uncovers the returnees sense of righteousness, but her actions reflect her internalization of the Western belief in Africa's inferiority.

Nevertheless, it is not only about geographical positionality; Ifemelu has acquired a privileged status as an American citizen, and she is financially independent upon her return, which means that her feelings of superiority also sprung from class. For instance, when she is at a hair salon, she receives an upsetting message from Obinze and she lashes out at the hairdresser, "You are going to blow-dry my hair with that brush? You must be joking. Can't *you people* think?" (p. 452, my emphasis). Here, Ifemelu is positioning herself as an outsider, she refers to a group of people with whom she does not belong, and whom she considers to be incapable of thinking. Her reaction in a moment of anger exposes her true feelings of entitlement.

Ifemelu's refusal to confront her own privilege is evident when the narrator describes Ifemelu's new status as a madam in Lagos society. While working as the editor of the magazine, Ifemelu is called "ma" by Esther, a woman older than her. However, as the narrator says, "status, of course, surpassed age: she was the features editor, with a car and a driver and the spirit of America hanging over her head" (p. 401). She is privileged. Thus, although she feels uncomfortable at first with being called "ma", she eventually accepts her status as a madam and performs accordingly. She explains, as the narrator: "even Esther expected her to play the madam. And so she did" (p. 401-402). For Ifemelu, the fact that Esther expects her to act superior, which means the woman has naturalized oppression and the feeling of inferiority, is used as an excuse to justify Ifemelu's condescending behavior towards her. Hence, Ifemelu would reaffirm her status by "complimenting Esther and joking with Esther, but always in that manner that was both playful and patronizing, and sometimes giving Esther things, an old handbag, an old watch" (p. 402). Therefore, Ifemelu agrees to reproduce the hierarchy between the two women, keeping Esther "at her place". The compliments and the used gifts symbolize economically privileged people's need to see themselves as charitable and kind, while at the same time stressing their difference, making their privileged circumstances known.

Similarly, Ifemelu would also act as a madam around Ayo, her driver: "She complained about his speeding, threatened to fire him for being late again, asked him to repeat her instructions to make sure he had understood" (p. 402). Ifemelu's resort to threat reveals the power structures at work in their interaction. She has the power to threaten him because she is the one responsible for his paycheck. Furthermore, by making the driver repeat the instructions, she seems to believe that he is not capable of understanding and following instructions as well as she is. Ifemelu's behavior is oppressive and patronizing. However, she seems to ignore the cause and consequence of her behavior and her contribution to a capitalist system of oppression. She heard "the unnatural high pitch of her voice when she said these things, unable fully to convince even herself of her own madamness" (p. 402), as if she was just pretending. Nevertheless, she seems comfortable with mistreating the members of "lower-classes" who work for her.

By portraying Ifemelu's "madamness", Adichie seems to invite the reader to be critical of Ifemelu's hypocrisy, her classist behavior, and her complicity with systems of exclusions. By revealing Ifemelu's contradictions through the use of juxtapositions between what she says and how she acts, Adichie seems to condemn these oppressive socio-economic hierarchies. The narrative leads the reader to become more aware of social inequalities and abuse of power,

especially because, as mentioned in Chapter II, some of Ifemelu's posts on her blog are almost didactic. The reader also learns about several forms of oppression because Ifemelu herself has experienced them. Hence, when towards the end of the narrative she begins to reproduce classist practices, one cannot fail to see the irony in her behavior.

For Bhabha (2017), "home" is connected with personal interests and not with an essentialized notion of belonging. For him, "what is being iterated or articulated around the concept of home are certain needs, certain interests, certain passions and affects, which actually then create that life-world, that existential comfort that you associate with home" (BHABHA, 2017). Conversely, Brah (1997, p. 192) defends that "[t]he question of home […] is intrinsically linked with the way in which processes of inclusion or exclusion operate and are subjectively experienced under given circumstances". From this perspective, it is possible to say that Ifemelu's experience of return migration and her perception of home reflect her own positionality. Her experience of migration, her status as an American returnee, and her financial stability are among some of the factors that impact Ifemelu's readaptation into Nigeria.

Ifemelu's initial struggle to feel at home in the U.S. is intensified by her feelings of alienation and oppression resulting from her being a Black African female immigrant, while in Nigeria, her experience of home is constantly altered by her status and feelings of superiority as an American returnee, her experience of gender, and her financial stability. In this chapter, I have tried to investigate the novel's portrayal of migration and return migration. First, this chapter examined the use of "mimicry" by some characters in the narrative, arguing that it involves a denial of part of their cultural identity. Then, it was possible to argue that because they are Black African immigrants, their chances of achieving the American Dream are reduced due not only to the history of racial and social exclusion of Blacks in the country, but also because of the negative imagery associated with Africa. Moreover, the narrative indicates that economic status is a possible means of ascending the social scales in the U.S. In fact, part of my argument here highlights the feelings of superiority that Ifemelu has towards some characters due to her academic success, financial stability, and status as an American citizen.

6 Chapter VI:
INTERSECTIONALITY IN *AMERICANAH*:
Tying up loose ends

Similar to the braider's fingers, moving back and forth and intertwining hair strands together, the plot of *Americanah* moves in temporal movements, as Ifemelu reflects on her past, present, and future, in a narrative full of flashbacks and flashforwards. Like the novel, the analytical chapters of this research also include non-linear movements, with different chapters sometimes referring to the same passage in the novel but from a different perspective, mixing passages from the characters' past and present. Just as a braid exists in the interlacing of hair strands, so is the experience of the characters in the narrative formed in the constant intermeshing of varied systems of oppression. The prime objective of my research was to develop an analysis of the novel from an intersectional feminist perspective, which is one of the contributions of my research. This interrelation between the different topics is made evident by the analyses in all my chapters. That is, despite the chapters' divisions, none of the analyses stand alone. Therefore, my analysis as a whole reinforces the importance of an intersectional understanding of human experience.

"'Becoming Black in America': Race Matters and Blogging in *Americanah*" discusses race taking into consideration the gendered, socio-economic, geo-political, cultural, and psychological dimensions of racism. One cannot understand Ifemelu's racial experience if one ignores her particular perspective as an immigrant Nigerian woman. In this chapter, through a discussion of the concept of coloniality and the social construction of race as a colonial invention intended to justify the colonization and subjugation of people considered to be inferior, it was possible to challenge Ifemelu's belief that race was not a relevant factor in Nigeria. On the contrary, the analysis has shown that racism is engendered in the functioning of Nigerian societies just as it is in the United States, even though the history of racism and the racial experience of Black people in these countries differ.

Furthermore, by analyzing the conceptual framework included in Ifemelu's blog posts, it was possible to unravel the narrator's efforts to expose the interlocking systems of oppression that keep poor Black women at the bottom of society, and contribute to the exclusion of several minority groups. Ifemelu's agency and resistance to stereotypical exclusionary epistemologies and beliefs are exposed as she opposes and contests oppressive discourses in her blogs, developing "an oppositional gaze".

An analysis of the theme of hair in *Americanah* reveals that the novel brings an intersectional perspective, for it is not possible to discuss hair in the novel focusing only on race, as there are several factors that alter the experience of each individual. The chapter "Hair As A Race Metaphor: Hair Matters In *Americanah*" demonstrated the impossibility of addressing hair politics without combining the discussion about racism with the one about gender oppression, since a hairstyle can either be seen as an expression of femininity or adequacy to gender roles, or the opposite. In this perspective, a simple naturally curly hair on an Afro can be seen by gendered racist society as an expression of aggression or overt political engagement. Similarly, a short haircut can be understood even by other Black people as an external marker of a person's sexuality. Moreover, as a discussion on the theme of "hair" highlights the inseparability of race and gender, the same can be said of class, because even the frequency of hair care and the aesthetic appearance of hair can be impacted by economic vulnerability. An even more striking form of this connection between race, class, and gender is seen in the association of the use of braids as lack of professionalism, which can impede the access of Black women to the labor market, and, consequently, their financial independence, contributing to the maintenance of these women at the base of the socioeconomic pyramid.

Regarding the theory of self-hatred in relation to hair alteration, it is noted that *Americanah* challenges the reductionism embedded in this understanding of the practice of straightening one's hair, presenting other factors that lead women to straighten their hair, as well as including positive portrayals of women with straightened hair. However, by describing Ifemelu's straightening as a painful and harmful process in which pain is naturalized, as well as by depicting the feeling of frustration felt by Ifemelu when facing her own image in the mirror when wearing short, curly hair, the novel does demonstrate that it is possible that some people are not even aware that straightening their hair may be a way to avoid accepting their own hair texture and dealing with their feelings of inferiority in relation to less curly hair.

Through the speech of characters like Wambui and, later, Ifemelu, the analysis has observed that one of *Americanah*'s agendas is to encourage Black women to go natural, to learn about their natural hair textures, and learn to love themselves as Black women with curly hair. In addition, it has also been observed that hair can be seen as a symbol of resistance, being natural styles such as dreadlocks and afros some of the ways found by Adichie to describe strong and independent women. *Americanah* also highlights the importance of sisterhood as a form of resistance to racist patriarchal oppression, as portrayed in the online community that Ifemelu joins in order to understand more about her natural hair texture and find emotional

support. Likewise, the hair salon can also be understood as a space for political resistance, which can be seen in the description of the hairdressers with whom Ifemelu interacts in the salon. They use the space of the hair salon as a form of collective support system; the salon, usually owned by an African immigrant woman, provides employment for other immigrant women, offering them the possibility of working closer to their children.

It was also possible to observe through the analysis of the interracial and intra-racial romantic relationships portrayed in *Americanah*, as discussed in "'What's Love Got To Do With All That Ticking?': Romantic Relationships In *Americanah* ", that failing to address the impact of oppressive power structures and the different locations from where each person in the relationship stands can prevent couples from truly connecting to each other. This failure can even culminate in the end of the relationship due to resentments one can harbor against the other and due to feelings of inferiority increased by the gendered, geo-political, socio-economic, and cultural differences they might have. The analysis of the novel's portrayal of romantic relationships also reveals the importance of self-love, of freeing oneself from the colonization of the mind that tarnishes one's self-esteem. Thus, love can be liberating, but only after one becomes aware of their own engagement with oppressive ideologies.

Concerning the protagonists' experience as immigrants, the chapter "'In America, You're Black, Baby': Migration and Return Migration in *Americanah*" unveils the psychological and socio-economic damages many African immigrants suffer due to negative stereotypes and misrepresentations of Africa and African people. In fact, the analysis has exposed how some characters internalize dehumanizing discourses about Africa. Discussing the characters' migration experiences entails a discussion on the intertwining of gendered racism and class. On the one hand, when immigrating to countries like the United States, immigrants need to deal with racist and exclusionary racial policies. Thus, their search for better opportunities is hampered by these oppressive power structures. On the other hand, characters like Aunty Uju show how, for some Black immigrants, not even years of higher education training can guarantee equal treatment, because prejudice against Black African immigrants can make their integration into the country much more difficult.

However, migration intermingles not only with race, but also with class, because the less financial stability an immigrant has, the more difficult their adaptation to the new country seems to be. As the analysis has shown, several characters end up resorting to illegal activities so they can support themselves and stay in the new country. Like I have mentioned earlier, some characters decide to work under other people's documents, seek arranged marriages or

live undocumented, in the hope of a better life in the new country. Nevertheless, the research indicates that insecurity, (job, financial, and emotional) instability, hard work, and prejudice often prevail. For immigrant women, this means that they are more vulnerable to situations such as abusive relationships and sexual exploitation. Concerning the particular experience of Nigerian immigrants, despite coming from a country where the official language is English, characters like Ifemelu decide to adopt an American accent to try to avoid being treated differently and being downgraded. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, the use of mimicry is problematic because it also implies the suppression of one's own personal and cultural identity at the expense of a culture seen as superior.

Regarding the theme of return migration, for Ifemelu, the return to Nigeria is challenging and conflicting. One of the conflicts faced by her is having to deconstruct the concept of "home", since just as she was transformed by the experiences lived during the diaspora, home is no longer the same. The fluidity of "home" is opposed to the imaginary idea of home she had built in her mind during the years she lived in the United States. One of the most difficult confrontations for Ifemelu is having to deal with the fact that she is no longer the same. My analysis of some of the passages after Ifemelu's return shows how she develops some feelings of superiority in relation to her home country and its people, which uncovers her internalization of stereotypes about Africa. Ifemelu's reproduction of elitist attitudes towards people who work with her reveals the complexity of her character, the intricacies of the plot, and the several layers that constitute someone's experience.

This research has tried to examine *Americanah* from an intersectional perspective focusing on some of the main themes in the narrative: race, hair, love, and migration. I discuss race because this novel is unequivocally about race, and I bring something new by exploring the conceptual framework Ifemelu includes in her blog, as well as a study about the impact of coloniality in Ifemelu's perception of racism. I have devoted an entire chapter of this work exclusively to discuss hair because there are few literary criticisms on hair imagery, and I wanted to contribute to this field of study. Love also occupies a significant part of my research because I had as an objective to investigate the novel's treatment of interracial and intra-racial romantic relationships because when I started this research there were few analyses of this topic. Understanding the characters' experiences of migration, one of the most widely studied topics in the novel, was also important to better understand the construction of race in the novel, for my focus was in the connection between gendered racism and class in the experiences of the immigrant characters.

Although this research has tried to provide an in-depth analysis of the novel, there are some limitations to it that can be addressed in future research about *Americanah*. One of the consequences of dividing the previous chapter between migration and return migration was realizing that there were too many relevant discussions within both themes that would have to be left out due to length constraints. One of the discussions I could not include in this research refers to Ifemelu's new blog, *The Small Redemptions of Lagos*. Since she believes that race is not an issue in Nigeria anymore, her posts have different subjects there, which could be analyzed in future works on the topics of migration or blogging in *Americanah*.

Despite being an intellectual man with a degree in higher education, Obinze feels a strong desire to prove himself, so decides to work as an undocumented immigrant — he finds a job as a cleaner, until he manages to improve his standard of living. His passage through England is filled with racial and class politics considerations, comparing the United Kingdom's and the United States' working-class bonding and interracial friendship. These relevant discussions were not included in this research because they did not fit with the main focus of the chapters. Likewise, I could not include an analysis of Obinze's experience with return migration and his marriage, when my hypothesis is that his marriage was his way of trying to reestablish his feeling of manhood, after being hurt by (what he seems to consider) a frustrating and humiliating experience of deportation. An analysis of the racialized gender pressures that drive Obinze's actions and choices deserves a well-developed discussion, which would not be possible in this research.

I could draft an entire thesis on migration and return migration, but that was never my goal. However, future research may benefit from a discussion about Ifemelu's nephew, Dike. Not including an analysis of Dike's racialized experience of migration is one of my greatest frustrations with my research. For choosing to prioritize Ifemelu's experience, it would make no sense to include his entire story in this research. However, I believe that Dike is one of the most important characters in the narrative, and his portrayal illustrates the importance of analyzing experience from an intersectional perspective.

Dike goes to the United States when he is only one year old to live in the country permanently. As a Black man raised in the country, he experiences structural racism and every-day-racism constantly. His experience of racism calls for an understanding of gender because he is a victim of prejudice resulting from stereotypes created about Black men, such as aggressiveness and accusations of involvement in criminal activities. From his childhood, he lived the cruel socialization that many male African Americans experience. However, Aunty

Uju does not allow him to identify himself as Black. She often reminds him that he is African. However, she does not allow him to learn Igbo either, depriving him of a more familiar and intimate contact with a part of Nigerian culture. He then lives in this "unhomeliness" situation, as he is not allowed to belong anywhere.

When Dike tries to kill himself, his mother is surprised that he had succumbed to what she considers American values, to an American disease, suggesting that depression is not a problem in Nigeria, to which Ifemelu replies by asking her if she had ever read Chinua Achebe's *Things fall apart* (1995). The reference to Okonkwo's suicide in Achebe's novel is significant since it represents his feeling of helplessness in the face of colonial power and invasion. It would be interesting to develop research that explores this comparison, as well as to build an analysis based on the concept of "double consciousness" and intersectionality, because he is an example of the Black man placed between the "irreconcilable worlds" Du Bois discusses. Nevertheless, regardless of the apparently fixed power structures in which society tries to place Dike, his experience is fluid. Gloria Anzaldúa affirms in "La conciencia de la mestiza" (2005, p. 79) that "rigidity means death" and this is almost the result of the attempt to pick out only one thread of identity as determinant in the life of young Dike. Furthermore, comments on psychological disorders and the differences between the way the United States and Nigeria deal with them is a recurring theme in the narrative. Therefore, it would be beneficial to the area to have research that develops an investigation of the theme of depression in both countries.

Although I have divided my research into four analytical chapters, the themes approached in each one of them intermingle, displaying Chimamanda Adichie's representation of the various ways in which socio-political and cultural systems of oppression overlap. One can certainly affirm that *Americanah* has an intersectional feminist agenda because it contests patriarchal ideologies, unraveling the operations of coloniality. The novel also points out possibilities for resistance, one of which is most strikingly represented by the celebration and pride in the Black hair. Before ending this work, I would like to recall the image of the hair braider. When braiding someone's hair, a hair braider superimposes a lock of hair over the other, for a brief moment, until that lock is interlaced again, but the truth is that this lock has never been alone, but interwoven with the others in the braid. Similarly, each analytical chapter of my research emphasizes a specific topic, but it is important to stress that the topics of race, hair, love, and diaspora have been intertwined from the beginning.

REFERÊNCIAS

PRIMARY SOURCE:

ADICHIE, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Americanah*. London: Fourth State, 2014.

SECONDARY SOURCES:

ACHEBE, Chinua. *Things fall apart*. New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1995.

ADICHIE, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Half of a yellow sun*. New York: Anchor Books, 2007.

ADICHIE, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Purple hibiscus*. London: 4th Estate, 2017.

ADICHIE, Chimamanda Ngozi. The danger of a single story. *TED*, TEDGlobal, July 2009. Disponível em: www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story. Acesso em: 19 out. 2020.

ADICHIE, Chimamanda Ngozi. *The thing around your neck*. London: Harper Collins, 2009.

ADICHIE, Chimamanda Ngozi. We should all be feminists. *TED*, TEDGlobal, Dec. 2012. Disponível em: www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_we_should_all_be_feminists. Acesso em: 19 out. 2020.

ANGELOU, Maya. *I know why the caged bird sings*. London: Virago Press, 2014.

ANZALDÚA, Gloria. La Conciencia de la Mestiza: towards a new consciouness. *In*: ANZALDÚA, Gloria. *Borderland / La Frontera*: the New Mestiza. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987, p. 77-101.

ATTA, Sefi. *A bit of difference*. Northampton: Interlink Publishing Group, 2013.

BAHRI, Deepika. Feminismo e/no pós-colonialismo. *Revista Estudos Feministas*, Florianópolis, v. 21, n. 2, p. 659-688, May/Aug. 2013.

BANKS, Ingrid. *Hair matters*: beauty, power, and black women's consciousness. New York: New York University Press, 2000.

BHABHA, Homi K. Diaspora and home: an interview with Homi Bhabha. *De Gruyter Conversations: Language & Culture*. Interview by Klaus Stiertorfer. Dec. 7th, 2017. Disponível em: https://blog.degruyter.com/diaspora-and-home-interview-homi-k-bhabha/. Acesso em: 19 out. 2020.

BHABHA, Homi K. *The location of culture*. London; New York: Routledge, 1994.

BHABHA, Homi. Of mimicry and man: the ambivalence of colonial discourse. *Discipleship*: a special issue on Psychoanalysis, v. 28, p. 125-133 Spring, 1984. Disponível em: https://www.jstor.org/stable/778467. Acesso em: 24 set. 2020.

BRAH, Avtar. *Cartography of diaspora*: contesting identities. London; New York: Routledge, 1997.

BRAH, Avtar; PHOENIX, Anna. Ain't I a woman? Revisiting intersectionality. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, v. 5, n. 3, p. 75-86, 2004.

BRAND, Dionne. *A map to the door of no return*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2001.

BYRD, Ayana D.; THARPS, Lori. *Hair story*: untangling the roots of black hair in America. New York: St. Martins Griffin, 2014.

CLIFFORD, James. *Routes*: travel and translation in the late twentieth century. Cambridge (Massachusetts): Harvard University Press, 1997.

COLLINS, Patricia Hill. *Black sexual politics*. New York; London: Routledge, 2004.

COLLINS, Patricia Hill. *Intersectionality as critical social theory*. Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2019.

CRAIG, Maxine. The decline and fall of the conk; or, how to read a process. *Fashion Theory*, v. 1, n. 4, p. 399-419, 1997. DOI:10.2752/136270497779613657.

CRENSHAW, Kimberlé. Mapping the margins: intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, v. 43, n. 6, p. 1241-1299, 1991.

CRENSHAW, Kimberlé. Opinion: Why intersectionality can't wait. *The Washington Post*, WP Company, Mar. 31st, 2019. Disponível em: www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2015/09/24/why-intersectionality-cant-wait/. Acesso em: 19 out. 2020.

DABIRI, Emma. *Twisted the tangled history of black hair culture*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2020.

DASH, Paul. Black hair culture, politics, and change. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, v. 10, n. 1, p. 27-37, Jan. 2006. DOI:10.1080/13603110500173183.

DAVIS, Angela Y. Afro images: politics, fashion, and nostalgia. *Critical Inquiry*, v. 21, n. 1, p. 37-45, 1994. DOI:10.1086/448739.

DU BOIS, William E. B. *The souls of black folk*. The Project Gutenberg EBook, Jan. 29th, 2008. Disponível em: www.gutenberg.org/files/408/408-h/408-h.htm. Acesso em: 19 out. 2020.

FANON, Frantz. *Black skin, white masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. Sidmouth: Pluto Press, 2008.

FANON, Frantz. *The wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press, 2004.

GLAPKA, Ewa. Postfeminism: for whom or by whom? Applying Discourse Analysis in research on the body and beauty (the case of black hair). *Gender and Language*, v. 12, n. 2, p. 242-268, 2016. DOI:10.1558/genl.30898.g&l (online), ISSN 1747–633x.

GUARRACINO, Serena, Writing «so raw and true»: blogging in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah. *In*: ESPOSITO, L.; PIGA, E.; RUGGIERO, A. (ed.). *Tecnologia, immaginazione e forme del narrare*. *Between*, IV.8, nov. 2014. p. 1-27.

HALL, Stuart. Cultural identity and diaspora. *In*: RUTHERFORD, Jonathan. *Identity: community, culture, difference*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990. p. 222-237.

HALL, Stuart. Thinking the diaspora: home-thoughts from abroad. *In*: HALL, C.; SCHWARZ, B. (ed.). *Essential essays*: identity and diaspora. Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2018. p. 206-226.

HOOKS, bell. Cultural criticism and transformation. [Entrevista concedida a] Sut Jhally. *Media Education Foundation*, 2005. Disponível em: www.mediaed.org/transcripts/Bell-Hooks-Transcript.pdf. Acesso em: 15 out. 2020.

HOOKS, bell. *Black looks*: race and representation. Boston: South End Press, 1992.

HOOKS, bell. *Outlaw culture*: resisting representations. New York; London: Routledge Classics, 2006.

HOOKS, bell. *Rock my soul*: black people and self-esteem. New York: Atria Books, 2003.

HOOKS, bell. *Salvation*: black people and love. New York: Harper Perennial, 2016.

HOOKS, bell. Straightening our hair. *In*: JOHNSON, Pamela; HARRIS, Juliette (ed.). *Tenderheaded*: a comb-bending collection of hair stories. Washington: Washington Square Press, 2001. p. 111-115.

IROMUANYA, Julie. Are we all feminists? The global black hair industry and marketplace in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah. *Meridians*, v. 16, n. 1, p. 163-183, 2018. DOI: 10.2979/meridians.16.1.17.

KELLEY, Robin D. G. Nap time: historicizing the Afro. *Fashion Theory*, v. 1, n. 4, p. 339-351, 1997. DOI:10.2752/136270497779613666.

LEETSCH, Jennifer. Love, limb-loosener: encounters in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*. *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, Apr. 2017. Disponível em: www.jprstudies.org/2017/04/love-limb-loosener-encounters-in-chimamanda-adichies-americanahby-jennifer-leetsch/. Acesso em: 19 out. 2020.

LUGONES, María. Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern gender system. *Hypatia*, v. 22, n. 1, p. 186-209, Winter, 2007.

LUGONES, María. Rumo a um feminismo descolonial. *Revista Estudos Feministas*, v. 22, n. 3, p. 935-952, 2014.

LUGONES, María. The coloniality of gender. *Worlds & Knowledges Otherwise*, p. 1-17, 2008.

LUGONES, María. Toward a decolonial feminism. *Hypatia*, v. 25, n. 4, p. 742-759, Fall, 2010.

MCCALL, Leslie. The complexity of intersectionality. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, v. 30, n. 3, p. 1771-1800, 2005.

MORRISON, Toni. *The bluest eye*. New York: Plume/Penguin Books, 1994.

NASH, Jennifer C. Practicing love: black feminism, love-politics, and post-intersectionality. *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, v. 11, n. 2, p. 1-24, 2011. DOI: 10.2979/meridians.11.2.1.

NDĩGĩRĩGĩ, Gĩchingiri. Reverse appropriations' & transplantation in Americanah. *In*: EMENYONU, Ernest N. (ed.). *A Companion to Chimamanda Adichie*, London: James Currey, 2017. p. 199-212.

NYAMNJOH, Francis B.; FUH, Divine. Africans consuming hair, Africans consumed by hair. *Africa Insight*, v. 44, n. 1, p. 52-68, June 2014.

OFILI, Okechukwu, MILLER, Sharee. *Afro*: the girl with the magical hair. Yaba, Lagos: Farafina Tuuti, 2015.

PRINCE, Althea. *The Politics of black women's hair*. London (Ontario, Canada): Insomniac Press, 2014.

PUAR, Jasbir. 'I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess': becoming-intersectional in assemblage theory. *PhiloSOPHIA: A Journal of Continental Feminism*, v. 2, n. 1, p. 49-66, 2012.

QUIJANO, Aníbal. Coloniality of power and eurocentrism in Latin America. *Nepantla*: *Views from South*, v. 15, n. 2, p. 49-66, 2000. DOI: 10.1177/0268580900015002005.

QUIJANO, Aníbal; WALLERSTEIN, Immanuel. Americanity as a concept, or the Americas in the modern world-system. *International Social Science Journal*, v. 44, n. 4, p. 549-557, Nov. 1992. DOI: 00208701.

ROBINSON, Phoebe. *You can't touch my hair*: and other things I still have to explain. New York: Plume Book, 2016.

THIONG'O, Ngũgĩ wa. *Decolonising the mind: the Politics of language in African literature*. Oxford: James Curry Ltd./Heinemann, 1986.

WALKER, Alice. *In search of our mothers' gardens*: womanist prose. New York: Harvest Book Hartcourt, Inc., 2003.

WALKER, Alice. *The color purple*. First Pocket Book mass printing ed. New York: Pocket Books, 1985.