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Blackness and the American Dream: Constructing Black Transnational Identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah and Chris Abani's GraceLand

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Introduction

For my MA thesis I chose to work on the two novels: Americanah by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and GraceLand by Chris Abani not only because I have been fascinated by the authors' literary production as prominent figures of postcolonial literature, but also because the analysis and study of these literary texts raises important questions.

Both Adichie and Abani are Nigerian, they belong to the Igbo ethnicity, and are known exponents of the important sub-categorization of the African diaspora in the U.S. that is composed of intellectuals, writers and professors. In this respect, Americanah and GraceLand show some similarities, in that the ethnic and cultural background of the two authors is ultimately reflected in the two novels and this constitutes the ideal framework for my analysis. However, they narrate diverse stories, from different gender and class perspectives, and in their peculiar and distinctive writing style.

My analysis aims at showing how Adichie and Abani construct the black transnational identities of the two protagonists, which result to be hybrid for multiple and different factors. Their hybridity cannot be separated from their blackness, the definition of which is still a major topic in African diaspora studies. In this respect my work, applying the theories outlined by Wright (2015) on the different interpellations of blackness, attempts to show how both Adichie and Abani differently interpellate and define blackness according to the journey of the two protagonists.

As far as the research method is concerned, after a thorough reading of the two novels main subject of my thesis, I proceeded in structuring the bibliography, based on the most authoritative figures belonging to the historical, literary and sociological framework of reference. After building the theoretical groundwork of my study, I divided the various phases of the work. The analysis that has been carried out individually for each of the two novels has brought out the main issues that the two authors have addressed through the protagonists' personal journey. Then for each novel I selected some significant passages that brought to light questions consistent with my argument. The questions raised

allowed me to demonstrate how both authors constructed the black transnational identities of the two protagonists, which result to be fragmented and hybrid.

In view of this, I decided to apply Wright's theories of interpellations of blackness to the two protagonists. In fact, Wright undermines that diasporic research that relies on a linear progressive narrative (and, therefore, on the hegemony of the Middle Passage epistemology as point of origin of a national identity), since it fails to give visibility to a good portion of black identities (such as women and African immigrants who have recently migrated to the West). Moreover, it excludes the possibility of return, which is a paramount notion in the definition of diasporas. On the other hand, Wright shows how the use of both linear and Epiphenomenal time provides a more cohesive and comprehensive definition of blackness (which operates both as a social construct and phenomenological concept).

With regards to Wright's theories of interpellations of blackness I referred to three types: vertical, multidimensional and self-interpellation.

I applied the first two types to the protagonist of Americanah Ifemelu. If we consider black people's hair as a metaphor for race, it is possible to see how the relationship that Ifemelu has with her hair reflects the relationship she has with her blackness. That is, she vertically interpellates her blackness when she adapts to the rules imposed by white societies and relaxes her hair, since she confines her blackness to a mere reaction to white agency. Instead, she multidimensionally interpellates her blackness when she decides to leave her hair natural. In refusing to internalize the Eurocentric beauty standard imposed by American society, she frees her blackness from the constraints of white supremacy and expresses agency.

The third type refers to the kind of blackness that cannot be interpellated in moments of anti-black racism and, for this reason, it reveals to be the perfect interpellation for Elvis who, since he is not living in the U.S., cannot directly face issues of racism. I show how Elvis's love for reading, which comes from an intimate and personal choice, can be read as a metaphor for the hybridity of his identity. Therefore, considering Elvis's self-interpellation of blackness allows us

to situate his black identity outside those interpellations that generate black subjects in accordance to white agency.

With regards to theories of the African diaspora, culture and globalization and how these concepts intersect with one another within the two novels, I referred to theories of prominent scholars such as: William Safran (1991), Robin Cohen (2008), Stuart Hall (1996), Paul Gilroy (1993; 2000) and Michelle Wright (2004; 2015).

As far as the structure of the thesis is concerned, I describe it in what follows. In the first chapter, after having explained the aim of my work and the reason why I chose to analyze these particular novels, I introduce concepts of identity, blackness, diaspora and race as well as an overview on African immigrants in the U.S. and their (often conflicted) relationship with African Americans. In particular, addressing identities in this work and more specifically black identities, means referring to a non-static and strategic concept of identity as outlined by Stuart Hall (1996), which understands them as always in becoming and as a combination of change, fragmentation and history.

With regard to diaspora, I proceed to outline the problem of the conceptualization of this phenomenon, which is in fact still debated. The understanding of the African diaspora, in particular, is still limited by the difficulties in defining the general term of diaspora.

After having described the five different historically recognizable types of African diaspora as outlined by Palmer (2000), I argue that his work is aligned with the works of scholars such as Michelle Wright, who are concerned with the discourse of black identity and its heterogeneity inside the African diaspora.

The study of African, or black, diaspora is central to Black Studies since it investigates the complexity of black identities who, otherwise, tend to be strongly homogenized (both in academic and popular discourses) on the basis of the Atlantic experience of forced migration. In this respect, works of scholars like Michelle Wright are paramount when it comes to investigating what comprises blackness, or better yet, what determines black identities. Wright (2015) argues that, since blackness, or more precisely race, is not the product of one’s biological traits, but rather a complex cluster of sociopolitical categories

and identities, being identified as black is therefore part social construct and part phenomenological concept, and, thus, meanings of blackness change over time and space.

After having introduced the concepts of black transnational identity and African diaspora, I proceed in exploring how theories of figures of the 18th and 19th century like Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Arthur de Gobineau and Thomas Jefferson draw the path for the modern racist discourse that has its roots in American and European history.

In fact, their invention of the concept of the “black other” underpins modern theories about the dichotomy of black and white and the creation of the category of race. Subsequently I explain that the concept of race can be defined as the consistent categorization of people based upon identifiable phenotypic characteristics and, as a social construction, is not based on classifications that are objective, scientific or biological. However, its effects on racialized people are unquestionable. So much so that in the U.S., the system of race determines the distribution of economic, social and political opportunities.

In this respect, after having described the three different groups of black people in the U.S.: the descendants of the Atlantic slave trade (i.e. African Americans;, those who voluntarily immigrated to the United States from the Caribbean after 1808, when the slave trade became illegal; and African immigrants, I show how the African immigrant population in the U.S. not only is very diverse in its educational, economic and English proficiency profile, but on average it is better educated than black people born in the U.S. or the immigrant population as a whole.

However, the well-established dichotomy of black and white in the U.S. shadows in-group differences among blacks, in fact, the blanket term “black” is often used to encompass all kinds of black people in the U.S., regardless of their country of origin. Being classified only as black or white is very offensive for African immigrants, especially because this classification associates them with the socially weaker and stigmatized category of African Americans and this is in fact at the roots of the conflicts between African Americans and Africans.

In the second chapter of my thesis I exclusively focus on Americanah and, in particular, on the protagonist Ifemelu, a young woman coming from a middle-low class family in Nigeria who, fueled by the promise of a better future and a better life overseas, decides to migrate to the United States. After 13 years in the U.S., a fellowship at Princeton, the creation of a successful blog on race and various (more or less satisfactory) relationships with white and black men, she decides to move back to Lagos. Adichie tells her story in a complex way, framing memories within back stories and scattering scenes from different times throughout the novel. Posts from Ifemelu's blog are interspersed throughout the narrative, and through them Adichie is able to give more direct cultural commentary.

The main themes of the novel involve race, black hair, class, gender, love relationships and migration. The novel's language is characterized by a mix of American slang, colloquialism, Igbo words, Nigerian and British English, which allows Adichie to situate her own novel as simultaneously playful and serious. Adichie's tone is mainly ironic, especially when she addresses the paradoxes and complexities of the race discourse in the U.S.

The chapter is divided into two sections. The first one focuses on Ifemelu's discovery of race in the U.S. In particular, selected passages from Ifemelu's blog show how Adichie wittily outlines issues of race(-ism), class and white privilege in America and how these categories intersect with one another and influence American society and its structure.

The second section analyzes how hair can be read as a metaphor for race. In particular, it investigates the effects that racialized ideals of beauty have on black women and how hair is deeply embedded in the racial discourse as a symbol of both oppression and liberation. In this respect, I demonstrate how Ifemelu's experience of race (and thus blackness) can be read in the light of what Michelle Wright (2015) calls "multidimensional" and "wholly vertical" interpellation of blackness. The multidimensional interpellation of blackness is predicated on the assumption that blackness possesses agency, involves choices and is not a mere object of white supremacy. In other words, it argues that black subjects perform the full range of human emotions and actions and "suffer from

no genetic or biological proscription from any aspect of humanity due to the 'impediment' of their racial designation" (Wright 2015: 114). The wholly vertical interpellation of blackness on the other hand refers to that reading of blackness in which the black subject can be interpellated only as an object of and, at best, a reactor against white agency.

If we think about hair as a metaphor for race it is possible to see a process of self-knowledge and identity construction through Americanah in which the turning points are marked by Ifemelu's relationship with her hair and, consequently, with the vertical and multidimensional interpellations of her blackness.

The third chapter is exclusively focused on Abani's GraceLand, which centers on the story of a teenager named Elvis, who works as an impersonator of his namesake, Elvis Presley, and who is trying to get out of the slum in Lagos in which he lives with his father, an alcoholic, and his stepmother Comfort, who does not treat him fairly. The story focuses on the difficult and violent environment that is Nigeria's largest city and Elvis's struggles to escape the orbit of his troubled family and make a better life for himself. Exploring themes such as: slum vs native village, mother vs father, poverty, violence, hybrid cultures and globalization, GraceLand is split between two main narratives, with the main story taking place in Lagos in 1983 and the secondary narrative taking place in the small village of Afikpo between 1972 and 1981. Abani cuts back and forth between the present and Elvis's childhood, interspersing the chapters with intertextual fragments of Igbo traditions.

Abani's writing style is highly effective in its metaphorical depiction of violence, which is a cross-cutting theme of the novel as well as a powerful force in shaping Elvis's identity. Moreover, Abani's emphasis on the role that music and literature play in shaping Elvis's subjectivity can also be read as an intertextual device able to highlight the diasporic quality of black identities.

This chapter is also divided into two sections, the first aims at showing how Abani raises questions of identity, masculinity, and cultural mongrelization through Elvis's experiences. Even though the novel takes place exclusively in Nigeria, it nonetheless gives an interesting and precious view on the impact that

American culture has on Lagos through globalization. In particular, the portrayal of America and its relationship with Nigeria is ambivalent throughout the novel as is Elvis himself towards the U.S. On the one hand, America in Elvis's mind is portrayed as the ultimate place where every dream comes true, even for black people (American commodities serving this purpose), while on the other hand, the concrete presence of America in Elvis's life is disappointing and reveals itself through global dark connections such as drugs and human trafficking.

The second part focuses on reading as a metaphor for mongrelization. In particular, I argue that the paramount role that Abani confers to literature in the novel empowers Elvis. Through his reading of any type of books from all over the world, and therefore, his embracing a mongrel culture that exceeds national border, Elvis expresses agency and has an active role in the formation of his hybrid identity.

Applying Wright's "self-interpellation" of blackness (different from the wholly vertical and multidimensional interpellations which were useful for the analysis of Americanah) to Elvis's black subjectivity, allows me to show how Abani constructs Elvis's black identity, which is indeed, as pointed out by Wright, dependent on notions of time and space and operates as a "when" and as a "where", rather than being a "what".

The fourth and last chapter closes the circle of my research, in that I analyze how Adichie and Abani, through the construction of the two protagonists' relationship with place, problematize the notions of attachment to the motherland and longing for return that characterize diasporas. In particular, I show how Ifemelu's conflicted relationship with U.S. spaces fuels her desire to return to her motherland. However, with her joining the Nigerpolitan club as a returnee, Adichie questions the possibilities opened up by the notion of Afropolitanism, satirizing it.

On the other hand, Abani's depiction of Elvis's relationship with place shows how Elvis does not show any particular attachment to his environment. On the contrary, places for Elvis are usually associated with traumatic experiences, both in childhood and adolescence. This allows for a rather cosmopolitan interpretation of Elvis's identity, which lets the reader suppose

that, if his return to the motherland is not so desirable, then maybe the U.S. can offer him that cross-cultural environment he seeks.

1. A Focus on Identity, African Diaspora and the Category of Race

In an increasingly globalized world such as today's, questions of migration and identity are becoming more and more central everyday. Cultures are the result of the mixture of other cultures, since travel, exchange of commodities and exploration of new territories have always been at the core of human life. Migration usually originates from the pursuit of new and better opportunities even though people do not exactly know how their life is going to be in the new country. Quite often they are dealing with a reality that is harder than expected, especially from a cultural point of view as it is the case, for example, of African immigrants in the United States.

Alongside with voluntary migration, in the course of history black people have been forced to leave their homeland and have been brutally deported to the New World Colonies to be enslaved. This is the heritage of most African Americans who are also the vast majority of the black population in the United States. They still endure the aftermath of slavery and segregation, which affects their everyday life in society as well as their self-esteem and identity construction. However, while not denying the importance and crucial role that African Americans have in American society when it comes to black culture, this work mainly focuses on another significant portion of U.S. black population - African immigrants in the United States - especially in their conflictual dialogue with the descendants of enslaved Africans about blackness.

In particular, this work aims at analyzing and discussing questions of black identity constructions, race and culture under the lens of the personal journey of the protagonists of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Chris Abani's *GraceLand*. In fact, as young African immigrants, through their experiences inside and outside the United States, they both face such questions. Whether they have already migrated to the U.S. (as in the case of Ifemelu, the protagonist of *Americanah*) or they are influenced by the American dream and are planning to migrate to the U.S. (as it is for Elvis, the protagonist of

GraceLand), their journeys in both novels offer valuable insights on these matters.

I chose to work on *Americanah* and *GraceLand* for a variety of reasons. Not only both Adichie and Abani are Nigerians and belong to the Igbo ethnicity, they also migrated to the United States. Their ethnic and cultural background then, that is ultimately reflected in these two novels, constitutes the ideal framework for an accurate analysis of the topic I have chosen for my MA thesis. Moreover, what is remarkable about the two novels is that, even though Ifemelu and Elvis are totally diverse in their stories and points of view, they address the same themes but from different class and gender perspectives. Ifemelu is a young woman coming from a middle-low class family in Nigeria who, fueled by the promise of a better future and a better life overseas, decides to migrate to the United States. Through Ifemelu's discovery of race, Adichie addresses differences among black people, stereotypes and issues of culture. Furthermore, Adichie offers a black female perspective that, if we take intersectionality into account, is a frequently neglected point of view when such matters are addressed.

Elvis, on the other hand, is a young male who is strongly influenced by American culture and its promises. His life in Lagos is so deeply marked by violence and precariousness that, in the end, he is forced to migrate to the U.S. However, we will never know how his life in the U.S. is going to be. Instead, we can see the ambiguity of the American portrayal that Abani conveys throughout the novel. In fact, while on one hand, America in Elvis's mind is portrayed as the land of the dream, on the other hand, its concrete presence in Elvis's life is revealed through dark global connections like drug and human trafficking. With the strong presence of cultural Igbo traditions, Abani addresses issues of migration, identity and violence through the experiences of a young black boy during both his childhood and adolescence.

Thus both novels are conveying meanings of black-African identity constructions in their being transnational and hybrid. In other words, my analysis aims at showing how Adichie and Abani construct the black transnational identities of the two protagonists which result to be fragmented for multiple and

different factors. Their fragmentation cannot be separated by their blackness, the definition of which is still a major topic of discussion in African diaspora studies. Therefore my work, through an experimental analysis, attempts at showing how both Adichie and Abani differently interpellate and define blackness according to the journey of the two protagonists.

Finally, Adichie's writing style is delicate and witty in its offering brilliant revelations on black African women and race, while Abani's is heartbreaking and tremendously accurate in its depictions of violence. I considered their marked difference not only to be utterly interesting but also a strong point for a more comprehensive analysis of the issues they address.

After having introduced the main theme of my work and the reasons for the choice of the two novels, this first chapter will introduce concepts of identity, blackness, diaspora and race as well as an overview on African immigrants in the U.S. and their (often conflicted) relationship with African Americans.

1.1. Identity

The present work understands identity not as fixed and stable, but rather as always in becoming and as a combination of change, fragmentation and history. In particular, the identities of the protagonists of the two novels are addressed in the process of their becoming while questioning issues of race, history, and culture. In this regard, the concept of identity outlined by Stuart Hall (1996) is essential for my analysis:

> This concept of identity deployed here is therefore not an essentialist, but a strategic and positional one. That is to say, directly contrary to what appears to be its settled semantic career, this concept of identity does not signal that stable core of the self, unfolding from beginning to end through all the vicissitudes of history without change; the bit of the self which remains always-already 'the same' identical to itself across time. Nor - if we translate this essentializing conception to the stage of cultural identity - is it that 'collective or true self hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed "selves" which a people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common' (Hall, 1990) and which can stabilize, fix or guarantee an unchanging 'oneness' or cultural belongingness underlying all the other superficial differences. It accepts that identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation. (Hall 1996: 4)

Therefore, addressing identities in this work and more specifically black identities, means referring to a non-static and strategic concept of identity. Moreover, the danger of incorporating a self inside a collectivity just to "guarantee an unchanging oneness" characterized by a shared history and ancestry, will be avoided. On the contrary, identities have to be considered as never unified but already fragmented and always in becoming. Only then identities can be truly represented in their multiple facets. Moreover, as Stuart Hall argues in *Questions of Cultural Identity*,

> We need to understand [identities] as produced in specific historical and institutional sites . . . They emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constructed unity - an 'identity' in its traditional meaning (that is, an all-inclusive sameness, seamless, without internal differentiation). Above all, and directly contrary to the form in which they are constantly invoked, identities are constructed through, not outside, difference. (1996: 4)

Hall's understanding of the importance of constructing identities through difference is even more relevant when we think about the differences that are obliterated in the definition of "blackness" especially in the U.S., where "black" is too often used as a blanket term to incorporate all people of color without regard for ethnicity, culture, nationality, or other identitarian aspects such as class and gender.

The oversimplification of considering a shared history as the point of origin of one people's identity has also been addressed by Michelle Wright in her book *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (2015). In particular, as the title of her work suggests, Wright criticizes the African diaspora discourse that, in order to define black transnational identity, identifies the Middle Passage as the shared point of origin of such identity. Before addressing this matter, however, an overview of the concept of African diaspora is necessary.

1.2. The (Modern) African Diaspora

1.2.1. The Problem of Defining Diaspora

While a broad definition of the term diaspora refers to "that segment of a people living outside the homeland" (Connor qtd. In Safran 1991: 83) a more comprehensive analysis of the term requires deeper investigation. The last fifteen years have seen an increased popularity of this term in the public discourse, due to its connection to the concepts of globalization and transnationalism, which question the old settled ideas of race, nation, class, gender, and sustain the hybridity and multiplicity of identities. In fact scholars of theorizations of the term are very much concerned with questioning the relationship between diaspora, nation and the hybridity of diasporic identities (Zeleza 2005: 35-39).

As Cohen outlined in his book *Global Diasporas* (2008) diaspora studies have undergone different phases in seeking to define what actually constitutes diaspora. In fact, far from being completely defined, the conceptualization of this phenomenon is still debated. The term was originally confined to the study of the jewish experience, then from the 1960s and 1970s the meaning was extended also to describe the scattering of Africans, Armenians and the Irish. In the 1980s and onwards, thanks to Safran, the term was used to describe different categories of people such as political refugees, expatriates, immigrants and ethnic and racial minorities. From the 1990s social constructionists argued that the meaning of the term needed to be more encompassing in order to respond to the increased complexity and fragmentation of postmodern world identities, while the idea of homeland was considered less relevant. By the turn of the century, scholars of diaspora studies have been arguing that, although today identities are much more deterritorialized and complex, ideas of home, or homeland, are still powerful discussions that need to be taken into account when defining diaspora (Cohen 2008: 1-2).

In fact, as Cohen suggests, a more comprehensive and complete response to the problem of defining diaspora lies in considering those multicultural,

hybrid and fragmented identities not separated by their attachment to place that characterizes diasporic life (Cohen 2008: 11).

Cohen provides a series of “tools” to deploy in order to define diaspora: factors such as social structures, historical experiences, time that has to pass before being able to define a people diasporic, are crucial. Moreover, the unwillingness of merging with locals and therefore not losing prior identity (for example refusing to change ethnically recognizable names or to adopt local social practices like religion, or avoiding intermarriage) is also a paramount element to define a diasporic identity: “A strong or renewed tie to the past or a block to assimilation in the present and future must exist in order to permit a diasporic consciousness to emerge” (Cohen 2008: 16). In addition to that, Cohen listed a series of common features of a diaspora, though clarifying that not every diaspora will have the same features and on the same degree. In his list of nine characteristics, based on a revised model of Safran (1991), the first five concerns homeland: the scattering from it; the dispersal does not necessarily takes place following a traumatic event, but also in search of work; the idealization of homeland; the importance that it has for collective memory, and the potential return to it, even if just for intermittent visits (Cohen 2008: 17). The other four characteristics regard the ethnic groups, their consciousness and their relationship with the host country: they have a strong sense of uniqueness; the relationship with the host society is troubled; they show affinity with co-ethnic members in other host countries; they can also benefit from the possibility of a “creative and enriching life” in the host country (Cohen 2008: 17).

Up to this point it is pretty clear that diaspora is not a fixed concept, that there are different types of diasporas, and that the complexity of its conceptualization is in fact still debated. The understanding of the African diaspora, in particular, is still limited by the difficulties in defining the general term of diaspora (Zeleza 2005: 35). The use of the term African diaspora became widely used only in the mid 1950s or 1960s, given the strong parallels between the Jewish and African historical experiences like forced migration, enslavement, exile, and the potential return movement (Cohen 2008: 39).

The study of African, or black, diaspora is central to Black Studies since it investigates the complexity of black identities who, otherwise, tend to be strongly homogenized (both in academic and popular discourses). Moreover, this homogenization is based entirely upon the Atlantic experience of forced migration. In addition to that, in the African academy the historic African diasporas tend to be ignored. However, this tendency is changing as African academics are intellectually engaging with historic diasporas and exploring their identities as migrant or diasporic intellectuals (Cohen 2008: 42; Zeleza 2005: 37)

1.2.2. The Core of the African Diaspora

Palmer identifies five major African diasporas: the most ancient one dates back to about 100.000 years ago when a great movement within and outside of Africa began. The second diaspora involves Bantu-speaking people that from the contemporary nations of Nigeria and Cameroon migrated to the Indian Ocean and other parts of Africa (2000: 27). The third diaspora, that Palmer identifies as one of trading,

> involved the movement of traders, merchants, slaves, soldiers, and others to parts of Europe, the Middle East, and Asia beginning around the fifth century B.C.E . . . [and] resulted in the creation of communities of various sizes comprised of peoples of African descent in India, Portugal, Sprain, the Italian city states, and elsewhere in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia long before Christopher Columbus undertook his voyages across the Atlantic. (Palmer 2000: 28)

The fourth major African diaspora is the most studied one, since it is the consequence of the Atlantic slave trade. It began in the 15th century and according to estimates because of this movement about 200.000 Africans came to Europe while about 12 millions reached the Americas. The fifth diaspora begins after the abolition of slavery in the 19th century and is still ongoing. These latter two diasporas constitute the modern African diaspora (Palmer 2000: 28). Hence, how could we define African diaspora?

> The modern African diaspora, at its core, consists of the millions of peoples of African descent living in various societies who are united by a past based significantly but not exclusively upon "racial" oppression and the struggles against it and who, despite the cultural variations and political and other divisions among them, share an emotional bond with one another and with

> their ancestral continent and who also, regardless of their location face broadly similar problems in constructing and realizing themselves. (Palmer 2000: 30)

What is interesting is that Palmer describes people of the African diaspora as united by a common past, but one that is not, however, based solely on racial oppression. In other words, African immigrants and African Americans in the U.S. share a part of their past and face similar problems when it comes to constructing their identity, in addition to a similar attachment to the mother country.

Together with providing a definition for the modern African diaspora Palmer also criticizes the works of scholars like Gilroy and others because they homogenize histories of variegated peoples like the Africans through the use of the term "Black Atlantic" (Gilroy 1993): "Not only does this appellation exclude societies such as those in the Indian Ocean that are not a part of the Atlantic basin, but there are fundamental differences in the historical experiences of the peoples of the North Atlantic and the South Atlantic and within these zones as well" (Palmer 2000: 31). Palmer's criticism is aligned with the works of scholars such as Michelle Wright, who are concerned with the discourse of black identity inside the African diaspora. In particular, Wright undermines that notion of African diaspora based on the hegemony of a "Middle Passage epistemology" (2015: 14) since it fails to give visibility to the heterogeneity of blackness in the diaspora.

1.3. Black Transnational Identity in the African Diaspora

"Blackness is simply too many things to be anything but everything" (Wright 2015: 3).

When we ask "What is blackness?" the number of possible answers is unlimited. While it is a fact that there is no such thing as a biological link connecting black communities across the world, it is also true that those communities share social, political and cultural discourses as Afrodescendants, in spite of their differences. In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) Paul Gilroy describes the black identity as a product of

transnational ongoing travels and exchanges across the Atlantic. Crucial to his argument is the Middle Passage slave trade, which, according to him, lies at the heart of the black diasporic communities across the Atlantic, as their genealogy.

According to Michelle Wright (2015) Gilroy belongs to that scholarship of blackness that is too focused on the Middle Passage epistemology that uses a "linear progressive narrative" approach (West Africa- Middle Passage- North America/Caribbean). This approach, Write argues, excludes the experiences of millions of black people across the globe, such as the ones of African women (2015: 4).

Taking part in this linear progressive narrative tradition, for example, are also scholars like Henry Louis Gates Jr., Maria Diedrich and Carl Pedersen, who, in their anthology *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage*, describe black identity as produced through a spatial and temporal continuum (namely a linear progress narrative) that comprises the Middle Passage epistemology and encompasses the global diversity of the African diaspora (1999: 8-9).

In contrast to these authors, Wright argues that is not possible for that spatial and temporal continuum to "encompass all the black Africans directly impacted by the slave trade, nor all the African-descended black communities in the Americas (or South Asia or, in a few cases, Europe) over the centuries" and this is due to both human diversity at the level of the individual and the impossibility for historical continuity to represent all the manifestations of blackness, since it would tie them in a "logic bound" of cause and effect providing "direction for the future" (2015: 18). In other words, Wright argues that concepts of blackness must include narratives that do not necessarily move in linear fashion from Africa to America, since the Middle Passage was not just a linear movement of enslaved Africans across the Atlantic from Africa to America, but also involved several returns backward in time and space. In fact, Wright questions the use of a linear progressive narrative within diasporic research, especially because of the notion of return:

> [T]he Middle Passage epistemology is often understood as diasporic - that is, containing not just a thematic but some aspect of a physical or spiritual need to return to "origins". . . In its most basic form, a linear progressive narrative struggles to be diasporic, because the notion of return suggests a reversal of

> the progressive direction from the narrative's origin to the present day/era. (2015: 72-73)

Wright argues that, since race is not the product of one's biological traits, but rather is a complex cluster of sociopolitical categories and identities, being identified as black is therefore part social construct and part phenomenological concept (2015: 4). By saying that blackness is intended as a construct Wright means that blackness is "based on a notion of spacetime that is commonly fitted into a linear progressive narrative" while being also phenomenological because of the Epiphenomenal time in which it operates (2015: 4). According to Wright, bringing together both these notions in the definition of blackness is meaningful, since both of them are based on concepts of space and time that are essential for an encompassing definition of blackness. Blackness therefore, should be investigated through an intersectional approach that locates the "Black collective in *history* and in the *specific moment* in which Blackness is being imagined - the 'now' through which all imaginings of Blackness will be mediated" (2015: 14). The "now" intended by Wright is also known as Epiphenomenal [1]time (2015: 4). By Epiphenomenal Wright means the time that "denotes the current moment, a moment that is *not* directly borne out of another (i.e., causally created)" (2015:4). In other words, the Epiphenomenal time, even though does not exclude causality tout court, differs from the linear progressive narrative because it does not understand time as linear and direct. She shows how, using both linear and Epiphenomenal time in the diasporic research provides a "more cogent, cohesive and inclusive analysis of blackness" (Wright 2015: 74) since they allow to include the experiences of all black people (African women included) that theories based on a Newtonian spacetime (i.e., that space and time always flow forward in linear fashion, like Gilroy's) leave aside.

Wright's theory of blackness accounts for both vertical and horizontal relationships within the global black community, namely, how black people across social hierarchies are affected by largely white political and social power structures (horizontal analysis), as well as how black people within the same

[1] Wright capitalizes her use of the term to distinguish it from its philosophical definition that understands it as related to "causal phenomena" (2015: 4).

social units interact with one another independent of, or in addition to, those white social power structures (a vertical analysis). She argues that the only way to produce a blackness that is "wholly inclusive and not hierarchical" is through an appreciation of intersectional dimensionalities (multidimensional/self-interpellation) that preclude exclusionary hierarchies of blackness. In other words:

> The only way to produce a definition of Blackness that is wholly inclusive and nonhierarchical is to understand Blackness as the *intersection* of constructs that locate the Black collective in *history* and in the *specific moment* in which Blackness is being imagined - the "now" through which all imaginings of Blackness will be mediated. Constructs of Blackness are produced through history, culture, and ancestry, which are predicated on a notion of time and space that is linear and driven by progress (with setbacks along the way); however, this linear spacetime, while offering the necessary "weight" of a material Blackness, at times excludes those who, in the contemporary moment, perceive and perform themselves as Black but do not share that linear timeline. (Wright 2015: 14)

Therefore, intersecting these notions of space and time allows an exploration of black identities in the African diaspora that incorporates also those marginalized by the dominance of the Middle Passage epistemology. In fact, this understanding of space and time has to be applied to actions as well, in order to understand black identities in their diversity and moments of performance:

> The spatiotemporality of our identity [is] manifested in the moment rather than a thing we have carried with us since our first breath. If identities are not "things" but moments in space and time, then it makes no sense to mindlessly insist that all women, all Blacks, all trans folks, all Kazakhs, or all airline pilots, surgeons or soldiers all think, behave, and act exactly alike in all moments - not the least because individuals who read themselves into specific sets of identities in one moment may not do so in the next. (Wright 2015: 33)

In sum, the concept of spatiotemporality has to be taken into account when speaking of blackness in the African diaspora. In other words: "Blackness must continually update itself in the moment at the level of the individual in order to accurately reflect and honor its trajectory "forward"… radiating outward from the individual and achieving meaning through the continual updating of intersecting interpellations in the 'now'" (Wright 2015: 172).

As we can see, both Wright and Hall argue for the specificity and hybridity of black transnational identity. At this point, after having introduced the concepts of black transnational identity and African diaspora, a focus on race

and the historical construction of this category will follow, since it is not possible to speak about being black, without addressing race.

1.4. The Black Other and the Category of Race

The following section will explore how and when the concept of the black other was born and how it laid the groundwork for the category of race. An understanding of theories of figures like Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Arthur de Gobineau and Thomas Jefferson is essential in order to understand the racial discourse and its roots in American and European history. As Wright underlines, in fact:

> One cannot divorce the Black Other and Black subject that follows from the specific historical, cultural, and even philosophical discourses through which s/he is interpellated . . . since the xenophobic biases that produce the black other to the Western nation and Western subject are the direct descendent of those early discourses on European and American national identity. (2004: 28-29)

The concept of the "black other" came into being in the late 18th and 19th century as an invention of Western philosophy. "For the West, the image of the Black Other is as vibrant as ever, reminding us that the belief in Black inferiority is the result not of objective observation but instead the need for self-definition" (Wright 2004: 27). The creation of the black other gave the possibility to the white subject to come into being and to define himself through this dichotomy. In other words, "in order to posit itself as civilized, advanced, and superior, Western discourse must endlessly reify Africa and the Black as its binary opposite" (Wright 2004: 27).

The concept of identity and the concept of nation are strictly related to each other. After the collapse of the absolute monarchies in Europe and the rebellion of the thirteen New World colonies against the British crown, territories were no longer defined according to who owned them. Their inhabitants too, could no longer identify themselves as citizens of those territories. It is in this climate of change during the Enlightenment, that: "the nature and notion of men - specifically the *European* man - became a central question" (Wright 2004: 28). This question was posed both internally and

externally the European continent, since the new trade routes both to Africa and America had also redefined Europe. Explorers discovered that Europe was relatively small and so was its number of people, and at the same time, the way in which enslavement and precious metals were enriching countries such as Spain, France and Britain were strongly questioning humanist assumptions developed by philosophes. Therefore, in answering the question about the identity of the European man, issues regarding the geographical, political, and moral aspects of the new European had to be raised. In this respect, the Enlightenment produced different conversations that posited European man at the center of progress and civilization, while promoting black inferiority relative to the white (Wright 2015: 29).

One of the most prominent thinkers of the 19th century is Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, whose formulation of white subject and black other is one of his most influential theories. In *The Philosophy of History* (1837) Hegel puts in place two dialectics on the black other: the first confines the black outside analytical history and therefore outside the development that is characteristic of Western civilization. Only Western civilization in fact can help the black other to make progress and in so doing, get him out of his stasis. In the second dialectic the black is considered as the antithesis of the white: whereas the black is primitive and enjoys servitude and chaos, the white is civilized and loves freedom and order. Through both these dialectics, Hegel implicitly creates justifications for the practice of slavery and colonialism (Wright 2004: 29-30).

Another definition of the black other belongs to the 19th century French writer and diplomat Count Arthur de Gobineau, also known as the "Father of Modern Racism" whose theories influenced, among others, Adolf Hitler. He argues that the black is an inferior species of human being that, through the threat of miscegenation, produces a direct threat to pure "Aryan bloodlines" and thus to the nation (Wright 2004: 30). However, the racial inferiority advocated by Gobineau does not aim at justifying colonization, brutality and enslavement, as opposed to Hegel and (as we will see) to Thomas Jefferson. Gobineau in fact, was more interested in using racial difference as a metaphor for innate class differences, arguing that without the leadership of the aristocracy, those who

were born just to serve (the blacks) would have let France into decline. In other words, he was much more concerned with class than with race (Wright 2004: 49).

In *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785) Thomas Jefferson produces a black other "whom nature has made a slave, and yet who nonetheless poses a threat to the nation because he resents this inferior station…. As a separate species (prone to mating with apes when in Africa), this black other is intrinsically and eternally backward and can never become part of the Western nation" (Wright 2004: 31). To people who contested slavery as being in opposition with the statements contained in the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson replied that slavery was not antithetical to the American Ideal, "Negroes" were. Slavery was instead the only solution to prevent the black other from destroying the young democracy (Wright 2004: 54). In so doing, "Jefferson not only laid the groundwork for this paradoxical discourse on the (White) American subject and the (Negro) Other but used the law to maintain the schism between Black and White, creating a vision of America in which the Negro played no part" (Wright 2004: 55).

Moreover, using a particular metaphor for blackness, namely the veil, Jefferson describes blackness not as a color but as a "separate identity, residing just below the skin and not within it. Blackness is either above or below the skin, never simply a color. This rhetoric denies Negroes status as human beings with a different color of skin and distances them from the human family" (Wright 2004: 62).

Thinkers such as Hegel, Gobineau and Jefferson draw the path for the modern racist discourse that has its root in the (not too distant) past. It is no surprise that race is still a vibrant matter particularly in the U.S. and so deep-rooted in its culture, especially if we think that Thomas Jefferson was one of the Founding Fathers. As the outlined theories have shown, the invention of the concept of the black other underpins modern theories about the dichotomy of black and white and the creation of the category of race.

Although the introduction on the concept of the black other has helped us to identify those theories that constitute the groundwork for the category of

race, it is not possible to determine the exact origin of this category. In fact, as Wright pointed out,

> The majority of scholars on racism agree that the exact origins of European racism cannot be determined, especially given that "race" signified a variety of characteristics and/or groups before scientific categorization proceeded to define what in fact constituted race - although the primary marker was visual difference, forcing race scientists to concoct a range of outrageously suspect experiments that predetermined Negro and/or Asian inferiority. (2004: 46)

The idea that race is socially constructed is widely accepted within social science disciplines, in fact, most social scientists recognize that existing racial categories developed due to particular historical circumstances (Obach 1999: 252). The concept of race can be defined as the consistent categorization of people based upon identifiable phenotypic characteristics, it is a social construction based on classifications that are not objective, scientific or biological. In fact, as pointed out by Teresa J. Guess,

> Discourse from anthropology, history and sociology characterizes the concept, "race," as having a modern history. According to Roy (2001: 81), "[r]ace was created mainly by Anglo-Europeans, especially English, societies in the 16th and 19th centuries." In spite of several centuries of use as a concept representing a natural phenomenon, sociological studies on "race" critique the notion as lacking scientific clarity and specificity. Rather than emerging from a scientific perspective, the notion, "race," is informed by historical, social, cultural, and political values. Thus, we find that the concept "race" is based on socially constructed, and certainly not scientifically, outmoded beliefs about the inherent superiority and inferiority of groups based on racial distinctions. (2006: 654)

As a social category, race represents notions that developed historically and that have no biological significance beyond the meaning attributed to them by society, in fact in nature, no races exist (Obach 1999: 253). In addition to that, we must consider that this concept varies in different nations on the basis of their racial history: a person who could be categorized as black in the U.S., might be considered white in Brazil or colored in South Africa. In the U.S., the paradigm of race is the historical black/white binarism. In particular, in the U.S. the social construction of race and whiteness are intimately linked to the history of social organization in American society. For example, in defining boundaries between the categorizations of black and white, a centuries-old criterion (very prominent in the 20th century) was the social and legal principle of hypodescent or "one drop rule": this rule meant that anyone with a visually recognizable trace of African

ancestry was simply black. Even though this rule is not applicable anymore, sociologically, this concept remains somewhat pervasive (Obach 1999: 254).

Even though race is a socially constructed category, its effects on racialized people are unquestionable. In the U.S., the system of race determines the distribution of economic, social and political opportunities, in fact, as pointed out by Benjamin A. Okonofua: “Home, ownership, employment, entrepreneurship, education, and political access are all allocated in unequal measures on the basis of racial categorization and or proximity to the dominant racial categories” (2013: 11). Therefore, although race is a social construct determined by phenotypic characteristics, racial classifications do produce tangible effects. Even after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (the most comprehensive antidiscrimination legislation in history), after more than 50 years later the same gaps in racial equality remain, or perhaps, have grown deeper. In fact, as pointed out by Angela Ounwuachi-Willig: “Today, the unemployment rate for African-Americans remains more than double that for whites, public schools are more segregated now than they were in the 1950s and young black males are 21 times more likely to be shot and killed by the police than their white male peers” (2016: 4). In a nutshell, recognizing race as a social construction does not make race less “real”. In this respect, in the next paragraph a broader analysis will follow in order to understand the tangible consequences that racial categorization has on black people in the U.S.

1.5. Black People in the U.S.: Differences and Conflicts

1.5.1. African Immigrants in the U.S.: an Overview

Broadly speaking, there are three different groups of black people in the U.S.: “those whose ancestors were involuntarily brought into the U.S. from the 16th to the 19th century; those who voluntarily immigrated to the United States from the Caribbean after 1808, when the slave trade became illegal; those who emigrated directly from Africa” (Ajiboye 2015: 69). African Americans in the U.S. are considered a single ethnic group, while African immigrants are comprised of multiple sub-ethnic groups with different national identities, languages, and cultural characteristics (Ajiboye 2015: 70). U.S. surveys and

Census Bureau data report that the majority of African immigrants in the U.S. come from five sub-Saharan countries, more specifically: Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Ethiopia and South Africa. The largest numbers of them are found in Texas, New York, California, Maryland, New Jersey, Massachusetts and Virginia (Simmons 2018).

The African immigrant population coming from these countries grew from 723.000 to more than 1.7 million between 2010 and 2015, which means that in 2015 they were 5% of all immigrants in the U.S.: an exponential growth if we think that in 1970 they were about 0,8% (Nsangou and Dundes 2018: 2). The majority of African immigrants came mostly after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, a legacy of the impact of the Civil Right Movement in the 1960s. The new federal law abolished the race-based immigration quota system and replaced it with a system that prioritized refugees, those with family members living in the U.S., and people with special skills (Nsangou and Dundes 2018: 2). According to research, African immigrant population not only is very diverse in its educational, economic and English proficiency profile, but on average it is better educated than black people born in the U.S. or the immigrant population as a whole (Simmons 2018; Nsangou and Dundes 2018: 2; Okonofua 2013: 10). However, as most of the American news on Africa is about poverty, famine, political upheaval and war, many Americans think that African immigrants in the U.S. are mostly desperate and poorly educated (Simmons 2018).

While many of them are refugees, there is also a large number of beneficiaries of the "diversity visa program", created to boost immigration from "underrepresented nations" (Fears 2002). Thanks to the Refugee Act of 1980, today there are thousands of refugees from Somalia, Sudan and Congo in the U.S.: "about 22% of African immigrants are refugees. . . At the same time, the diversity visa program - also known as the visa lottery- has opened the door to immigrants who have become legal permanent residents, 17% came through the program, compared to 5% of the total U.S. immigrant population" (Simmons 2018). According to this program, applicants must have completed the

equivalent of a U.S. high school education or at least two years of recent experience in an occupation.

1.5.2. African Immigrants and Race

Race is a vibrant matter in the U.S. and racial discrimination is still a main characteristic of society. Black people, particularly, have always occupied a disadvantaged position with respect to other racial groups. Moreover, many studies have confirmed that race still plays a major role when it comes to employment, education, income, wealth, home ownership and segregation (Okonofua 2013: 10). Understanding the role of race in determining the condition of the black community in America allows also for recognition of differences among the black people. In fact, affirming that only social and cultural deficiencies, and not race, are responsible for the underprivileged condition of the black community in the U.S., would suggest that black people are homogenous and face the same economic and social problems. On the contrary, there appears to be growing tension and conflict within the black community. In particular, African immigrants resent the fact that they are lumped together with African Americans in the general categorization of being "black", which is considered to be the lowest category in American social system. In fact, as Benjamin Okonofua pointed out:

"African immigrants are questioning their racial categorization as Black, which they see as a metonymic device for the inferior position of African Americans relative to Whites" (2013: 2).

When African immigrants come to the U.S. they question its social differentiation based on race in two ways: firstly, because they do not properly fit into it, since they have different socio-historical experiences, and secondly, because they "inject[...] the fundamentally different systems of social classifications that they bring with them into the American racial complex. . . The identity frames in their countries of origin continue to influence migrants' conception of the self and structures the way(s) in which they interact with others in the United States" (Okonofua 2013: 2). Thus, African immigrants with their socio-historical background are constantly negotiating the system of racial categorization and differentiation in their everyday interaction with Americans.

Recognizing differences among black people in the U.S. allows for a better investigation of black identities in the diaspora and their understanding. In fact: “The very term African diaspora must be used with great caution, underscoring the point that until recent times, those people who resided on the African continent defined themselves solely in accordance with their ethnic group. Furthermore, it is we who homogenize these people by characterising them as Africans” (Jackson and Cothran 2003: 578). It is the same issue raised by Wright (2015) and Palmer (2000) in their discussion of the heterogeneity of the African diaspora and the importance of considering black identity in its variety and in its relation to African ancestry and not only on the basis of a shared past of slavery.

The well-established dichotomy of black and white in the U.S. shadows in-group differences among blacks. The aftermath of slavery has always allowed for a single interpretation of race relations, namely in terms of black and white. In this respect, a brief overview of the term “black” as a badge of identity is worth addressing. While initially “black” was an imposed label through the terms “Negro” and “colored”, it was subsequently appropriated by African Americans as a way to resist racism and express black pride. In fact, as pointed out by Tom W. Smith:

> As the civil rights movement began making tangible progress in the late 1950s and early 1960s . . . in order to break from the past and to shed the remnants of slavery and racial serfdom, it was argued that a new name was needed. “Negro” was criticized as imposed on Blacks by Whites, as denoting subservience and complacency. In its stead “Black” was promoted as standing for racial pride, militancy, power, and rejection of the status quo. (1992: 499)

However, by the end of the 1980s black people started advocating for the switch of the term from black to African American, in order to express cultural heritage and attachment to their ancestral homeland, in this respect: “‘African American’ as opposed to ‘black’ would connote ethnicity over color and connote equality in pluralism” (Smith 1992: 507). In fact, U.S. have a better record of accepting and fairly treating ethnic groups than it does racial groups (Smith 1992: 508).

Given the well-established U.S. black/white binarism and its predominance when it comes to investigate race and differences, there are not

many studies on cultural and ethnic differences among Africans immigrants in the U.S.

> While it is arguably politically advantageous to unite on the basis of skin color, doing so also ignores group differences critical to in-group identity. It is offensive to any group to be subsumed by another. It is especially frustrating for Africans because not only are they distinct from African Americans, reflecting the intersectionality of race and immigrant identity, but they are also very different from each other: that is, individuals from Cameroon are distinct from those of Ethiopia, etc. (reflecting a serious flaw in the use of the label "African"). (Nsangou and Dundes 2018: 20)

The blanket term "black" is often used to encompass all kinds of black people in the U.S., regardless of their country of origin.

> There is a lack of recognition, particularly among white people, about the differences between Africans and African Americans, for whom the category of "Black" disguises cultural differences. With emphasis on race in the US within-race ethnic differences are difficult for white people to discern which helps account for their assumptions on "pan-Black" solidarity. (Nsangou and Dundes 2018: 4-5)

Far from sharing feelings of "pan-Black" solidarity, America's black community is very much diversified in terms of culture, social status, aspirations and how they think of themselves (Fears 2002). Being classified only as black or white is very offensive for African immigrants, especially because this classification associates them with the socially weaker and stigmatized category of African Americans and this is in fact at the roots of the conflicts between African Americans and Africans.

> By the 1950s, historians say, black unity led to the formation of the modern civil rights movement and created a powerful Democratic voting block to fight oppression. In the 60s, black unity became "Black Power" and "Black is Beautiful". Black people acknowledged each other as "brothers", developed elaborate handshakes ending in hugs and spoke slang to communicate dissenting thoughts past the ears of white people. But the fact of Black unity in everyday life, and the history that led to it, was lost on many of the black foreigners who started arriving in droves after the 1965 Immigration Act. . . . Unlike black people in the United States, West Indians and Africans grew up among black majorities that were ruled by black governments. "Black Is Beautiful" was a given, as was black pride, because there was no white-imposed segregation after their liberation from slavery and colonialism. (Fears 2002: 9)

In other words, even though African Americans and African immigrants are sharing the same phenotype and both belong to the black racial category, their lived experience, language and culture are markedly different and so is the

perception they have of themselves in terms of identity and culture. African immigrants have understandings about their ancestry that are totally different from those of African Americans and this can lead to hostility between the two groups. “In the United States, the African American has experienced discrimination in magnitudes that have concomitantly diminished not only his identity but also his self-worth as a progressively creative social entity” (Okonofua 2013: 3). On the other hand, the African immigrant conceives race through ethnic differences and this does not typically involve valuation. In fact, even though the African immigrant recognizes ethnic differences, the access to certain opportunities is not determined on the basis of inherent biological superiority or inferiority of a group (Okonofua 2013: 4).

The creation of the one-drop rule that was at the basis of the American black/white binarism derived from the need that white people felt to neatly separate the “pure” white blood line, from the black one. This binary distinction caused the erasure of internal differences among black people and unified them in terms of their racial identity.

On the other hand, African immigrants consider their racial categorization in terms of national origin, socio-cultural heritage and language by variously defining themselves “Ethiopian American”, “Ghanaian American”, “Nigerian American”, and so on (Okonofua 2013: 5). These identities are meant to set boundaries and allow for specificity when it comes to racial category in the U.S. Most importantly:

> [B]ecause the prevailing system of racial classification lumps African immigrants and African Americans into the Black or African American category without enabling these elements to make clear behavioral and cultural assertions based on their sociohistorical milieus, opportunities and resources can only be accessed as African American. And in an environment where the African American identity is disvalued or has limited purchasing power, elements within must find creative ways to compete for the limited opportunities available to the category. This often produces conflict such as involves, for African Immigrants, the creation of double boundaries . . . Thus, the self-ascription as “Nigerian-American” or other hyphenated identity is meant to repudiate the historically fixed color line and is seen to constitute the best avenue for unlocking opportunities and resources that are locked to African Americans or Blacks. (Okonofua 2013: 3)

In other words, when African immigrants come to the U.S. and immediately become absorbed in this amorphous black racial category, they feel

the urge to distinguish themselves, especially because they are assimilated into a group that is mainly discriminated and this creates in them feelings of resentment and confusion. However, they are not rejecting the category of "blackness" per se, but the fact of being confined into this category that does not merely aim at defining their skin color, but it places them in a group, namely the one of African Americans, in which economic and social disadvantages are the norm (Okonofua 2013: 4).

1.5.3. Main Sources of Conflicts among African Americans and African Immigrants

A main source of conflict among African Americans and African immigrants in the U.S. is the different perception of ethnic identity. On the one hand, African immigrants believe that African Americans' feeling of "rootlessness" (Okonofua 2013: 6) is causing them frustration and, therefore, to despise and resent the African immigrant, since African Americans crave that sense of historical attachment specific to African culture they lack. On the other hand, the African American sees the construction of the African immigrant's identity as a repudiation of the African American identity and, therefore, of blackness. Actually, the construction of the immigrants' identity represents their effort to find a compromise between their ethnic identity and their new "racialized" self in the U.S. (Okonofua 2013: 6).

In the U.S. African immigrants experience a lot of pressure in order to become American. In fact, the process of acculturation in the U.S. consists of the so called "Americanization": which is that process that allows immigrants to the U.S. to become people who share American beliefs and customs, in other words, by assimilating them into American society. This process typically involves learning the English language and adjusting to American culture. Like other immigrants, African immigrants have to fit in the rigid classification and categorization of the American society in order to prove their "Americanness". In other words, they have to blend into the "melting pot" that characterizes American culture. For African immigrants, the expectation is for them to fit in the African American category in order to be considered American, which opens

the door only to the limited opportunities that African Americans have and not much more (Okonofua 2013: 6).

As previously stated, African immigrants often refuse to be categorized as African American and, therefore, as disadvantaged entities in the U.S. Thus they may decide to "act White" (Okonofua 2013: 7) and even change their complexion through the practice of skin bleaching[2]. In less drastic attempts to fit in the white society they decide to buy houses in white neighborhoods, are favorable to intermarriages and, in general, try to resist as much as they can to the assimilation in the African American group. On the other hand, this kind of behavior exacerbates the hostility among the two groups.

Another main source of conflict among African Americans and African immigrants is the access to the limited social and economic resources and opportunities available for black people in the U.S.: "[R]esource contestation occurs along several dimensions including struggle for cultural, political, and economic resources" (Okonofua 2013: 8).

According to various studies, African immigrants are better at avoiding residential isolation than African Americans. Even though they are still segregated from whites and cannot compare with them in terms of upward mobility and income, they manage to escape that residential isolation that is often the impediment for African American prosperity (Okonofua 2013: 8). On the other hand, African Americans believe that African immigrants' proximity to whites impedes their own access to the resources they need in order to accumulate wealth, occupy prestigious positions at work, obtain scholarships and so on. Moreover, they send back to Africa much of the money they make, demonstrating the impossibility for them to be actually americanized. African immigrants instead, argue that their presence in the socioeconomic space enhances African American prestige and wellbeing (Okonofua 2013: 9). To sum up, the American racial system promotes on the one hand identification and

[2] Skin whitening, also known as skin lightening and skin bleaching, refers to "the intentional alteration of one's natural skin colour to one relatively, if not substantially lighter in colour through the use of chemical skin lightening agents, either manufactured, or the combination of the two as defined by The World Health Organisation (WHO)." (Adu-Gyamfi 2017: 3)

ambivalence with the oppressor and on the other hand ambivalence and antagonism toward oneself and group. Moreover:

> [M]ainstream America does not perceive the African immigrant as a threat; instead, s/he is actively conscripted, for purely polemical reason, as a partner in the struggle to recreate a postracial America. It is much easier to preach the gospel of colorblindness to a population with no personal or emotional connection to past racial oppression than to a population whose entire historical milieu is based in racial oppression and resistance to racial oppression. (Okonofua 2013: 11)

Mainstream America therefore, perceives the African immigrants as having a strong identity structure with respect to African Americans because of their cultural experiences in Africa, their well-defined ethnic rootness and, ultimately, because they do not have to deal with a historical legacy of slavery and segregation. However, mainstream America does not recognize the heterogeneity that characterizes African immigrant population, lumping it under the blanket term of black.

1.6. An Example of Contemporary African Diaspora: African Intellectuals in the U.S.

One of the additional features that Cohen adds to Safran's model of diaspora (1992) involves those "groups that disperse for colonial or voluntarist reasons" (2008: 6) such as for work, and which constitute a sub-categorization of the diaspora. Although this feature moves away from the more classical meaning of diaspora as forced dispersal, it is still reflected in different diasporas such as the Jew, Chinese, Lebanese and African. This sub-categorization is also connected to another aspect of diaspora that is also present in Safran's original list and that is then emphasized by Cohen, namely "the positive virtues of retaining a diasporic identity" (Cohen 2008: 7). In fact, as pointed out by Cohen, diaspora allows for positive dimensions of "transnational existence" and "cosmopolitan consciousness" since "the tension between an ethnic, a national and a transnational identity is often a creative and enriching one" (2008: 7). In an increasingly globalized world such as today's, the endless number of new connections and possibilities are a powerful push for diaspora, which is composed of people who are much more inclined to move and travel, and whose

internationalism is a great professional advantage. In fact, as pointed out by Cohen:

> Members of the diasporas are almost by definition more mobile than people who are rooted solely in national spaces. They are certainly more prone to international mobility and change their places of work and residence more frequently. . . In the age of globalization, their language skills, familiarity with other cultures, and contacts in other countries make many members of diasporas highly competitive in the international labour, service, and capital markets . . . Many members of diasporic communities are bi- or multilingual. They can spot 'what is missing' in the societies they visit or in which they settle. (2008: 146-148)

If we take into account our previous overview on African immigrants in the U.S., we can see that many of them are voluntary migrants, highly educated, skilled and contribute to the American economic growth. Therefore, they reflect those characteristics of contemporary African diaspora that falls under the sub-categorization described by Cohen (2008). Such sub-categorization can be also defined as "strong diaspora" which is the key to determine success in the global economy (Cohen 2008: 148). In fact, strong diasporas possess the following three key features: "(a) a *strong identity*; (b) *an advantageous occupational profile*; and (c) *a passion for knowledge*" (2008: 149). With strong identity Cohen means that these members of the diaspora have a definite ethnic or religious identity that is then used for creative purpose; with advantageous occupational profile he means that these members are often more strongly represented in the professions, possess two passports, and are generally more wealthy; and finally, with passion of knowledge he means that these members show passion for education and possess various certifications: "degree certificates, vocational or professional qualifications are the passports of the successful members of a diaspora. . . A passion for knowledge is also adequately or even spectacularly served by intense curiosity" (2008: 150).

Therefore, perfectly fitting into the category of strong diaspora, is the sub-categorization of contemporary African diaspora in the U.S. composed by intellectuals, writers and professors. In fact, besides the two Nigerian writers subject of my thesis, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Chris Abani, there are many other famous writers and professors who are living and teaching in the U.S. (or did up until recently) such as for example: Chinua Achebe, Flora

Nwapa, James Thiong'o Ngugi, Ama Ata Aidoo, Marie Angèle Kinguè, and Chinelo Okparanta. With their remarkable works and teaching positions, they are certainly part of that African contemporary diaspora that represents those "positive virtues" of being a transnational and diasporic identity as intended by Cohen (2008).

After having introduced paramount concepts such as identity, diaspora, blackness, race, and differences among black people in the U.S., the next chapter of my thesis will take a closer look on another African immigrant in the U.S., the protagonist of *Americanah*: Ifemelu. In particular, it will focus on her discovery of "being black", and on how hair can be considered a powerful metaphor for race.

2. *Americanah* and the Discovery of Race in the U.S.

The present chapter will address questions of race, blackness and identity as raised by Adichie through the personal journey of the protagonist of Americanah, Ifemelu. The novel starts with the frame story of Ifemelu getting her hair braided in a salon in the U.S. after she breaks up with her boyfriend and decides to go back to Nigeria. Adichie tells her story in a complex way, framing memories within back stories and scattering scenes from different times throughout the novel. The narrative sometimes switches to the perspective of Obinze, her first love that she met before leaving for the U.S. In particular, there are three main voices in the novel: third-person narration through Obinze and Ifemelu and the text of Ifemelu's blog posts (as well as some emails and text conversations). Posts from Ifemelu's blog are interspersed throughout the narrative, and through them Adichie is able to give more direct cultural commentary.

As a black immigrant in the U.S. Ifemelu discovers how the category of race is deeply embedded in American society, so much so that she decides to write a blog on it. The blog becomes so successful that she obtains a fellowship at Princeton. However, even though she is living a successful life in the U.S., an important part of her identity is restlessness and dissatisfied, (the Nigerian part especially) and, therefore, she decides to move back to Lagos.

The main themes of the novel involve race, black hair, class, gender, love relationships and migration. The novel's language is characterized by a mix of American slang, colloquialism, Igbo words, Nigerian and British English, which allows Adichie to situate her own novel as simultaneously playful and serious. Adichie's tone is mainly ironic, especially when she addresses the paradoxes and complexities of the race discourse in the U.S.

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first one will focus on Ifemelu's discovery of race in the U.S. as well as on her criticism of mainstream America and white privilege. As a black African immigrant in the U.S. Ifemelu is immediately confronted with one of the biggest issues in America: race. As part of American tribalism (Ifemelu explains this concept in her blog and shows

how it is the groundwork of American hierarchical society, more in paragraph 2.1.2) race is deeply embedded in society and it inevitably shapes people's identity as a powerful force. In particular, selected passages from Ifemelu's blog will show how Adichie outlines issues of race(-ism), class and white privilege in America and how these categories intersect with one another and influence society and its structure.

The second section analyzes how hair can be read as a metaphor for race. In particular, it investigates the effects that racialized ideals of beauty have on black women and how hair is deeply embedded in the racial discourse as a symbol of both oppression and liberation. In this respect, I will demonstrate how Ifemelu's experience of race (and thus blackness) can be read in the light of what Michelle Wright (2015) calls "multidimensional" and "wholly vertical" interpellation of blackness.

The multidimensional interpellation of blackness is predicated on the assumption that blackness possesses agency and involves choices. In other words, it argues that black subjects perform the full range of human emotions and actions and "suffer from no genetic or biological proscription from any aspect of humanity due to the 'impediment' of their racial designation" (Wright 2015: 114). The wholly vertical interpellation of blackness on the other hand refers to that reading of blackness in which the black subject can be interpellated only as an object of and, at best, a reactor against white agency.

In other words, I will show that Ifemelu's experience of race takes place through hair by applying Michelle Wright's theory of different interpellations of blackness that take place, from time to time, whether as a result of a choice (multidimensional interpellation) or as a reaction to white agency (wholly vertical interpellation).

2.1. "In America, You Are Black, Baby"[3]

As previously pointed out, this section will analyze how, through Ifemelu's blog, Adichie addresses issues of race and blackness in the U.S. as

[3] Heading of a post in Ifemelu's blog (Adichie 272).

experienced and criticized by the protagonist. Ifemelu's blog is called "Raceteenth or Curious Observations by a Non-American Black on the Subject of Blackness in America" (Adichie 4). Ifemelu starts her blog after she has had a conversation with her white boyfriend Curt on how women's magazines clearly display racialized beauty ideals, in which black women play almost no part. This episode will be further described in paragraph 2.2 since it marks the particular relationship Ifemelu has with her hair, and therefore with race.

Through this blog Ifemelu gives accurate, critical insights on race in America from her perspective as a black African immigrant. Before coming to the U.S. Ifemelu did not know she was black: "I came from a country where race was not an issue; I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America" (Adichie 359). Moreover: "I discovered race in America and it fascinated me" (Adichie 499). As pointed out in chapter 1, African immigrants find the category of race in the U.S. confusing and bewildering since in their "Africanness" (this term being too generic as well when used to describe the immense variety of African culture) they distinguish themselves in terms of ethnicities and not of race or skin color (Okonofua 2013: 5).

The problem for immigrants in the U.S. is that American culture is represented by a melting pot of cultures that are assimilated and blended together through the process of Americanization. Far from promoting multiculturalism, this process is characterized by cultural assimilation and fosters standardization of immigrants in the U.S. The effect of this process for African immigrants is that they feel the pressure of two different forces: on the one hand to become American and therefore to shed their "otherness", and on the other hand "to adapt America to the full force of their history" (Okonofua 2013: 6). For African immigrants this process is particularly stressful with respect to European migrants, since Americanization involves mainly "being white" and their whiteness opens the full range of possibilities and resources that are denied to black people. The African immigrant on the other hand, since is not white, is expected to be African American, who, because of his history of slavery, segregation and discrimination, is a disadvantaged entity (Okonofua 2013: 7).

The category of race in the U.S. is deeply embedded and structured in society both ideologically and socioeconomically. It is, in fact, an important part of American tribalism. So much so that Ifemelu can even make a living in the U.S. by writing a blog on race, which she closes only when she decides to go back to Lagos. In fact, as she explains to her white boyfriend Curt, race for her is not such a vibrant matter anymore once she is back in Nigeria: “So you still blogging?” [Curt asked] “Yes.” “About race?” “No, just about life. Race doesn’t really work here. I feel like I got off the plane in Lagos and stopped being black” (Adichie 586).

“Black” in the U.S. is a blanket term used to cover all types of black people in America regardless of their ethnicity or ancestry. Thus, African Americans and African immigrants in the U.S. are automatically incorporated in this amorphous category and deprived of their individual and cultural identity. This matter is deeply criticized by Ifemelu in her blog:

> 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. We all have our moments of initiation in the Society of Former Negroes. Mine was in a class in undergrad when I was asked to give the black perspective, only I had no idea what that was. So I just made something up. And admit it- you say “I’m not black” only 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? Would you still say “Don’t call me black, I’m from Trinidad”? I didn’t think so. (Adichie 272-273)

Because Ifemelu is seen as black in the U.S., she is supposed to be a spokesperson for all black people, even though she is African, not African American, and her cultural heritage and identity are much more complex than what mainstream America believes. Her individual identity as African immigrant fades into the background, because first of all, she is a black person in the U.S. Her tone is ironic, especially towards those African immigrants who do not want to be defined as blacks just because in the U.S. they represent an underprivileged category.

What is deeply emphasized by Ifemelu is that being lumped in this amorphous black category, especially for African immigrants, means being identified with the lowest class in American society, and, as explained in chapter

one, this implies getting limited access to socioeconomic resources as well as facing prejudices and racism. This is the biggest struggle when it comes to African immigrants in the U.S. and identity. Being considered as black and nothing else represents a problem not because of blackness per se, but because this leads to struggles and difficulties for African immigrants' cultural identity and their socioeconomic achievement.

Ifemelu addresses this matter and explains with a series of specific examples, what it really means to be black in America:

> So you're black, baby. And here's the deal with becoming black: You must show that you are offended when such words such as "watermelon" or "tar baby" are used in jokes, even if you don't know what the hell is being talked about- and since you are a Non-American Black, the chances are that you won't know. . . You must nod back when a black person nods at you in a heavily white area. It is called the black nod. It is a way for black people to say "You are not alone, I am here too." In describing black women you admire, always use the word "STRONG" because that is what black women are supposed to be in America. If you are a woman, please do not speak your mind as you are used to doing in your country. Because in America, strong-minded black women are SCARY. And if you are a man, be hypermellow, never get too excited, or somebody will worry that you're about to pull a gun. When you watch television and hear that a "racist slur" was used, you must immediately become offended. Even though you are thinking "But why won't they tell me exactly what was said?" Even though you would like to be able to decide for yourself how offended to be, or whether to be offended at all, you must nevertheless be very offended. When a crime is reported, pray that it was not committed by a black person, and if it turns out to have been committed by a black person, stay well away from the crime area for weeks, or you might be stopped for fitting the profile. If a black cashier gives poor service to the non-black person in front of you, compliment that person's shoes or something, to make up for the bad service, because you're just as guilty for the cashier's crime. If you are in an Ivy League college, and a Young Republican tells you that you got in only because of Affirmative Action, do not whip out your perfect grades from high school. Instead, gently point out that the biggest beneficiaries of Affirmative Action are white women. If you go to eat in a restaurant, please tip generously. Otherwise the next black person who comes in will get awful service, because waiters groan when they get a black table. You see, black people have a gene that makes them not tip, so please overpower that gene. If you're telling a non-black person about something racist that happened to you, make sure you're not bitter. Don't complain. Be forgiving. If possible, make it funny. Most of all, do not be angry. Black people are not supposed to be angry about racism. Otherwise you get no sympathy. This applies only for white liberals, by the way. Don't even bother telling a white conservative about anything racist that happened to you. Because the conservative will tell you that YOU are the real racist and your mouth will hang open in confusion. (Adichie 273-274)

Ifemelu's argument is strong and her tone is at times ironic. Her claims are based on everyday experience, on her encounters with blackness and what it means to be black in the U.S., something she is still in the process of learning.

As an African immigrant in the U.S. Ifemelu does not quite understand some things that for African Americans are just common sense, but, since she looks black, people expect her to act like a black person in America, that is to say, as an African American. Through Ifemelu's experience as a racialized immigrant in the U.S., Adichie is addressing the complexities, paradoxes and ironies of the U.S. racial discourse. In fact, Adichie uses the experiences of Ifemelu as a non-American black person, to point out the bewilderment that the U.S. racial discourse elicits, especially for those black people that have not internalized the socio-cultural rules that such discourse implicates. Perhaps the biggest paradox ironically addressed by Adichie is the fact that, even though the racial discourse is at the basis of American social structure, white people pretends that race does not exist and do not want to talk about it, because it makes them uncomfortable. In fact, "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. . . Or just find a white writer. White writers can be blunt about race and get all activist because their anger isn't threatening" (Adichie 417). On the other hand, it is interesting to point out what Blaine's sister, who is African American, says:

> "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 be just labelled angry and shunned." (Adichie 418)

To Shan, Ifemelu is an outsider, even though she is black. Therefore, Shan does not value skin as something connecting them. In this respect, Adichie addresses the internal divisions inside the black community, with which Ifemelu is struggling. In fact, while mainstream America considers her African American, African Americans do not see her as part of their community.

Moreover, white people accuse African Americans of being angry for the atrocities their ancestors had to endure during enslavement and segregation and, therefore, they are not willing to listen to them. White people usually have a get-over-it-already attitude when it comes to race issues since "slavery was so long ago" (Adichie 405). African immigrants, on the other hand, because of their

extraneousness towards enslavement are lacking that anger and, therefore, can benefit from the possibility of being heard.

In so doing, through Ifemelu's experience and an ironic tone, Adichie portrays not only the struggle that black people have to face everyday in America, but also the paradoxes and complexities of the American racial discourse. Both African Americans and African immigrants are constantly subjected to ideas and expectations that society has of them and this inevitably plays a role in the construction of their identity.

2.1.1. Race, Class and White Privilege

Throughout the novel Ifemelu's blog addresses issues of race and class in America showing how these categories intersect with each other in everyday life and, sometimes, overlap (a focus on the matter of intersectionality will follow in section 2.2).

In one of her posts Ifemelu comments ironically on how Americans mix biases of class and race. She addresses this matter writing about a racist episode she experienced when working as a babysitter in a rich white family house: indeed in this episode we see that race is more important than class, that black skin obliterates social status for the white viewer, who sees blacks only as destitute. While Ifemelu is babysitting in the rich white family house, she is waiting for a carpet cleaner, and once she opens the door, the white man reacts with bewilderment:

> He stiffened when he saw her. First surprise flitted over his features, then it ossified to hostility. "You need a carpet cleaned?" he asked, as if he did not care, as if she could change her mind, as if he wanted her to change her mind. She looked at him, a taunt in her eyes, prolonging a moment loaded with assumptions: he thought she was a homeowner, and she was not what he had expected to see in this grand stone house with the white pillars . . . She would never forget him, bits of dried skin stuck to his chapped, peeling lips, and she would begin the blog post "Sometimes in America, Race is Class" with the story of his dramatic change, and end with: *it didn't matter to him how much money I had. As far as he was concerned I did not fit as the owner of that stately house because of the way I looked. In 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.* (Adichie 204-205)

Ifemelu feels resentful and criticizes the strong connection between biases of race and class in the U.S. In fact, as previously pointed out, upward mobility for black people is harder than for other people. Ifemelu's blog is addressing this matter, offering a disillusioned perspective of America, whose hierarchical social structure is adamant. Ifemelu goes deeper on this matter in a post called: "What Academics Mean By White Privilege, or Yes it Sucks to Be Poor and White but Try Being Poor and Non-White":

> So this guy said to Professor Hunk, "White privilege is nonsense. How can I be privileged? I grew up fucking poor in West Virginia. I'm an Appalachian hick. My family is on welfare." Right. But privilege is always relative to something else. Now imagine someone like him, as poor and as fucked up, and then make that person black. If both are caught for drug possession, say, the black guy is more likely to be sent to jail. Everything else the same except for race. Check the stats. The Appalachian hick guy is fucked up, which is not cool, but if he were black, he'd be fucked up plus. He also said to professor Hunk: 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. The black guy on the street in New York doesn't want to think about race, until he tries to hail a cab, and he doesn't want to think about race when he's driving his Mercedes under the speed limit, until a cop pulls him over. So Appalachian hick guy doesn't have class privilege but he sure as hell has race privilege. (Adichie 429)

As we can see, the narrative form of the blog allows Adichie to address complex matters of the U.S social structure with an ironic tone. In particular, through the use of colloquialism and slang such as "fucked up" or "fucking poor" she is situating her own novel as simultaneously playful and serious.

She points out how the intersection between class and race is lethal for black people when it comes to society structure. The disadvantage of black people with respect to white people is a matter of fact in America. Even poor white people are higher than black people in American social hierarchy. In fact, white people, even if poor, can at least disregard race and claim colorblindness, which is ultimately what constitutes white privilege. What is meant by Adichie in this passage, is that colorblindness actually maintains white privilege by negating racial inequality. Embracing a colorblind perspective allow whites to believe that the material success they enjoy is just the result of their individual hard work and investments in education and not of their privileged position in social hierarchy. In other words, this perspective purports that class and culture,

and not institutional racism, are responsible for inequality (Gallagher 2003: 23). Adichie, therefore, through the narrative form of the blog, reveals to American readers their own obsession with blindness to race and its pervasive presence in all interactions with people.

On the matter of intersection of race, class, whiteness and blackness Ifemelu also points out that:

> A hundred years ago, the white ethnics hated being hated, but it was sort of tolerable because at least black people were below them on the ladder. Don't say your grandfather was a serf in Russia when slavery happened because what matters is you are American now and being American means you take the whole shebang, America's assets and America's debts, and Jim Crow is a big-ass debt. Don't say it's just like antisemitism. It's not. In the hatred of Jews, there is also the possibility of envy - they are so clever, these Jews, they control everything, these Jews - and one must concede that a certain respect, however grudging, accompanies envy. In the hatred of American Blacks, there is no possibility of envy - they are so lazy, these blacks, they are so unintelligent, these blacks. (Adichie 404)

Ifemelu underlines that the hatred against black people has deep and ancient roots, whose aftermath they are still enduring today and most importantly, that anti-blackness is qualitatively different from prejudice against white ethnics and Jews. In this respect, Dinesh D'Souza argues that, since Jews are a religious and cultural group made up of "white Jews, brown Jews, and black Jews", secular anti-Semitism has a "career distinct from racism" especially because Jews enjoys a sort of "protective coloration" that does not allow for an easy distinction from other people (so much so that Nazis were compelled to use yellow stars and tattoos to distinguish them). Whereas black people, because of their skin color, are considered a biologically distinct, inferior race (1995: 522).

Jim Crow laws were enacted in the late 19th century, and enforced racial segregation in the Southern U.S. under the motto "separate but equal". Enforced until 1965, these laws institutionalized economic, educational, and social disadvantages for African Americans and other people of color living in the South. In particular, after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the resentment of white southerners against black Americans was exacerbated not only because of their loss of free labor after the end of slavery, but also because their white supremacy was now challenged by black people's new rights (Gates and Appiah 1999: 1211). In addition to that, because of the

theories of inferiority of black people with respect to white people (as the theories of Jefferson, Hegels and Gobineau outlined in chapter one have shown) blacks are still considered to be unintelligent and lazy. These theories have also fostered the idea that black people have a natural inclination for chaos, disorder and violence, and until today white mainstream America is still reluctant to reject them as racist and recognize the full humanity of blacks. In fact, as Ifemelu points out, there are many cases in American history in which black people have been unjustly accused of crimes they did not commit simply because of their blackness.

A perfect example for that is "The Central Park Jogger Case", a criminal case based on the assault and rape of a 28 year-old white woman on an April night in 1989 in Central Park. A few days after the rape occurred, five African American minors were abruptly stopped in the streets of Harlem by the police, who unjustly accused them of the rape of the woman. The police tortured and forced them to sign a false confession. After two trials and without any scientific evidence, the jury condemned the five African American minors to spend from 5 to 15 years in prison. Only after having suffered terrible years of violence and public hatred, the truth about their innocence came out and in 2002 they were acquitted from all charges related to the crime. In 2003 they sued the City of New York for malicious prosecution, racial discrimination and emotional distress but the city refused for a decade to settle the suits. In 2016 the five men received a total settlement of about 43 million dollars from New York City, which, however, still has not apologized (Harris 2019). This is an example of what Ifemelu refers to when she is talking about white privilege and the terror a black man feels when being suddenly stopped for no apparent reason by the police. The American justice system has often proved to have double standards when it comes to black people.

However, class and race are only two of the four sides of the so called American tribalism, which, as explained by Ifemelu in her blog, also entails ideology and region. American tribalism is the groundwork of U.S. hierarchical society and, as such, a reflection of its identity. In the post "Understanding

America for the Non-American Black: American Tribalism" Ifemelu accurately describes the nature of American tribalism and its effect on society's structure:

> In America, tribalism is alive and well. There are four kinds - class, ideology, region and race. First, class. Pretty easy. Rich folk and poor folk. Second, ideology. Liberals and conservatives. They don't merely disagree on political issues, each side believes the other is evil. Intermarriage is discouraged and on the rare occasion that it happens, is considered remarkable. Third, region. The North and the South. The two sides fought a civil war and tough stains from that war remain. The North looks down on the South while the South resents the North. Finally, race. There's a ladder of racial hierarchy in America. White is always on top, specifically White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, otherwise known as WASP, and American Black is always on the bottom, and what's in the middle depends on time and place. (Or as that marvelous rhyme goes: if you're white, you're all right; if you're brown, stick around; if you're black, get back!) Americans assume that everyone will get their tribalism. But it takes a while to figure it out . . . The longer you are here, the more you start to get it. (Adichie 226-227)

Ifemelu's observations on American tribalism accurately reflect American reality and allow the readers of her blog to better understand it. In particular, she reflects back to American readers their own prejudices and defamiliarizes their sense of themselves as the norm. In so doing, through Ifemelu's blog, Adichie is revealing to American readers what they sound like. An article appeared in the magazine *The New Yorker* in 2018 describes American tribes as "badges of identity, not of thought. In a way they make thinking unnecessary, because they do it for you, and may punish you if you try to do it for yourself. . . Tribes demand loyalty, and in return they confer the security of belonging" (Packer 2018). In other words, American tribalism reflects American identity and its structure. Tribes provide for its members crystallized beliefs they passively assimilate and, in so doing, they automatically fit in the American system. Moreover, even the same words have different meanings according to race tribalism. Ifemelu better explains this matter in a post that she called "Understanding America for the Non-American Black: A Few Explanations of What Things Really Mean", where she gives a deeper insight into the language of American tribalism:

> 1. Of all their tribalisms, Americans are most uncomfortable with race. If you are having a conversation with an American, and you want to discuss something racial that you find interesting, and the American says, "Oh, it's simplistic to say it's race, racism it's so complex," it means they just want you to shut up already. Because of course racism is complex. Many abolitionists wanted to free the slaves but didn't want black people living nearby. Lots of

> folk today don't mind a black nanny or black limo driver. But they sure as hell mind a black boss. What is simplistic is saying "It's so complex." But shut up anyway, especially if you need a job/favor from the American in question. 2. Diversity means different things to different folks. If a white person is saying a neighborhood is diverse, they mean nine percent black people. (The minute it gets to ten percent black people, the white folks move out.) If a black person says diverse neighborhood, they are thinking forty percent black. 3. Sometimes they say "culture" when they mean "race". They say a film is "mainstream" when they mean "white folks like it or made it." When they say "urban" it means black and poor and possibly dangerous and potentially exciting. "Racially charged" means we are uncomfortable saying "racist." (Adichie 434-435)

Adichie shows how, with time, Ifemelu is learning hidden meanings of words and what people can or cannot say aloud in America. With her ironic tone and through the use of colloquialisms (such as "sure as hell") Adichie is pointing out how white America is definitely uncomfortable talking about race. The not too distant past of slavery and segregation is still hunting American society, which prefers to think of itself as having made progress and great achievement when it comes to race(-ism). Expressions like "racially charged" or "racism it's so complex" are simply shortcuts that white America takes to avoid the race discourse. What is striking though, is that racism is alive and well and acts undisturbed in American society. So much so that sometimes the word is even used by white Americans as the opposite of the original meaning. In fact, the phenomenon of the so called "reverse racism" is becoming more and more popular among white society, especially the conservatives. Ifemelu explains this phenomenon in her blog in the following terms:

> 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 schools 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 . . . If you make the mistake of saying this, you will be accused of a curiosity called "playing the race card." Nobody quite knows what this means. When my father was in school in my NAB country, many American Blacks could not vote or go to good schools. The reason? Their skin color. Skin color alone was the problem. Today, many Americans say that skin color cannot be part of the solution. Otherwise it is referred to as a curiosity called "reverse racism." . . . the American Black deal is kind of like you've been unjustly imprisoned for many years, then all of a sudden you're set free, but you get no bus fare. And, by the way, you and the guy who imprisoned you are now automatically equal. If the "slavery was so long ago" thing comes up 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? (Adichie 447-448)

What Ifemelu ironically emphasizes, is the paradox that problems for black people have started from skin color, but for whites skin color cannot be in turn the solution. The point is that not only white America is not willing to recognize the socioeconomic disadvantage of black people in the U.S., but black people are even accused of "playing the race card" or, even worse, of reverse racism if they complain or fight for their rights. The famous magazine *The Atlantic* in an article called "The Myth of Reverse Racism" explains this phenomenon as "the direct response to affirmative and race-based policies in the 1970s" that "helped shape a certain post-civil-rights-movement view of America where black people were the favored children of the state, and deserving white people were cast aside." Moreover, "[a] 1979 California Law Review article defines reverse discrimination as a phenomenon where individual blacks . . . began to be given benefits at the expense of whites who, apart from race, would have had a superior claim to enjoy them." (Newkirk II 2017). What is clear, is that after the Civil Right Movement in the 1960s, white people were afraid to lose their privilege and, consequently, their position of power. Therefore, this idea of reverse discrimination has still today widespread support among mainstream America. There are many studies showing that white people not only believe in reverse racism but this belief has also increased in the last few years:

> [d]ata show that many Americans do perceive reverse racism to be a significant societal problem. A 2016 Public Religion Research Institute poll indicates that half of all Americans, 57 percent of all white people and 66 percent of the white-working class believe that discrimination against white people is as big a problem in America as discrimination against black people. (Newkirk II 2017)

Adichie refers to the matter of reverse discrimination in an episode in which Ifemelu, right after her first diversity talk in Ohio in which she explains the importance of not equating all acts of discrimination, receives an email written in capital letters saying: "YOUR TALK WAS BALONEY. YOU ARE A RACIST. YOU SHOULD BE GRATEFUL WE LET YOU INTO THIS COUNTRY" (Adichie 377). In that moment Ifemelu understands that American people do not want to hear her ideas and get inspiration for real change, they just want to feel good about themselves and, in the end, the only space where she can

really express herself and be heard is her blog. In this regard, the following passage from her post is a perfect overview on the relationship between reverse racism and white privilege in the U.S.:

> Don't say "Oh, racism is over, slavery was so long ago." We are talking about problems from the 1960s, not the 1860s. If you meet an elderly American black man from Alabama, he probably remembers when he had to step off the curb because a white person was walking past . . . Finally, don't put on a Let's Be Fair Tone and say "But black people are racist too." Because of course we're all prejudiced (I can't even stand some of my blood relatives, grasping, selfish folks), but racism is about the power of a group and in America it's white folks who have that power. How? Well, white folks don't get treated like shit in upper-class African American communities and white folks don't get denied bank loans or mortgages precisely because they are white and black juries don't give white criminals worse sentences than black criminals for the same crime and black police officers don't stop white folk for driving while white and black companies don't choose not to hire somebody because their name sounds white and black teachers don't tell white kids that they're not smart enough to be doctors and black politicians don't try some tricks to reduce the voting power of white folks through gerrymandering and advertising agencies don't say they can't use white models to advertise glamorous products because they are not considered "aspirational" by the "mainstream". So after this listing of don'ts, what's the do? I'm not sure. Try listening, maybe. Hear what is being said. And remember that it's not about you. American Blacks are not telling you that you are to blame. They are just telling you what is. (Adichie 404-406)

Once again, Adichie's language is characterized by colloquialism and American slang (e.g. "folks" "treated like shit"). Moreover, the absence of punctuation, gives the post the style of a stream of consciousness, providing the reader with an effective and powerful flow of associative ideas and images. Through this post, Ifemelu's criticism offers an accurate portrayal of American response to racial discourse. It is important to differentiate between common human prejudices and the power of white privilege over black people. This power has ancient roots and is so embedded in American society, practices and mentality, that leaves little to no space for change. The big problem is that white people are close and secure in their system of beliefs and do not want to listen because it makes them uncomfortable. They claim that racism against black people is over on the one hand, but on the other hand they accuse black people of reverse racism. Either way, white people have the possibility to choose whether to see issues of race or not. Black people in America do not have the same possibility, even if they are not African American but black African immigrants, like Ifemelu. They are constantly forced to think of themselves and

the world around them in terms of race, since this category has enormous power both on their socioeconomic achievement and identity construction. America has taught Ifemelu to think in terms of race and, through her blog, she questions American social structure as well as her own identity. Once she gets to the U.S. she cannot choose whether to think in terms of race or not because she is black. Only white mainstream America can choose not to deal with race and, ultimately, this is exactly what white privilege is.

2.1.2. Race and Ifemelu's Identity Construction

As part of American tribalism, race is so deeply embedded in society that it inexorably shapes people's identity as a powerful force. Once she gets to the U.S., Ifemelu is forced to deal with this reality and to think in terms of race and to accept blackness as a part of her identity. The events in her American life are marked by her experience of race. Whether she is in line at the supermarket or struggling to find a job, being black will always play a major role in her U.S. life. In other words, blackness acts as a filter for both society and self-perception. Racism vs (self) love, and oppression vs liberation are two basic dichotomies of race experience (this matter will be further explored in section 2.2.). Through this experience Ifemelu questions her identity and sees America's true colors, which are not glowing as she thought they would, but "all of them [are] matt, disappointingly matt" (Adichie 126). As pointed out in chapter 1, when addressing identities my work

> accepts that identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation. (Hall 1996: 4)

Ifemelu's identity, therefore, is already always conflicted and fragmented because of the interaction of multiple factors that foster her changing. As it will be explored in section 2.2, factors like race, migration, relationships and ideals of beauty act on the process of her identity formation. Hence, how to explore Ifemelu's identity construction as a black subjectivity in the African diaspora? Or rather, since Ifemelu is an African immigrant in the U.S., how to investigate her African diasporic identity as a black subject in the West?

As previously outlined, blackness only became a racial category "with the forced removal of West Africans to the Western Hemisphere. From the start, Black identity has been produced in contradiction. . . Blacks in the West have nonetheless had their history shaped by the very concrete effects of Western racism" (Wright 2004: 1-2).

On the other hand, it can be argued, that since Ifemelu is a black African and not an African American, she can define herself through a different set of historical, cultural, and ethnic values that transcend race. However, as the novel portrays, despite this range of differences she is still identified as simply "black" in America, and therefore, lumped in this collective amorphous category that forces her to question her individual identity. On the matter of individual and collective African diasporic identity Wright points out that:

> seeking to determine Black subjectivity in the African diaspora means constantly negotiating between two extremes. On the one end stands that "blackness that swallows", the hypercollective, essentialist identity, which provides the comfort of absolutist assertions in exchange of total annihilation of the self. On the other hand stands the hyperindividual identity, most commonly found in poststructuralist critiques of racism and colonialism, which grants a wholly individualized (and somewhat) fragmented self in exchange for the annihilation of "Blackness" as a collective term. (2004: 2)

What Wright interestingly emphasizes here is the importance of constantly negotiating between black hypercollective and hyperindividual identities when it comes to investigating black subjectivities in the African diaspora. We can see an example of this negotiation in Ifemelu's identity construction process: she leaves Africa with her set of Nigerian values, she gets to the U.S. and, after being swallowed into the "black" category so much that she starts to write a blog on it, she decides to go back to Lagos. She goes back to Nigeria with her new self:

> "And what an ugly house," Ifemelu said. It was monstrous, with two alabaster angels guarding the gate, and a dome-shaped fountain sputtering in the front yard . . . And yet she had once found houses like that beautiful. But here she was now, disliking it with the haughty confidence of a person who recognized kitsch. (Adichie 484)

She is inevitably changed, and she acknowledges it. Even though she is happy to be back at home, she knows that she has to look for a compromise with

her new American self in Lagos. Therefore she joins the Nigerpolitan[4] club of returnees, where she feels comfortable, even though she feels guilty for it: "'I know,' Ifemelu said, and she caught the righteousness in her voice, in all their voices. They were the sanctified, the returnees, back home with an extra gleaming layer… An unease crept up on Ifemelu. She was comfortable here, and she wished she were not" (Adichie 501). Joining the Nigerpolitan club means that she is negotiating between the different facets of her identity and this negotiation is more of a struggle.

Hence Ifemelu, as a black subject in the African diaspora, is a Nigerian immigrant in the U.S., a race blogger with a scholarship at Princeton, and a returnee in Lagos. Her experience of blackness in the U.S. allows her to question her identity in terms of race and, ultimately, to come to terms with herself when she decides to go back to Lagos. She negotiates between her being black in the U.S. and her being a black Nigerian. In the U.S. she has been swallowed in the amorphous category of blackness and then she decides to go back to her homeland, where she joins the Nigerpolitan club, a safe place where her American part can feel comfortable and understood. In fact, when she returns to Lagos after thirteen years, she struggles to adapt to the changed city with her new self and she feels the need of meeting other returnees with whom she can share her American part (more on this matter in section 4.2).

Ifemelu's identity construction process is a constant negotiation between the different facets of her identity as an African immigrant. It is because of her experience of race that in the end she decides to go back to Lagos and closes her race blog. Moreover, in order to feel whole in Lagos, she has to find a compromise with her "Americanness" and decides to join the Nigerpolitan club.

At this point, a question arises: how does Ifemelu's experience of race takes place, exactly? In the next section of this paragraph I will attempt to answer this question through an experimental analysis based on hair as a metaphor for race and on Michelle Wright's theory of different interpellations of blackness.

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[4] The word Nigerpolitan is the Adichie's "coinage to define returnees in Lagos… [a] group that build[s] the homeland with tons of complains about everything in Nigeria and Lagos" (Fongang 2018).

2.2. Experiencing Blackness: Hair as a Metaphor for Race in *Americanah*

"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 263)

As Michelle Wright (2015) pointed out in *Physics of Blackness*, there are many dimensions from which to interpellate blackness. In the following work I will address blackness from both a vertical and a multidimensional point of view: according to Wright, a wholly vertical interpretation of blackness portrays it as a series of struggles against white racism's othering-processes and so defines it as a reactor to white agency (2015: 113); on the other hand, a multidimensional approach to blackness "predicate[s] on the assumption that Blackness possesses agency and involves choices" (2015: 114), that is to say it is not merely the outcome of racism.

Taking into account both these definitions in what follows I will address how blackness is experienced from the point of view of Ifemelu, the protagonist of Adichie's *Americanah*. In particular, I will show how Adichie uses hair as a metaphor for race in the U.S. in order to express what it means for Ifemelu to be black, and how this experience of blackness influences her process of self-knowledge and identity construction.

As I have already underlined, this work does not claim fixed notions of identity or blackness in any way, on the contrary it aims at showing how different interpellations of blackness are portrayed in the novel through the protagonist's conflicted and complex process of identity construction. In a series of hair-related events, Ifemelu experiences blackness in its vertical interpellation when being oppressed and othered for her hair; on the other hand when she decides to act and free herself (and her hair) from the oppression of racialized beauty ideals she interpellates blackness from a multidimensional point of view.

Not only is hair strictly connected to beauty ideals and race, but it is also a major issue for black women, both ideally (for what it symbolizes) and practically (for the special treatments black hair needs). Also the relationships

Ifemelu has with different men helps her to bring forward this process of self-knowledge and race discovery. Firstly, I will explain why and to which extent hair is a major issue for black women both culturally and practically and how racialized beauty ideals of hair negatively affect black women. Secondly, with a closer reading of selected passages from the novel I will focus my analysis on Ifemelu's vertical and multidimensional experience of blackness that occurs through hair as a metaphor for race. Hence Ifemelu's encounters with blackness will be used as opportunities to address broader race concerns. The aim of this work is to show how Ifemelu's experience of race interpellates blackness from both a vertical and multidimensional point of view and how this influences the process of her already conflicted and complex identity construction.

2.2.1. Hair matters

Every significant event in a woman's life, is preceded or followed by a visit to the hairdresser's. Whether she has just ended a relationship or she wants to look perfect for a job interview, hair matters. Particularly for black women and girls the relationship with hair is strictly connected to their identity construction (Johnson and Bankhead 2014: 86). Black hair has a unique texture that allows a various number of different styles and "for both African men and women hair is intricately connected to cultural identity, spirituality, character make up, and notions of beauty" (Johnson and Bankhead 2014: 87).

There are hidden ways in which culture and history condition our beliefs, preferences, desires and choices. In African societies hair has historically played an important role in the communication system and in denoting social status. A Wolof girl, for example, would wear her hair partially shaved just to show that she is too young to get married. Black men, on the other hand, wear a style known as the high top fade, a hairstyle where the sides of the head are shaved with the top portion growing upwards and as high as possible. The style conveys various cultural and political messages (e.g. images of Africa or partner's name) in that special symbols are etched into the hair or onto the scalp. Hair in African societies has a value for spirituality too, in fact, it is frequently used to increase the potency of medicines and indigenous healing potions. Therefore, "It is an

understatement to suggest that hair is merely part of African cultural identity, as hair and identity are inseparable" (Johnson and Bankhead 2014: 87).

With regards to black America, the repression of African hair started when Europeans began to shave the heads of the enslaved Africans upon arrival to the Americas. Europeans knew the complexity and significance of black hair and they were often struck by the various hairstyles that they saw within each community. Shaving their heads meant a symbolic removal of African culture and further acted to dehumanize Africans coming to the Americas in bondage. In fact,

> Africans with cultural identities such as Wolof, Asantes, Fulanis, and Mandingos entered the slave ships, yet an enslaved unidentifiable people exited onto the shores of the Americas. Without their combs, oils and native hair recipes Africans were left unable to care for an essential part of themselves. Europeans deemed African hair unattractive and did not consider it to be hair at all; for them it was considered the fur of animals and was referred to as wool or woolly. (Johnson and Bakhead 2014: 88)

The atrocities of African enslavement and the forcible removal from their homeland created a new phenomenon: for the first time in history African beauty, body and hair was racialized and European features were the accepted standard of beauty. Compared to the long and straight European hair, black people's hair was considered disturbing, unattractive and often compared to the fur of animals. In fact, while working on the plantation men were expected to be shaved and women had to cover their heads so as not to offend whites' notion of decorum (Johnson and Bankhead 2014: 88).

Short, matted, kinky, nappy, coarse, brittle, woolly, are all synonyms for "bad" hair that are opposed to long, straight, silky, buncy, manageable, healthy, shiny, or "good" hair. After more than two centuries words like wool and kinky are still used to describe in pejorative terms hair that does not conform to European standards (Johnson and Bankhead 2014: 88; Bryant 2013: 81; Robinson 2011: 358). The European beauty standard refers to that ideal of beauty that considers European features (e.g. white skin, long soft hair) the most attractive, in other words:

> Africans with cultural identities such as Wolof, Asantes, Fulanis, and Mandingos entered the slave ships, yet an enslaved unidentifiable people exited onto the shores of the Americas. Without their combs, oils and native

> hair recipes Africans were left unable to care for an essential part of themselves. Europeans deemed African hair unattractive and did not consider it to be hair at all; for them it was considered the fur of animals and was referred to as wool or woolly. (Johnson and Bakhead 2014: 88)

In *Americanah* Adichie addresses issues concerning black hair, since hair is strictly related to race. In fact, as a Nigerian woman immigrated to the U.S., Ifemelu does not know what it really means to be black in America. Through hair as a metaphor for race she experiences a series of events that build and progressively change her self-perception as a black woman in a white society. Before going on with the analysis, a focus on the concept of intersectionality is necessary.

2.2.2. The Importance of Intersectionality

> "The intersection of hair as race particular to Blacks and hair as beauty particular to females places a specific burden on Black females that is not experienced by either Black males or White females. The combination of hair as race with hair as beauty is an example of how intersectionality is essential to understanding subject matters specific to Black females." (Robinson 2011: 361)

The relationship between race, hair and gender is worth addressing for two main reasons: (1) Black women's hair is devalued and subject to discrimination due to its remarkable diversity from European female standards; (2) Race discourses are generally addressed from a black male perspective while gender issues are usually focused on white females. This forces black women to choose in which one of the two categories to fit because intersectionality often remains a neglected aspect in this area (Robinson 2011: 361; McCall 2005: 1776). Yet black women often experience biases that are the result of the intersection of the categories of race and gender. In this respect, intersectionality is an essential aspect to consider. McCall explains that interest in intersectionality was born as a result of the inadequacy of separate gender- and race-based research to address "neglected points of intersection" (2005: 1780) such as the one mentioned above. Therefore intersectionality allows those "categories" set at specific points of intersection such as gender, race and hair not to be underlooked or undervalued. There are three different approaches to the complexity of intersectionality: the anticategorical, the intercategorical and the intracategorical approach (2005: 1773). By and large the first approach aims

at deconstructing categories because of the irreducible complexity of social life; the second approach uses categories strategically to explicate relationships of inequality among social groups, and the third approach falls in between the two, therefore it is the most suitable for the sake of this work. The intracategorical approach acknowledges the stable and durable relationship that social categories represent, though it also maintains a critical stance toward categories. In other words, it interrogates their boundaries focusing on those social groups at neglected point of intersection, in order to reveal the complexity of lived experience within such groups. In fact black women are situated between race and gender and have to face threats of racism, sexism and an intersection of the two (Robinson 2011: 360).

Therefore the concept of intersectionality proves to be essential when addressing the matter of wearing black hair natural. In the following example it can be seen how Ifemelu, as a black woman set at a specific point of intersection of race and gender, has to face a multiple threat made of racism and sexism right after she cuts her hair short and leaves it natural:

> One day, at the farmers' market, as she stood hand in hand with Curt in front of a tray of apples, a Black man walked past and muttered, "You ever wonder why he likes you looking all jungle like that?" She stopped, unsure for a moment whether she had imagined those words, and then she looked back at the man. He walked with too much rhythm in his step, which suggested to her a certain fickleness of character. A man not worth paying any attention to. Yet his words bothered her, prised open the door for new doubts. (Adichie 263)

Interestingly, the racist comment comes from a black man, who, with his judgemental attitude, expresses how outrageous he sees the interracial relationship between Ifemelu and Curt. This attitude can be related to the history of enslavement and its consequences. In fact, black women have never been enslaved by other group of men other than white men, so this is what makes these relationships the most different and somewhat threatening, especially to black men (see Zebroski 1999). Ifemelu's "doubts" are a consequence of the process of othering that she undergoes when a black man implies that Curt, a white man, is in a relationship with her just because of her "wild" looks. In fact, before that, she was not thinking about her relationship in terms of race. While now, she is questioning herself and her relationship because of it.

Historically, notions of "vulgarity" were associated to black bodies. Black hair worn natural did not escape this misconception and also today it continues to be perceived as "jungly" and untamed (Johnson and Bankhead 2014: 92). Thus it is not surprising that the adjective "kinky" is used both to describe hair and sexual behaviour. Therefore, wearing her hair natural causes Ifemelu to face racist, sexist and racist-sexist biases that have their roots in the (not too distant) past.

2.2.3. Hair as a Metaphor for Race

If we think about hair as a metaphor for race it is possible to see a process of self-knowledge and identity construction through *Americanah* in which the turning points are marked by Ifemelu's relationship with her hair and, consequently, with the vertical and multidimensional interpellations of her blackness.

Divided between Lagos and the U.S., both physically and spiritually, Ifemelu experiences blackness through her experience with hair. Hair, in this regard, is the perfect metaphor for race since it is portrayed as a means of both oppression and liberation depending on whether a vertical interpretation of blackness (Ifemelu straightens her hair and in so doing she responds to and accept white beauty standards, which define black hair as ugly) or a multidimensional one (Ifemelu chooses to wear her hair natural, claiming its beauty, and falls in love with it) is interpellated.

Her experience with her hair and, therefore, with race, starts once she decides to migrate to the U.S. When Ifemelu is living in Lagos she dreams about a better future and new opportunities in the U.S.:

> The strike ended. Ifemelu returned to Nsukka, eased back into campus life, and from time to time, she dreamed of America. When Aunty Uju called to say that there were acceptance letters and a scholarship offer, she stopped dreaming. She was too afraid to hope, now that it seemed possible. (Adichie 121)

America is considered to be the land of opportunities, a fascinating place enveloped in the glow of a beautiful dream. Moreover, the African sense of inferiority in relation to African Americans needs also to be taken into account. In fact, African American culture in Africa is seen as Eurocentric, and therefore,

it is very influential in terms of how people speak and dress in Africa (Jackson and Cothran 2003: 600). Adichie is addressing this matter in the following passage:

> "You look like a Black American" was [Obinze's] ultimate compliment, which he told her when she wore a nice dress, or when her hair was done in large braids. Manhattan was his zenith. He often said "It's not as if this is Manhattan" or "Go to Manhattan and see how things are." (Adichie 80)

When Ifemelu talks with Aunty Uju about the scholarship offer in the U.S., the subject of hair is mentioned straightaway: "'Make small-small braids that will last long, it's very expensive to make hair here,' Aunty Uju told her. 'Aunty, let me get the visa first!' Ifemelu said" (Adichie 122). The matter of hair is very serious for black women not only for its spiritual and cultural legacy (Johnson and Bankhead 2014: 87) but also for practical aspects. Black hair needs a lot of care and special treatments. It needs to be combed and treated with creams and oils. In fact, if not moisturized and oiled properly, black hair can incur in serious damage and even breakage because of the "kink factor" which makes it very dry (Robinson 2011: 363).

Once Ifemelu gets to America her expectation is immediately betrayed by reality. What Ifemelu had pictured in her head was a glowing, promising America that could give her what, up to then, she had only ever dreamed of. In the books Obinze gave her to read and in their talks about the future America was this distant, exotic place full of promises. Seeing the "matt" colors of America is now the first step in her process of the discovery of race. When she sees Aunty Uju she is struck by how much she has changed and how she does not take care of her hair so much anymore:

> And she thought, watching her, how the old Aunty Uju would never have worn her hair in such scruffy braids. She would never have tolerated the ingrown hair that grew like raisins on her chin, or worn trousers that gathered bulkily between her legs. America had subdued her. (Adichie 135)

Through the "scruffy braids" of her aunt's hair, Ifemelu can now see her struggle, difficulty, and resignation. Her "scruffy braids" are the result of her feeling defeated as a black woman in the U.S. Therefore, in the first years Ifemelu is living in the U.S. and trying to fit in, she experiences blackness from a wholly vertical dimension. When Aunty Uju learns that she has passed the

exam to become a physician, she says she must relax her hair in order to do the interview and get the job:

> "So I will be a family physician in this America," she said, almost in a whisper. She opened a can of Coke and left it undrunk. Later, she said, "I have to take my braids out for my interviews and relax my hair. Kemi told me that I shouldn't wear braids to the interview. If you have braids, they will think you are unprofessional." So there are no doctors with braided hair in America? Ifemelu asked. "I have told you what they told me. You are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do if you want to succeed." (Adichie 146)

Aunty Uju will have to straighten her hair in order to conform to the rules imposed by white beauty standards. Her blackness is vertically interpellated as a reaction to these rules to which she has to conform, and Ifemelu has to do the same:

> When [Ifemelu] told Ruth about the interview in Baltimore, Ruth said, "My only advice? Lose the braids and straighten your hair. Nobody says this kind of stuff but it matters. We want you to get that job." . . . Since she came to America, she has always braided her hair with long extensions, always alarmed at how much it cost. She wore each style for three months, even four months, until her scalp itched unbearably and the braids sprouted fuzzily from a bed of new growth. And so it was a new adventure, relaxing her hair. (Adichie 250)

Ifemelu has never straighten her hair, but she is curious and ready to do it, especially because it will increase her job opportunities. Both Aunty Uju and Ifemelu have to adapt to America's "implicitly" dictated social (and beauty) rules in order to have success. Their blackness is wholly vertical interpellated since their decision to straighten their hair is simply a reaction to the rules imposed by white supremacy. In fact, straightened hair on a black woman can be seen as a mitigation of her being black because it "minimizes her African ancestry" and therefore it positively influences her career and social achievement (Robinson 2011: 359). At first, Ifemelu tries to relax her hair alone at home using products that are supposed to be gentle. Unfortunately, the relaxer is not strong enough so she decides to go to the hairdresser:

> "Girl, you need a professional," the hairdresser said as she reapplied another relaxer. "People think they're saving money by doing it at home but they're really not." Ifemelu felt only a slight burning, at first, but as the hairdresser rinsed out the relaxer, Ifemelu's head bent backwards against a plastic sink, needles of stinging pain shot up from different parts of her body, back up to her head. "Just a little burn," the hairdresser said. "But look how pretty it is. Wow, girl, you've got the white-girl swing!" (Adichie 250)

Ifemelu has to feel terrible pain in order to have "the white-girl swing" and increase her opportunities to obtain a job. Straightening her hair is a symbol of oppression of her blackness, which is wholly vertically interpellated because it is the reaction generated by the need to adapt to white beauty standards. In fact, once she looks in the mirror she feels odd: "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 251). Relaxing her hair makes her feel that she has lost something characteristic of her black identity, something natural of herself. She feels the wrongness of that gesture: giving up a part of her blackness in service of being what white society expects from her. In this respect, her vertical experience of blackness is fueling the incompleteness of her identity formation process.

2.2.4. Black Hair and Biases

Wearing braids or other black hairstyles that do not involve straightening and relaxing, can be seen as controversial from both white and black people, though for different reasons.

Firstly, hair is strictly related to beauty notions that are in turn related to power. As previously mentioned, centuries of slavery and oppression had an impact on hair valuations that resulted in a denigration by both black and white people of black short, kinky, dry hair in favour of an Eurocentric beauty ideal that celebrates white long, straight, soft hair (Johnson and Bankhead 2014: 90). The connection between notions of beauty and race has been investigated by many prominent scholars in the field, since the two are very much related. In fact, as Anne Anlin Cheng pointed out:

> In the realm of race studies, beauty occupies just as unbecoming a history. The works of Meg Armstrong, Emmanuel Eze, Henry Louis Gates, Sander L. Gilman, and Paul Gilroy, among others, have demonstrated the historic complicity between the philosophical discourse of aesthetic judgement and a metaphysics of racial difference since the Enlightenment. (2000: 192)

Beauty notions therefore can be a means of oppression if embedded in the racial discourse. There are many studies focusing on the impact that

European standards of beauty have on black women through media, society and work environment. It is not surprising that in the age of "global Americanization" (Cheng 2000: 194) in which we live the ideal of white beauty, in general, is still predominant. What is startling is the internal acceptation of white aesthetic standards by black people, for which we need to look back at history. Since the 17th century African American women and their beauty have been juxtaposed against white beauty standards, particularly pertaining to their skin color and hair. During slavery, black women who were lighter-skinned and had features that were associated with European characteristics (e.g. wavy or straight hair) tended to be house slaves and those black women with darker-skin hues and kinky hair tended to be field slaves. This racist legacy and African American internalization of this white supremacist racial classification brought about a complex that makes black women alter, disguise, and cover up their physical selves in order to assimilate and to be accepted as attractive. Therefore, the desire of a black woman to change her outer appearance to meet a Eurocentric ideal may lead her to loathe her own physical appearance and to believe that "black" is not beautiful (Cheng 2000: 195).

There is another reason (that also has its roots in history) why wearing natural hair for black people can be socially problematic. During the 1960's and 70's Civil Rights Movements a new hairstyle became popular among black people, the "Afro", also called the "natural". The Afro hair was neither relaxed nor braided but just combed upwards and outwards. The use of chemical and heat processing restraint was refused in order to have healthy and "free" hair as a symbol of "Black self-love", "Black power", "social rebellion" and "civil revolution" (Johnson and Bankhead 2014: 89).

"While society has undergone various socio-cultural and sociopolitical shifts, there are still those who see the Afro as a sign of militancy and Black power." (Johnson and Bankhead 2014: 89). Wearing natural hair such as the Afro-style still conveys a message of political militancy and rebellion, and as a consequence it is perceived by white people as threatening and adversarial. In this regard, when Ifemelu is forced to cut her hair short because of the burns and

infection caused by straightening chemicals that are damaging her scalp and hair, Adichie writes:

> For three days, she called in sick. Finally, she went to work, her hair a very short, overly combed and overly oiled Afro. "You look different", her co-workers said, all of them a little tentative. "Does it mean anything? Like, something political?" Amy asked, Amy who had a poster of Che Guevara on her cubicle wall. "No," Ifemelu said. At the cafeteria, Miss Margaret, the bosomy African American woman who presided over the counter- and, apart from two security guards, the only other Black person in the company- asked, "Why did you cut your hair, hon? Are you a lesbian?" "No, Miss Margaret, at least not yet." (261)

Because the Afro hairstyle was worn in the 60's and 70's as a symbol of political militancy against white power, wearing natural hair in the present day can be seen as a means of conveying a political message and not simply for what it is, a healthy choice of self-love. Nobody asks Ifemelu if cutting her hair short was for necessity or simply for a change of style. They assume there was something else behind it, whether political belief or sexual orientation.

She did not go to work because she was afraid of what other people could say and because she was not able to recognize herself. Her hair used to mirror white beauty ideals and now it does not. Even though at first she makes this choice just for the sake of her health, thanks to it she eventually frees herself from the oppression of straightened hair. Adichie addresses this matter once again through Ifemelu's blog:

> When you DO have natural Negro hair, people think you "did" something to your hair. Actually, the folk with the Afros and dreads are the ones who haven't "done" anything to their hair. . . . I have natural kinky hair. Worn in cornrows, Afros, braids. No, it's not political. No, I am not an artist or poet or singer. Not an earth mother either. I just don't want relaxers in my hair- there are enough sources of cancer in my life as it is. (Adichie 367)

With her ironic and colloquial tone, Adichie emphasizes that it is a well-known fact that chemicals and relaxers can be really dangerous for the health but many black women are ready to endanger their health for the sake of beauty standards determined by race. Many researches (see Bryant 2013) have been conducted on the negative effect that the internalization of European ideals of beauty has on black girls and women. From family context to media messages the Eurocentric beauty ideal is considered to be the norm. Black natural hair on the other hand is considered to be the (negative) exception to the rule. It goes

without saying that this has a damaging impact on self-esteem and self-love that affects everyday life.

On the same day that Ifemelu cuts her hair short she finds out that Curt is flirting via e-mails with a white woman with long and straight hair, and she feels terrible:

> Pictures [Ifemelu] had seen of his ex-girlfriends 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. She shut the laptop. She felt small and ugly. (261)

In this passage Adichie emphasizes that Ifemelu feels terrible, looking at all the women of different races that Curt dated. All of them have hair that is very different from hers. None of them has kinky, short hair. She suffers from this comparison, since her hair does not fit in the widely accepted ideal of beauty.

As a huge source of information about the ideals reflected by society, media have great power in influencing not only consumers' behaviour, but also the perception people (women particularly) have of themselves. In this respect, since black women do not reflect the dominant Eurocentric beauty ideal, they are underrepresented in beauty magazines and ads, in which whiteness is dominant and blackness almost invisible.

Adichie refers to this matter through a passage that opens the way to Ifemelu's blog after Curt sees a copy of the magazine *Essence* and innocently tells her that the magazine seems "racially skewed" (Adichie 363). Hence Ifemelu decides to bring him to the bookstore and show him different women's magazines:

> [Ifemelu said:] "Now I'm going to flip through, page by page, and you tell me how many Black women you see." "Babe, come on," Curt said, amused, leaning back, paper cup to his lips. "Just humour me," she said. And so he counted . . . [Ifemelu said:] "So three Black women in maybe two thousand pages of women's magazines, . . . This [article] tells you about different hair products for *everyone*- and 'everyone' means blondes, brunettes and redheads. I am none of those. And this tells you about the best conditioners- for straight, wavy and curly. No kinky . . . Now, let's talk about what is racially skewed. Do you see why a magazine like *Essence* even exists?" (Adichie 364)

Even apparently simple things such as ads for products for everyday care in popular magazines can convey meanings of inadequacy for those who do not

conform to dominant ideals of beauty. Eventually Ifemelu frees herself from this negative scheme thanks to the advice of her friend Wambui who suggests cutting her hair short and letting it grow natural: "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…. You're always battling to make your hair do what it wasn't meant to do" (Adichie 257). This passage is particularly symbolic because it highlights how forcing black hair to fit into certain racialized beauty standards equates with oppressing blackness in order to confine it to a vertical interpellation, namely a mere reaction to white agency. After a little time, Ifemelu falls in love with her hair and consequently, she experiences a new, multidimensional facet of her blackness in which her agency involves the choice not to feel othered anymore: "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 263).

2.2.5. Ifemelu's Blackness and her (In)completeness

After the bookstore episode with Curt, Ifemelu starts writing her blog. In fact, being in an interracial relationship with a white man who is pretty naive when it comes to race and black people's struggles, makes Ifemelu reflect even more on the importance of sharing and discussing race issues in the U.S. with other (black) people. In this respect, Adichie's narrative choice of using a race blog is remarkable, since its peculiar dialogical nature of a virtual meeting place allows for an open conversation in which everyone can share ideas and points of view. In so doing, Ifemelu too, as a racialized African immigrant, can learn about race.

It is her discovery of blackness that in the end takes her back to Lagos. Or better, it is her multidimensional interpellation of blackness that allows her to choose to go back to her homeland. After the end of Ifemelu's relationship with Curt because of her unfaithfulness, Ifemelu feels that: "There was something wrong with her. She did not know what it was but there was something wrong with her. A hunger, a restlessness. An incomplete knowledge of herself. The sense of something farther away, beyond her reach" (Adichie

358). She betrayed him not just for sex, but because she was curious, she felt incomplete, she was still looking for something, in fact, "she was looking for something solid, flailing, and all she touched dissolved into nothingness" (Adichie 355).

This sense of incompleteness will not be overcome even when she meets Blaine and begins a relationship with him. Blaine is African American and an academic. Under his suggestion she applies for and obtains a scholarship at Princeton. Ifemelu often says that she does not feel comfortable in academic circumstances. Nonetheless, through her blog and workshops she brings discussions involving race, gender, and so forth to the attention of everybody, in particular of the black community. Thanks to this blog she learns to know herself and her complex process of identity construction moves forward. However, Blaine's approach to the blog is very different from Ifemelu's: "She did not ask for his edits, but slowly she began to make changes, to add and remove, because of what he said. Then she began to resent it. Her posts sounded too academic, too much like him…. 'I don't want to explain, I want to observe,' she said" (Adichie 386). Their different understanding of the aim of the blog and, especially, of race issues, reflects their different understanding of life in general: "There was an impatience in her tone, almost an accusation, as she added that academics were not intellectuals; they were not curious, they built their stolid tents of specialized knowledge and stayed securely in them" (Adichie 400).

Ifemelu's conflicted experience of blackness is totally different from the academics' search for fixed notions. She wants to observe and to experience without looking for definitions, since she herself is still conflicted in the ongoing process of her identity construction. Even when she begins her relationship with Blaine, there is always something that makes her feel distant and different from him, especially because of their different vision of the world. She loves him and admires him, but their different approach to race creates a boundary between them:

> Weeks before, an older white woman standing in line behind them at the grocery store had said, "Your hair is so beautiful, can I touch it?" and Ifemelu said yes. The woman sank her fingers into her Afro. She sensed Blaine tense, saw the pulsing at his temples. "How could you let her do that?" he asked afterwards. "Why not? How else will she know what hair like mine feels like?

> She probably doesn't know any Black people." "And so you have to be her guinea pig?" Blaine asked. He expected her to feel what she did not know how to feel. There were things that existed for him that she could not penetrate." (Adichie 387)

Hair is again the turning point, the metaphor through which Ifemelu makes the experience of race and goes on in the process of interpellating blackness. She does not think about the potential insult behind that white woman's gesture, she does not see herself as an object of white biases, she simply let that woman touch her hair to satisfy her curiosity. A boundary is set between Blaine and Ifemelu in that moment. He is an African American academic whose concern with race and his interpellation of blackness is wholly vertical, while Ifemelu is experiencing blackness in its multidimensionality, especially if we consider that she chooses to allow the white woman to touch her hair and therefore she expresses agency.

It is when her blog is going very well, she has a fellowship at Princeton and she is in a long-lasting relationship with Blaine that she feels the compelling need to go back to Nigeria. It is when she should have felt most complete, that she feels lost in "amorphous longings, shapeless desires, brief imaginary glints of other lives she could be living" (Adichie 6). A clear sign of her incompleteness is also the relationship she is having with her blog:

> She began, over time, to feel like a vulture hacking into the carcasses of people's stories for something she could use. Sometimes making fragile links to race. Sometimes not believing herself. The more she wrote, the less sure she became. Each post scraped off yet one more scale of self until she felt naked and false. (Adichie 5)

She has nothing more to say on race, she feels "naked" and "false" talking about it, so she decides to close the blog. Discovering race in America and experiencing blackness from different dimensions allows her to understand that she is ready to go back home. Only then will she be able to come to terms with herself. In Lagos, Ifemelu goes to a Nigerpolitan meeting and eventually discovers a new self as a black returnee (more on this matter in section 4.2). She is still the one who has missed her homeland but she is also the one who has inevitably changed through her experience of blackness in the U.S. In fact, she starts writing a new blog in Lagos and she talks about it with Curt: "So you still blogging?" "Yes." "About race?" "No, just about life. Race doesn't really work

here. I feel like I got off the plane in Lagos and stopped being Black" (Adichie 586).

As a returnee Ifemelu opens a new blog that focuses on life rather than on race since her experience of race in the U.S. is now concluded but the complex process of her identity construction is still ongoing.

Analyzing selected passages from the novel this section has outlined Ifemelu's discovery of race and experience of blackness both from a wholly vertical and a multidimensional interpellation according to the definitions of these concepts provided by Wright (2015). Without relying on fixing notions of identity or blackness, this chapter has portrayed Ifemelu's experience of blackness as embedded in her complex process of self-knowledge and identity formation that is never really completed. The choice of wearing her hair natural (at first for health reasons and then as an act of self-love and liberation) represents her ultimate refusal to be oppressed by the rules dictated by white agency and in so doing it addresses blackness in its multidimensionality. Ifemelu's agency finally allows her to come to terms with the different facets of her blackness and herself: a Nigerian immigrant in the U.S., a race blogger with a scholarship at Princeton, a black returnee in Lagos.

3. *GraceLand* and the (Ambivalent) American Dream

The present chapter will address questions of identity and blackness as raised by Abani through the personal journey of the protagonist of *GraceLand* Elvis Oke. In particular, under the light of what Abani refers to as "mongrelization" (Aycock 2009: 6) I will investigate the diasporic and transnational dimensions of Elvis's identity.

GraceLand centers on the story of a teenager named Elvis, who works as an impersonator of his namesake, Elvis Presley, and who is trying to get out of the slum in Lagos in which he lives with his father, an alcoholic, and his stepmother Comfort, who does not treat him fairly. The story focuses on the difficult and violent environment that is Nigeria's largest city and Elvis's struggles to escape the orbit of his troubled family and make a better life for himself. Exploring themes such as: slum vs native village, mother vs father, poverty, violence, and globalization, *GraceLand* is split between two main narratives, with the main story taking place in Lagos in 1983 and the secondary narrative taking place in the small village of Afikpo between 1972 and 1981. Abani cuts back and forth between the present and Elvis's childhood, interspersing the chapters with intertextual fragments of Igbo traditions.

Abani's writing style is highly effective in its metaphorical depiction of violence, which is a cross-cutting theme of the novel as well as a powerful force in shaping Elvis's identity. Moreover, Abani's emphasis on the role that music and literature play in shaping Elvis's subjectivity can also be read as an intertextual device able to highlight the diasporic quality of black identities. Finally, since Elvis is living in Lagos and not in the U.S., his blackness cannot be interpellated through the category of race and, therefore, via moments of anti-black racism. Elvis's black identity is, as a consequence, self-interpellated, that is, his interpellation of blackness begins in the self and because of that, it is not a mere reaction (to white racism) but produced as a choice. Wright describes choice as "the fulcrum of agency" that interpellates blackness in the "now" (i.e. Wright's Epiphenomenal time) rather than through a cause-and-effect history.

The ambiguous presence of U.S. culture in Nigeria is a cross-cutting theme in the whole novel, so much so that Elvis's identity is characterized by the pervasive influence that the Lagosian globalized culture, permeated by American mass culture, has on him. Moreover, Elvis migrates to the U.S. only at the end of the novel, therefore his identity construction cannot be addressed in terms of race. Abani portrays Elvis's black subjectivity as strongly shaped by the Lagosian globalized reality in which he lives, as well as by Igbo notions of masculinity and the strong relationship he has with reading.

This section aims at showing how Abani raises questions of identity, masculinity, and cultural mongrelization through Elvis's experiences. Even though the novel takes place exclusively in Nigeria, it nonetheless gives an interesting and precious view on the impact that American culture has on Lagos through globalization. In particular, the portrayal of America and its relationship with Nigeria is ambivalent throughout the novel as is Elvis himself towards the U.S.: "He mused over his mixed feelings. His fascination with movies and Elvis Presley aside, he wasn't really sure he liked America. Now that the people he cared about were going there, he felt more ambivalent than ever" (Abani 55). On the one hand, America in Elvis's mind is portrayed as the ultimate place where every dream comes true, even for black people (American commodities serving this purpose), while on the other hand, the concrete presence of America in Elvis's life is disappointing and reveals itself through global dark connections such as drugs and human trafficking.

Thus this chapter is divided into two main parts. The first will focus on Elvis's identity as it is influenced by masculinity ideologies, violence and the ambiguous American presence. In particular, it will show how Lagosian globalized culture has an impact on Elvis's life, because, as we will see, American commodities are associated with a high social status and well-being and, therefore, with patterns of identity. In fact, as Paul Jay pointed out: "the exchange of cultural commodities [is] central to the fashioning of identity" (2010: 2), since, through commodities, consumers define their social identity. In other words, objects are instruments of personal realization, in that they confer to individuals a role in the social reality. The fragmentation of Elvis's identity is

reflected in the complexity of his existence which is permeated with violence and power that are exerted through an imposed masculinity and the difficult Lagosian reality. However, as the second part of the chapter will show, through the love of literature, Elvis expresses agency and chooses to embrace the transnational culture that underpins his mongrel identity.

The second part is more experimental and will focus on reading as a metaphor for mongrelization. In particular, I will argue that the paramount role that Abani confers to literature in the novel empowers Elvis. In particular, through his reading of any type of books from all over the world, and therefore, his embracing a mongrel culture that exceeds national border, Elvis expresses agency and has an active role in the formation of his hybrid identity. Applying Wright's "self-interpellation" of blackness (different from the wholly vertical and multidimensional interpellations which were useful for the analysis of *Americanah*) to Elvis's black subjectivity, allows me to show how Abani constructs Elvis's black identity, which is indeed, as pointed out by Wright, dependent on notions of time and space and operates as a "when" and as a "where", rather than being a "what".

In particular, applying this theory will show how Elvis's blackness, self-interpellated through his personal choice of reading different kinds of books, from the Koran to Baldwin, allows him to approach and become familiar with different types of cultures, to appreciate them and, therefore, to move beyond the nation.

3.1. Elvis and "Mongrel" Identities

3.1.1. Masculinity, Diaspora and Violence

Throughout the novel, Abani shows how Elvis's "mongrel" identity is shaped by different factors: the influence that American cultural capital has on him, and notions of masculinity that are part of Igbo traditions, marking his childhood in a violent way.

However, before analyzing this aspect, it is necessary to outline the connection between diaspora and fragmented cultural identities. In fact, the two concepts are deeply intertwined since diaspora problematizes fixed notions of

identity, space and sense of attachment and belonging to the motherland (see chapter 1). Elvis's diasporic identity, as portrayed by Abani, perfectly embodies this problematization, since even though he was born and grew up in Nigeria, he never truly fitted in that reality. In fact, as his friend Redemption affirms, "Your type no fit survive here long" (Abani 317; more on this matter in section 4.3). In other words, Elvis's experience questions a certain diasporic ideology which sacralizes the motherland as well as that linear link between place and self-consciousness. As Paul Gilroy underlines,

> Diaspora is an especially valuable idea because it points toward a more refined and more wieldy sense of culture than the characteristic notions of rootedness . . . It makes the spatialization of identity problematic and interrupts the ontologization of place . . . It rejects the popular image of natural nations spontaneously endowed with self-consciousness, tidily composed of uniform families: those interchangeable collections of ordered bodies that express and reproduce absolute distinctive cultures . . . As an alternative to the metaphysics of "race", nation and bounded culture coded into the body, diaspora is a concept that problematizes the cultural and historical mechanics of belonging. It disrupts the fundamental power of territory to determine identity by breaking the simple sequence of explanatory links between place, location, and consciousness. (2000: 122-123)

Therefore, diaspora problematizes cultural identities and offers the opportunity to better investigate them, since it does not rely on that spatial and cultural homogeneity that is usually dictated by notions of territory, rootedness, uniform families and race. Elvis's placement in the black diaspora perfectly fits into this scheme of cultural heterogeneity as described by Gilroy. In fact, on the one hand, Elvis's life is surrounded by American commodities and shaped by his fascination for them, on the other hand, his family consists of a violent alcoholic father, an uncle who repeatedly rapes his own daughter (one time Elvis too) and a stepmother who does not treat him fairly. Moreover, his mother died when he was only eight years old. The only memory Elvis has of her is her journal that he keeps reading when he is looking for answers. Thus, Elvis's broken family impedes him to develop a cohesive, coherent identity, which Abani, indeed, portrays as fragmented, hybrid and with a conflicted sense of belonging to his motherland. So much so that, in order to survive, he will eventually migrate to the U.S.

Masculinity throughout the novel is a major theme which intersects many others. In particular, Abani portrays how masculinity is imposed on Elvis by his father who, even if well intentioned, ends up traumatizing him with his brutality and lack of tenderness. One of the most significant moments in Elvis's childhood in which masculinity is imposed on him is the Igbo ritual that is supposed to mark his transition from boyhood to manhood at the age of five. As explained in the novel, the ritual would have normally included the killing of an eagle, however, Elvis finds himself having to kill a chick:

> Elvis had no idea why his father had summoned him to the backyard, away from the toy fire engine he was playing with. He had no idea why he had been asked to strip down to his underwear, or why uncle Joseph first strapped a grass skirt on him and then began to paint strange designs in red and white dye all over his body. But he was five years old, and had learned not only that no one explained much to him, but that it was safest not to ask. Uncle Joseph had a habit of expressing his impatience in slaps. His mother, Beatrice, stood in the shadows, leaning on a doorframe for support. She was ill and had been for a while. Whatever was going on must be important, Elvis thought, if she had gotten out of bed for it. She had a sudden coughing bout and would have fallen over had Aunt Felicia not caught her and led her back in. "Mommy! Mommy!" Elvis called, struggling to get to her. "Stand still," Sunday said, pulling him roughly by the arm. He stumbled, but steadied himself against his uncle. Near tears, he watched Beatrice retreat into the house. He looked around for Oye, but she was nowhere to be found. Instead he saw his teenage cousins, Innocent and Godfrey, and a gaggle for other boys ranging from ten to nineteen. This group was made up of young men from the neighboring hamlets that had come to welcome Elvis on his first step to manhood as dictated by tradition, and as part of the ritual they would form a retinue of singers. The truth was, they were only there because they hoped that they would all be treated to good food and plenty to drink. Sunday noticed Elvis's attention straying and realized that he was looking for his mother and grandmother. "It is time to cut your apron strings," he said to Elvis. "Dis is about being a man. No women allowed." "Easy, Sunday," Joseph said. "Easy what? Dis is why he has to learn early how to be a man, you know?" "I know, but easy." Elvis stood still throughout the exchange as Joseph continued to paint . . . Elvis started asking questions. "What is happening?" "Today, Elvis, you are going to kill your first eagle." "But I'm too little." "Don't worry," Uncle Joseph said, laughing. "But why must I kill the eagle?" "It is de first step into manhood for you. When you are older, de next step is to kill a goat, and den from dere we begin your manhood rites. But dis is de first step." . . . When Joseph finished painting Elvis, he sent his son Godfrey out to summon the male elders. While he was gone, Joseph handed Elvis a small homemade bow with an arrow strung in it. On the end of the arrow, pierced through its side, was a chick. It was still alive and it chirped sadly. There was a line of blood from its beak that ran into the yellow down around its neck. The blood was beginning to harden and stiffen the feathers into a red necktie. "It is alive," Elvis said. "Of course it is. You just shot it," Joseph replied. "I didn't." "You did," Sunday said. "Is this an eagle chick?" Elvis asked. Joseph laughed. "Elvis, you funny. No, it is chicken, eagle is too expensive" Elvis stood there holding the bow and arrow, with the helpless chick as far away from him as possible. He did not want the blood touching him. He tried not to make eye contact with the dying bird. (Abani 17-20)

This traumatic event in Elvis's childhood that, however, is supposed to be a solemn moment, is recounted by Abani in a grotesque and ironic way, which emphasizes Elvis's estrangement from the rite and the vacuity of the practice. The fact that the ritual cannot be performed the way it used to be suggests Abani's emphasis on its anachronism. Elvis is playing with his toy when Sunday and his uncle Joseph begin to prepare him for the rite. When he starts looking for his mother and grandmother, the female figures he associates with tenderness and protection, his father treats him even more severely and forces him to face violence. Right after the killing "Sunday picked Elvis up and held him close to the decaying birds. Elvis turned away from the smell. 'Don't turn away from death. We must face it. We are men,' Sunday said. Elvis turned to him, tears brimming. 'But it stinks.' 'So does life, boy. So does life,' Joseph said." (Abani 21). The event is traumatizing, since it forces Elvis to see an innocent bird dying, and this makes him sad, so much so that he cannot even look it in the eye. Elvis clearly refuses to see this tradition as part of himself. In fact, as also pointed out by Amanda Aycock:

> Elvis refuses to recognize this constructed performance of manhood as his own . . . This perfunctory motion towards Igbo tradition also points to the constructed nature of culture and identity. Additionally Elvis experiences arbitrary cruelty and death: he is quite disturbed by both his kill and the dead chicks that other boys have killed, for the sake of their "manhood." (2009: 13-14)

Another aspect to consider in this passage is the fact that Elvis's father (Sunday) makes him perform this rite at the young age of five. This urgency of marking his son's belonging to the Igbo ethnic group at such a young age can be interpreted as a reflection of the pressure Sunday feels from cultural, economic and political changes that are taking place in Lagos in that moment and that he perceives as threats to their cultural inheritance[5].

Therefore, Sunday is establishing his son's belonging to the Igbo community in order to fix Elvis's cultural identity and, in marking his masculinity, he is also defining his social identity. In other words, since Sunday is perceiving change as a threat, moved by anxiety and feeling powerlessness,

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[5] For a deeper analysis of the social, political and economic situation of Lagos in the years in which the novel is set, see Omelsky 2011.

he focuses on Elvis's masculinity because he believes that it is something on which he still has power.

In fact, as pointed out by Gilroy, masculinity is seen as a means to guarantee and restore that "natural" social hierarchy, complicated by diaspora, that relies on boundaries between genders, and that is considered to be the groundwork of the nation:

> [w]here separation, time, and distance from the point of origin or the center of sovereignty complicate the symbolism of ethnic and national reproduction, anxieties over the boundaries and limits of sameness may lead people to seek security in the sanctity of embodied difference . . . Gender differences become extremely important in nation-building activity because they are a sign of an irresistible natural hierarchy that belongs at the center of civic life. The integrity of the nation becomes the integrity of its masculinity. In fact, it can be a nation only if the correct version of gender hierarchy has been established and reproduced. The family is the main device in this operation. It connects men and women, boys and girls to the larger collectivity toward which they must orient themselves if they are to acquire a Fatherland. (Gilroy 2000: 127)

The fact that this important culture-linked rite of passage is immediately followed by something more profane, is emblematic. In fact, Elvis and his teenage uncles, after the event, celebrate, but while they drink beer they buy him Fanta:

> "Ah Elvis done taste him first blood, so as a man, he must drink with men," Innocent replied. Ordering beers for himself and Godfrey, he opened up a cold bottle of Fanta for Elvis. "How you dey" Innocent asked him. "I was afraid," Elvis replied. "Dat's how dese things are. De trials of dis world things come as surprise, so you must have a warrior's heart to withstand dem. Dat's why your papa no tell you about today. You understand?" Innocent said. Elvis shook his head and took a sip from his soda. "Leave him. He is a child," Godfrey said. "Dere is time for such talk later." Innocent nodded and took a swig of beer. Sitting on the counter in his grass skirt, drinking his Fanta and watching Godfrey and Innocent tease the girl behind the counter, Elvis felt like a man. (Abani 21)

Right after the cruel killing rite, his young uncles buy Elvis an American drink symbolizing the global reach of capitalism. The image portrayed by Abani is somewhat ironic and grotesque. Elvis sitting in his traditional grass skirt drinking a Fanta addresses the mongrelization of culture in Lagos.

Masculinity and violence shape Elvis's identity since his childhood. After his wife's death, Sunday starts to drink his sorrows away, since he cannot express his sadness in any other way: "The formal year-long mourning period for Elvis's mother had just ended. The entire family had performed the full rites,

with the exception of his father. Igbo men didn't mourn women publicly. It was considered bad taste" (Abani 60). Masculinity leaves no space for expressing sadness, which would be a sign of weakness.

Another traumatizing moment in Elvis's childhood in which masculinity is imposed to him is when he dresses like a girl for fun at the age of nine years old, triggering his father's violent reaction:

> Elvis longed to try on their makeup and have his hair plaited. Aunt Felicia finally gave into his badgering and wove his hair into lovely cornrows. One of the other girls put lipstick on him. Giggling, and getting into the game, another pulled a minidress over his head. On Elvis, it fell nearly to the floor, like an evening gown. He stepped into a pair of Aunt Felicia's too-big platforms and pranced about, happy, proud, chest stuck out. (Abani 61)

In this passage, Abani's depiction of Elvis's fragmented identity is clearly evident. Elvis is only a child when he genuinely starts questioning gender boundaries and differences, even if just for fun. Moreover, he is filled with pride. He insistently asks the girls to be dressed like a girl and once they have completed the job he feels proud, his chest "stuck out", he feels good. However, right after this moment of fun and happiness, his father sees him and reacts with rage and violence:

> Looking up, he saw his father, Sunday, coming up the path. Aunt Felicia and Oye took in Sunday's approaching figure with alarmed gasps and then looked back at Elvis's cornrowed hair, painted face and dress, but it was too late. Elvis had kicked off the platforms and was halfway down the steps running to meet Sunday. He thought that somehow his father would like him better with the new hairdo. Sunday had not been the same since Beatrice died and he'd lost all interest in his son, except to reprimand or punish him. Sunday stopped and squinted as Elvis approached, face changing in slow degrees from amusement to shock and finally rage. Elvis ran straight into the first blow, which nearly took his head clean off. As he fell, his father grabbed him with one hand, steadying him, while with the other he beat him around the head, face, buttocks, everywhere. Too shocked to react, still out of breath from his sprint, Elvis gulped for hair as his father choked him. Suddenly, Oye towered beside them. Sunday glanced at the steel of her eyes and dropped Elvis like a rag. She caught him, enfolding him into her as he sobbed himself into unconsciousness. (Abani 61)

Elvis's father almost kills him, because he thinks that Elvis is going to be an homosexual. Ironically, Elvis thinks that his father would love him more if he were a girl, most definitely because he associates love and tenderness with women, given that men are supposed to hide their emotions. Instead his father beats him until Elvis retreats to his grandmother and faints. Right after, his father

explains the reason for his reaction: "No son of mine is going to grow up as a homosexual! Do you hear me?!" (Abani 62). Masculinity is imposed on Elvis through violence, even though his father only intends to protect him. In fact, right after the beating, Sunday shaves Elvis's head to remove the cornrows and says: "I'm only doing dis for your own good. It's not easy to be a man. Dese are trying times. Not easy" (Abani 63). Again, the pressure of changing times and fear of losing one's own cultural inheritance, and therefore identity, make Sunday perpetrate violence in service of masculinity. The connection linking together diaspora, identity, masculinity and violence is even more evident in another passage of the novel, when after discovering that Sunday was involved in the killing of his cousin Godfrey (the son of Elvis's rapist uncle) Elvis questions his father:

> [Elvis asks his father:] "Did you pay Innocent to kill Godfrey?" "You don't understand de difficulty of trying to be a man in dis society. So many expectations, so much pressure. You will see." "So he is dead." "I never said dat" "You didn't have to. Dad, did you have anything to do with it?" "Do you know what people ask you when dey meet you as a young man? Who is your father? First, dey want to know your father's name, de stock you come from, before dey decide whether to bother talking to you." Elvis was silent. He reached for the kaikai. With trembling hands he put the bottle to his mouth and took a deep drink . . . "So what does that mean?" Elvis asked. "In dis place, it used to be dat all you had was your name- before dis new madness with money started. De measure of a man was his name. It will be again. It took me years of pain, suffering and hard work to build a name people could respect. My father was a houseboy to de white priests. We were nobody. To de whites we were their servant's children, mini-servants. To de traditional world, we were white people's slaves, a curse, so we were disinherited of land, clan, everything. I built our name up with honor until it became a force to be reckoned with. I have never had much money, but I had a name dat opened doors. A name people spoke with respect." "He was killed for a name?" "No! He was killed because he was a threat to all we had. De only inheritance I had to give you was a name of honor. His actions were muddying de only thing of value we had to give you . . . Can't you understand? I did dis out of love for you." (Abani 186-187)

Therefore, this terrible act of violence is seen by Sunday as an act of love towards his son. Murdering Elvis's cousin means to protect the good name of the family and, therefore, to guarantee the value of Elvis's heritage. A good name is considered even more important than money because it is a mark of honor. It represents a badge of identity that lasts for generations, something that black people, possessing little else, have to look for and protect. In this respect, Abani emphasizes that both in Africa and in the "traditional world" black people were

servants of white people and consequently deprived of their dignity, honor and cultural identity. For this reason, Sunday has gone through years of suffering and struggles in order to build something that could not be bought by money or erased with time: his honorable identity to pass on to Elvis. However, Elvis does not understand his father's gesture, on the contrary, he finds it reproachable. At this point, it is clear that Elvis's identity as portrayed by Abani, is deeply influenced by cultural beliefs in which masculinity plays a major role. However, this heteropatriarchal system prevents Elvis from obtaining what he desperately seeks from his father: understanding and recognition.

If we take into account the theories of diaspora mentioned in chapter 1 of my work, we can clearly see how Elvis is indeed a diasporic subject, in that he experiences a domestic diaspora and then migrates to the U.S. In particular, Safran's first diasporic feature argues that people must have been dispersed from their homeland, one personal "center" to at least two "peripheral" places (1991: 83). Reading Abani's novel as a representation of diaspora we can see that Elvis is forced to move to a city 800 miles away from his home village, moving into a sort of intra-national diaspora. There is also another example of dispersal representing a domestic diaspora, namely when Maroko is destroyed by the Lagosian government, and Elvis and the other slum inhabitants are subsequently forced to move to other parts of the metropolis. The feature of dispersion as represented in the novel also indicates a "victim diaspora" (Cohen 2008: 39), in that the destruction of Maroko represents victimization due to forced migration. Moreover, the issue of being victimized also relates clearly to the third diasporic feature stating that the expatriates believe that "they are not. . . fully accepted by the host country" (Safran 1991: 83). The destruction of Maroko with the intention of dispersing the slum dwellers from valuable real estate is probably the most prominent instance of this aspect. That Elvis is troubled by the host community is further described aptly by his best friend, Redemption: "Your type no fit survive here long" (Abani 318). However, various features of Elvis's diaspora are present in the novel, and will be further investigated in chapter 4.

Another cross-cutting theme of the novel is violence, which is perpetrated at a familial, domestic and public level. In fact, as Matthew Omelsky

pointed out: "Violence in *GraceLand* is presented as a cancer that pervades every layer of Nigerian society. . . These ubiquitous layers of violence constitute the terrain upon which the characters in *GraceLand* navigate and the core of their precarious existence" (2011: 85).

Besides Sunday's beatings, violence perpetrated at a familial level is represented by Elvis's brutal raping by his uncle: "Holding Elvis's squirming body down with one hand, the man yanked Elvis's shorts down with the other. For a second everything seemed to stop. Elvis felt the man hard against his buttocks, and then a burst of fire ripped him into two. The man tore into him, again and again. The pain was so intense, Elvis passed out" (Abani 198). Abani's description of this terrible act of violence is heartbreaking, his metaphoric writing style allowing to imagine the physical and mental impact that such traumatic experience has on Elvis.

The violence experienced by Elvis is not only perpetrated at the level of family during childhood but also in the public sphere when he is an adolescent. Towards the end of the novel, the Lagosian slum of Maroko is razed to the ground according to the government's provision named "Operation Clean de Nation" (Abani 247) which is the climax of this "state-sponsored" violence experienced by Elvis (Omelsky 2011: 85). Right after the operation, Elvis is arrested by the police in Freedom Square (again Abani's irony) and the description of the torture he suffers is utterly touching:

> Elvis felt his feet touch the floor. He collapsed in a heap, unable to feel his body. No, that wasn't quite right. He could feel his body- but as a single sheet of flaming pain. He sat awkwardly on the floor in front of a tin plate of rice and reached for the spoon, but neither arm would move. They dangled uselessly in his lap like a pair of broken wings . . . Someone was slapping him roughly, but the mists of unconsciousness claimed him again. He dreamed he was standing underneath a fountain . . . He opened his mouth to drink and felt its ammonia burn . . . A soldier stood in front of him, urinating into his face . . . He didn't struggle against the pain anymore. It was a part of him now. It seemed like he couldn't remember a time when it was not there. It had become essential to him. As long as he was in pain, he was still human. (Abani 293-294)

Violence deprives Elvis of his humanity, his arms are like "broken wings" he cannot move and unconsciousness wraps him with dreams. His body is so filled with pain that it is basically the only thing that, after the torture and the humiliation, reminds him he is still alive and still human. Abani's

metaphorical writing style, in depicting Elvis's physical and mental suffering, allows to understand how the boy's identity is strongly and inexorably shaped by violence. It surrounds every level of Elvis's life. It is violence and his inability to adapt to this reality, that in the end, will force him to leave Lagos and migrate to the U.S.:

> ". . . America is better dan here. For you." [Redemption said]. "But this country is just as good as America." [Elvis answered] "Redemption shook his head. "Not for you. Go." . . . Elvis stared from Redemption to Okon and then to Blessing. He knew they were right, but the thought of leaving for America frightened him. Even though it had become painfully clear to him that there was no way he could survive in Lagos, there was no guarantee he would survive in America. (Abani 317-318)

In this climate of trauma, violence and aggressive masculinity, the idea of America plays a crucial role in Elvis's identity formation. In fact, Abani conveys an ambiguous portrayal of the American dream throughout the novel. On the one hand, American commodities, besides representing the globalized and mongrelized culture in Lagos, are also a means that Elvis uses to escape reality and that he associates with the achievement of a better life status. On the other hand, throughout the novel, Elvis discovers the dark global connections in which America is involved, such as drug and organ trafficking. For this reason, as we will see, Elvis is not sure he will have a better life once he gets to America, but he has to go, since the only thing he is sure about, is that in Lagos he has no possibility of surviving.

3.1.2. Globalization and Transnational Contamination in Lagos

Analyzing Elvis's identity means also focusing on the mongrelized and cosmopolitan reality of Lagos in which he lives, since, as it will be shown, it has a great influence on him. Even though part of the novel is set in Afikpo, a small Nigerian village in which Elvis spends his childhood, the majority of the novel is set in the metropolis of Lagos. The metropolis is a site of displacement, disruption and fragmentation for Elvis, who has to struggle to survive and make a living in its violent reality: "Sitting on the crowded bus, he thought his father might be right; this was no way to live. He was broke all the time, making next to nothing as a street performer" (Abani 5-6). His behavior is also deeply influenced by American culture and commodities: he tries to make a living by

impersonating Elvis Presley on the beaches of Lagos, he smokes cigarettes all the time, he loves American movies that star John Wayne and he reads books of prominent American authors such as James Baldwin. The way in which Abani describes the mongrelized culture Elvis inhabits, allows us to understand that his identity is transnational because he embraces a transnational culture even before moving to the U.S. In fact, as pointed out by Abani: "We are all transnational, either in the real sense of a passport, where you've lived in different countries and have spent life migrating through different continents, or in the way in which culture mixes" (Abani qtd. in Aycock 2009: 7).

Elvis's life is deeply shaped by the forces of globalization active in Lagos. The presence of America, in particular, is ambivalent in the way it acts on Elvis's personality. On the one hand, American commodities are associated with the achievement of a high social status and therefore America is idealized as a promised land. On the other hand, America's presence in Lagos worsens Elvis's desperation and bewilderment, especially when he discovers U.S. involvement in organ and drug trafficking.

The impact that American commodities have on Elvis's identity can be explained by pointing out the role that planetary marketing plays in shaping consumers' perceptions, since it enhances the association of a branded product with identity. As explained by Gilroy:

> The term "identity" has recently acquired great resonance, both inside and outside the academic world. It offers far more than an obvious, common-sense way of talking about individuality, community, and solidarity and has provided a means to understand the interplay between subjective experiences of the world and the cultural and historical settings in which those fragile, meaningful subjectivities are formed. Identity has even been taken into the viscera of postmodern commerce, where the goal of planetary marketing promotes not just the targeting of objects and services to the identities of particular consumers but the idea that any product whatsoever can be confused with identity. Any commodity is open to being "branded" in ways that solicit identification and try to orchestrate identity. (Gilroy 2000: 98)

What Gilroy emphasizes is the indisputable role that global commerce has on identity construction. Commodities are strictly related to the formation of subjectivities, so much so that they are increasingly confused with identity itself, and this is certainly due to the major role played by the historical and cultural environments in which those identities are set. "Postmodern commerce" and

"planetary marketing" are notions embedded in the comprehensive concept of globalization. If we think about globalization as an ancient, historical phenomenon whose essential characteristic is the traveling of people and commodities, it is inevitable to consider it related to economics as much as to culture, since commodities are a symbol of culture, and therefore, are related to identities. Paul Jay emphasized the historical importance of globalization as a phenomenon of exchange of commodities and culture that was born at least in the sixteenth century:

> As some scholars define globalization as a contemporary phenomenon linked to the development of electronic media, the rise of transnational corporations, global financial institutions, and proliferating forms of entertainment that easily leap national boundaries . . . I argue that it is a mistake to approach globalization itself as a contemporary phenomenon and that it makes much more sense to take a historical view in which globalization is dated as beginning in at least the sixteenth century and covering a time span that includes the long histories of imperialism, colonization, decolonization and postcolonialism . . . Furthermore, in my view the debate whether globalization is an economic or cultural phenomenon is based on a false distinction. We cannot neatly separate economic from cultural commodities; when commodities travel, culture travels, and when culture travels, commodities travels. Materialist critics are therefore wrong when they claim that a culturalist model is inappropriate for studying what is essentially an economic phenomenon. And, yet, cultural critics are also mistaken when they ignore the economic and material aspects of globalization. (2010: 2-3)

It is not possible to separate its economic side from the cultural one and vice versa. In the light of what Jay outlined, therefore, globalization creates "transnational spaces" in which "to push beyond natural boundaries to imagine the global character of modern experience, contemporary culture, and the identities they produce" (Jay 2010: 9). In this respect, the transnationalized spaces of Lagos described by Abani foreground Elvis's fragmentation caused by globalization. The description of one of the biggest markets of Lagos given by Abani reflects the globalization of the metropolis, where the local is mixed with the international and where blended commodities symbolize blended cultures:

> The huge sprawling area in front of him, full of the cry of commerce, was Tejuosho Market, one of the biggest in Lagos . . . He paused and lit a cigarette before entering the crush. The market was for the most part comprised of open-air stalls. Everywhere, traders squatted or sat on floor mats. The closed stalls further into the market, housing the electronics and clothes shops, were known in local parlance as imported side. He navigated the colors - yellow gari, red tomatoes and chilies, purple aubergines, brown and even orange bread, dun groundnuts, yellow-green guavas and red-yellow mangoes. Stalls with children

> calling in husky voices "Coca-Cola! Is a cold!" while hunkered over wooden boxes housing chunks of ice nestling bottles of Coca-Cola, Fanta, Sprite and plastic bags of cold water under wet blankets of jute sacking. Pausing by a cart selling secondhand books, he rifled through, looking for something to buy. There was a set of dog-eared Penguin Classics. Elvis pulled a Dickens out, A Tale of Two Cities, his favorite, and read the first line: It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." Smiling, he closed the book. That was the perfect description of life in Lagos, he thought. (Abani 111)

Abani clearly describes the mongrelization that characterizes Tejuosho Market. Elvis is a little overwhelmed by it and has to lit a cigarette before "entering the crush". However, he also enjoys it and "navigates" the colors of shining local products with delight. Together with local products the market offers an imported side and refreshing American drinks. There are also imported books, and the first line of Dickens's novel offers him the perfect description for Lagos, suggesting both the transnational imaginary space of Elvis's mind (that easily associates Dickens's cities with Lagos) and his ambivalence towards the metropolis. In fact, when looking at Lagos he thinks: "How could a place be so ugly and violent yet beautiful at the same time? He wondered" (Abani 7). Elvis is overwhelmed by but at the same time appreciates the Lagosian vibrant atmosphere.

His embracing the culturally mongrelized environment in which he lives is also represented at the beginning of the novel, when he is in his room early in the morning:

> The radio played Bob Marley's "Natural Mystic," and he sang along, the tune familiar. "There's a natural mystic blowing through the air / If you listen carefully now you will hear . . ." His voice trailed off as he realized he did not know all the words, and he settled for humming the song as he listened to the sounds of the city waking up: tin buckets scrapping, the sound of babies crying, infants yelling for food and people hurrying but getting nowhere. Next door someone was playing high life music on a radio that was not tuned properly. The faster-tempoed highlife distracted him from Bob Marley, irritating him. He knew the highlife tune well, "Ije Enu" by Celestine Ukwu. Abandoning Bob Marley, he sang along: "Ije enu, bun a ndi n'kwa n'kwa ndi n'wuli n'wuli, eh…" (Abani 3-4)

This passage is particularly significant not only for the strong presence of mongrelization, represented by Elvis's simultaneously listening to reggae and highlife music, and his language switching, but also because music, in this respect, is portrayed by Abani as crucial to diasporic identities.

The whole novel is permeated by the presence of American music and films. As explained by Abani, music plays an important role in the novel since it is "the ultimate art form because it never involves translation" (Aycock 2009: 10). In other words, music conveys meanings and ideas directly, without intermediations and therefore, it is a powerful form of transnational communication and identification. Elvis's identity is not only shaped by Elvis Presley's music, he is also familiar with and enjoys Bob Marley's music. In terms of transnational diasporic identities, this can show how, through music, ideas and beliefs travel across the globe and shape contemporary subjectivities in forms that exceed national borders. In this respect, Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic* (1993) showed how ideas and styles in music have traveled, interacted, and become a transnational debate about authentic identity, making music not simply a matter of influence from prominent centers to new arenas. Abani's choice of mentioning Bob Marley, besides showing Elvis's mongrelized culture, can also be interpreted as an intertextual device that Abani deploys to refer to the matter of diasporic and transnational identities. In fact, according to Paul Gilroy, Bob Marley, as leading exponent of reggae music (originated in Jamaica in the late 1960s and quickly adopted in Europe, U.S. and Africa as a voice of the oppressed) does not represent a simple cultural commodity, on the contrary, his transnational figure invites to raise questions of identity in the diaspora. In particular, it challenges the idea that a shared identity must be based on some kind of preexisting uniformity, quite the opposite, it proves how a common identity can rely on choice, on shared values and beliefs:

> [Bob Marley's] enduring presence in globalized popular culture [lends itself] to the study of postmodern diaspora identity. [His life and work] help us to perceive the workings of those complex cultural circuits that have transformed a pattern of simple, one-way dispersal into a webbed network constituted through multiple points of intersection . . . Like so many others, he too did not go to Africa to make his home. He chose instead, . . . a more difficult cosmopolitan commitment and a different form of solidarity and identification that did not require his physical presence in that continent . . . His transnational image invites one further round of speculation about the status of identity and the conflicting scales on which sameness, subjectivity, and solidarity can be imagined . . . Perhaps, in [his] image, we can discern the power of identity based, not on some cheap, pre-given sameness, but on will, inclination, mood, and affinity. The translocal power of his dissident voice summons up these possibilities and a chosen, recognizably political kinship that is all the more

> valuable for its distance from the disabling assumptions of automatic solidarity based on either blood or land. (Gilroy 2000: 130-132-133)

Therefore, Bob Marley's presence in the novel not only symbolizes the cosmopolitan, mongrelized culture and environment of Lagos, but also embodies Abani's suggestion that African diasporic identities can be linked to one another on the basis of "inclination, mood and affinity". Bob Marley's poetic and political language made him become a planetary figure whose music traveled around the world and let people develop a shared sense of identity, solidarity and communality that goes beyond the basis of blood or land. In this respect Bob Marley's music, as a cultural commodity, is a powerful means to convey values and ideas that fight and resist white power. As pointed out by Gilroy:

> What are wrongly believed to be simple cultural commodities have been used to communicate a powerful ethical and political commentary on rights, justice, and democracy that articulates but also transcends criticism of modern racial typology and the ideologies of white supremacy. (2000: 130)

Therefore, Elvis's listening to Bob Marley's music underlines his transnational and cosmopolitan identity. Moreover, it invites to consider the complexity of identities that are forged and linked through the African diaspora thanks to the political and poetic language of sufferance that gives voice to the oppressed, such as Marley's (and Abani's).

The underlying heterogeneity of Elvis's culture is also reinforced by the fact that Elvis's listening to Bob Marley is interrupted by the presence of highlife music which, even though at first it irritates him, leads him to sing along because of its rhythm and familiarity. Born in Nigeria, highlife music is actually a fusion of "black" and "white": "Highlife is one of the myriad varieties of acculturated popular dance-music styles that have been emerging from Africa this century and which fuse African with Western (i.e. European and American) and islamic influences" (Collins 1989: 221). Therefore, music is deployed by Abani as an intertextual device, a symbol of the mongrelized environment in which Elvis is living as well as a means to invoke meanings of diasporic identities.

3.1.3. The American Dream in Lagos

Throughout the novel America is portrayed, as already pointed out, in an ambivalent way. In particular, there is an emergent contrast between the fascination that Elvis and other people feel towards America, and the negative presence of America that materializes itself throughout the novel.

The presence of U.S. influence is visible from the beginning of the novel, when Elvis is getting ready to impersonate Elvis Presley on a beach of Lagos. What is interesting about this passage is that Elvis is reconfiguring the American singer, In fact, his figure is reinterpreted through Elvis's idea on how the singer really looked like:

> he turned to the small tin of talcum powder stuck in one of the pockets of his bag. He shook out a handful and applied a thick layer, peering into the mirror. He was dissatisfied; this was not how white people looked. If only he could use makeup, he thought, the things he could do. But makeup was a dangerous option, as he could be mistaken for one of the cross-dressing prostitutes that hung around on the beach. They were always hassled by the locals, and often beaten severely. (Abani 11)

When Elvis tries to look white with the help of the talcum powder, he is disappointed with the result, but he cannot wear make-up and risk being mistaken for a cross-dresser. Only when he is alone in the intimate space of his room he can try and look as much as the real Elvis, but in the end this proves impossible:

> Drawing quickly and expertly with the black eye pencil, he outlined his eyes, the tip of the pencil dancing dangerously close to his cornea. Pulling the mascara brush free, he knocked the dried goop off before dragging it through his already dense lashes. Again he examined his hard work intently before selecting a deep red lipstick. Not satisfied with its shine, he rubbed some petroleum jelly obìver his lips and then smacked them, Much better, he thought . . . He pulled the wig on, bending to look in the mirror. Elvis has entered the building, he thought, as he admired himself. This was the closest he had come so far to looking like the real Elvis, and he wishes he had a camera . . . He began to dance around the room . . . Not wanting the makeup to run, he sat on the bed and put on the table fan . . . From the bed he could see himself in the mirror on the desk, and he stared hard. What if he had been born white, or even just American? Would his life be any different? Stupid he thought . . . He smiled. It spread across his face in fine tendrils that grew wider as he laughed until his skin showed through. I look like a hairless panda, he thought. Without understanding why, he began to cry through the cracked face powder. (Abani 78)

Again, Abani's depiction of this intimate moment that shapes Elvis's identity is touching. The image of Elvis's crying after having imagined of being born white is a means that Abani deploys to address the inferiority complex that black people have towards white people. It can be read as Abani's intention to emphasize the disruptive role played by the construction of the category of race in people's lives. In fact, as also Ayckock points out: "[T]he acknowledgement of the absurdity of trying alter his skin - and the tears that follow- point to the destructiveness of ascribing essential characteristics based on race, and the hopelessness it cruelly instills in people" (Aycock 2009: 16).

Whiteness and the U.S. are always associated with something pleasant, namely the promise of a better life. Elvis genuinely believes that the real Elvis looks like this. Putting makeup on, Elvis reinterprets the American singer according to the idea he has of him, thus he is also appropriating American cultural capital, reconfiguring it in his own way. In fact, as Omelsky emphasizes: "what must be critically underscored is that Elvis does not simply mimic Presley's movements and aesthetic. Whether he is cognizant of it or not, Elvis reconfigures the Presley aesthetic in accordance with his needs and desires" (2011: 89). Thus, Elvis is actively participating in the fragmentation and mongrelization of his identity.

Although Elvis believes that Americans tourists particularly enjoy an Elvis impersonator, the only American spectator appearing in the novel is a "gargantuan-bellied man" (Abani 11) that instead humiliates him after his performance. The contrast between Elvis's belief and reality is pretty evident. Moreover his understanding of the U.S. is also influenced by his friend Redemption:

> Elvis hung on his every word, listening as Redemption told him, at every opportunity, of his plans to leave for the United States. "States is de place where dreams come true, not like dis Lagos dat betray your dreams," Redemption would say. "It is full of blacks like us, you know, American Negroes wearing big Afros, walking with style, talking anyhow to de police; real gangsters." (Abani 26)

The image they have of America is idyllic. They think black people there have many and better possibilities in comparison with Lagos, they associate America to the achievement of a higher social status. In fact, Elvis makes the

decision to find a job and to save money in order to migrate to the U.S.: "[he] had decided to find steady work . . . Maybe with the money he earned, he could save up to go to America. That was a place where they appreciated dancers" (Abani 24).

As Omelsky points out: "The 'idea of America' is situated above all other non-African spaces because of the sense of appropriated social distinction that it confers on youth in the novel" (2011: 87). In another passage in which Elvis and his friends are at the motor park seeing *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* for the first time, it is possible to see the strong influence of American commodities and the idealization of the U.S. they fuel:

> The film were shown courtesy of an American tobacco company, which passed out packets of free cigarettes to everybody in the audience, irrespective of age. That was half the fun; what could be better than free cigarettes and a free movie? If they could get that here, in a dusty end-of-the-highway fishing town, they thought, America must indeed be the land of the great . . . To Elvis, the plot lines were simple and were about the eternal struggle between the good of John Wayne and the evil of the villain, known simply, mysteriously, yet profoundly as Actor . . . Running the length of the motor park was a low cement wall where Elvis and his friends usually sat smoking and trying out conversations from the films. American English was exotic and a treat for the tongue, unlike the stricter grammar of England's English, which they learned at school. (Abani 146-149)

Besides the evident idealization of America which is considered to be a dream place, and the abiding presence of cigarettes as the symbol of American culture par excellence, what is also remarkable in this passage is that Elvis and his friends are culturally reconfiguring the film and, therefore, actively expressing and forging their mongrelized identities. Just like Elvis does with his "queer" impersonification of Elvis Presley, Elvis and his friends reinterpret American films according to their experiences since they like "trying out conversations from the films" and this provides them with a sense of a "higher social distinction". As Omelsky points out:

> poor and working class people find a "release" in their experience of these old American films. Despite the flimsy makeshift screen and archaic projector, Abani describes the crowd's experience as "magical". Since most of the crowd is illiterate and unable to read the subtitles, they create their own story lines or listen to the projection operator who screams out his own outlandish accompanying narrative that fuses Indian Bollywood and American Hollywood tropes . . . Elvis and his friends analyze the film's characters according to their lives and struggles in Lagos . . . These youth derive a sense of social distinction from their rearticulation of these American images and

> sounds, which "elevates" them into a euphoric space that centers on the "idea of America." (2011: 89-90)

Thus, their reconfiguration of American cultural items helps them construct their imaginary sphere. In this respect, their mongrelized culture and identities are also the result of their desire to escape the difficult setting of Lagos, and the idea of America is the primary means to achieve this purpose.

When Elvis is chased by the military and he is afraid and has no idea what to do, he "desperately seek[s] words of wisdom" unwrapping Bazooka bubble gum[6] (Abani 240). This image perfectly embodies Elvis's belief that American cultural capital can empower him and, therefore, save him from his difficult and dangerous life in Lagos. After having unwrapped quite a few without finding the words he needs, his faith in American cultural capital remains nonetheless intact. As pointed out by Omelsky:

> [t]he idealism of social and material uplift is constructed around the idea of America as a destination where one achieves fame, wealth and even "redemption." As such, the youth's utopian image of America seems to be accompanied by a belief that American cultural capital can provide one with a sense of "agency" or "empowerment". As if the more American cultural capital youth acquire, the closer they come to making this utopian idea of their own "lived experience", thus escaping from their precarious Lagosian lives. (2011: 92)

In other words, American commodities are seen as a potential and symbolic means to escape their violent reality and in so doing, to achieve a better life status. However, America's portrayal is ambivalent throughout the novel. In particular, the idealized America collides with the actual presence of America in Elvis's and his friends' lives. In fact, America is the land that enslaved black people, as Sunday explains to Elvis. A further example of such ambiguity is when Elvis unintentionally ends up being involved in organ trafficking together with his friend Redemption, who knew what was going on from the beginning and explains it to Elvis:

> "American hospitals do plenty organ transplant. But dey are not always finding de parts on time to save people life. So certain people in Saudi Arabia and such a place used to buy organ parts and sell to rich white people so dey can save their children or wife or demselves." "They can't do that!" [Elvis answered.]

[6] Bazooka bubble gums were produced in America shortly after WWII and are characterized by a tiny comic strip featuring the eyepatch-wearing brand mascot Bazooka Joe that is wrapped around each piece of gum (Newman 2012: 2).

> “Dis world operate different way for different people. Anyway, de rich whites buy de spare parts from de Arabs who buy from wherever dey can. Before dey used to buy only from Sudan and such a place, but de war and tings is make it hard, so dey expand de operation. People like de Colonel use their position to get human parts as you see and den freeze it. If we had cross de border yesterday, airplane for carry dose parts to Saudi hospital so dat dey can be sold.” . . . “And none of the Americans ask questions about where the organs come from?” “Like I said, if your only child dey die, you go ask question?” “How could you get us involved, knowing all of this? We are as bad as the Colonel and the Saudis.” “No forget de whites who create de demand.” (Abani 241-243)

Elvis is shocked when he learns the truth about the dark connection between Africa and America. Abani portrays the hold of America in Elvis’s life as both idyllic when translated into the allure of its commodities, and horrific when it reveals the darkest nature of its global connections such as human trafficking. Remarkable is also Abani’s emphasis on the role that the U.S. has in creating the demand that ultimately originated such terrible practice.

Towards the end of the novel, after America has revealed to Elvis its double-sided face and Redemption gives him his passport to migrate to the U.S., Elvis feels more ambivalent than ever: “the thought of leaving for America frightened him. Even though it had become painfully clear to him that there was no way he could survive in Lagos, there was no guarantee he would survive in America” (Abani 318).

The ambivalence of the American dream culminates at the end of the novel, when Elvis is about to leave for the U.S. and, while at the airport, he begins to read James Baldwin’s *Going to Meet the Man*:

> Opening it at the turned-down page that marked his place, he began to read. Jesse had just come on the lynching scene with his father. As he read, Elvis began to see a lot of parallels between himself and the description of a dying black man slowly being engulfed by flame. The man’s hands using the chains that bound him as leverage to pull himself up and out of the torture. He flinched at the part where the unnamed white man in the story cut off the lynched black man’s genitalia. He closed the book and imagined what kind of scar that would leave. It would be a thing alive that reached up to the sky in supplication, descending the root itself in the lowest chakra, our basest nature. Until the dead man became the sky, the tree, the earth and the full immeasurable sorrow of it all. He knew that scar, that pain, that shame, that degradation that no metaphor could contain, inscribing it on his body. And yet beyond that, he was that scar, carved by hate and smallness and fear onto the world’s face. He and everyone like him, until the earth was aflame with scarred black men dying in trees of fire. (Abani 319)

Elvis's identification with the black man of Baldwin's short story is very interesting, especially from an intertextual point of view. At an intertextual level, Abani's choice of mentioning James Baldwin is emblematic as Baldwin was a major black American essayist and novelist deeply concerned with issues of race, class, sexual intricacies and the integration of African Americans, as well as their internalized struggles. Moreover, Elvis's reading of this story right before leaving for the U.S. aptly foretells the struggles that Elvis will have to face once he gets to America, which, as *Going to Meet the Man* clearly shows, is no dream land, and his impending racialization as black. Therefore, Baldwin's novel in Abani's text represents a questioning of the American dream and the role of black people in it[7].

Metaphorically, the passage is powerful also because Elvis identifies with the black man lynched by the white man: right at the scene of the cutting of the black man's genitalia he "flinches" and closes the book, because he can imagine, or better feel, that pain. He imagines the black man's scar, which is not merely the physical and spiritual reflection of the "pain, shame and degradation" Elvis has undergone. It is a scarring of the whole world. Elvis knows that scar because he knows that pain: the earth is "aflame with scarred black men dying in trees of fire". Because of slavery, their being part of a victim diaspora (see Cohen 2008) and more generally, because of their underprivileged condition, black people's suffering is inscribed in the whole world, which is responsible for fostering their condition. In this respect, Abani's poetic metaphor expresses all the pain that black people have been going through because of the white Western world and its imposed supremacy. In other words, the presence of Baldwin and Elvis's identification with his character are literary devices that Abani deploys to address and problematize black people's struggles to forge a new identity on the continent of the American dream, and therefore, an African identity in the diaspora.

Finally, the fragmentation of Elvis's identity in which the ambiguity of the American dream plays a role, is also evident in the last passage of the novel

[7] The article on *The New York Times* titled "The American Dream and the American Negro" (1965) reports Baldwin's powerful speech on this matter (see Works Cited).

when Elvis, pulling out his mother's journal, thinks: "It had never revealed his mother to him. Never helped him understand her, or his life, or why anything had happened the way it had. What was the point? Nothing is ever resolved, he thought. It just changes" (Abani 320). Through this passage Abani implies that Elvis already knows that his problems will not be solved once he gets to the U.S., they will just be different. Even though he is about to leave for America, he has not understood himself or his life yet. His African diasporic identity is and will always be fragmented.

Another force that very much helps him in the process of his mongrel identity construction, is literature. Abani confers a special position to reading, which is a force that very much empowers Elvis. The next section will attempt at showing how Elvis interpellates blackness and expresses agency through his reading choices.

3.2. Interpellating Blackness: Reading as a Metaphor for Mongrelization

3.2.1. The Power of Literature

"Books, he felt, were sacred and should therefore not be bartered over" (Abani 111).

GraceLand is permeated by literature, to which Abani confers a great power. In fact, throughout the novel authors from all over the world are read by Elvis, who finds in reading and literature a powerful means to shape his mind and escape the violent reality in which he lives. Books to Elvis prove to be a comfortable getaway from the discontent of his life and they fuel his imagination. He reads all the time because he finds inspiration in books, they are a means to interpret reality as well as a source of well-being:

> He was broke all the time, making next to nothing as a street performer. He needed a better job with a regular income. He pulled a book from his backpack and tried to read. It was his current inspirational tome, a well-thumbed copy of Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*. He read books for different reasons and had them everywhere he was: one in his backpack, which he called his on-the-road book, usually one that held an inspirational message for him; one by his bed; and one he kept tucked in the hole in the wall in the toilet for those cool

> evenings when a gentle breeze actually made the smell there bearable enough to stay and read. (Abani 7)

Reading to Elvis is a moment of pleasure and it helps him find answers. Abani's emphasis on the paramount role that literature has in life is also recognizable in the speech of the charismatic King of Beggars: "A country often becomes what its inhabitants dream for it. Much the same way that a novel shapes the writer, the people perspective shapes the nation, so the country becomes the thing people want to see" (Abani 155). Interestingly, according to Abani, it is not the writer that shapes the novel, but the opposite. In fact literature is the force that shapes people's imagination, their identity and, indeed, nations themselves.

Reading for Elvis is always associated with something pleasant: "he loved the musty smell of old books" (Abani 28). His mother's journal is also what he turns to when he needs to feel her close and he is looking for tenderness: "he tried to imagine his mother as made out of air. All of his memories of her were sketchy and had been supplemented by the fantasies he built around the things he read in her journal" (Abani 104). Reading is also the only thing that brings him close to his dad:

> Reading the paper had begun as part of a homework assignment from Sunday. His initial resentment with the work was balanced by his happiness that his father was spending time with him, even if it was to ask questions about what he had read. But now his pleasure was singular and he looked forward to it. (Abani 175)

Reading, therefore, is a way out from the violence that permeates Elvis's life. Moreover, reading is necessary for him to survive, and this is quite evident towards the end of the novel when he is at the airport, waiting to get on the plane for the U.S.: "Not wanting to think about it anymore, he reached into his bag and pulled out a book, one of the only luxuries he'd allowed himself before leaving . . . He touched the shiny paperback cover: James Baldwin's *Going to Meet the Man*" (Abani 319). Elvis is moving to a foreign country with nothing, and he does not even know if he is going to survive there, but as long as he has his books with him, he has hope.

Abani emphasizes Elvis's love for reading from the beginning of the novel: "The book he had fallen asleep reading, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*,

fell from his side to the floor, the old paperback cracking at the spine, falling neatly into two halves as precisely as if sliced by a sword" (Abani 5). Reading is the pleasure Elvis allows himself even before sleeping, and Abani's reference to the renowned Ellison novel can be seen again as an intertextual reference: the book in fact addresses issues of blackness, identity and race.

Throughout the novel the presence of literature, and the significant role it plays in Elvis's mongrelization become more and more evident. In this respect, the following passage at Tejuosho Market is emblematic:

> Pausing by a cart selling secondhand books, he rifled through, looking for something to buy. There was a set of dog-eared Penguin Classics. Elvis pulled a Dickens out, a *Tale of Two Cities*, his favorite, and read the first line: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." Smiling, he closed the book. That was the perfect description of life in Lagos, he thought. There were also novels by West African authors: Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*; Mongo Beti's *The Poor Christ of Bomba*; Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*; Camara Laye's *The Radiance of the King*; Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*; and thrillers like Kalu Okpi's *The Road* and Valentine Aily's *The Cobra*. He'd read them all and ran his fingers along their spines nostalgically. He settled for a torn copy of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and a near-pristine copy of James Baldwin's *Another Country*. He paid the asked price without haggling. Books, he felt, were sacred and should therefore not be bartered over. (Abani 111)

Elvis is ravished by the presence of all these books, his veneration for them is almost palpable and he is struggling to make a decision on which book to buy. In the end, he buys a Dostoyevsky and a Baldwin: this image is very representative of his cross-cultural love for literature that inevitably shapes his transnational identity. Moreover, in reading Dickens's sentence about the city, Elvis can immediately recognize Lagos. This does not only highlight Abani's emphasis on the role of literature as something timeless and borderless, but also the mongrelization that characterizes every big city of the world. In fact, Elvis's identification of Lagos with Dickens's city can be read as a demonstration of how every city of the world is similar, since it represents the space of the mongrel human unconscious. In fact, in an interview Abani affirms:

> there is only one city in the world, and it replicates itself endlessly . . . Cities have similar narratives. In fact, if you've lived in one big city and you are driving through another big city, it looks entirely familiar to you, even though it might be thousands of miles away. It's the way in which cities are almost . . . the manifestations of our desire . . . The city becomes the container for the unconscious. The human unconscious . . . This idea of the city being liminal and a space where the unconscious can develop happens to be, for me as a writer, one of the best spaces to locate the ideas I have about the human

> condition. We are most transnational than we believe. We are more peripatetic than we believe; we are more nomadic in that sense. We are more mongrelized than we would ever like to accept we are. (Abani qtd. In Aycock 2009: 5)

Therefore, Abani aims at showing how Elvis's identity is mongrel also because he recognizes and appropriates those transnational spaces of cities. The fact that he recognizes Lagos in the city described by Dickens is a clear sign of that. In this way, Abani not only confers to literature a prominent status throughout the novel, but he makes it stand out as a powerful force that shapes Elvis's transnational and mongrelized identity.

3.2.2. Elvis's Identity: Blackness and/as Agency

"Yet for all its successful (and less successful, forgotten) deployments, Blackness remains undefined and suffering under the weight of many definitions, not one of which covers every type of Blackness or coheres with all the other denotations and connotations" (Wright 2015: 1).

Abani's emphasis on the paramount role that literature plays in shaping Elvis's identity is particularly significant if we think of reading as a metaphor for mongrelization. In particular, Abani portrays reading as an empowering force that shapes Elvis's mongrel and fragmented identity. In this respect, reading can be seen as Elvis's informed choice, one that enables him to actively participate in the process of his mongrel identity formation, and therefore, as agency.

Applying Michelle Wright's theory on the self-interpellation of blackness to Elvis's identity, I will argue that Elvis's mongrelized blackness is generated by agency. In fact, Elvis's black identity is not merely a reaction to the influence of the Lagosian mongrel reality, since he actively participates in his mongrelization through his choice of reading. In other words, in embracing cross-cultural contaminations, Elvis expresses agency.

Two premises need to be made. Firstly, the fact that Elvis is not living in the U.S., must be taken into consideration, as because of this his blackness cannot be truly interpellated by anti-black racism moments (and thus, neither through a wholly vertical nor multidimensional interpellation as in the case of

Ifemelu's black identity). In this way, if we separate Elvis's blackness from this system of cause-and-effect (or linear) interpellation (see chapter 1), we can consider it as self-originating and, therefore, as a choice. In fact, as pointed out by Wright: "[T]he self-determination of the individual can produce a Blackness that effectively breaks from its history of objecthood (figures of ridicule; slaves and sharecroppers) . . . [that] is interpellated through the 'now' rather than through a cause-and-effect history. It is also produced as a choice" (2015:119). Secondly, as previously outlined, we must consider that Elvis's black identity is fragmented and mongrel. In other words, we cannot separate his being black from its transnational identity. In fact, Abani's depiction of the human condition portrays Elvis's agency as always embedded in the contradictions and complexities that characterize the present moment and any form of resistance in the transnational reality in which he lives. In fact, even if, as previously shown, Elvis reconfigures elements of American cultural capital, his reconfigurations cannot be read as forms of resistance per se, since he is not actually subverting norms, but only expressing his mongrelization. In a nutshell, the ambiguity that permeates the whole novel does not allow to consider Elvis's agency as resistance. In fact, as also pointed out by Omelsky,

> Abani's narrative [and his] ambiguous sketches of African youth agency- and indeed, human agency broadly construed- are his great contributions to contemporary thought . . . Abani simultaneously expands and unsettles our understanding of the notion of agency, pressing us to consider the inherent contradictions, complicities, and contingencies that perhaps accompany any ascription of resistance. (2011: 94)

However, if we apply Wright's self-interpellation of blackness, we can consider Elvis's agency not in accordance to practical outcomes or notions of resistance, but to his ability to choose in the "now", or in the Epiphenomenal time (see chapter 1), regardless of whether the result is positive or negative. As pointed out by Wright:

> If, however, we add Epiphenomenal time to our interpellation here, the "now" is *foregrounded* by agency because Blackness begins at its own interpellation in the moment. At the same time, this moment is nuanced because it involves a potentially endless set of negotiations. Instead of the Black Subject being moved down a line through cause and effect as in a strictly linear interpellation, the Subject in the moment is variously informed by a variety of external and internal stimuli (what is witnessed and what happens; what is thought and felt)

> that also can intersect with one another . . . [we have to] understand choice as the fulcrum of agency [that] denotes choice as the moment of interpellation that is not "free" of, but in fact intensely informed by, whatever in the physical and mental environment one notices in that moment . . . this argument admittedly spills over into theorizing the subject's performance within the quotidian . . . the individual is not a cohesive, coherent unit but a multidimensional accretion of attitudes and feelings, some of which may contradict others. "Choice" therefore, is not the ability of a discretely bounded mind or body but rather the inevitable unpredictability of "the one" who is also "the many". This is a scene of neither defeat nor triumph but simple a moment of endless possibilities. (Wright 2015: 116-118)

Therefore, Wright's argument on self-interpellation of blackness perfectly fits Abani's depiction of Elvis's negotiations with the complexity that both characterizes and surrounds him and that informs his choice. In fact, through the mongrelized Lagosian environment in which he lives, Elvis is constantly exposed to different and contrasting internal and external stimuli. He has to constantly negotiate between society's expectations and survival (showing masculinity and living a criminal life) and his internal desire of escaping this reality (forging his mongrel culture by doing what he loves: reading). Wright's definition of the individual's choice perfectly combines with Abani's depiction of Elvis's fragmented identity. He is "the many". His actions represent a moment of choice that is determined by mental and physical circumstances and, in so doing, his blackness cannot be separated from his mongrelization. Moreover, Wright's argument stays in line with Abani's "politics of ambivalence," for which Elvis's actions are never truly depicted either as triumphs nor as defeats (Omelsky 2011: 93) but as a negotiation and reinterpretation of the reality around him which is the groundwork for his mongrel identity. In other words, Elvis's agency is represented by his ability to choose a fragmented and conflicted black identity: this denotes a series of possibilities that are not considered according to their positive or negative outcome, but simply as a negotiation of the individual within the quotidian.

As already pointed out, reading for Elvis is associated to something pleasant as well as an escape from reality that satisfies his thirst for knowledge both of the world and himself. In the following example it is possible to see how Elvis's mongrelized identity is not merely the result of the globalization forces active in Lagos, instead it is much more the result of his agency, expressed by his reading choices:

> Elvis's attention was captured by a bookseller . . . The bookseller was a short man, with a bald patch and round stomach that made Elvis think of Friar Tuck from Robin Hood. He smiled. Bookseller Tuck, as Elvis mentally christened him, was calling out passersby: "come and buy de original Onitsha Market pamphlet! Leave all dat imported nonsense and buy de books written by our people for de people. We get plenty. Three for five naira!" Elvis drew closer. A small crowd was gathering, and some were already buying the pamphlets . . . These pamphlets, written between 1910 and 1970, were produced on small presses in the eastern market town of Onitsha, hence their name. They were the Nigerian equivalent of dime drugstore pulp fiction crossed with pulp pop self-help books. They were morality tales with their subject matter and tone translated straight out of the oral culture . . . The covers mirrored American pulp-fiction with luscious, full-breasted Sophia Loren look-alike white women. Elvis had read a lot of them, though he wouldn't admit it publicly. These books were considered to be low-class trash, but they sold in the thousands. "For dose of you whom are romantic, dere is *Mabel De Sweet Honey Dat Poured Away* and *How to Avoid Corner Corner Love* and *Win Good Love from Girls*" Bookseller Tuck called. Spotting Elvis holding the books he had bought from the secondhand vendor, Bookseller Tuck turned to him. "You, sir, you look like educated man. Here, try dis one," he said, passing Elvis a book. Turning it over, Elvis looked at the title: *Beware of Harlots and Many Friends*. Smiling, Elvis glicked it open at random, stopping at "24 Charges Against Harlots." He scanned them quickly, jumping numbers . . . Elvis shuddered and closed the book and handed it back, opting instead for *Mabel the Sweet Honey That Poured Away*. Paying for the book, he hid it between the Dostoyevsky and the Baldwin and headed deeper into the market. (Abani 111-113)

This passage is remarkable for various reasons. Firstly, it is interesting to notice how Elvis's reading makes him associate the white, English character of Friar Tuck with the black Nigerian bookseller: another sign of how Elvis's mongrelized identity reconfigures and negotiates culture. Secondly, even though Elvis is aware of the poor quality of the hybrid pamphlets (which blend together revisited American pulp-fiction stories and Nigerian morality tales) he reads them anyway. Therefore, Elvis's agency in the "now" is represented by his choice of reading and thus to negotiate between Nigerian and transnational cultures at the market: his mongrelized black identity is forged through his reading different types of books. In so doing, Elvis is self-interpellating his blackness, which is characterized by mongrelization. Furthermore, even though he prefers and acknowledges the higher literary status of Dostoyevsky and Baldwin, he nonetheless buys the local mongrel pamphlet that he knows he will enjoy anyway. Thus, Elvis's Blackness is determined by his choice of embracing cross-cultural contaminations through reading.

Moreover, this moment of self-interpellation perfectly fits the significant connection between mongrel cultures and agency as outlined by Paul Jay:

"[E]very culture is always shaped by other cultures, and agency has more to do with the intelligent and imaginative negotiation of cross-cultural contact than with avoiding such contact. Agency from this point of view is a function of that negotiation, not its victim" (2010: 3).

Another example of Elvis's self-interpellated blackness is when he chooses to switch from borrowing books from the local library to the United States Information Service Library:

> He had been using the USIS library for about a year, having found out about it from a flyer he saw at the local library, which had so few books he had to pace his borrowings so as not to finish them all too quickly. Apart from the endless old tomes on chemistry, physics, electronics and philosophy, the local library had an anthropology section that only had books with the word "Bantu" in their titles - like *Bantu Philosophy* and *Bantu Worldviews*. Something about the word "Bantu" bothered him and made him think it was pejorative. Maybe it had something to do with not ever hearing that word used outside of that section in the library. The only other books there were treatises on Russian and Chinese culture and politics. These came either printed in bold glossy colors or in badly bound volumes with the fading print slanted on the page as if set by a drunken printer or as though, tired of the lies, the words were trying to run off the page. So it had been with some relief that he spotted the USIS flyer on the bare cork bulletin board. (Abani 55)

Elvis's choice to read books from the United States Service Library instead of the local library shows his agency, which is represented by Elvis's intelligent negotiation of cross-cultural contact. In fact, he chooses to read books from the USIS library because he does not find the books of the local library satisfying and stimulating, as explained in his critical remark. In so doing, he is self-interpellating his Blackness in the "now" since he chooses to embrace the opportunities that transnational contact offers him as soon as he learns about the other library.

The paramount importance that reading has in shaping Elvis's identity is displayed until the end of the book. Before leaving Lagos, Elvis has three books with himself at the airport: his mother's Bible and journal and James Baldwin's *Going to Meet the Man* (Abani 320). The Baldwin, besides being Abani's intertextual reference to Elvis's approaching the realm of race (see 3.1.3), is also "one of the only luxuries he's allowed himself before leaving" (Abani 319). Moreover, since his mother's journal "had never revealed his mother to him. Never helped him understand her, or his life" (Abani 320), Elvis's choice of

reading the Baldwin novel right before leaving, can be seen as Elvis's ultimate embracing of his cultural hybridity. In so doing, Abani portrays how Elvis self-interpellates his blackness until the very end of the novel: without money and without certainty, the only thing he can do is reading.

Applying Michelle Wright's theory on the interpellation of blackness, my analysis has demonstrated how Elvis's blackness is self-interpellated and, therefore, produced as a choice. Moreover, considering the self-interpellation of blackness allows us to situate Elvis's black identity outside those interpellations that generate black subjects in accordance to white agency, since Elvis is not living in America. In fact, as pointed out by Wright: "If one always interpellate one's Blackness in moments of anti-Black racism, the resulting identity is fraught with tension, anxiety, and hatred" (Wright 2015: 119). In this respect, Elvis interpellates his blackness is such a way that his identity can benefit from his agency, since his choice of reading is an act of pleasure and escape from a violent and disappointing reality.

4. Ifemelu’s and Elvis’s (non)Return: Between Diaspora and Cosmopolitanism

The following section will analyze how Adichie and Abani, through the construction of the two protagonists’ relationship with place, problematize the notions of attachment to the motherland and longing for return that characterize diasporas. In particular, it will show how Ifemelu’s conflicted relationship with U.S. spaces fuels her desire to return to her motherland. However, with her joining the Nigerpolitan club as a returnee, Adichie questions the possibilities opened up by the notion of Afropolitanism, satirizing it.

On the other hand, Abani’s depiction of Elvis’s relationship with place shows how Elvis does not show any particular attachment to his environment. On the contrary, places for Elvis are usually associated with traumatic experiences, both in childhood and adolescence. This allows for a rather cosmopolitan interpretation of Elvis’s identity, which let the reader suppose that, if his return to the motherland is not so desirable, maybe the U.S. can offer him that cross-cultural environment he has always seeked.

4.1. The Attachment to the Motherland and the Possibility of Return

Before analyzing in deeper detail how Adichie and Abani problematize Ifemelu’s and Elvis’s (non)return to the motherland, it is necessary to introduce the critical context of recent discussions on attachment to place when it comes to diaspora.

The problem of defining what actually constitutes diaspora (see chapter 1) involves, in particular, the concepts of the attachment to the motherland and the possibility of return. Cohen (2008), besides defining the various forms of diaspora and their historical peculiarities, argues that all diasporas share similar traits in that they elevate the place of the original community in importance over the scattered destinations of the migrants. In fact,

> [diasporas] normally include a notion of 'homeland' or a looser idea of 'home' in their collective myths or aspirations. Indeed, a homeland is imbued with an expressive charge and a sentimental pathos that seem to be almost universal. Motherland, fatherland, native land, natal land, *Heimat*, the ancestral land, the search for 'roots' - all these similar notions invest homelands with an emotional, almost reverential dimension. (Cohen 2008: 103)

Thus, the attachment to homeland (or the idea of homeland) is an essential characteristic of diaspora, since the natal territory will always have some claim on diasporic identities' emotions and loyalty. Moreover, even though diasporic migrants have in many cases found great advantages in their dispersal from the homeland (such as in the case of the important sub-categorization of diasporic intellectuals outlined in chapter 1) they never lose that sense of a special geographically determined identity that, in fact, draws them together in the new communities of the host country (Cohen 2008: 149).

The notion of attachment to homeland is strictly related to the concept of the possibility or desirability of return. According to Safran, this feature is essential in order to define the diasporic consciousness, in fact: "[diasporic people] regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return - when conditions are appropriate" (Safran 1991: 83). Cohen, on the other hand, argues for a broader vision of the concept of return, which, in today's globalized reality, can assume the form of intermittent visits:

> With the increased possibilities for travel in the global age and the frequent discrepancy between favoured lifestyles in the diaspora and less secure ones at home, diasporas have nowadays retained their connections to home by means of a virtual re-creations of home and intermittent visits rather than via a return movement. (2008: 166)

However, Cohen also criticizes that social constructionist critique of diaspora that dismantles the very notions of homeland and return, since, in so doing, it expropriates diaspora of its prototypical sentiments of melancholic alienation and displacement (2008: 10).

In this respect, Paul Gilroy also emphasizes the melancholic sentiments towards the homeland that characterize the forced dispersal and, therefore, a strong desire to return as essential elements of diaspora, since they "make it more than a voguish synonym for peregrination or nomadism" (2000: 123).

In sum, the theories mentioned above all argue that the notions of attachment to the motherland and the possibility of return, although in different degrees, are paramount elements of diaspora, since, through that melancholic sentiment that characterize them, they better distinguish it from other forms of migration.

4.2. Ifemelu's Relationship with Place and Her Return

Adichie portrays Ifemelu's relationship with place in such a way that we can see her progressive detachment from the U.S. space, which is fueled by the hostility she faces in those spaces, not only from whites, but sometimes also from black people (who, as previously outlined, are far from being a cohesive community in America). As we will see, this detachment from the American space is then translated into a deep desire of returning to Lagos. However, after being in America for 13 years, she has to struggle to re-adapt her new "American" self to the mega-city, and, for this reason, she decides to join the Nigerpolitan club.

An example of Ifemelu's detachment from the U.S. space is recognizable in the following passage, when she moves to Baltimore and experiences an unpleasant episode with an Ethiopian taxi driver:

> Ifemelu came to love Baltimore - for its scrappy charm, its streets of faded glory, its farmers' market that appeared on weekends under the bridge, bursting with green vegetables and plump fruit and virtuous souls - although never as much as her first love, Philadelphia, that city that held history in its gentle clasp. But when she arrived in Baltimore knowing she was going to live there, and not merely visiting Curt, she thought it forlorn and unlovable. The buildings were joined to one another in faded slumping rows, and on shabby corners, people were hunched in puffy jackets, black and bleak people waiting for buses, the air around them hazed in gloom. Many of the drivers outside the train station were Ethiopian or Punjabi. Her Ethiopian taxi driver said, "I can't place your accent. Where are you from?" "Nigeria." "Nigeria? You don't look African at all." "Why don't I look African?" "Because your blouse is too tight." "It is not too tight." "I thought you were from Trinidad or one of those places." He was looking in the rear-view with disapproval and concern. "You have to be very careful or America will corrupt you." (Adichie 255)

Adichie emphasizes that once Ifemelu does not look at Baltimore with the visitor's eyes any longer, but as a citizen, the city loses its glow. She cannot truly see herself as part of the American reality, nor she can find cohesion with

other black people, as the episode with the Ethiopian man shows. On the contrary, he has a judgemental attitude, in that he accuses her of having abandoned her African heritage for Western ways.

What is remarkable about Ifemelu's relationship with place, is that Adichie portrays Ifemelu's perception of the American space as both fascination and alienation because of her blackness. In fact, the very beginning of the novel opens with a poetic description of Princeton in summer, something that Ifemelu particularly enjoys. Her pleasure, however, is disturbed by her feeling as an outsider in that reality:

> Princeton, in the summer, smelled of nothing, and although Ifemelu liked the tranquil greenness of the many trees, the clean streets and stately homes, the delicately overpriced shops and the quiet, abiding air of earned grace, it was this, the lack of a smell, that most appealed to her, perhaps because the other American cities she knew well had smelled distinctly. Philadelphia had the musty scent of history. New Haven smelled of neglect. Baltimore smelled of brine, and Brooklyn of sun-warmed garbage. But Princeton had no smell. She liked taking deep breaths here. She liked watching the locals who drove with pointed courtesy and parked their latest- model cars outside the organic grocery store on Nassau Street or outside the sushi restaurants or outside the ice cream shop that had fifty different flavours including red pepper or outside the post office where effusive staff bounded out to greet them at the entrance. She liked the campus, grave with knowledge, the Gothic buildings with their vine-laced walls, and the way everything transformed, in the half-light of night, into a ghostly scene. She liked, most of all, that in this place of affluent ease, she could pretend to be someone else, someone specially admitted into a hallowed American club, someone adorned with certainty. But she did not like that she had to go to Trenton to braid her hair. It was unreasonable to expect a braiding salon in Princeton - the few black locals she had seen were so light-skinned and lank-haired she could not imagine them wearing braids - and yet as she waited at Princeton Junction station for the train, on an afternoon ablaze with heat, she wondered why there *was* no place where she could braid her hair. (Adichie 2-3)

Besides pointing out the numerous American cities that Ifemelu knows pretty well (so much so that she has a distinctive smell for each of them) and that make her the subject of a sort of domestic diaspora in the U.S., Adichie shows how Ifemelu's stream of consciousness is soon interrupted by reality, namely the fact of having to go to another town, in order to get her hair braided. In fact, there are not many black people in Princeton and, therefore, there is not much demand for such a service, which makes her feel even more of an outsider, reinforcing her detachment from the U.S. space.

Right after this passage, Ifemelu reflects on the first time she has noticed the rigid spatial division between blacks and whites in the U.S.:

> During her first year in America, when she took New Jersey Transit to Penn Station and then the subway to visit Aunty Uju in Flatlands, she was struck by how mostly slim white people got off at the stops in Manhattan and, as the train went further into Brooklyn, the people left were mostly black and fat. (Adichie 6)

Adichie underlines the geographical and socio-economic division between black and white people in America that clearly privileges white people, and this is critically observed by Ifemelu, who can never really fit into that reality. Ifemelu's detachment from the U.S., as portrayed by Adichie, is certainly fueled by the host community's hostility, because of her blackness and of what the racial discourse in the U.S. (as previously outlined) entails. Therefore, with time Ifemelu starts nurturing a strong desire to go back to Lagos. This desire perfectly mirrors that typical melancholic sentiment of the diasporic subject towards the motherland, that is also fueled by the difficult integration in the host community (see Cohen 2008), and that, in the end, translates into the longing for return. In the following passage Adichie accurately depicts this sentiment:

> 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. 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. She scoured Nigerian websites, Nigerian profiles on Facebook, Nigerian blogs, and each click brought yet another story of a young person who had recently moved back home, clothed in American or British degrees, to start an investment company, a music production business, a fashion label, a magazine, a fast-food franchise. She looked at photographs of these men and women and felt the dull ache of loss, as though they had prised open her hand and taken something of hers. They were living her life. 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. And, 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 . . . She began to plan and to dream, to apply for jobs in Lagos. She did not tell Blaine at first, because she wanted to finish her fellowship at Princeton, and then after her fellowship ended, she did not tell him because she wanted to give herself time to be sure. But as the weeks passed, she knew she would never be sure. So she told him that she was moving back home, and she added, "I have to," knowing he would hear in her words the sound of an ending. "Why?" Blaine asked, almost automatically, stunned by her announcement. There they were, in his living room in New Haven, awash in soft jazz and daylight, and she looked at

> him, her good, bewildered man, and felt the day take on a sad, epic quality . . . "Why?" he asked. He taught ideas of nuance and complexity in his classes and yet he was asking her for a single reason, the *cause*. But she had not had a bold epiphany and there was no cause; it was simply that layer after layer of discontent had settled in her, and formed a mass that now propelled her. She did not tell him this, because it would hurt him to know 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. (Adichie 8)

Adichie emphasizes that, even though Ifemelu is living a successful life both in her career and in her relationship with Blaine, homesickness and the desire of living another life in Nigeria, in the end, take her home. In the sentence "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" Adichie refers to the importance of roots, pointing out that roots for Ifemelu mean being where she has no need to explain herself, her motherland, where her diasporic identity really wants to be. Not even Blaine, who "taught ideas of nuance and complexity in his classes" can understand her. This is most certainly due to his being African American and, therefore, alien to those sets of African cultural and ethnic meanings that Ifemelu brings with her (and that she actually shares with his friend Boubacar, a Senegalese professor of whom Blaine is jealous, since they both share something that Blaine lacks) and, therefore, he cannot understand Ifemelu's deep desire of returning to Lagos. Moreover, his being stunned can represent Adichie's emphasis on the sense of disbelief that many people have when they see qualified Africans deciding to go back to Nigeria, since Africa in the American news is always portrayed as famine, poverty and war.

Once Ifemelu arrives in Lagos, she is bewildered by how much the city has changed:

> At first, Lagos assaulted her; the sundazed hast, the yellow buses full of squashed limbs, the sweating hawkers racing after cars, the advertisements on hulking billboards (others scrawled on walls- PLUMBER CALL 080177777) and the heaps of rubbish that rose on the roadsides like a taunt. Commerce thrummed too defiantly. And the air was dense with exaggeration, conversations full of overprotestations. One morning, a man's body lay on Awolowo Road[8]. Another morning, The Island flooded and cars became

[8] The yellow buses are typical of the Nigerian landscape and part of its pop-culture, they are called "molues". The dead man's on the road is also something that is not so uncommon to see in Lagos, especially because many people are hit by cars or buses everyday (these matters are also addressed by Abani and, therefore, further investigated in the next section).

> gasping boats. Here, she felt, anything could happen, a ripe tomato could burst out of solid stone. And so she had the 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? When she left home, only the wealthy had mobile phones, all the numbers started with 090, and girls wanted to date 090 men. Now, her hair braider had a mobile phone. 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 enamoured of free things? “Americanah!” [her friend] Ranyinudo teased her often. “You are looking at things with American eyes. But the problem is that you are not even a real Americanah. At least if you had an American accent we would tolerate your complaining!” (Adichie 475-476)

Besides underlining the fast and remarkable economic development that characterizes the vibrant, globalized atmosphere of Lagos, Adichie portrays Ifemelu’s struggles to adapt to the new, changed mega-city. She feels she “is falling into the new person she had become, falling into the strange familiar”. Adichie’s oxymoron emphasizes how Ifemelu’s new self is indeed a non-American “Americanah”. Her life in the U.S. has inevitably shaped her identity, which has changed, together with Lagos. Even though she has now returned to her motherland, the American part of her misses some things that Lagos cannot offer her, whereas in the U.S. she was missing things of Lagos that America could not give her. In so doing, Adichie problematizes Ifemelu’s return as a diasporic identity, an aspect that is particularly evident when she joins the Nigerpolitan Club.

4.2.1. Adichie’s satire of Selasi’s Afropolitanism

With her coinage of the term Nigerpolitan, Adichie refers to the concept of “Afropolitan” as outlined by Taiye Selasi in her essay “Bye-Bye, Babar” (2005). With a blend of the words African and cosmopolitan, Selasi argues that the Afropolitans are the newest generation of African emigrants who are willing to understand African cultural complexity, in that they embrace both their African heritage and their new self in the Western world. She points out that the Afropolitan identity is made of three intersecting dimensions: national, racial and cultural.

> While our parents can claim one country as home, we must define our relationship to the places we live; how British or American we are (or act) is

> in part a matter of affect. Often unconsciously, and over time, we choose which bits of a national identity (from passport to pronunciation) we internalize as central to our personalities. So, too, the way we see our race - whether black or biracial or none of the above - is a question of politics, rather than pigment; not all of us claim to be black. Often this relates to the way we were raised, whether proximate to other brown people (e.g. black Americans) or removed. Finally, how we conceive of race will accord with where we locate ourselves in the history that produced 'blackness' and the political processes that continue to shape it. (Selasi 2005: 5)

In so doing, Selasi explains how and why the hybrid, African, transnational identity is the result of unique cultural and political influences and choices, and, in so doing, she questions that discourse based on geography as the site for shared identities. In other words, the Afropolitan is a citizen of the world, who indeed, according to Selasi, has a privilege: "The Afropolitan knows that nothing is neatly black or white; that to 'be' anything is a matter of being sure of who you are uniquely. To 'be' Nigerian is to belong to a passionate nation; to be Yoruba, to be heir to a spiritual depth; to be American, to ascribe to a cultural breadth; to be British, to pass customs quickly" (Selasi 2005: 6). Selasi is complicating today's African diasporic identity, arguing that, perhaps, any other definition will be an oversimplification (2005: 6).

However, Selasi's essay was met with much controversy. In fact, as Susan Gehrmann points out, while some scholars consider the concept of Afropolitanism as offering a futuristic perspective of Africa into a globalized world, others criticize the concept for its superficiality, commodifications and class bias: "three major reproaches are now regularly being addressed as regards Afropolitanism, namely: (1) its elitism/class bias, (2) its a-politicalness, (3) its commodification" (2016: 62). In this respect, the Irish-Nigerian sociologist Emma Dabiri argues that the Afropolitan is a largely commodified concept that speaks only for elitists and excludes the majority of African experience:

> The problem is not that Afropolitans are privileged *per se* - rather it is that at a time when poverty remains endemic for millions, the narrative of a privileged for telling us how great everything is, how much opportunity and potential is available may drown out the voices of a majority who remain denied basic life chances. (Dabiri qtd. in Gehrmann 2016: 62)

However, as Gehrmann emphasizes, it is a known fact that "Afropolitan literature" is having great success lately, and that "Afropolitan identities are deeply embedded into literary discourse" (2016: 66), such as is Adichie's

Ifemelu. In fact, we can clearly see that Ifemelu falls within this category of Afropolitans, especially if we consider that she returns back home. As pointed out by Selasi: "Most Afropolitans could serve Africa better in Africa than at Medicine Bar on Thursdays. To be fair, a fair number of African professionals are returning" (2005: 6). Selasi's argument on the Afropolitan surely sounds glamorous and appealing, but the adjustment of the different dimensions that form the Afropolitan, may not be so easy as it seems, as Ifemelu's experience both in the U.S. and as a returnee shows. Adichie's mocking depiction of the Nigerpolitan club emphasizes this aspect:

> The Nigerpolitan Club meeting: a small cluster of people drinking champagne in paper cups, at the poolside of a home in Osborne Estate, chic people, all dripping with savoir faire, each nursing a self-styled quirkiness - a ginger-coloured Afro, a T-shirt with a graphic of Thomas Sankara, oversize handmade earrings that hung like pieces of modern art. Their voices burred with foreign accents. *You can't find a decent smoothie in this city! Oh my God, were you at that conference? What this country needs is an active civil society.* Ifemelu knew some of them. She chatted with Bisola and Yagazie . . . They were the sanctified, the returnees, back home with an extra gleaming layer. Ikenna joined them, a lawyer who had lived outside Philadelphia and whom she had met at a Blogging While Brown convention. And Fred joined them too. He had introduced himself to Ifemelu earlier, a pudgy, well-groomed man. "I lived in Boston until last year," he said, in a falsely low-key way, because "Boston" was code for Harvard (otherwise he would say MIT or Tufts or anywhere else), just as another woman said, "I was in New Haven," in that coy manner that pretended not to be coy, which meant that she had been at Yale. Other people joined them, all encircled by a familiarity, because they could reach so easily for the same references. Soon they were laughing and listing the things they missed about America. "Low-fat soya milk, NPR, fast Internet," Ifemelu said. "Good customer service, good customer service, good customer service," Bisola said . . . "I miss a decent vegetarian place?" Doris said, and then talked about her new house help who could not make a simple sandwich . . . "A vegetarian restaurant? Impossible. There are only four vegetarians in this country, including Doris," Bisola said. "You're not vegetarian, are you?" Fred asked Ifemelu. He just wanted to talk to her. She had looked up from time to time find his eyes on her. "No," she said. "Oh, there's this new place that opened on Akin Adesola," Bisola said. "The brunch is really good. They have the kind of things we can eat. We should go next Sunday." *They have the kinds of things we can eat*. An unease crept up on Ifemelu. She was comfortable here, and she wished she were not. She wished, too, that she was not so interested in this new restaurant, did not perk up, imagining fresh green salads and steamed still-firm vegetables. She loved eating all the things she has missed while away, jollof rice cooked with a lot of oil, fried plantains, boiled yams, but she longed, also, for the other things she had become used to in America, even quinoa, Blaine's specialty, made with feta and tomatoes. This was what she hoped she had not become but feared that she had: a "they have the kinds of things we can eat" kind of person. Fred was talking about Nollywood, speaking a little too loudly. "Nollywood is really public theatre, and if you understand it like that, then it is more tolerable. It's for public consumption, even mass participation . . ." "I like Nollywood," Ifemelu said, even though she, too, thought Nollywood was more theatre than film. The urge to be contrarian was

> strong. If she set herself apart, perhaps she would be less of the person she feared she had become. (Adichie 501- 503)

Adichie's tone is ironic and filled with mockery. The members of the Nigerpolitan club think of themselves as the "sanctified", since they did what many have not the courage to do: go back home. However, they feel the urge to gather in these meetings in order to officially mark their "elevated" social status as returnees, complaining together about what they miss about America or does not work in Lagos, and flaunting multiple degrees at prestigious universities they are very careful not to name because it would sound as bragging.

Ifemelu, even though she is indeed an Afropolitan, feels conflicted in this environment. In fact, whilst on the one hand she feels safe and comfortable because she somewhat understands and agrees with some of the members' complaints, on the other hand she wishes she was not, because this makes her an outsider in Lagos too, and this is the paradox that, ironically, the notion of Afropolitanism includes. In America she was considered black, back in Nigeria she is considered an "Americanah". This makes her identity even more fragmented. In this respect, Adichie problematizes Ifemelu's return, in that she questions the glamorous and fascinating notion of Afropolitan (returnees) as addressed by Selasi. In fact, in emphasizing the paradox that such concept entails, Adichie shows how Ifemelu's joining the Nigerpolitan Club only exacerbates her alienation in the Lagos that she has so much missed and that now she has to adjust to again.

4.3. Elvis's Relationship with Place and the Ambiguity of his Return

Throughout the whole novel, Abani emphasizes the roles that both Afikpo and Lagos play in Elvis's identity construction. In fact, the narrative structure includes frequent flashbacks to Elvis's childhood in Afikpo, a small village in a largely Igbo area of southeastern Nigeria, in which Elvis experiences a series of traumatic events. However, after having moved to Lagos with his father, Elvis struggles to make a living in the big city. In fact, after losing a steady job in the construction trade, he ends up being involved in the Lagosian criminal

underworld, in which, however, he proves to be a real outsider because of his naivety and innocence. Abani clearly shows how Elvis strives to find his place in Lagos until the end of the novel without success. In fact, he suffers torture at the hands of the Colonel (head of Nigeria's despotic government), whereas his father dies during his futile fight against the "Operation Clean the Nation" that razes Maroko (the Lagos slum where Elvis and his father are living) to the ground. Once Elvis is free from the Colonel's jail, he decides to escape to the U.S. thanks to his friend Redemption who gives him his passport and visa. Even though Elvis is reluctant and afraid of starting a new life in the U.S., he knows he has to leave Lagos, since leaving constitutes his ultimate chance to survive.

Elvis's return to his motherland is very unlikely to happen. In this respect, the difficult environment of the place of origin and the ambiguity of the place of destination do not allow to think about an "easy reconciliation" for Elvis's diasporic identity. In fact, as outlined by Paul Gilroy: "Diaspora yearning and ambivalence are transformed into a simple unambiguous exile once the possibility of easy reconciliation with either the place of sojourn or the place of origin exists. Some, though not all, versions of diaspora consciousness accentuate the possibility and desirability of return" (2000: 124). In this respect, Ifemelu's diaspora differs from the one of Elvis, since desirability of return is what, ultimately, makes her a returnee, and therefore, an Afropolitan. Abani's narrative structure, on the other hand, clearly shows how Elvis's diaspora is characterized by the impossibility of return, both to Afikpo and Lagos, since both places are the sites of traumatic, dangerous and violent experiences, and therefore, Elvis's return is very unlikely to happen.

In fact, if we think about Elvis's relationship with place, it is also very much characterized by a cosmopolitan attitude. In particular, if we take into account the diaspora theories previously outlined, arguing for the paramount role that the elevation of the place of the original community has, in comparison with the scattered destinations, we can see that Elvis does not elevate any original place in particular. On the contrary, both Afikpo and Lagos are connected with traumatic memories. The cosmopolitan identity, on the other hand, does not

privilege any place in particular, but is more inclined towards the appreciation of an international environment.

In order to understand how Abani questions diasporic notions of homeland, it is important to consider his portrayal of Afikpo in Elvis's childhood, which occurs in flashbacks from the main action in Lagos. Besides being Abani's own birthplace, Afikpo is also an ancient Igbo cultural center, which, however, for Elvis is linked to traumatic and violent events (see chapter 3) rather than cultural ones, such as the incestuous raping of his cousin Efua by her father (Abani 64), who rapes Elvis too (Abani 198); the initiation ritual in which he has to kill a chicken to prove his masculinity, which he can never really accomodate (Abani 19); his father's brutal beating when Elvis is caught in female garb (Abani 60). This series of traumatic experiences distance Elvis from his attachment to the hometown and to Igbo traditions that are an important part of it. On the other hand, in Afikpo, he starts showing fascination for cross-cultural contaminations and therefore, he begins to forge a cosmopolitan identity. In fact, in Afikpo Elvis first begins to explore and to attach himself to Western cultural forms, beginning with his name, indicative of his mother's familiarity with American culture, as his grandmother Oye tells him: "'Your mother loved Elvis Presley…' 'So that is how I got my name'" (Abani 104).

In Afikpo Elvis also remembers being captivated by Ajasco dancers who performed "Arabian, Indian and American magic" (Abani 66) and who strongly fascinated him: "These Ajasco dancers moved to Elvis Presley's 'Hound Dog'. Watching, mesmerized, Elvis realized then what he wanted to do more than anything else" (Abani 65). Moreover, his grandmother Oye speaks English with a Scottish accent because she spent her childhood among Scottish missionaries, and she also has a strong connection with an international community of "pen friends from all over the world" (Abani 82). Elvis facilitates her connection because he reads the letters aloud for her. Even though Abani intersperses the novel with fragments of Igbo traditions, these textual excerpts are inserted in the novel with many other texts and therefore do not provide Elvis with an authoritative account of a native Igbo culture. On the contrary, his culture proves to be hybrid and mongrel (see chapter 3). In a nutshell, Abani portrays Elvis's

experience in Afikpo not as an immersion in a site of Igbo traditions, but as inaugurating a general attachment to a more international environment.

With regard to Lagos, it is easy to see that Abani portrays Elvis's experience as one of a naive young boy from the province, who tries to find success in the precarious and corrupting mega-city, without success. By the end of the novel, when it seems that Elvis has no possibility of surviving, he manages to find a solution and escapes to the U.S.

Abani represents "the madness" of Lagos through the eyes of Elvis, who witnesses many episodes in which the city results to be a place where individual lives are of little importance. An example of that is when an overwhelmed, scrap merchant commits suicide, throwing himself into his wares after the police set them ablaze:

> [the man] stared into the blaze and the flames ripped through his heart, the fire entering him. His mind reached back and, like a dead star, collapsed upon itself. He screamed. It was sudden. The sound startled Elvis, who let go of the man and jumped back. It also startled the crowd of strangers and other spectators gathered round the fire, and they turned to look. The man screamed again and tore his clothes off, dancing around the fire naked, emitting piercing calls, bloodcurdling in their intensity. Before anyone could react, he jumped into the fire. As the flames licked around him, it seemed the fire smacked its lips in satisfaction. And in the fire, he continued to yell as he wrestled with it. The last thing Elvis heard before the man died was his terrible laugh. Its echo hung in the air. He never thought to ask the man's name. (Abani 73-74)

Abani describes the episode with his poetic, metaphorical and heartbreaking style, portraying with accuracy and efficacy the hopelessness of the man's extreme gesture. Elvis witnesses the scene with bewilderment, he is a spectator of Lagos's ruthlessness and he thinks that he does not even know the man's name, a sign of the lack of importance of one's own individuality.

Sometimes Abani's depiction of Lagos is grotesque. Perhaps the most remarkable example of that is when Elvis is riding home on a molue that transports the citizens of Lagos through the streets filled with people and that occasionally kills pedestrians. While on the bus, Elvis is shocked when he sees that people are crossing streets on the motorways rather than using the overhead bridges, since, in that way, many of them lose their lives:

> Pensive on the bus ride home, Elvis did not pay too much attention to the cars that in spite of their speed wove between each other like the careful threads of

> a tapestry. The motorways were the only means of getting across the series of towns that made up Lagos. Intent on reaching their own destinations, pedestrians dodged between the speeding vehicles as they crossed the wide motorways. It was dangerous, and every day at least ten people were killed trying to cross the road. If they didn't die when the first car hit them, subsequent car finished the job. The curious thing, though, was that there were hundreds of overhead pedestrian bridges, but people ignored them. Some even walked up to the bridges and then crossed underneath them. Elvis was pulled back to the present as the car in front of the bus hit someone. The heavy wheels of the bus thudded over the inert body, spinning into another lane. Elvis winced and turned to the man next to him. "We are crazy you know. Did you see that?" "Uh-uh," the man grunted. "Why can't we cross the bridges? Why do we gamble with our lives?" "My friend, life in Lagos is a gamble, crossing or no crossing." "But why not even the odds a little? Did you know that they have soldiers standing on the islands in the middle of the roads to stop people from crossing the busy roads instead of using the overhead walkways?" "Ah, dat's good," the man said. "Yes, but that's not the point. Why do we need to have soldiers there to tell us it is dangerous to cross the road?" "I don't understand." "If you cross the road without using the overhead bridges, you increase the chances of being hit by a car. Simple logic, really." "So what is your point, my friend? We all have to die sometimes, you know. If it is your time, it is your time. You can be in your bed and die. If it is not your time, you can't die if even if you cross de busiest road. After all, you can fall from de bridge into de road and die. Now, isn't dat double foolishness?" Elvis stared at him, shook his head and went back to staring out of the window. Outside, the road was littered with dead bodies at regular intervals. "At least take away the bodies," he muttered to himself. "Dey cannot," the man interjected into his thoughts. "Dis stupid government place a fine on dying by crossing road illegally. So de relatives can only take de body when dey pay de fine." "What about the State Sanitation Department?" "Is dis your first day in Lagos? Dey are on strike or using de government ambulances as hearses in deir private business. Dis is de only country I know dat has plenty ambulances, but none in de hospitals or being used to carry sick people." (Abani 55-56-57)

Abani's depiction of Lagos is grotesque in its being brutal. People die because they are hit by a bus or a car, but what is even more absurd, is that they are responsible for their own death, since they refuse to use the overhead bridges. Elvis is bewildered and shocked because of this, and when he talks about it with another passenger trying to share his perplexity, the man does not agree with him, on the contrary, he finds a reason in that madness, saying that life in Lagos is indeed a "gamble", leaving Elvis more confused than before.

4.3.1. Elvis's Cosmopolitan Perspective

Abani's depiction of Lagos through the eyes of Elvis allows us to understand that Elvis feels estranged and alienated in that reality, where he cannot fit. In this respect, Elvis's possibility of returning to Lagos from the U.S. is made very unlikely. If we look at the novel from a closer perspective, we can even notice that Elvis openly rejects the diasporic embracing of a single place as

site of cultural exclusivity. In fact, when the King of Beggars gives a speech in support of a return to authentic Igbo culture, Elvis proves to take a critical stance that seems to be rather oriented towards a cosmopolitan perspective:

> The King of Beggars got up onstage and began plucking reluctant chords from a battered out-of-tune guitar. The crowd grew silent as he performed a series of tone poems. He was talking about the beauty of the indigenous culture that had been abandoned for Western ways. It was essentialist, maybe even prejudiced, because the culture he spoke of was that of the Igbo, only one of nearly three hundred indigenous people in this populous country . . . He spoke of the evils of capitalism that the United States of America practiced - a brand of capitalism, he said, that promoted the individual interest over the communal. It was a land of vice and depravity, infested with a perverse morality based on commercial value rather than a humanistic one. The King called for everyone to return to the traditional values and ways of being. Elvis wasn't completely convinced, though . . . Elvis's main problem with the King's theories was that they didn't account for the inherent complications he knew were native to this culture, or the American. As naive as Elvis was, he knew there was no way of going back to the "good old days," and wondered why the King didn't speak about how to cope with these new and confusing times. (Abani 154-155)

Elvis's stance is critical and demonstrates how, in that moment, he is thinking of himself as a citizen of the world. Elvis's perspective seems more cosmopolitan than ethno-nationalist, in that he argues that the King's appeal is excluding non Igbo-people and that a different approach is needed when dealing with these "confusing times". In fact, as pointed out by John D. Schwetman, "The true cosmopolitan worldview rejects ties to the land and regards efforts to privilege one place over another with suspicion because such ties to the land form the basis for bias toward local attachments that the cosmopolitan seeks to overcome" (2014: 188).

Therefore, in outlining how Elvis's diasporic identity tends towards cosmopolitanism Elvis's approach recalls that tension between the cosmopolitan and the diasporic as addressed by Stuart Hall in his essay "Cultural Identities and Diaspora", in which Hall imagines a diasporic identity that embraces the best of both worlds: "Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identifications or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence, but *positioning*. Hence, there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position, which has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental 'law of origin'" (1990: 226). In his essay, Hall argues for a notion of diaspora that is not overly absolute or concrete, and

underlines that even though shared African origins unite Caribbeans of African descent, those origins should not be essentialized. In so doing, he shifts the emphasis from a physical place to more unstable culturally determined signs. In this respect, we can see similarities with Selasi's notion of the Afropolitan. In fact, Hall argues that cultural identities in the diaspora are a matter of becoming and positioning and are not grounded in a mere recovery of the past, which, when found, would secure a sense of oneself into eternity (as, in fact, also argued by Wright, see chapter 1). He shows how cultural identities of the diaspora are constantly in a state of becoming, they are transformational, since on the one hand, culture consists of its recovered history, but on the other hand, cultural identity is also determined by the context in which culture is produced. The movement of Africans, along with the presence of foreigners in Africa itself, has, over time, created a complexity of blended, mixed or hybridized African cultures. Recognizing this complexity is a key component of Afropolitanism. In this respect, Selasi, creates an imaginary of Afropolitan individuals who are recognizable, for instance, by their "funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes" which reflects the complexity addressed by Hall (2005: 1).

The education that Elvis acquires through the exposure to cultural differences (especially through reading, as outlined in chapter 3) has been examined by numerous critics, who focused on the analysis of Elvis's achievement in order to understand whether Elvis's return to Lagos and/or his survival in the U.S. are plausible or not. These critics argue for different interpretations of Elvis's achievement. On the one hand it can be considered as maturation, especially because he is observing Lagos with a clarity that many lack (as the example with the King of Beggars has shown) and therefore, he has acquired the cosmopolitan education he needs to survive in the globalized American reality. On the other hand, Elvis's achievement can be considered as a failure, since, because of his traumatic experiences, he fails to integrate in the community (isolation prevents the individual from maturation) and therefore, it is very unlikely he will "mature into a functional migrant adulthood" (Schwetman 2014: 197).

In other words, Abani's *GraceLand,* which portrays Elvis's diasporic identity as mongrel as much as cosmopolitan, is so permeated by ambiguity that the reader can hardly guess what is going to happen to Elvis. Whether he is going to have a better life in the U.S. or he is ever going back to Lagos or Afikpo, remains shrouded in mystery.

However, as Abani's depiction of Elvis's relationship with both Lagos and Afikpo has suggested, as much as Elvis is indeed a diasporic subject, his attachment to place seems to be prevented by both traumatic events and his cosmopolitan perspective, and therefore, his return to Afikpo or Lagos seems very unlikely to happen. On the other hand, it is maybe more plausible to argue that in the U.S. he will find the place that can offer him that cross-cultural contaminations that he seeks and, therefore, he can go forward in the process of his mongrelization.

Conclusion

My thesis has shown how understanding the importance of constructing black identities through difference means referring to a non-static and strategic concept of black identity that avoids the danger of incorporating a self inside a collectivity just to "guarantee an unchanging oneness" characterized by a shared history and ancestry. In this respect the connection between diaspora and fragmented cultural identities is paramount, since diaspora problematizes fixed notions of identity, space and sense of attachment and belonging to the motherland.

Constructing identities through difference is even more relevant when we think about the differences that are obliterated in the definition of "blackness" especially in the U.S., where "black" is too often used as a blanket term to incorporate all people of color without regard for ethnicity, culture, nationality, or other identitarian aspects such as class and gender.

With regards to Americanah and the race discourse in the U.S., my analysis has shown how Adichie, through Ifemelu's blog, clearly addressed the disadvantage of black people, with respect to white people in the U.S. Even poor white people are higher than black people in American social hierarchy. In fact, white people, even if poor, can at least disregard race and claim colorblindness, which is ultimately what constitutes white privilege. What is emphasized by Adichie, is that colorblindness actually maintains white privilege by negating racial inequality. Embracing a colorblind perspective allow whites to believe that the material success they enjoy is just the result of their individual hard work and investments in education and not of their privileged position in social hierarchy. In other words, this perspective purports that class and culture, and not institutional racism, are responsible for inequality.

Adichie describes how America has taught Ifemelu to think in terms of race and, through her blog, she questions American social structure as well as her own identity. Once she gets to the U.S. she cannot choose whether to think in terms of race or not because she is black. Only white mainstream America can

choose not to deal with race and, ultimately, this is exactly what white privilege is.

Through Ifemelu's blog, Adichie expresses her observations on American tribalism, which accurately reflect American reality and allow the blog readers to better understand it. In particular, in Americanah Adichie reflects back to American readers their own prejudices and defamiliarizes their sense of themselves as the norm. In so doing, she is revealing to American readers what they sound like.

With regards to GraceLand, my analysis has addressed how Abani constructs the mongrel identity of Elvis. The hybrid environment in which Elvis lives, as portrayed by Abani, shows that whiteness and the U.S. are always associated with something pleasant, namely the promise of a better life. Elvis's reconfiguration of American cultural items helps him construct his imaginary sphere. His mongrelized culture and identity is also the result of his desire to escape the difficult setting of Lagos, and the idea of America is the primary means to achieve this purpose. However, the ambiguity that permeates the whole novel, reveals how Elvis is strongly shaped by the negative concrete presence of the U.S. in Lagos. Abani has also shown how, in terms of transnational diasporic identities, through music and literature, ideas and beliefs travel across the globe and shape contemporary subjectivities in forms that exceed national borders.

The oversimplification of considering a shared history as the point of origin of one people's identity has also been addressed by Michelle Wright (2015), which is one of the main scholars upon which I based my theoretical groundwork. In particular, in questioning the use of a linear progressive narrative within diasporic research, which excludes the notion of return, Wright shows how, using both linear and Epiphenomenal time in the African diaspora studies provides a "more cogent, cohesive and inclusive analysis of blackness" (Wright 2015: 74). In other words, together these notions of spacetime allow to include the experiences of all black people (including African women and Africans recently migrated to the West) that theories based on a Newtonian spacetime (i.e., that space and time always flow forward in linear fashion) leave aside. Applying Wright's theories to both Ifemelu's and Elvis's identities allowed me

to show how both the protagonists interpellate blackness from different dimensions that enhance inclusive and non-hierarchical understandings of black identities.

Ifemelu's experience of blackness, as embedded in her complex process of self-knowledge and identity formation, is never really completed. The choice of wearing her hair natural (at first for health reasons and then as an act of self-love and liberation) represents her ultimate refusal to be oppressed by the rules dictated by white agency and in so doing it addresses blackness in its multidimensionality. Ifemelu's agency finally allows her to come to terms with the different facets of her blackness and herself: a Nigerian immigrant in the U.S., a race blogger with a scholarship at Princeton, an "americanah" returnee in Lagos.

With regard to GraceLand Abani shows how Elvis's "mongrel" identity is shaped by different factors: the influence that American cultural capital has on him, notions of masculinity that are part of Igbo traditions, violence, and the power of music and literature. The metropolis is a site of displacement, disruption and fragmentation for Elvis, who, in the end, has no choice but to escape to the U.S. However, the way in which Abani describes the mongrelized culture Elvis inhabits, allows us to understand that his identity is transnational because he embraces a transnational culture even before moving to the U.S.

My analysis has demonstrated how Elvis's blackness is self-interpellated and, therefore, produced as a choice. Moreover, considering the self-interpellation of blackness allows us to situate Elvis's black identity outside those interpellations that generate black subjects in accordance to white agency, since Elvis is not living in America. In fact, as pointed out by Wright: "If one always interpellate one's Blackness in moments of anti-Black racism, the resulting identity is fraught with tension, anxiety, and hatred" (Wright 2015: 119). In this respect, Elvis interpellates his blackness in such a way that his identity can benefit from his agency, since his choice of reading is an act of pleasure and escape from a violent and disappointing reality.

As far as Ifemelu's return to Lagos is concerned, I have shown how Ifemelu in America is considered black, back in Nigeria she is considered an

"Americanah". This makes her identity even more fragmented. In this respect, Adichie problematizes Ifemelu's return, in that she questions the glamorous and fascinating notion of Afropolitan (returnees) as addressed by Selasi. In fact, in emphasizing the paradox that such concept entails, Adichie shows how Ifemelu's joining the Nigerpolitan Club only exacerbates her alienation in the Lagos that she has so much missed and that now she has to adjust to again.

With regards to GraceLand as Abani's depiction of Elvis's relationship with both Lagos and Afikpo has suggested, as much as Elvis is indeed a diasporic subject, his attachment to place seems to be prevented by both traumatic events and his cosmopolitan perspective, and therefore, his return to Afikpo or Lagos seems very unlikely to happen. On the other hand, it is maybe more plausible to argue that in the U.S. he will find the place that can offer him the cross-cultural contaminations that he has always sought out and, therefore, he can go forward in the process of his mongrelization.

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Summary in Italian

Per la mia tesi di laurea magistrale ho scelto di analizzare due romanzi scritti in lingua inglese appartenenti alla letteratura postcoloniale: *Americanah* di Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie e *GraceLand* di Chris Abani, non soltanto perché affascinata dalla produzione letteraria degli autori, ma anche perché l'analisi e lo studio di questi testi letterari solleva questioni importanti.

Entrambi gli autori sono nigeriani, appartengono all'etnia Igbo e sono figure autorevoli di quella importante sottocategoria della diaspora africana negli Stati Uniti che è composta da intellettuali, scrittori e accademici. A tal proposito *Americanah* e *GraceLand* mostrano delle somiglianze, grazie anche al bagaglio etnico e culturale che accomuna i due autori, che si riflettono nei due romanzi, diventando la cornice ideale per un'analisi accurata. Le storie narrate da Adichie e Abani presentano differenze sia dal punto di vista delle prospettive di genere e classe, sia nello stile narrativo che caratterizza rispettivamente i due autori.

La mia analisi mostra come Adichie e Abani costruiscono le identità nere transnazionali dei due protagonisti, che risultano essere ibride per fattori molteplici e differenti. La loro ibridità non può essere separata dalla loro nerezza, la definizione della quale è ancora oggetto di discussione degli studi sulla diaspora africana. In tal senso applicando le teorie di Michelle Wright sulle diverse interpellazioni di nerezza, la mia ricerca tenta di mostrare come Adichie e Abani abbiano interpellato e definito, rispettivamente, la nerezza dei due protagonisti.

Per quanto riguarda il metodo di ricerca, dopo la lettura approfondita dei due romanzi, ho raccolto tutta la documentazione bibliografica delle figure più autorevoli appartenenti al contesto storico, letterario e sociologico di riferimento. In seguito, ho costruito le fondamenta del mio studio, suddividendo le varie fasi del lavoro e l'analisi che è stata svolta singolarmente per ognuno dei due romanzi, ha fatto emergere le principali problematiche che gli autori hanno affrontato attraverso i protagonisti. A quel punto, per ogni romanzo ho selezionato alcuni passaggi significativi che mettevano in luce questioni coerenti con la mia argomentazione; le tematiche emerse mi hanno permesso di

dimostrare come entrambi gli scrittori abbiano costruito le identità nere transnazionali dei due protagonisti che si sono comunque rivelate frammentarie e ibride. In considerazione di ciò, ho ritenuto di applicare le teorie della Wright (2015) che sostengono l'importanza di collocare lo studio delle identità nere della diaspora africana al di là dell'epistemologia della tratta atlantica degli schiavi, che esclude determinate identità (come per esempio donne e africani recentemente immigrati in occidente).

In particolare, la Wright sostiene l'importanza di mettere in discussione l'uso esclusivo di una narrativa lineare progressiva all'interno della ricerca diasporica, in quanto essa esclude la nozione di ritorno, fondamentale nella definizione di concetto di diaspore. Diversamente Wright mostra come l'utilizzo sia del tempo lineare che di quello basato su un'intersezione di spazio e tempo fornisca un'analisi più coesa, inclusiva e convincente del concetto di nerezza (in quanto essa è in parte costrutto sociale e in parte concetto fenomenologico).

Per quanto riguarda l'applicazione delle sue teorie sull'interpellazione della nerezza, ho fatto riferimento a tre tipologie: verticale, multidimensionale, auto-interpellazione.

Le prime due tipologie le ho applicate alla protagonista di *Americanah*, Ifemelu. In particolare, mostrando come i capelli delle persone di colore possano rappresentare una metafora della razza, ho analizzato come il modo in cui Ifemelu si relaziona con i suoi capelli, rispecchi il rapporto che lei ha con la sua nerezza. Ifemelu interpella verticalmente la suanerezza quando si adegua agli standard di bellezza occidentali, lisciando chimicamente i suoi capelli e reprimendo in tal modo la sua nerezza, che assume le forme di una mera reazione alla supremazia dei bianchi. Diversamente, interpella multidimensionalmente la sua nerezza quando decide di lasciare i suoi capelli al naturale, e quindi, rifiutando di accettare le regole imposte dalla società americana, libera la sua nerezza dai vincoli che la confinano ad essere un mero oggetto della supremazia bianca.

La terza tipologia si riferisce a quel tipo di nerezza che non può essere interpellata in momenti di razzismo e, per questo motivo, risulta essere l'interpellazione perfetta per Elvis che, non trovandosi in America, non può

scontrarsi direttamente con la questione razziale. L'amore di Elvis per la lettura, che lo porta a leggere libri da tutto il mondo e che nasce da una scelta intima e personale, può essere interpretato come metafora dell'ibridità della sua identità. In tal modo Elvis, interpellando la sua nerezza ibrida leggendo, genera un'identità nera che è fuori da quelle interpellazioni che concepiscono le identità delle persone di colore solo in relazione alla supremazia bianca. Infatti la Wright sostiene che interpellando la nerezza esclusivamente in momenti di razzismo, l'identità che ne risulta è carica di tensione, ansia e odio. Invece, come possiamo notare, Elvis interpella la sua nerezza in modo tale che la sua identità ne beneficia, dal momento che la sua scelta di leggere è un atto di piacere e fuga da una realtà violenta e deludente.

Per quanto riguarda teorie della diaspora africana, cultura, identità, e globalizzazione e come questi concetti si intersecano l'uno con l'altro all'interno dei due romanzi, ho fatto riferimento a teorie di studiosi noti come William Safran (1991), Robin Cohen (2008), Stuart Hall (1996), Paul Gilroy (1993; 2000) e Michelle Wright (2004; 2015).

A questo punto procedo con la descrizione del contenuto della mia tesi capitolo per capitolo.

Nel primo capitolo, dopo aver spiegato lo scopo della mia ricerca e la ragione dietro la scelta dei due romanzi, introduco concetti di identità, nerezza, diaspora e la categoria di razza così come una panoramica sugli africani immigrati negli Stati Uniti e il loro rapporto conflittuale con gli afroamericani. Nel trattare l'identità, o meglio le identità nere, la mia tesi si riferisce a quel concetto di identità strategico e non statico come delineato da Stuart Hall (1996) che le descrive come in continuo divenire e come una combinazione di cambiamento, frammentazione e storia. Per quanto riguarda il concetto di diaspora, procedo esponendo le problematiche dietro la concettualizzazione di questo fenomeno, che è ancora oggetto di discussione. Comprendere ciò che realmente caratterizza la diaspora africana, in particolare, è ancora limitato dalle difficoltà incontrate nel definire il termine più generale di diaspora.

Dopo aver descritto i cinque tipi di diaspora africana storicamente riconoscibili, come descritti da Palmer (2000) sostengo che il suo lavoro è in

linea con quello di studiosi come Michelle Wright (2004; 2015) che si occupano della questione delle identità nere della diaspora africana. In particolare Wright mina quella nozione di diaspora africana basata sull'egemonia dell'epistemologia della tratta atlantica degli schiavi che fallisce nel dare visibilità all'eterogeneità della nerezza nella diaspora.

Lo studio della diaspora è centrale per gli studi africani, dal momento che indaga la complessità delle identità nere che altrimenti tendono ad essere fortemente omogeneizzate (sia nel discorso pubblico che in quello accademico) sulla base dell'esperienza atlantica di migrazione forzata.

A tal proposito, i lavori di studiosi come Michelle Wright sono fondamentali quando si tratta di definire cos'è la nerezza o meglio, cosa determina le identità nere. Wright (2015) sostiene che dal momento che la nerezza, o meglio, la razza, non è il prodotto di tratti biologici, ma piuttosto un insieme complesso di categorie e identità sociopolitiche, essere identificati come persone di colore è in parte un costrutto sociale e in parte un concetto fenomenologico. Questo fa sì che significati di nerezza cambino in base al tempo e allo spazio.

Dopo aver introdotto i concetti di identità nera transnazionale e diaspora africana, procedo nell'esplorare come le teorie di Georg Willhelm Friedrich Hegel, Arthur De Gobineau e Thomas Jefferson, figure del diciottesimo e diciannovesimo secolo, abbiano segnato il percorso per le moderne teorie razziste che hanno le loro radici nella storia americana ed europea.

Infatti, la loro invenzione del concetto di "altro-nero" è alla base delle moderne teorie sulla dicotomia di bianco e nero e della creazione della categoria di razza. Successivamente spiego come il concetto di razza possa essere definito come la categorizzazione sistematica di persone, basata su caratteristiche fenotipiche identificabili, e come costrutto sociale non poggi su classificazioni che sono oggettive, scientifiche o biologiche. Tuttavia i suoi effetti sulle persone razzializzate sono indiscutibili, tanto più che negli Stati Uniti la categoria di razza determina la distribuzione di opportunità economiche, sociali e politiche.

Dopo aver descritto i tre diversi gruppi di persone di colore negli Stati Uniti (i discendenti della tratta atlantica degli schiavi, ovvero gli afroamericani;

i volontari immigrati dopo il 1808, quando la tratta degli schiavi è diventata illegale; gli immigrati africani) mostro come la popolazione africana negli Stati Uniti, non soltanto sia variegata nel suo profilo formativo, economico e di conoscenza della lingua inglese, ma sia di media anche più qualificata rispetto agli afroamericani o alla popolazione immigrata in generale.

Tuttavia la ben consolidata dicotomia di bianco e nero negli Stati Uniti oscura differenze interne alla comunità di colore infatti, il termine generale "nero" è spesso utilizzato per inglobare tutti i tipi di persone di colore, indipendentemente dalla loro nazione d'origine. Essere classificati semplicemente come bianchi o neri è molto offensivo per gli africani immigrati, specialmente perché questa classificazione li associa con la categoria socialmente più debole e stigmatizzata degli afroamericani e ciò, infatti, risulta alle radici del conflitto tra afroamericani e africani.

Nel secondo capitolo della mia tesi mi concentro esclusivamente sull'analisi di *Americanah* e in particolare sulla protagonista, Ifemelu, una giovane donna nigeriana proveniente da una famiglia di classe medio-bassa che animata dalla promessa di un futuro migliore e di una vita migliore oltreoceano, decide di migrare negli Stati Uniti.

Dopo tredici anni negli Stati Uniti, una borsa di studio a Princeton, la creazione di un blog di successo sulla questione della razza e varie (più o meno soddisfacenti) relazioni con uomini bianche e di colore, decide di tornare a Lagos.

Adichie racconta la sua storia in maniera complessa alternando, lungo tutto il romanzo, i ricordi con storie secondarie e frammenti di scene presenti e passate.

Anche i post del blog di Ifemelu sono sparsi lungo tutta la narrazione e attraverso di loro Adichie fornisce dei commenti culturali diretti. I temi principali del romanzo riguardano la questione della razza, i capelli delle persone di colore, classe, genere, relazioni amorose e migrazione.

Il linguaggio del romanzo è caratterizzato da una miscela di slang americano, colloquialismi, parole Igbo e inglese nigeriano e britannico che permettono ad Adichie di rendere la narrazione contemporaneamente divertente

e ricca di riflessioni culturali profonde. Il tono di Adichie è per lo più ironico soprattutto quando tratta i paradossi e le complessità della questione della razza negli Stati Uniti.

Il capitolo è diviso in due parti, la prima si concentra sulla scoperta di cosa voglia dire essere di colore negli Stati Uniti da parte di Ifemelu. In particolare, passaggi selezionati dal blog di Ifemelu mostrano come Adichie tratti questioni di razza, classe e privilegio dei bianchi in maniera ironica e come queste categorie si intersechino l'una con l'altra e influenzino la società americana e la sua struttura.

La seconda parte analizza come i capelli possano rappresentare una metafora della razza, in particolar modo indaga gli effetti che gli ideali di bellezza razzializzati hanno sulle donne di colore e come le problematiche dei capelli siano profondamente radicate nel discorso della razza, come simbolo sia di oppressione che di liberazione.

A tal proposito dimostro come l'esperienza di Ifemelu dei capelli (e quindi della nerezza) può essere analizzata alla luce di quelle che Michelle Wright (2015) chiama interpellazioni di nerezza multidimensionale e verticale. L'interpellazione multidimensionale sostiene che le identità nere siano in grado di esercitare tutta la gamma delle emozioni e azioni umane e che non soffrano di proibizioni di natura genetica o biologica imposti dalla definizione razziale. In tal modo, si liberano da quel vincolo gerarchico che le genera come mero oggetto della supremazia bianca.

Diversamente, l'interpellazione verticale fa riferimento a quella concezione di nerezza per la quale l'identità nera può essere interpellata solamente come oggetto della supremazia bianca.

Considerando i capelli come metafora della razza è possibile tracciare un percorso di conoscenza personale e costruzione di identità di Ifemelu attraverso *Americanah* nel quale i punti di svolta sono rappresentati dalla relazione che la protagonista ha con i suoi capelli e di conseguenza con le interpellazioni verticali e multidimensionali della sua nerezza.

Il terzo capitolo è focalizzato esclusivamente su *GraceLand* il quale narra la storia di un giovane adolescente nigeriano di nome Elvis che lavora come

impersonatore del famoso Elvis Presley e che cerca di allontanarsi dai bassifondi di Lagos nel quale vive con suo padre, un alcolizzato, e la sua matrigna Comfort che lo tratta ingiustamente. La storia è focalizzata sull'ambiente difficile e violento della città più grande della Nigeria e sulle battaglie di Elvis per cercare di sfuggire alla sua realtà deludente e crearsi una vita migliore.

Esplorando temi come bassifondi vs villaggio, madre vs padre, povertà vs violenza, culture ibride e globalizzazione, *GraceLand* si divide tra due narrazioni principali, con la storia primaria che si svolge a Lagos nel 1983 e quella secondaria che si svolge nel piccolo villaggio di Afikpo tra il 1972 e il 1981. Intervallando le due narrazioni con una serie di flashback Abani inframezza i capitoli del romanzo con frammenti intertestuali di tradizioni Igbo.

Lo stile di Abani è molto efficace nelle descrizioni metaforiche della violenza che attraversa tutto il romanzo, in quanto rappresenta una forza potente che forgia inesorabilmente l'identità di Elvis. Inoltre Abani, servendosi della musica e della letteratura come strumenti intertestuali, conferisce loro un ruolo fondamentale nel costruire la soggettività di Elvis e nell'evidenziare le qualità diasporiche delle identità nere. Anche questo capitolo è diviso in due parti, la prima mostra come Abani solleva questioni di identità, mascolinità e ibridità culturale attraverso le esperienze di Elvis.

Anche se il romanzo si svolge interamente in Nigeria, ciononostante offre una prospettiva interessante e preziosa sull'impatto che la cultura americana ha su Lagos attraverso la globalizzazione. In particolar modo, il ritratto dell'America e il suo rapporto con la Nigeria è ambivalente lungo tutto il romanzo, così come lo è Elvis verso gli Stati Uniti. Infatti, da un lato l'America nella fantasia di Elvis è rappresentata come un luogo idilliaco, dove ogni sogno si realizza, anche per le persone di colore (con i prodotti americani che alimentano questa credenza). Dall'altro lato, la presenza concreta dell'America nella vita di Elvis è deludente e si rivela attraverso connessioni globali oscure come il traffico di droga e di essere umani.

La seconda parte si concentra sulla lettura come metafora di ibridizzazione. In particolare, sostengo che il ruolo fondamentale che Abani attribuisce alla letteratura nel romanzo conferisce ad Elvis un certo potere:

attraverso il suo leggere ogni tipo di libri da tutto il mondo e quindi nell'abbracciare una cultura ibrida che va al di là dei confini nazionali, Elvis dimostra di avere un ruolo attivo nella formazione della sua identità ibrida.

Applicando l'auto-interpellazione della Wright (diversa dalle interpellazioni verticali e multidimensionali utili per l'analisi di *Americanah*) alla soggettività di Elvis, mi permette di mostrare come Abani costruisca l'identità nera di Elvis che è infatti, come sostenuto dalla Wright, dipendente da nozioni di tempo e spazio e opera come un "quando" e un "dove" piuttosto che essere un "cosa".

Il quarto e ultimo capitolo chiude il cerchio della mia ricerca in quanto analizzo come Adichie ed Abani, attraverso la costruzione della relazione dei due protagonisti con i rispettivi luoghi, problematizzino le nozioni di attaccamento alla madrepatria e desiderio di ritorno che caratterizzano le diaspore. In particolare mostro come la relazione conflittuale che Ifemelu ha con gli Stati Uniti, alimenti il suo desiderio di ritornare nella sua madrepatria. Tuttavia, con la sua adesione al Nigerpolitan Club come rimpatriata, Adichie mette in discussione le possibilità scaturite dalla nozione di afropolitanismo così come concepito dalla Selasi, satirizzandolo.

Dall'altro lato, la descrizione che Abani fa della relazione di Elvis con i luoghi, evidenzia come Elvis non mostri nessun tipo di attaccamento particolare al suo ambiente, al contrario, i luoghi per Elvis sono per lo più associati ad esperienze traumatiche sia nell'infanzia che nell'adolescenza. Questo permette un'interpretazione piuttosto cosmopolita dell'identità di Elvis che lascia supporre al lettore che, se il suo ritorno nella madrepatria non è così desiderabile, forse gli Stati Uniti possono offrirgli quell'ambiente transnazionale che ha sempre cercato.

In conclusione, la mia tesi mostra come comprendere l'importanza di costruire identità nere attraverso differenze, significa riferirsi a un concetto strategico di identità nera, che aggira l'ostacolo di incorporare l'individuo nella collettività solo per garantire una "unitarietà immutevole" caratterizzata da un passato e una storia condivisi. A tal proposito, la connessione tra diaspora e identità culturali frammentarie è fondamentale, dal momento che la diaspora

problematizza quelle nozioni d'identità, spazio, senso di attaccamento e appartenenza alla madrepatria prestabilite.

Costruire le identità attraverso differenze è ancora più rilevante se pensiamo a tutte quelle diversità obliterate nella definizione di nerezza specialmente negli Stati Uniti, dove il termine "nero" viene troppo spesso utilizzato come concetto generale per incorporare tutte le persone di colore indipendentemente dall'etnia, cultura, nazionalità o atri aspetti identitari importanti come classe e genere.

Come mostrato, l'eccessiva semplificazione di considerare una storia condivisa come punto di origine dell'identità di un popolo è stata anche trattata da Michelle Wright (2015), uno degli studiosi principali sui quali ho basato le fondamenta teoriche della mia tesi. In particolare, nel mettere in discussione l'uso di una narrativa lineare progressiva all'interno della ricerca diasporica che esclude la nozione di ritorno, Wright mostra come utilizzando sia il tempo lineare che quello basato su un'intersezione di spazio e tempo fornisca un'analisi più coesa, inclusiva e convincente del concetto di nerezza. In altre parole unire entrambe queste nozioni di spazio-tempo permette di includere le esperienze di tutte le persone di colore, di ogni epoca e di ogni luogo che le teorie basate esclusivamente su uno spazio-tempo newtoniano (secondo cui spazio e tempo progrediscono in maniera lineare e causale) escludono.

Applicare le teorie di Wright sia all'identità di Ifemelu che a quella di Elvis, mi ha permesso di mostrare come i protagonisti interpellino la loro nerezza da diverse prospettive che valorizzano concezioni di identità nere inclusive e non gerarchiche.

L'esperienza della nerezza di Ifemelu, fortemente radicata nel suo processo di conoscenza di se stessa e formazione d'identità, non è mai veramente completa. La scelta di indossare i suoi capelli naturali (inizialmente per ragioni di salute e poi come atto di amor proprio e liberazione) rappresenta il suo rifiuto finale di essere oppressa dalle regole dettate dalla supremazia bianca e in tal modo interpella la sua nerezza nella sua multidimensionalità. Questa sua scelta le permette, in ultima analisi, di fare i conti con le diverse sfumature della sua

nerezza e con se stessa: una nigeriana immigrata negli Stati Uniti, una blogger con una borsa di studio a Princeton e una rimpatriata "*americanah*" a Lagos.

Per quanto riguarda *GraceLand*, Abani mostra come l'identità ibrida di Elvis sia forgiata da diversi fattori: l'influenza che il capitale culturale americano ha su di lui, le nozioni di mascolinità che sono parte delle tradizioni Igbo, la violenza e il potere che la musica e la letteratura esercitano (positivamente) su di lui. La metropoli è un luogo di spostamento, sconvolgimento e frammentazione per Elvis che alla fine non ha altra scelta che fuggire negli Stati Uniti. Ciononostante, il modo in cui Abani descrive la cultura ibrida che circonda Elvis, ci permette di capire che la sua identità è transnazionale perché egli abbraccia una cultura transnazionale anche prima di migrare negli Stati Uniti.

La mia analisi dimostra come la nerezza di Elvis è auto-interpellata e quindi prodotta come scelta. Inoltre, considerare l'auto-interpellazione di Elvis, ci permette di collocare la sua identità nera al di fuori di quelle interpellazioni che confinano la nerezza a rappresentare un mero oggetto della supremazia bianca, tanto più che Elvis non vive in America. Infatti, come sostenuto dalla Wright, interpellare la nerezza solo ed esclusivamente in momenti di razzismo, vuol dire che l'identità che ne risulta è carica di tensione, ansia e odio. Al contrario, Elvis interpella la sua nerezza in modo tale che la sua identità ne beneficia, dal momento che la sua scelta di leggere è un atto di piacere e fuga da una realtà violenta e deludente.

Per quanto riguarda il ritorno di Ifemelu a Lagos ho mostrato come Ifemelu in America sia considerata "nera" e in Nigeria un' "americanah", questo fa si che la sua identità sia inevitabilmente frammentaria. A tal proposito l'Adichie problematizza il ritorno di Ifemelu, mettendo in discussione l'affascinante nozione di afropolitanismo elaborata dalla Selasi. Infatti, enfatizzando il paradosso generato da questo concetto, Adichie mostra come l'adesione di Ifemelu al Nigerpolitan club inasprisca la sua alienazione nella Lagos che le è molto mancata e alla quale ora deve nuovamente adattarsi.

Per quanto riguarda *GraceLand* la descrizione di Abani della relazione conflittuale che Elvis ha con Lagos e con Afikpo ci suggerisce che, per quanto Elvis sia infatti diasporico, il suo attaccamento ai luoghi sembra essere impedito

sia da eventi traumatici che dalla sua prospettiva cosmopolita e quindi il suo ritorno ad Afikpo o Lagos sembra molto improbabile. D’altro canto, è forse più plausibile affermare che negli Stati Uniti, Elvis troverà quel luogo che può offrirgli quelle contaminazioni transculturali che lui ha sempre cercato e, in tal modo, può proseguire nel suo processo di ibridizzazione.