

Faculté de philosophie, arts et lettres

**On the impact of migration,
'Blackness' and gender on a young
woman's identity construction in
the United States – *Americanah*, by
Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie**

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Introduction

Migration has been an omnipresent subject throughout the history of mankind. Nowadays, more than ever, it has become a topical sociopolitical subject. More than a social reality, migration has also pervaded literature: as both a literary theme and a reality at the origins of many acts of creation. Thus, migration has occupied a growing place in the past years. Among migrants' stories, accounts can be distinguished based on various factors, including origins and gender. Female migration is not marginal, as one out of two migrants is a woman, according to recent statistics¹. Despite this, female migrant voices in literature have only emerged quite recently. Therefore, it is particularly interesting to study how a fictional account addresses the themes of migration and feminine identity construction, and to examine the interest of discussing these themes through literature. The forthcoming dissertation will thus study the notion of identity construction through the main lens of the migratory experience, by looking at the factors that can influence the development of a Black female character's identity construction. This study is primarily based on the novel *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. In the book, the main character Ifemelu leaves Nigeria to seek better education and opportunities in the United States. The book follows her journey as a young girl and later young woman navigating American society. What is more, the story follows her surprising return to the motherland, after spending thirteen years in America, and a successful life story that has led her to become an academic at Princeton and renowned blogger about issues of race. Through the combination of the migratory and gender experiences, the fictional representation of the impact of migration on Black feminine identity will be envisioned in the current dissertation.

To begin with, we will look into how one's identity can fluctuate depending on the place and culture the person is navigating at a given moment (a tri-component of 'who', 'when', and 'where'). Based on studies that reflect on migrants' conditions and struggles, particularly those oriented around women's experiences, we will draw common grounds between the migrant condition and Ifemelu's point of view, transcribed as a fictional yet unique experience.

¹ 36th Report of the International Federation for Human Rights (French: Fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l'homme; FIDH). Theme: Women and migration.
Available at: https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/Femme_Migrations_Eng.pdf.

Furthermore, we will study how one's perception of one's own identity does not always add up with the surrounding society's vision: it would not be rare to find a collision of perceptions between one's own impressions and what views are imposed on them by society. Typically, a series of stereotypes is usually projected onto immigrants, as well as onto women of color. The intersection of these two conditions thus exposes the migrant character to a series of stereotypes, expectations and discriminations specific to one's situation. Through a sociocultural analysis, we will look at which factors can exercise a discriminatory influence on a character, potentially hindering their personal development. Using a postcolonial analysis, we will see how a postcolonial subject becomes a postcolonial immigrant.

More specifically, we will ground our research on Ifemelu's migration process and adaptation to the American society, as well as on the discriminations a female immigrant can face when trying to adapt to the US. We will also look at the subsequent fears of not being able to integrate, as well as losing part of one's identity in the process. Likewise, we will study how an immigrant can feel torn between two cultures, and how this cultural in-betweenness can be traumatic for the migrant. Indeed, the resulting tension can cause a blurred sense of self and question the individual's belonging to both cultures. However, we will see how Ifemelu is able to bridge this cultural opposition by going against the dominant narrative which sets the US as inherently superior to any other culture. It is by resisting the dominant narrative, engaging in forms of resistance that go against the cultural pressures imposed by the American society and offering new perspectives that Ifemelu comes to terms with both aspects of her identity. Indeed, adopting a postcolonial standpoint based on Ifemelu's firsthand experience, we will look at how an individual from a previously colonized country progressively finds her own voice and gets to tell her story. Through her blog, Ifemelu not only emerges from the invisibility into which a migrant can be cast, but she is also able to subvert reminiscent colonial narratives. Indeed, by coming to voice and creating analytical content which subverts the dominant narrative, Ifemelu finds strength and affirmation within herself, escaping external pressures.

What is important in Ifemelu's experience is the fact that she explores her own identity through the confrontation with another nation and its culture. She is therefore exploring her own sense of identity and belonging through the immigrant narrative, opening a discourse on colonialism and post-colonialism, but also on issues of race and gender. The question of race had not occurred to her while in Nigeria, but she has to learn what it means to be Black in America, therefore undertaking one of the most difficult challenges to an individual: self-

defining one's own identity. The concept of 'Blackness', however, is a tricky one; clearly, her experience as a Black woman from Nigeria is not similar to an African American's. As we will see, it is not only Ifemelu's identity that is explored. Through her own 'Black experience', as a member of the African diaspora, she also explores the notion of 'Blackness' and the many 'different ways of being Black' in a complexly globalized world where realities often underlay multiple layers. By adopting her standpoint, we can grasp a fragment of the complicated interrelationships between non-American Black and Black American communities. Through her own subjectivity and sometimes candid observations of the American racial context, the spotlight is thrust upon a Black individual's experience navigating racial prejudice and stereotypes, together with her own personal development. The being and becoming of the character are in constant reshaping, altogether configuring the character's coming of age and personal construction. However, by looking into the character's own identity writing (metaphorical as well as literal), we will get an inside firsthand grasp of the marginalized experience, and a testimony of dissent and counteraction towards a perpetuated dominant cultural vision.

Chapter 1: The migration process

1. The feminization of migration

Female migration is neither recent nor marginal, yet women's conditions and gender dynamics have been considered only recently in the migration literature. Since the early 20th century, there has been a marked increase in the proportion of migrant women; a phenomenon referred to as the "feminization of migration", which deserves to be a subject of its own. It is following the dismantling of the colonial regimes in the middle of the 20th century that the migratory displacements were accentuated and that the theme of the migration also became a more prominent literary *topos*. The theme of migration truly became a literary pattern in the 1980s. However, it is only recently that women's voices have begun to emerge on the subject, the theme having previously been mainly addressed through the voices of male migrants. For a long time, migration was only considered under the stereotypical representation of economic migration of a male subject, which not only obscures part of the reality of migration but also the role of women in this phenomenon. Moreover, recent interest in migrant women has also been marked by stereotypes of migrant women as "passive, mere companions of men and isolated at home."² (Dallera, C., & Ducret, V., 2014). This view does not consider realities different from those traditionally presented, thus partly obscuring the complexity and diversity of situations faced by migrant women. Therefore, the aspects that concern them, the obstacles they encounter in the host country and their needs are little taken into consideration. Furthermore, the stereotypical presentation of migrant women as passive, merely following men in their migratory journeys, presents women as submissive and unwilling followers, not recognizing their role as full subjects. This vision thus fails to recognize migrant women as students, workers, independent people providing for themselves. It also disregards the difficulties related to migration, but also the intersectional difficulties related to integration. This is why it is important to bring back to light migratory pathways that have independent women as central figures. The first women's writings that address issues related to immigration and its corollary, issues of identity, only appeared in the 1990s. However, since then, the issue of female migration has made its way into sociological research as well as into fictional writing.

² Our translation. Original text: "comme passives, simples accompagnatrices des hommes, isolées au foyer" (p. 3).

2. Debunking the 'single story' of migration through storytelling

The novel *Americanah* bridges the gap between sociological research and literature, highlighting the migratory experience of a Black female immigrant through a narrative which deconstructs the dominant stereotypical representations. Indeed, this engaged novel plays an important sociocultural role, which goes beyond mere fiction. The benefit of addressing the theme of migration through fiction refers directly to some of the major characteristics of literature, namely challenging dominant narratives and changing the way we think, with the intrinsic potential of having real-life social impacts. Indeed, literature does not solely serve as a representation of reality as it exists, it can also act as a disruptive force in the mainstream sociopolitical discourse. Historically, novels have had the power to question and offer new perspectives on notions such as politics, class and gender. Literature can therefore help understand current challenges at stake and lend a voice to traditionally marginalized members of society, who might not have access to a medium to express their realities.

While not forgetting the fictional dimension of this novel - although based on research and a collection of real-life experiences - the stated aim of the book is to present a different representation of the female migratory journey, far from the dominant stereotypical representation, with the hopes of changing the traditional narrative on the topic. Among other things, setting the focus on a storyline rarely narrated is a matter of storytelling. Adichie explains her approach to storytelling in detail in the TED talk named *The Danger of a Single Story* (2009)³. In this talk, she opposes the power of a multi-layered narrative to the single narrative. Through her speech, Adichie points out to the common mistake of reducing a person, a country, or a continent to a single narrative, what she calls "the danger of a single story"⁴. This detrimental form of reasoning could for example result in depicting Africa "as a place of poor, voiceless, and starving people, fighting senseless bloody wars and constantly succumbing to deadly diseases like AIDS"⁵. Similarly, it is easy to see how this sort of wrong depiction of a continent or country can also be applied to individuals, particularly immigrants. The danger of having a single, simplified story, is not only the inability to accurately tell a person's story, but it is also about defining and categorizing them through a story which does not reflect their experience and ends up misrepresenting reality and creating long-lasting stereotypes. However,

³ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: *The danger of a single story*. TED: Ideas Worth Spreading.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

alongside the danger posed by misrepresentations, stories can also be used as tools to empower and create new visions and representations. According to Adichie, written narrative is an excellent means to convey ideas, and it is about "memory, history, reconciliation and identity"⁶. Through *Americanah*, Adichie aims to challenge conventional depictions of Africa and America, as well as of the traditionally dominant Western world and the migratory process, therefore adopting a postcolonial standpoint at the same time. Through Ifemelu's journey and identity negotiation, similar in tropes to the European genre of the *bildungsroman*, Adichie bases her novel on a Western canon, adapting it as to carry a postcolonial growing-of-age narrative. Ifemelu and Obinze's romance also delineates the start and end of the novel and allows the reader to draw parallels between their experiences. However, once again in the spirit of going against mainstream expectations, the narrative does not focus on the love story, but rather on the female protagonist defining her identity and finding her own voice, through a feminist and postcolonial perspective.

2.1 Intersectionality theory

Alongside the use of storytelling to deconstruct the dominant narrative in regard to the theme of migration, Adichie also bases the novel on the intersectionality theory, introduced by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1989), in order to give a new perspective about migrant women's journeys. As mentioned earlier, the theory of intersectionality is a feminist argument stating that women tend to be discriminated against based on a series of factors which are not mutually exclusive, such as gender, race, class, sexuality, religion and physical appearance. However, if we stick to a cumulative perception of the phenomenon, the explanation is insufficient. It is the articulation of different social relations, often simultaneously and acting in an oppressive way, that impacts the life trajectory of migrants. The theory of intersectionality stems from the Black feminist movement, which draws attention to the intersections between the different relationships of domination, such as patriarchy and racism, which make Black women's experiences of discrimination complex and specific. In the case of Black migrant women, the oppression can be triple, based on class, gender and ethnicity. Thus, the primary goal of intersectionality is to speak out against the combined discriminations that oppress women, by making visible the techniques of oppression of marginalized female subjects, in the attempt of a sociopolitical impact. Just as storytelling can play a role in going against dominant narratives,

⁶ Ibid.

so does the intersectional approach, which plays a counter-narrative role against dominant perspectives of gender and remnant colonialist views. Integrating both approaches, literature does not stand as a simple mimesis of reality, but it is inspired by it to create a discourse that aims to have a sociopolitical influence in return. This approach is close to the field of sociology of literature, which studies the social production of literature and its social implications. In this case, the novel's first interest is descriptive, making certain issues visible through Ifemelu's analysis of what she is seeing around her in the American society, particularly with regard to issues of race (her blog progressively becomes renown in that aspect). At the intersection with storytelling, intersectionality can represent, according to Yolaine Parisot (2016), a tool to unveil the mechanisms of construction of dominant narratives, but also to propose alternative representations. In our analysis of the novel *Americanah*, we will use the intersectionality perspective to see how the novel in turn presents dominant narratives, and deconstructs them, always in relation to the concepts of class, gender and race. Beyond subverting dominant images, the novel also proposes new images, more nuanced or reflecting aspects rarely considered in dominant narratives.

2.2 'Insider within' theory

Through her specific position, as an outsider to American society, yet a Black person experiencing certain forms of discriminations, Ifemelu takes on the role of an 'outsider within'. This reflects the moment when Black women, or in this case, migrant women, start producing outputs and knowledge about their experiences. In order to describe similar analytical approaches to societal issues, Patricia Hill Collins (1986) has developed the 'outsider within' theory. Here again, it is the unique position and standpoint of Black women, at the junction of issues such as racism and sexism, which is at the basis of this theory. This theory mainly focuses on Black intellectual women's writings, stating more specifically that Black women have at some point used their specific position in academia to produce what is called 'Black feminist thought', which consists of three key points: "(1) Black women's self-definition and self-valuation; (2) the interlocking nature of oppression; and (3) the importance of Afro-American women's culture" (Collins, 1986). All of these aspects are figured in the book and the first two ones are exemplified by Ifemelu's figure, particularly as she reaches a high-level academic position, and is a blog writer orienting her posts mainly on issues of race. However, it is important to point out that the 'outsider within' theory does not set the focus on the

discrimination as such, but on the acts of creation and critical approaches the specificity of the marginalized position allows. In this case, Black women, despite an apparent marginal role, take on a role of observer and thinker, turning into an actor of a deconstructing scheme from the inside. In the particular case of migration, the foreign perspective is able to set a renewed look on society, to question situations and filter them through their perspective. A stranger will be more likely to spot certain patterns, which may have become unnoticeable to those already immersed in them. Although the outsider might indeed experience some forms of discrimination, on the counterpart, it can also be the starting point for a reflexive thought, both external and introspective. Looking into the potential benefits of social difference, Lee (1973) points that the situation can be a synonym of painful experience but can also stimulate an act of creation. In the novel, not only can the readers sense Ifemelu's thinking process through her thoughts, but also through the blog she holds, named *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*, carrying her personal analyses and describing her social interactions. The intertwining of both communities is put to the foreground, with the latent interrogation of what it means to be and (in her case) to become Black, in the context of the USA. Having to learn what 'Blackness' is underpins that it is in reality a social construct, something into which she, as an African woman, got (un)willingly initiated. This can not only question the issues at stake in the contemporary society, but also show her personal approach and evolution in regards with the issue. Her own experience also spotlights a 'coming out of the dark' feeling: her presence could have remained marginal and voiceless, an invisible migrant lost in the mass. However, writing her blog gives her a voice and a renewed presence, including on the societal sphere, as she became an influential speaker (both online and through conferences). Her voice, which was considered to be insubordinate and "having a natural proclivity towards provocation" (p. 52), is used to its full potential in the US to stand up against discrimination. Furthermore, while in Nigeria she was told it would have been better if she had been a boy, being this vocal; in the US, her position as a female allows for a unique discourse on the issues of race and gender. Seeing one person's identity construction intertwined with an act of sociological discourse enrichment points to the consideration of personal as well as societal development going hand in hand and raises the question of migrant's input and benefits to a society. However, to reach this level of insightful writing about one's condition, the integration process will have already been underway for some time, so that many elements related to migration and acclimatization in the new environment will already have had time to be processed and would be integrated into one's discourse. The advantages of a production by the subjects directly concerned by the migratory phenomenon is

threefold: firstly, a production of knowledge from a position that gives direct access to this knowledge and experience, i.e. giving the floor to the main people concerned; secondly, to anchor one's experience and bring it to light, where normally there are a lot of stereotypes and apparent opacity around the issue of the migratory experience; finally, an act of empowerment, which finalizes the process of integration into the host society, by becoming fully aware of one's own narrative power and by participating in a collective narrative going against the stereotyped story usually delivered. For example, on the one hand, migrant women are traditionally perceived as a homogeneous group, whereas what characterizes them most is their diversity (in age, administrative and personal status, level of education, training, professional insertion, etc.). On the other hand, they are being attributed a mobility and a migratory path dependent on men, which they follow passively, often accompanied by the rest of the family. The image of the migrant woman is therefore rather opaque and stereotyped, obscuring the fact that migrant women can be single, and gain mobility for professional purposes or to study, as is the case for Ifemelu. Reading one's personal account and analysis on a subject experienced first-hand sets back the focus on one's self-definition and empowerment, as well as setting the record straight about one's reality, far from the mainstream images conveyed by traditional media.

2.3 Preserving a collective memory of migration

In addition, the novel form can also contribute to the movement of collection and preservation of the memory of migration, based on the testimonies collected during several waves of migration. As the authors Rosita Fibbi, Claudio Bolzmann and Marie Vial state it (2001):

These testimonies constitute the materials with which individual and collective memory and identity are constructed. These accounts, nourished by emotions, of subjects involved in the action, offer us a different perspective on migration, from below, sometimes complementary to that provided by the official history, from above.

In the same way, a fictional writing such as *Americanah* can also participate in the societal debate of individual and collective identity, in the context of a globalized world where migration is an element to be considered. Within the narrative of *Americanah*, Ifemelu puts her testimony as a migrant in writing through her blog and makes it an object of collective memory and debate. The testimony is also important because it is that of a young, independent migrant woman who came to the US to study: once again, far from the dominant stereotype of the

migrant woman submissive to her husband, passively following him, content to stay at home and never integrating into the host society. On the contrary, Ifemelu very quickly proves to be a brilliant student, involved in her studies and in the student life of the campus. Progressively, she climbs the social ladder, thus going from being a migrant and a student, to becoming a professor, writer and lecturer. In the novel itself, it is interesting to note that the story is narrated directly by a protagonist of the migratory adventure, that is to say, told from the inside, far from the images and stories carried by traditional media which can dehumanize migrants and take away their right to tell their story. Instead, by immersing the reader not only in Ifemelu's consciousness, but also in her self-writing, the author allows the readers to fully immerse themselves in her experience as both a migrant and an intersectional character. The advantage of a fictional narrative is, of course, that it is easy to play with the thread of time. Indeed, fiction has the advantage of presenting the lifepath of a fictional character over several years, not requiring to record a real person's experiences during such a long time, but allowing to easily condense a series of events in a fictional format. Indeed, in the migratory experience, the temporal dimension is key: not only does it play an important role in the integration process, but the age of immigrants when they arrive in the host country of immigration plays an important role when considering integration and identity construction. In other words, the advantage of the fictional narrative is that it does not require the reconciliation of real-life and fictional time. Being able to control the temporal aspect within the fictional writing thus allows the author to make his reader live the migratory experience of a subject in accelerated form. By modulating time, the author can also present the reader with the character's series of migratory perceptions, that are initially naive (idealizing the migratory journey and the ease of adaptation), and then progressively less so. Thus, the reader first lives the experiences once alongside Ifemelu, before reliving it after a few years, when she analyses them again in her blog. This allows the character to approach the same events with more distance and emotional detachment, while taking a more global analytical look. As the Fibbi, Bolzmann and Vial put it (2001),

at stake in this memory work is the definition/redefinition of the group, a group whose boundaries would either prolong the exclusion of the 'newcomers' (who have now been there for decades), keeping them in the usual symbolic invisibility, or encompass them in a partially new whole, which confers a meaning, shared by all, to the new composition of the group whatever the particular modalities of its arrangement.

In Adichie's novel, Ifemelu follows a similar path: when she arrives in the US, she is initially invisible in the society: having just arrived in the country, she is put on hold, unable to work or get involved in society before the academic term starts. As she is looking for a job, she is advised to use the Green Card of another Black girl, as no one will notice that they are two totally different people. Similarly, in her first apartment, she struggles to connect with the other roommates and to be part of the group, and ends up locking herself in her room when she is unable to pay the rent, trying to make herself invisible and be forgotten. During this difficult period of integration, Ifemelu withdraws herself from society and falls into a period of depression, overwhelmed by the efforts required to adapt. Despite her relentless efforts, she had not been able to find a job: she is ashamed and feels like she has failed. This period is accompanied by silence, as evidenced by her loss of contact with her family and friends, including her lover Obinze. This posture of withdrawal and silence may be characteristic of a depressive episode, stemming from the feeling of having failed from adapting to the host country, therefore feeling like a disappointment to the relatives. This episode also raises the issue of the isolation of migrant women. Fortunately, with the help of a female ally, her friend Ginika (who had also migrated from Nigeria), Ifemelu eventually finds work as a babysitter in a wealthy white family. Thereafter, the support of the network of women around her, consisting primarily of Ginika, Aunt Uju, and her university friend Wambui, will continue to be an important aid that "provides her with moral guidance in the face of gender adversity" (Okuyade, 2011). These other migrant women will also provide a panel of examples of other immigrant female figures, also navigating the American reality alongside Ifemelu. Surrounding herself with women whose experiences are to some extent similar to hers allows her to gain self-confidence in navigating the American society, despite all the challenges it presents for an immigrant woman. Later, after feeling more comfortable with the surrounding society and becoming familiar with the academic environment, Ifemelu gradually becomes more vocal, regaining some of her natural voice (which she had already been using in Nigeria) and even going beyond, gaining in personal affirmation. The second part of the authors' shared reflection on the integration of migrant women ("to encompass them in a partially new whole, which confers a meaning, shared by all, to the new composition of the group whatever the particular modalities of its arrangement") is realized much later in the novel when Ifemelu progressively emerges from her anonymity and invisibility by writing her blog posts. Indeed, these progressively gain popularity and gather a community around her, but also bring her a certain credibility and status as an expert on the issue of intersectional discrimination, particularly as a Black migrant in the US. Ifemelu achieves this authorial position by creating her own

community and producing her own meaningful content through the medium of a blog. However, it is important to emphasize, as Abdelmalek Sayad (1977) does, that:

any study of migratory phenomena that neglects the conditions of origin of immigrants is condemned to give only a partial and ethnocentric view of the migratory phenomenon: on the one hand, [...] it is the immigrant - and him alone - who is taken into consideration; on the other hand, the explicit and implicit problematic is always that of adaptation to the 'host' society.

In our study, we establish some points of comparison between Ifemelu's positions in Nigeria, in the USA and then back in Nigeria, focusing however more on the central stage (her encounter with the concept of 'race', especially 'Blackness', in the USA) in order to focus on her migratory journey. Through this position, we consider the formative years in the USA as truly the key stage of her self-acceptance and assertion of her vocal positions on intersectional issues. Nevertheless, and although it is a defensible position within the framework of our argumentation, this position is still an ethnocentric position, taking largely into account the adaptation to the host society, although the question of the return to the home country and the reintegration into the culture of origin will also be briefly addressed.

3. Migration process and dominant image of Western values

The 'single story' traditionally conveyed could portray Africa as backward, poor, uneducated where women's condition is not very advanced. However, in Nigeria, Ifemelu is educated, goes to a mixed school and is encouraged by her parents to pursue a university education. Despite being a woman, this does not influence the level of education she receives. However, during her higher education, a series of strikes shakes the Nigerian university system. Classes are suspended for long periods of time, which lead to a massive departure of young people who preferred to study abroad, mainly in the USA and Great Britain. Having been awarded a fellowship at the university of Princeton, Ifemelu has the opportunity to migrate to the United States. Ifemelu realizes at that time that her prospects would be limited in Nigeria, the university strikes posing an impediment to her educational path. For a change, the reasons for leaving Africa are not economic, but rather a desire for education abroad. The fact that she receives a scholarship from Princeton also demonstrates a form of merit in the quality of her

application. These factors run counter to the stereotypical image of the migrant, who is usually portrayed as a poorly educated person, migrating to seek unskilled labor abroad. However, academia in Nigeria is not the only Nigerian institution that is discredited, the entire educational system is also disregarded. Privileged families prefer European or American schools to Nigerian schools. The Nigerian education system is not well considered and is seen as unpromising for the young generations. However, the fact that once again the focus is on Western institutions (in this case, educational institutions) shows a hint of colonialism and Eurocentric view, placing Western values at the top. However, this vision does not only concern the educational system. Ifemelu's and her generation's 'longing for elsewhere' is actually part of the Nigerian culture, which is still strongly impacted by the country's post-colonial situation, perceiving the West as inherently superior to Nigeria. Thus, individuals who are able to do so seek to leave Nigeria to study or work, mainly in England or the United States. Prospects in Nigeria are seen as bleak and not very prosperous, compared to prospects in these Western countries. The ultimate goal of most Nigerians is therefore to obtain a visa for one of these two countries. Pregnant women who can afford it go abroad to give birth so that their baby automatically acquires the nationality of the country: this is the case of Aunt Uju, who chooses to give birth to Dike in the United States, so that he automatically gets the American nationality. As previously mentioned, in addition to the fact that the Western dream is already present in the minds of young people, the numerous strikes amplify the intensity of this desire to go abroad. Given that the academic and economic situation is compromised and that future prospects seem meager, the choice to study and settle in this fantasized elsewhere (in this case the USA), makes sense. Ifemelu's family and classmates see migration as a golden opportunity, and Obinze's dream is also to move to the US. Obinze who is "fluent in the knowledge of foreign things, especially of American things" (p. 67) is certain that "America is the future" (p. 70). Similarly, the ultimate compliment he gives Ifemelu is "You look like a black American" (p. 67). For the majority of Nigerians, the supremacy of the United States is undeniable, and the country embodies the most prosperous future that is possible. America is thus seen as a country that would overcome all of Nigeria's shortcomings. This image is reinforced by colonial tinges still present in the homeland, namely a strong cultural influence from former colonial countries, and on a larger scale from the West. Those who have gone to England or the United States are held up as examples and admired, and Ifemelu dreams of having a similar trajectory. The opulence associated with the West is related to the image of Nigerians leaving and returning to their native country with their arms full of gifts and enthusiastic stories. It is the lack of hope for a better future in Nigeria and the prospect of a better future overseas that leads young

Nigerians to dream of elsewhere. Ifemelu, once the coveted visa obtained, has in turn the opportunity to leave the homeland, and she migrates to the USA in the hope of finding better educational and job opportunities. She believes that America is a land of opportunity, and that she will thrive in that environment in all regards. America, to Ifemelu, her parents, friends and Obinze is the place that would guarantee success and prosperity. Ifemelu's family and friends hold America in high regard. Ifemelu's mother believes that Jesus told her in a dream that Ifemelu "would prosper in America" (p. 100); her father had also predicted that she would excel in America, as the land creates opportunities for people to thrive; To Ifemelu's friends, "American passport is the coolest thing" (p. 65). For many, the flight to this modern, highly regarded country is a once in a lifetime achievement, a golden ticket to prosperity, not to be wasted. Toni Morrison also addresses the imaginary around this journey of migration in *Playing in the Dark* (1992), where the 'elsewhere' is fantasized as a liberation from all the problems linked to the native country that is being left:

the flight from the Old World to the New, is generally understood to be the flight from oppression and limitation to freedom and possibility...from a society perceived to be unacceptably permissive, ungodly, and undisciplined...[from] poverty, prison, social ostracism, and not frequently death.

Being granted such an opportunity to study in the country of her dreams, Ifemelu wants to take full advantage of this experience and to achieve an optimal integration in the host country. However, upon her arrival, she is frequently confused about many cultural habits she is not used to or she did not expect to encounter in America, which make her feel that "there were things she should already know but, through some personal failing of hers, did not know" (p. 107). This reflects the migrant's struggle to adapt, accompanied by insecurities of not properly adjusting because of not doing something right (yet not knowing what that might be). At the same time, Ifemelu expresses her enthusiasm to understand everything about America and "to wear a new, knowing skin right away" (p. 135). This image of wearing a new skin can also reflect on a new layer of identity being added. Being very motivated to understand the surrounding society, Ifemelu resorts to reading American books, novels and biographies to better understand the US. Thanks to her readings, Ifemelu starts to get better gain insight into "America's mythologies, [...], America's tribalisms – race, ideology and region" (p.136). Already at the beginning of her stay in the US, Ifemelu associates certain American cultural concepts with forms of tribalism. The use of the word is ironic, because not only does it refer

to a primitive meaning, whereas America is usually associated with progressiveness; but historically, it is rather Africa that has had the term 'tribal' associated with it.

However, soon enough, Ifemelu feels torn between the mental images she had built up of the US and the reality of what she experiences on a daily basis, and the adaptation that it requires: the host country having been an object of fantasy long before it was even considered as a land of immigration, a disappointment and confrontation with the harsh reality inevitably follow. One of the first disappointments, but also one of the greatest: the realization of the existence of the concept of race, particularly as a discriminating factor. Thus, Ifemelu realizes the extent of how present racism still is in the country, while everyone pretends that it is not the case and that individuals are not discriminated against based on their skin color; a country where she realizes "racism exists but racists are all gone" (p. 315). Through her narrative, Ifemelu shows the 'other side of the mirror' of the so-thought perfect America, where social advancement is based on race, therefore hindering people of color and immigrants' prospects. However, even if the promises are not fulfilled upon arrival, she tries to hold on to her initial hopes, feeling that "the real America, [...] was just around the next corner she would turn" (p. 111). That feeling is also enhanced by the commercials she sees on TV: "She ached for the lives they showed, lives full of bliss, where all problems had sparkling solutions in shampoos and cars and packaged foods, and in her mind they became the real America, the America she would only see when she moved to school in the autumn." (p. 113) Moreover, her financial situation is not at all what she had imagined, as the following excerpt shows: "This was America at last, glorious America at last, and she had not expected to bed on the floor" (p. 106). Similarly, Aunt Uju has to work three jobs alongside her medicine studies, as she is not allowed to practice medicine in America, despite being a licensed doctor back in Nigeria. However, at this point, Ifemelu clings to the idea that the American dream is still within reach, and that things will be brighter once she begins her semester at college. Her dream, already back in Nigeria, was to be "in a house from the *Cosby Show*, in a school with students holding notebooks miraculously free of wear and crease." (p. 99) However, it is also because she had seen college life through movies and TV shows that she is all the more disappointed when she starts her first academic year. The poverty that she encounters as a student is the ultimate factor that demystifies the American ideal that she had mentally constructed. Despite having access to a borrowed Green Card, which allows her to work in the host country (circumventing the limitations of her student visa that prohibit her from working), Ifemelu struggles to find a job. Indeed, her scholarship is not sufficient to pay for all expenses and she cannot find a way to earn money. Due to these

financial difficulties, she struggles to keep up with her studies because of her precarious situation. However, no matter how difficult her situation gets, she knows it is not possible to go back to Nigeria. At this point in her life, any advancement and improvement in her condition seems stalled due to her unstable situation. Despite assiduous efforts to find work, she cannot find a job, and her savings are dwindling rapidly, putting her in a precarious situation that she had never experienced in Nigeria. The only job she is offered is one helping a sports coach relax", a job close to prostitution. Because of her precarious financial condition and the succession of job rejections she receives, Ifemelu at first accepts the job, which pays \$100 a day. Her only experience with the sports coach turns her into a sexual object and leads her into a dark spiral. For Ifemelu, this episode is the culmination of the series of disappointments she has suffered since arriving in the country she has thought would be an El Dorado that would welcome her with open arms. At this point, she finds herself in a position inferior to anything she had ever known in Nigeria: she then begins to understand that immigration can also lead to instances of failed identity. Even though she came from a modest family, she had always had easy access to an education and had never had to consent to sex in exchange for favors (which in this case is money to live). Following this episode, which Ifemelu is not able to talk about to her relatives, she withdraws from the outside world ("her self-loathing had hardened inside her" (p. 154). After this shameful scene, Ifemelu also abruptly cuts ties with her boyfriend Obinze (who was still in Nigeria), as she is too ashamed to tell him about her situation in the US and what she was forced to do in order to survive. The financial distress is accompanied by another disappointment and shame: that of not being able to send money to her native country and not being able to support her family financially, despite the fact that she is in this much idealized country. Her disillusionment is so great compared to the expectations and fantasies she had projected, that the cumulative series of disappointments lead Ifemelu into a dark period, devoid of hope. She would never have imagined such a sequence of events and such a rapid fall into precariousness in a country that seemed to be full of prospects. America, which internationally has the reputation of a welcoming land, promising prosperity and better perspectives to its newcomers, appears very disappointing in Ifemelu's eyes. In that way, Ifemelu's narrative subverts the dominant narrative, making the reader see America in all its truth and drawbacks. However, we can see that in Ifemelu's case, even without having undergone an arduous migratory journey to immigrate to the United States (she was offered a scholarship to study at Princeton), the series of disappointments and the social downfall compared to her life in Nigeria cause her to fall into depression. It is finally by finding a job as a babysitter in a rich white family that Ifemelu regains hope and comes out of the torpor. It is therefore the economic

perspective that guides Ifemelu at first, a factor of primary importance for an immigrant that conditions his future prospects, his relationship to the surrounding society and his personal well-being.

4. Confrontation with otherness

Because of her migratory trajectory, Ifemelu is confronted with a new host country, and inevitably, with many other forms of otherness. In addition to the social and historical particularities of the host country, another form of otherness is the people themselves. Indeed, the social interactions constitute a large part of the novel. Ifemelu is a very analytical person, who examines with great detail and insight human relationships: she is therefore able to account for a series of episodes where otherness is at stake. In her case, the relationship to social otherness is fourfold: the relationship to the locals, to Nigerian immigrants, to other immigrants, but also to Black Americans. The analysis in this section will focus on the relationships between protagonists belonging to the different groups, which in some cases can hinder the integration and personal development of the subjects. As we will see, the novel portrays the American society as scarred by racism and stereotypes between communities. Moreover, in this case, otherness often favors the outbreak of inequalities and discriminations. The relationship to otherness (often marked by racism) is one of the main topics of Ifemelu's blog, which she writes based on her personal experiences. Ifemelu experiences with 'otherness' fairly soon after arriving in the US: she is herself perceived as 'other' in the US because of her skin color, whereas skin color was not a characterizing factor in Nigeria. Indeed, in her home country, the criteria for differentiation were only gender, class, religion and ethnicity, but not race. Ifemelu puts it this way 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" (p. 220). However, what is particularly difficult to accept as a Black non-American who has just arrived in the US is that this racial label thrust on them once they arrive in the US is heavily laden with connotations, namely that "black is at the bottom of America's race ladder" (p. 220). This already complicates the experience of a Black immigrant coming to the US in terms of social and professional prospects. As Ifemelu writes it in her blog: "Sometimes in America, Race Is Class" (p. 166); " 'Blacks' as a whole are often lumped with 'Poor Whites'. Not Poor Blacks and Poor Whites." (p. 166). Thus, in American perceptions, the Black man is low on the social and

economic scale. An episode encountered by Ifemelu illustrates this point. One day, when Ifemelu was working as a babysitter for the wealthy white Turner family, she opened the door to a white cleaner, whose first reaction was surprise, upon seeing a young Black woman open the door to the large mansion: "He stiffened when he saw her. First surprise flitted over his features, then it ossified to hostility" (p. 166). The man could not conceive that she could be the owner of the house, that a Black woman could have a social and economic status superior to his own. After the first moment of surprise, the man became hostile, unable to comprehend the reality that was thus presented to him. A change in his attitude occurred only after Ifemelu clarified that she was not the householder: "It was like a conjuror's trick, the swift disappearance of his hostility. His face sank into a grin. She, too, was the help. The universe was once again arranged as it should be." (p. 166). As Diallo also argues, there is a tendency for some white people to invisibilize the discriminations experienced by Black people by saying that poor whites are not privileged either. Yet, even if these individuals do not enjoy economic privilege, they do not face racial profiling and socioeconomic discriminations based on skin color. In any case, being white brings a more advantageous social position than being from a minority. Diallo mentions an experiment: a white American professor once asked an audience of white students in a class about racism "Would you like to be treated like Black people?" and no one raised their hand, because even without realizing it, people know that they are privileged in some ways by being white. Yet there is an ostentatious denial in the public sphere of this assertion, which in turn perpetuates the invisibilization of the discrimination suffered by people from minorities.

Moreover, social stratification is also geographic. Ifemelu studies at Princeton, a renowned college with few Black students. From the very first lines of the novel, the metaphor of hair is used to represent the concept of race and its social and geographical implications. By observing her fellow college peers from Princeton, Ifemelu comments that the only Black people she encounters "are so light-skinned and lank-haired she could not imagine them wearing braids" (p. 3). She also notices that as she moves away from Princeton by train, at each train stop the population gradually changes from white to Black: at Princeton Junction there are only "People [...], all of them white and lean" (p. 4), whereas in Trenton, she sees "Black people, many of them fat" (p. 5). There is therefore a geographical separation between wealthy and poor communities, portrayed through race. Again, the metaphor of hair illustrates this, as in order to have her hair braided, Ifemelu has to travel to Trenton, a ghettoized suburban environment, home to immigrant communities of color ("they were in the part of the city that had graffiti, dank buildings and no white people" (p. 9)).

Regarding the social interactions between individuals from different communities, upon arriving in the United States, Ifemelu discovers the concept of race (as established in the American culture), which is also often linked to social class. As she adjusts to the United States, Ifemelu learns to categorize people based on origin, according to concepts that she had never known in Nigeria. For example, when meeting Aunt Uju's neighbor, Ifemelu discovered the categorization of 'Hispanic': "If Ifemelu had met Alma in Lagos, she would have thought of her as white, but she would learn that Alma was Hispanic, an American category that was confusingly, both an ethnicity and a race." (p. 105). Later, recalling this episode, Ifemelu writes a post in his blog entitled "Understanding America for the Non-American Black: What Hispanic Means" (p. 105). In the post, she explains that Hispanics are "the frequent companions of American blacks in poverty rankings, Hispanic means a slight step above American blacks in the American race ladder" (p. 105).

To begin our inquiry of the social interactions between members of different racial communities, we will first discuss the relationships with white Americans. Indeed, relations with them can sometimes be complicated, due to latent racism, which tends to either disregard discriminations or specificities proper to certain minorities, or to categorize people from minorities in stereotyped boxes. Thus, African immigrants are seen through stereotypical images of Africa as poor, scarred by AIDS, deprived of social rights and with no prospects for the future. Because of their lack of cultural awareness, white Americans also confuse different countries and their people; and as a person of color, it is also possible to be perceived as an exotic person. The white person may also take an excessive stance to counteract the usual stereotypes of Africa, exaggerating the qualities of Africa and the beauty of its women. This is what Kimberly, from the Turner family where Ifemelu babysits, does: she raves about the "beautiful name" of Ifemelu, coming from "wonderful rich cultures" (p. 146). Ifemelu immediately thinks that Kimberly would not have said that Norway had a "rich culture" (p. 146). Similarly, Kimberly calls any black woman "beautiful", and as Ifemelu notes, "the women she referred to would turn out to be quite ordinary-looking, but always black" (p. 146). This is the exact opposite of the derogatory attitudes that can be expressed about Africa, where conversely, anything from African culture is put on a high footing. The mother of the Turner family, Laura, also expresses preconceptions about Africa and Nigerians, telling Ifemelu that "[she] read on the Internet that Nigerians are the most educated immigrant group in this country." (p. 167). Laura adds that in comparison with the people who live on less than a dollar a day in Nigeria, Ifemelu and other immigrants are privileged to be in the US. This comment

surprises Ifemelu, because she had never been called privileged in her entire life, and it feels good to be thinking of herself that way. However, to remind an immigrant that they are privileged to be in the US is to establish a relationship of domination that places the US as superior to the immigrant's country of origin. It is also a covert way of reminding the migrant of the privilege of their situation and reminding them that they should be grateful for the opportunity to live in the US. In a similar way, when talking to white people, African immigrants may hear them talking about Africa in terms of charity and benevolence. This is the case with a guest at the Turner family's party, when a white woman suggests that Ifemelu should work for her NGO in Africa after she graduates. This conversation again brings Ifemelu back to the disparities between the US and Africa, as Ifemelu would at that moment like to belong to the other camp for once, the camp of the givers and not the receivers, "to be among those who could afford copious pity and empathy" (p. 170). For all these reasons, minorities and immigrants may feel suspicious of white Americans, who hold stereotypes about African immigrants and people of color. In addition to the racism that permeates much of the interactions between white natives and minorities, relationships can also be strained by a lack of recognition of the issue of racism, with a majority of white Americans wanting to be praised for the progress they have made over the past few decades, but not wanting to face the remaining problems. For instance, during an encounter with a white man on the train, he shares with Ifemelu an opinion that is probably widely shared in the American society, which no longer wants to hear about race and racism: "Race is totally overhyped these days, black people need to get over themselves, it's all about class now, the haves and the have-nots" (p. 4). Another similar comment (also noted by Ifemelu) also indicates that the American society, as a whole, is no longer willing to address issues of race, reflecting it through the following falsely humanistic statement: "The only race that matters is the human race" (p. 4).

On the other hand, relationships can also be complicated within the Nigerian immigrant community. For example, on the way to Trenton, "She hoped her driver would not be Nigerian," because if he realizes that she is Nigerian herself, he will either brag that he actually has a better position than a cab driver ("he had a master's degree, the taxi was a second job" (p. 8)) or he would drive in grim silence, feeling humiliated that a fellow Nigerian, "a girl at that" (p. 8), would have a higher social position than him in the USA. Moreover, a sort of competition is established between Nigerian immigrants, namely that those who have resided in the USA for the longest are those who are taken the most seriously, establishing a sort of hierarchy between migrants from the same country, who would have adapted the best or would have gained the

most knowledge about the host country: "to earn the prize of being taken seriously among Nigerians in America, (...) she needed more years." (p. 16). Furthermore, there is a certain fear among Nigerian expatriates (but also among other immigrant communities) to not 'lose oneself', meaning to not lose Nigerian values and to not be perverted by the US. A comment by Bartholomew, Aunt Uju's first boyfriend in the US, reflects this fear: "A girl in Nigeria will never wear that kind of dress. Look at that. This country has no moral compass." (p. 116). Similar comments, found among immigrants of other backgrounds, again reflect this duality, between admiration for the US, and fear of being perverted, losing traditional values and engaging in corrupt practices. Ifemelu, however, contradicts Bartholomew's point about Western practices, retorting that, on the contrary, girls in Nigeria wear much shorter dresses than that: "some of us changed in our friends' houses so our parents wouldn't know" (p.116). Similarly, Bartholomew writes on a blog that Nigerian women have been brainwashed by the West and should be ashamed of calling themselves Nigerian (p.117).

Ifemelu also draws a relationship to otherness in relation to the Black community in the United States. Wrongly, the Black African and Black American communities are often confused, and their specificities not considered, especially by White Americans. Furthermore, the two communities also have prejudices between them. For example, Aunt Uju's neighbor, upon Ifemelu's arrival, explains that she must be vigilant with her daughter's education, otherwise "your children become what you don't know. [...] Otherwise, she will start behaving like these black Americans" (p.112). This points to a negative image of the Black American community, associated with delinquency. Later on, another episode occurs during a brief interaction with an Ethiopian taxi driver, which emphasizes the preconceptions between the different Black communities. The cab driver asks Ifemelu where she is from, as he cannot place her accent. When she replies that she is from Nigeria, the man is surprised:

"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." (p. 206)

We can see through this excerpt that the man is trying to estimate Ifemelu's origins based on her accent as well as her physical appearance (especially the way she dresses). Again, this speaks about the stereotypes about Black Americans that are held within the Black African community. Indeed, her clothes would be too revealing, which would not be characteristic, nor worthy, of an African woman. In view of her dress, which seems disapproved by the man, he would have thought at first sight that she would be from Trinidad or from "one of those places" (which he says with disdain). Through this series of episodes, we discover a certain level of contempt and animosity from African immigrants towards Black Americans.

However, while African immigrants hold a series of stereotypes towards Black Americans, they do the same towards other African immigrant populations. The hair salon in Trenton where Ifemelu goes to have her hair braided represents a social setting where many representatives of these different racial communities meet. As Ifemelu has to wait 6 hours for her hair to be braided, she witnesses events and discussions that reflect the positions of members representing their respective communities. Thus, from the moment she arrives, the hairdressers have an ambiguous relationship towards Ifemelu. On the one hand, a bond of mutual recognition emerges, as she is warmly welcomed by Halima, who recognizes in her an African counterpart: "[...] Halima smiled at Ifemelu, a smile that, in its warm knowingness, said welcome to a fellow African; she would not smile at an American in the same way" (p. 11). It is also this shared sense of belonging that leads another hairdresser, Aisha, to solicit Ifemelu's help in influencing her Igbo suitor (of the same ethnicity as Ifemelu) to marry her. Despite the stereotype of Igbo not marrying outside their community, the hairdresser still tries to appeal to a sense of African sisterhood to ask Ifemelu's help in convincing the man to marry her. Later, the hairdressers criticize a Black American client who already has two children, in spite of the fact that "She looked about seventeen" (p. 102). However, according to them, this would never have happened in Africa. They also speak of Black Americans as "these people", stated again in a dismissive way, highlighting the differences between Africans and Black Americans. "When a girl is thirteen already she knows all the positions. Never in Afrique!" (p. 103). This shows the hostile attitude that can exist towards the Black American community, which is considered morally corrupt by some African immigrants. When the hairdressers judge the young Black American girl who is already a mother of two children at the age of seventeen, they expect Ifemelu to join them in criticizing the alleged depravity of Black American girls, "in this shared space of their Africanness, but Ifemelu said nothing" (p. 103). Ifemelu also knows that after she leaves, the hairdressers will mock her, the Nigerian woman who feels so important because she goes to

Princeton and no longer eats real food but only granola bars, like an American. She knows they will laugh at her, but only mildly – "They would laugh with derision, but only a mild derision, because she was still their African sister, even if she had briefly lost her way." (p. 103). Her identity is therefore judged on the basis of these few pieces of information (her natural hair, her accent, her job at Princeton, the cereal bar and the return to Nigeria), but despite the fact that she presents an image closer to an American's than an African immigrant, the hairdressers still recognize her as an "African sister". However, already in her presence evoke a series of stereotypes about Nigeria, mentioning how "Nigerians are known for stealing credit cards and doing drugs and all kinds of crazy stuff" (p. 187); "I cannot marry a Nigerian and I won't let anybody in my family marry a Nigerian. [...] Not all but many of them do bad things. Even killing for money." (p. 187). Shortly after, a young white woman named Kelsey comes in to deliver her share of stereotypes about Africa, reminding Mariama how lucky she is to be able to live in the US, raise her children and have a business there, because she could not have had these 'privileges' in her native country: "But you couldn't even have this business back in your country, right? Isn't it wonderful that you get to come to the US and now your kids have a better life?" (p. 189). Ifemelu perceives in Kelsey a type of liberal nationalism where she is allowed to criticize the US but would not allow a stranger to do the same. She would also expect them to be silent and grateful, always reminding non-Americans how much better they are in the US, adopting an imperialist tone, denigrating any culture other than American.

Later, at university, Ifemelu gets introduced to the African Students Association, an association that brings together African immigrants to share their common experiences in the American social context. A feeling of fraternity is also born between these African immigrant students, who are able during their meetings to relieve some of the burdens accumulated due to the stereotypes that Americans propagate all day long about Africa: "They mimicked what Americans told them: *'You speak such good English. How bad is AIDS in your country? It's so sad that people live on less than a dollar a day in Africa.'*" (p. 139). However, these immigrants do not only make fun of the US, but also of Africa and its shortcomings, "and they felt safe to mock because it was mockery born of longing." (p. 139). This attitude reflects the ambivalence of their position, torn between the two cultures.

In his welcome speech to the African Student Association, Mwombeki, the president of the association, delivers a speech that reflects this ambivalence in community relations. On the one hand, he urges the students present to sympathize with African Americans in a spirit of

brotherhood (i.e., in a spirit of solidarity against the white native): "Try and make friends with our African American brothers and sisters in a spirit of true pan-Africanism." (p. 140) However, he also instructs the African immigrants not to become like Black Americans, completing his thought by saying: "But make sure you remain friends with fellows Africans, as this will help you keep your perspective" (p. 140). It is interesting to observe that in his speech, he speaks of "fellow Africans" in a spirit of unity, whereas, as seen above, a series of stereotypes exists between the different African nationalities. The unity is furthermore marked in opposition to other communities present on American soil, including Black Americans, who in the African collective imagination have undergone a decadence of morals. In the second part of his speech, however, Mwombeki highlights the fact that it is sometimes easier to make friends with international students who are external to these considerations between communities. The connections are then based on shared migration experiences rather than shared skin color or ethnicity: "You also find that that you might make friends more easily with other internationals, Koreans, Indians, Brazilians, whatever, than with Americans both black and white. Many of internationals understand the trauma of trying to get an American visa and that is good place to start friendship" (pp. 140-141). This series of thoughts, coming from the same character, illustrates the ambivalence of positions towards the different communities present on the territory. In this imbroglio of relations, Ifemelu has mixed feelings towards the African immigrant community, which leads her to live in an ambivalent community relationship, rejecting certain aspects of the African community, while seeking to get closer to it for other reasons. At first, Ifemelu wants to blend into the American society, and tries to appear a certain way, even changing her appearance and accent. Later, however, she feels at different moments the need to reconnect with the African community. After her connection to the African Student Association, she seeks again to reconnect with the African community when she is a PhD student at Princeton. It is then through the character of Boubacar, a Senegalese, that Ifemelu reconnects with her Africanness. With him, she is able to share certain realities and thoughts that she cannot express to Blaine, her Black American companion. At that point, Blaine feels bitter toward this complicity because he does not share their Africanness: "Perhaps Blaine resented this mutuality, something primally African from which he felt excluded" (p. 340). From their first meeting, Ifemelu expresses "brotherly" feelings for Boubacar (p. 340). In both cases, that of Boubacar and the African hairdressers, an almost sibling-like bond can arise between people of African descent. However, this feeling does not always operate. Moreover, even when a bond of affinity is established, it first goes through a categorization and stereotyping of the other. Subsequently, Ifemelu herself categorizes the people she meets,

classifying them as Black Americans or Africans, as first-generation immigrants or not. Similarly, when observing Blaine for the first time, she says:

She knew right away that he [Blaine] was African American, not Caribbean, not African, not a child of immigrants from either place. She had not always been able to tell. [...] But the longer she spent in America, the better she had become at distinguishing, sometimes from looks and gait, but mostly from bearing and demeanour, that fine-grained mark that culture stamps on people. (p. 176)

In this section, we have discussed the difficult and stereotyped social relationships that may exist between the different communities, which constitute an encounter with otherness in the US. We have provided a series of examples of social interactions presented by Ifemelu to illustrate the relationships between White Americans, Black Americans, African immigrants and Nigerian immigrants themselves. As we have seen, the interactions are guided by stereotypes, power relations, inequalities and discriminations. The concept of 'Blackness' being thrust upon the immigrants when they arrive in the US, they cannot help but adhere to this racial categorization and in turn reproduce the stereotypes they have learned. By embracing these racial categorizations, immigrants hope to conform to American cultural norms in order to stand out as little as possible. On the other hand, African immigrants do not wish to fully adhere to American standards for fear of betraying their own values and to 'lose themselves' and risk depravity, as associated with Black Americans. Through Ifemelu's perspective, we see the perceptions that different communities can have of each other. These observations are based on racial and social categories that influence the relationships between individuals in the American society.

Chapter 2: An identity torn between two cultures

So far, we have seen the reasons that led Ifemelu to migrate and what were her expectations for the country that everyone fantasized about in her homeland. We have also seen how her situation has improved upon migrating, but also when she has experienced disappointment about expectations which did not get fulfilled. Upon her arrival in the United States, Ifemelu was immersed into the Western culture, and struggled to adapt, having to break through cultural barriers and to negotiate the many identities coming along with being a Nigerian in America. The novel depicts how African immigrants can struggle with the displacement and adaptation processes involved in migration, while having to reconfigure their identities at the same time. In this section, we will look at the elements on which Ifemelu feels a tension: the two sets of values and the two forms of identity at stake. Indeed, Ifemelu has to proceed to an internal negotiation and adopt a personal stance on the multicultural standpoint.

Upon her arrival, Ifemelu feels like she is failing to properly adapt to the new country: she feels no strong connection to the country or its people, experiences oppression and discrimination and faces serious financial problems. At one point, relatively soon after arriving in the US, Ifemelu feels disappointment with the country she had fantasized about, feels homesick and would like to return home, even though she knows that it is not possible. During her long stay in the USA, she experiences several phases of fascination for the host country, followed by phases of rejection of certain aspects of the country's culture. A similar phenomenon occurs with regard to the African immigrant community, towards which Ifemelu has mixed feelings. It appears that Ifemelu is caught somewhere between the two countries and cultures, neither totally American nor totally African.

1. The fear of not integrating

On the one hand, the novel shows the fear of immigrants to not be able to integrate into the new society, to 'stand out' and suffer discrimination limiting their prospects, including economic and professional. Through the story, Ifemelu gradually changes aspects of her personality in order to better integrate into the society. Similarly, Ifemelu begins to lie about the number of years she has lived in the U.S. because she has learned that her value, worth, and respect given increase with the number of years she has lived in the U.S. "the jeer on the

Nigerian's face had taught her that, to earn the prize of being taken seriously... she needed more years. Six years, she began to say when it was just three and a half" (p. 16). When Ifemelu tells Aisha the hairdresser that she has been living in the States for fifteen years, "a new respect slipped into Aisha's eyes" (p. 16). The more years migrants spend in the USA, the more they assimilate into the American culture, and the more respect they gain, as they appear 'whiter' and more knowledgeable than a newly arrived African immigrant. It is a cultural perception that places anything American or highly assimilated as superior.

2. The fear of losing one's own identity

On the other hand, however, the novel shows in turn Ifemelu's and other fellow African immigrants' fear of being corrupted by this 'other' culture, which would drive them away from their African roots, traditions and values. Any posture of identity hybridity would already be experienced as a betrayal of the native country. Indeed, we see Ifemelu repeatedly denying the fact that she might be influenced by the American culture and might be thinking like an American. Indeed, the coexistence of the two cultures (Nigerian and Western) is experienced as impossible to combine and as signifying loss of part of her identity, and therefore failure. It is important to note that throughout her stay in the USA, Ifemelu takes offense when someone tells her that she has become 'Americanized', as she has internalized that adopting Western standards drives her away from her native values, which thus represents a betrayal of her country and a part of herself. For this reason, Ifemelu rejects this hybrid version of her identity for a long time, because she believes that it only applies to the immigrant "who got lost" and who has failed (p. 117). Moreover, Ifemelu is critical of those who have changed due to exposure to the American culture, such as her aunt Uju: "America had subdued her" (p. 110).

As we can see, the process of decolonization is operating and it is not easy for the subjects living it to define themselves in relation to this painful past. Indeed, adopting (even partially) a set of values related to colonialism can create a clash of values. As bell hooks puts it in *Black looks: race and representation* (1992): "we are always in the process of both remembering the past even as we create new ways to imagine and make the future" (p. 12). Similarly, Stuart Hall states in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* (1990) the following:

Cultural identity ... is a matter of "becoming" as well as "being". It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history, and

culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere "recovery" of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.

As he states it, the negotiation between the two identities is also difficult because it is at the transition between past and future: cultural identity in this case is actually the link to the colonial past, and calls for a positioning on these narratives in order to form a future narrative. In other words, identity is not something which already exists, it is not fixed in place, time, history and culture. Rather, it transcends these aspects and requires reconfiguration and constant evolution. Going back to the novel, fairly soon after arriving in the US, Ifemelu experiences a tension between the two cultures, finding it difficult to acclimate to this new land. As Okuyade (2011) explains in his article, in this type of narrative, the African protagonist at first assimilates societal values of the new land, but eventually ends up building an identity constructed around countering these values, because they are crippling to the individual, as they are coated with racism and discrimination. As McLeod (2010) points out, the process of identity formation begins with trauma and anxiety for the migrant, since he is always torn between losing his original identity and the need to conform to new cultural expectations. Fanon (1986) analyzes this tension as a gap between the idealized image of the American society and the belittling treatment suffered as a Black person in the US, resulting in the tension between adapting or not to that culture.

3. A cultural in-betweenness resulting in trauma and blurred sense of self

If the immigrant agrees to adapt, this in turn allows him to receive preferential treatment and lessen the suffering associated with discrimination on the basis of race. It is this assumption that causes the immigrant to adopt a mimicry stand, trying to get as close as possible to the dominant standards in order to be better accepted. For Edward Said (1995), the colonizer expects the colonized to undergo forms of mimicry and try to become like the colonizer, but not quite yet. Indeed, the colonizer wants to keep the dominant position, yet have the "other" adopt its values. However, if the mimicry was to get too authentic and obliterate all cultural barriers, the colonial ideology would be rendered null. As Bhabha states it (1994), "colonial

mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a *subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*... mimicry must continually produce... its difference". In his words, it is a strategy close to camouflage; it is this ambivalence of the identity, to be "almost the same, but not quite" (authors' italics). Fanon (1986) theorizes that the disdain which emerges between different Black communities, the feeling of inferiority and conflicted identities due to issues of race and associated prestige, is an outcome of being Black in a racist and Eurocentric world. These identity disorders, experienced as traumas to the psyche and identity development, result from the internalization of racist and oppressive values specific to the Eurocentric culture, and hinder the constitution of a valued Black identity. These same processes result in self-denial, leading to the alienation of Black individuals from their own culture and values. As can be seen, this cultural in-betweenness, often associated with cultural diversity, is actually a source of trauma and anxiety. Ifemelu comes to navigate these two cultural aspects at once, trying to integrate aspects of both cultures into her identity, while fearing that she will lose herself in the process and lose a part of her identity. One of Ifemelu's comments reflects particularly well this stance: "home was now a blurred place between here and there" (p. 117). This confirms the emergence of a transnational and globalized identity, which is to some extent also an uprooted identity. The notion of home intrinsically refers to the notion of roots and belonging. Yet, in this excerpt, Ifemelu herself says that she cannot clearly situate her sense of belonging, and that for her, the boundaries have been blurred. Home appears in this case as a place that is indistinct, blurred, not grounded in reality - a fictional place that combines characteristics of both locations (Nigeria and the United States). It is also between these two cultural spaces (each of which raises questions of class, gender, identity, ethnic belonging and race) that Ifemelu must construct and forge an identity for herself, in a painful psychic tension. However, Ifemelu is not the only character torn between the two cultures. Adichie also gives the example of Bartholomew, Aunt Uju's first partner in the US, who had not returned to Nigeria in years but continued to maintain an idealized image of the country, based on his memories and on online chat rooms held by Nigerian expatriates talking about the country. His image of the country is of course distorted (as Ifemelu points it out); once again, because of the distance, the country of birth becomes blurred and often idealized. Just as the US had been idealized before the migrants' arrival, the native country in turn becomes a fantasy place, "a mythology of home".

4. Bridging the oppositions between global 'North' and 'South'

As already discussed above, during her stay in the US but also following her return to Nigeria, Ifemelu in turn distances herself from the intrinsic values of both the country of origin and the host country, without completely detaching herself from either of them, which leads her to become a culturally hybrid character. The advantage, however, is that this allows her to produce a critical and reflexive outlook on both societies, putting them in a dialogical relationship that questions both without granting absolute superiority to one or the other. To describe this very specific stance, Taiye Selasi (2005) has coined the term of 'Afropolitan' (a portmanteau word regrouping the words 'African' and 'cosmopolitan'), referring to how Africans can belong to two distinctive worlds and cultures and become products of a globalized world, which in turn influences their identities and perspectives on cultural aspects. As stated by Phiri (2016), *Americanah* "appears to undermine mythologies of home" through Ifemelu's character, "an African of the world" who bridges both cultures. Gikandi (2011) completes this statement by describing Ifemelu as transnational character living a "life divided across cultures, languages and states [...] and feeling at home in many". She finds herself at a crossroads between the discovery of the American life and at a supposed space of 'shared Blackness' or 'Africanness', that she approaches with similar caution. Her own approach tends to prove that subjectivity is key and that there is no such thing as a unique Black or African immigrant experience. From her standpoint, she mocks at times both cultures, although globally embracing both.

Throughout the novel, "the line of demarcation between 'North' and 'South', between zones of 'development and underdevelopment', is not stable, but 'porous, broken, often illegible'" (Comaroff, J., & Comaroff, J. L., 2012). As Adichie has declared in many interviews, *Americanah* is "a book about longing for home and what home means", hereby illustrating a character's journey in a globalized, multi-faceted world in constant movement. By exploring the challenges and social issues faced by Ifemelu in her home country, abroad, and then back home after her return, as well as her blurred feeling of belonging to one over another, Adichie draws a tenuous link between the North and the South, which are at all times in communication. The novel presents the character of Ifemelu, an 'Afropolitan' who "must form an identity, but also defend it on three levels: national, racial and cultural" (Selasi, 2005). In other words, she is a diasporic and hybrid character, navigating both identities and their aspects at the same time. As a young female migrant, facing the discrimination induced by colonialism and patriarchy, Ifemelu embodies the "global South" facing tenuous oppression and discrimination,

a metaphor for the human suffering caused by capitalism and colonialism on the global level, as well as for the resistance to overcoming or minimizing such suffering. [...] a South that also exists in the geographic North (Europe and North America), in the form of excluded, silenced and marginalized populations, such as undocumented immigrants, the unemployed, ethnic or religious minorities, and victims of sexism, homophobia, racism, and islamophobia. (Boaventura de Sousa, 2016, pp. 18-19).

In this depiction, the 'global South' is a synonym of the figure of the 'other', an identity that is defined through exclusion and domination, based on criteria of ethnicity, race, gender and class. This relationship of inferiority is based on the universalist principle of the Eurocentric white male set as the norm, with those not fitting this norm being defined in the negative (this includes all non-Westerners and women). The two groups are thus defined by this opposition and seem to exist only through it. It is thus through the complex dynamics of this relationship between colonizer and colonized, 'self' and 'other', that alienating stereotypes are formed. Majumdar (2007), through a Marxist perspective, argues that it is precisely from this opposition that a new relationship can be born (Majumdar, 2007, pp. 217-218). The way out is to reaffirm one's 'other' culture with pride and to actively oppose this reductionist view of culture and identity. However, North-South relations of domination are perpetuated not only through geographical or mental representations, but also directly experienced by minorities, such as what Ifemelu experiences when she arrives in the United States. Later on, she is confronted with several exchanges or situations that remind her of this situation of superiority of the North towards the South. During a party in the US with rich people, she meets a woman, chair of the board of a charity in Ghana, who offers her a position with her team in Africa. Ifemelu realizes "the luxury to charity that she could not identify with and did not have" (p. 169), "wanting suddenly and desperately to be from the country of people who gave and not who received" (p. 170). Ifemelu is confronted with an image of Africa as poor, inferior, in need of help and charity from the West. It is thus a stereotypical image that is presented in the discourse of her interlocutor, based on the common image of Africa as stricken by disease and poverty, in need of salvation from the West. This image perpetuates stereotypes about the continent and maintains the 'single story' traditionally shown in the media. This image is also projected onto people from that place. Ifemelu is thus seen through the image of her African identity portrayed as inferior, 'other', and is expected to receive pity and charity from wealthy American benefactors who think they have good intentions but actually project attitudes of superiority and domination. It is worth highlighting that the concept of 'Blackness', as discussed earlier, is intimately linked to this

aspect of domination of the North over the South. As Ifemelu explains it, the concept of race does not exist in Nigeria, it is only when she arrived in the USA that Black identity was projected onto her, anchoring her in a history of discrimination against the Black community, and in turn placing her in this racial dynamic.

5. The question of language

Another element that constitutes a point of tension between the two cultures, at the crossroads between cultural barrier, process of integration and resistance to an imposed linguistic and cultural vision, is the question of language. Specifically, to what extent do immigrants have to learn not only the language, but also its accent and idiomatic peculiarities in order to be integrated into society. And through the same logic, to what extent must they deny the linguistic characteristics of their native language and camouflage their accent. Again, this question reflects the dominance of the global North over the global South, imposing in this case what the dominant language and accent is supposed to be. Ifemelu had to face this question early on in the USA. Indeed, the relationship to language, as an integral part of a culture and identity, quickly became an inevitable question. Thus, even before confronting her own relationship to language, she observes that Aunt Uju pronounces her name differently in the US, "She pronounced it *you-joo* instead of *oo-joo*" (p. 104). When Ifemelu asks her why she pronounces it that way, Uju says that it is what they call her in the US. Ifemelu is surprised that she has changed the pronunciation of her name. Similarly, she perceives that Aunt Uju puts on a different accent "when she spoke to white Americans, in the presence of white Americans, in the hearing of white Americans" (p. 108). She perceives that "with the new accent emerged a new persona, apologetic and self-abasing" (p. 108); having to modify one's language and culture (reflected here through one's name) indicates submission to American linguistic and cultural expectations. Ifemelu feels that her aunt is trying to "Americanize" herself, including through the way she speaks, shedding some of her Nigerian identity through the process. Through this comment, Ifemelu expresses her vision of all immigrants, who are distinguished from the natives by their accent and are attributed a new identity once they arrive in the new land. The way of speaking reflects part of the person's identity and social position. When she arrives in the US, it does not occur to her that something might be wrong about the way she speaks and she does not question her own relationship to language. However, when she shows up at the international student office to enroll for university, the employee, Cristina Tomas, speaks to her

in an extremely simplified and very slow way: "You. Will. First. To. Get. A. Letter. From. The. International. Students. Office" (p. 133). Ifemelu comes back with the letter, and the employee says: "I. Need. You. To. Fill. Out. A. Couple. Of. Forms. Do. You. Understand. How. To. Fill. These. Out?" (p.133). Ifemelu then realizes that she is talking to her like that because of her "foreign accent, and she felt for a moment like a small child, lazy-limbed and drooling" (p. 133). When Ifemelu points out to her that she speaks English, the employee replies: "I bet you do. I just don't know how *well*" (author's italics). Ifemelu is confronted for the first time to a differentiated treatment because of her accent (which she did not think she had). Her American counterpart speaks very slowly in English and with detached syllables, even though Ifemelu has told her that she can speak English. Through her latter comment, Cristina Tomas also lets her know that she has assessed her level of English through her accent, and it was not deemed acceptable, according to hegemonic American standards. However, as much of Ifemelu's education in Nigeria had been in English and as she had even been in the debate group of her school, she therefore feels hurt by the way she is treated because of her accent: "She shrank like a dried leaf. She had spoken English all her life, led the debating society in secondary school, and always thought the American twang inchoate" (pp. 133-134). Ifemelu is stripped of a part of her identity for which she had felt pride. It is interesting to note that the only valid accent seems to be the American one, illustrating an imperialist vision, with hints of colonialism. The employee points to her seemingly inadequate identity (due to her accent), which does not fit within the American set of standards. On a larger scale, this confrontation on the basis of linguistic values evokes a confrontation of values between the hegemony of the USA, which wishes to impose its set of values, and any other cultural minority that would wish to defend its own cultural values. By letting her know that she does not conform to the linguistic standards and that she should adhere to a standard, 'superior' model of American English, Cristina Tomas represents the imperialist power, one similar to the one which had previously colonized Nigeria. As a result, in order not to experience the same treatment again, her otherness and seemingly inadequate identity being reminded through her accent - and a differentiated treatment having been granted to her (different tone and use of English, supposedly adapted to her level of English) - Ifemelu decides to adopt an American accent. Following this episode, Ifemelu realizes that in order to better integrate and not be stigmatized, she will have to acquire an American accent and, in a way, cut back on her Nigerian identity, making it less striking. To make up for it, Ifemelu implements an act of 'mimicry', referring to the strategy of adopting an idea or set of values of another culture in order to be better integrated. In this case, adopting an American accent is a strategy Ifemelu uses to present herself as belonging to a higher social

class and origin than she really is. As Franz Fanon states it, once a subject masters the "other language", thus "processing the world expressed and implied by that language" (Fanon, 1986, p. 18), the subject becomes "proportionately whiter" and is therefore considered more of a real human being, and in turn gets better integrated into society. After that event, which was quite humiliating for Ifemelu as it clearly set her as 'other', different and foreign, she decided to change her accent and adopt an American one in order to facilitate her adaptation to the American society and ease her migratory journey. However, adopting the American accent comes as hard work: it is an effort, "with consciousness, it was an act of will" (p. 173). Three years later, while she has already started questioning parts of the American culture, another linguistic comment makes her question her initial decision to conceal her Nigerian accent. Indeed, a telemarketer congratulates her on the phone, telling her: "You sound totally American" (p.175). Her first reaction is to thank him, but this remark nonetheless triggers a series of thoughts related to identity. Ifemelu consciously realizes at this point the changes she has made to be more accepted in the US and perceives that she has denied part of her Nigerian identity, which makes her feel remorseful. Indeed, how has it come that she thought it was "a compliment, an accomplishment, to sound American?" (p. 175)? At that moment, Ifemelu realizes how the North-South relationship of domination is established through language. She becomes aware of the changes she has agreed to in order to be more accepted by the American society, and decides to take a step back and reconnect with that part of her Nigerian identity: "she had taken on, for too long, a pitch of voice and a way of being that was not hers" (p. 175). With this comment, she questions the affirmation of her identity through her way of speaking. The linguistic aspects in this case are presented as a reflection of her identity, and Ifemelu decides to get rid of the superficial additions she had adopted to conform to America, but which do not reflect her identity and who she really is. The rejection of these artifices allows her to come to terms with herself. As soon as she gets rid of her American accent, Ifemelu says she feels like herself again: "This was truly her" (p. 175). Later, Ifemelu faces a discussion about bilingualism with Aunt Uju, who refuses to let Dike (Ifemelu's cousin) speak Igbo:

"Please don't speak Igbo to him," Aunt Uju said. "Two languages will confuse him."

"What are you talking about, Aunt? We spoke two languages growing up."

"This is America. It's different." (p. 109)

Several things appear through Aunt Uju's speech. First, she confirms that the relationship to a dual identity and multilingualism is different in the US. Linguistically and

culturally, it is the American part of Dike's identity that must predominate in order to be well integrated in the host country and not suffer discrimination. However, this refusal to expose Dike to a part of his native culture and thus to a part of his identity will have heavy consequences on his identity construction, as he will experience, as a teenager, periods of depression and will even attempt suicide. We can therefore observe the importance of language and the cultural identification to which it is linked, in relation to the development of a person's identity.

During her time in the United States, Ifemelu is unable to shake off a certain feeling of alienation, especially due to the racism and colonial vision that are still very present in the United States. Gradually however, Ifemelu reconnects with aspects of her Nigerian identity that she had put aside upon her arrival in the US in order to counter the weight of the pressures that apply to her. The process of rejecting hegemonic values is therefore gradual, after an initial stage when Ifemelu had adopted them in order to facilitate her integration process in the US. Thus, Ifemelu ends up reappropriating her Nigerian accent and opting for natural hair, two steps after which she says she has regained part of her identity. Later on, the launching of her blog coincides with the return to natural hair, which shows that these events follow one another, and that the path of deconstruction of oppressive norms is built gradually (as a step-by-step process). Each of these decisions constitutes a militant choice at the societal level, fighting against racism, sexism and classism in the American society. These decisions also constitute steps of empowerment and resistance at the individual level. Furthermore, these choices are part of a struggle against the values imposed by the 'global North', which oppress those who deviate from the white norm. However, after thirteen years spent in the USA, struggling to negotiate her feminine subjectivity "in a society plagued by the debilitating forces of patriarchy" (Okuyade, 2011, p. 152), she closes her blog and decides to return to Nigeria, in the final stage of emancipation and definition of her own voice, not dictated by any agreed standards and expectations. Indeed, it would have been expected that she would have settled permanently in the USA, a country considered to offer far more opportunities than Africa. However, Ifemelu chooses the "non-dominant" path, and goes against expectations (i.e., to pursue her career in the US and stay there permanently). In the end, even if she refuses to admit it, it is interesting to note that her migration, which was supposed to be of limited duration and last only for the time of her studies, is largely extended in time. It is only after thirteen years in the US that Ifemelu finally considers returning to her native country. However, upon her return to her native country, Ifemelu again refuses to imagine that the US could have changed her, as this would mean having to accept the loss of part of her Africanness, but also the distance that would have

been emerged between her and her native country due to her immigration and successive adaptation processes.

From these thoughts on the relationships of domination between global North and South, it is interesting to pursue the analysis through a postcolonial approach and through the concept of negritude.

6. Postcolonial approach

Based on the analysis lead so far, *Americanah* belongs to the postcolonial movement, which examines the social and political power relationships installed by colonialism and neocolonialism, including the human consequences of the social, political and cultural narratives surrounding the colonizer and the colonized. Postcolonial theory holds that decolonized people develop a postcolonial identity that is based on cultural interactions between different identities (cultural, national, and ethnic as well as gender and class) which are assigned varying degrees of social power by the colonial society. The movement also aims to undermine the so-thought superiority of the Eurocentric universalism, which puts forward what is considered to be 'Western values', but in turns marginalizes what is considered as 'other'. Robert Young (2016) sums up the different principles of postcolonialism in the following definition:

At its simplest level, the postcolonial is simply the product of human experience, but human experience of the kind that has not typically been registered or represented at any institutional level. More particularly, it is the result of different cultural and national origins, the ways in which the colour of your skin or your place and circumstance of birth define the kind of life, privileged and pleasurable, or oppressed and exploited, that you will have in this world. Postcolonialism's concerns are centred on geographic zones of intensity that have remained largely invisible, but which prompt or involve questions of history, ethnicity, complex cultural identities and questions of representation, of refugees, emigration and immigration, of poverty and wealth—but also, importantly, the energy, vibrancy and creative cultural dynamics that emerge in very positive ways from such demanding circumstances. Postcolonialism offers a language of and for those who have no place, who seem not to belong, of those whose knowledges and histories are not allowed to count. It is above all this preoccupation with the oppressed, with the subaltern classes, with minorities in any society, with the concerns of those who live or come from elsewhere, that constitutes the basis of postcolonial politics and remains

the core that generates its continuing power.

In other words, postcolonialism gives a voice to those who have been traditionally silenced and marginalized by dominant discourses. It also studies how certain people are oppressed based on origin and race, in relationship to a dominant self-imposed group. The postcolonial paradigm studies the historical and geographical roots of the colonial perspective, as well as the human narratives, with a focus on the resistance offered by the traditionally oppressed groups. Among other forms of resistance, a call for representation and empowerment through a regained voice are possible forms of countering the dominant narrative. However, in order to organize resistance, the postcolonial movement is not afraid of borrowing from western knowledge and using it to its own advantage. Postcolonialism also believes in hybrid knowledges and cultures. The postcolonial approach reflects the tensions at stake when navigating both cultures, but also how hybridity can be beneficial, in fighting the oppressing movement from the inside. Similarly to the postcolonial movement, the novel also takes from the negritude movement, which focuses on countering the feeling of inferiority of Black people by taking pride in their Black identity, developing cultural aspects deemed as 'other' from the Eurocentric perspective, as well as developing a 'Black consciousness'. Negritude and postcolonial theories provide resources and a background perspective to understand Black people's projected inferiority and distress in regard to assimilation. On the other side, it also encourages the reevaluation of African identity and culture through a renewed esteem for African languages and cultures.

However, another important point to consider in postcolonial studies is how academic studies are being carried out and how discourse about these marginalized groups is being created. This thought is based on the relationship between Western academic institutions and the 'other', as the voice of the subaltern or 'marginal' subject can only find legitimacy through Western academic institutions. Indeed, it is because academia has established 'marginality' as an area of investigation that it has started to be studied. Nevertheless, this relationship is based on another paradox, as the 'marginal' voice historically emerged because studied by the academic systems, yet these systems perpetuate the 'otherness' of their status. bell hooks (1990) also questions the complex relationship between the academic system and the 'other'. Indeed, ideally, the goal would be for the academic community not to position itself as an expert, which would again constitute a dominant position. On the other hand, traditionally, knowledge has emerged from the expertise of Western academic, which implies that the subaltern should

comply to the investigating academic as he would not be an expert on his own experience. About the binary relationship of investigation, between the academic and the subaltern native, hooks states (1990) that:

[There is] no need to hear your native voice, when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still [the] colonizer, the speaking subject, and you are now at the center of my talk.

However, more recently, it has been possible to observe that knowledge no longer emerges only from high-level institutions, but also from personal experiences and self-constituted speech groups, including via social networks. This renewal in terms of creation and access to experiences and knowledge also allows all those sufficiently informed to constitute themselves as experts on a subject that relates to their personal experience. Additionally, it allows for the reclamation of a voice and the overcoming of the shackles of institutional domination for formerly oppressed subjects.

These remarks also refer to Ifemelu's journey: after having struggled to adapt to the new culture, she had progressively started to change herself in order to conform as much as possible to the white dominant norm. However, these changes deprived her of parts of her identity, and created additional tensions as Ifemelu knew she would remain marginal whatever the efforts she would make to conform to the Eurocentric worldview. Her journey took her as far as becoming part of Western academia, finding further legitimacy in Western academic institutions, and becoming a Black intellectual among peer intellectuals. However, despite all these steps pointing towards integration, Ifemelu still had a feeling of alienation and oppression. It was then that she gradually started to renounce the artifacts she had adopted in order to 'westernize' herself, and started resisting in her own way, through her blog and physical appearance (by wearing her hair natural). It is therefore interesting to see how she subverts her dual position: despite her academic background, she prefers to have her statements on race and gender issues emerge outside of the academic system, choosing not to conform to the dominant system. By writing on her own behalf, her legitimacy comes from herself (and perhaps from the community of readers), but not from a Western institution that would exercise power over her speech. Overall, it is clear that her resistance, self-acceptation and search for a voice are

reflections of a postcolonial standpoint. For these reasons, it is clear that *Americanah* offers a renewed narrative of a migrant's journey, taking on America's 'Master Narrative' and its belittling stereotypes. Through the character of Ifemelu, Adichie explores the rejection of Western domination and the reassertion of African awareness and identity. On the one hand, Ifemelu rejects the parts of Western culture which were traditionally used to affirm domination and render Africans inferior. On the other hand, she also embraces certain values considered as Western, in order to assert her own identity and fuel her resistance. These values are ones of freedom of speech, feminism and individualism, which end up helping her not only challenge American standards, but also African ones (such as the Nigerian female's subjugation, the westernized educational system, and corrupted political system in Nigeria).

Ultimately, Ifemelu's choice to return to Nigeria embodies a decision to reject the perception of superiority of the West, but also to reject the discrimination and prejudice inflicted on Black people. Her decision also counters the stereotypical image carried by the 'single story' of an impoverished African continent, preferring through her choice to assert her African identity and reject the vision of African inferiority as usually projected by Western discourses. Indeed, to the image of alleged superiority commonly associated with the United States, the novel opposes a darker vision, where Ifemelu faces a series of disappointments, not meeting at first the economic prosperity and personal development she had envisioned, but also facing a series of discriminations. In this regard, the novel adopts a postcolonial stance, drawing attention to the imperfections of the West and adopting a critical outlook towards it. The novel, with regard to the concepts of negritude and postcolonialism, proceeds to dismantle the reductionist consideration of African values, cultures and identities in order to offer a renewed and more realistic vision of the realities of Africa, through Ifemelu's journey and re-evaluation of African values.

Evidently, this perspective also involves the question of storytelling, challenging the 'single story' and contrasting it with a more nuanced view of both the US and Nigeria. The problem is that the US have been historically held up as a model, with the international reputation of "a land of freedom" and prosperity, while other cultures and identities are seen in contrast as minorities and 'others'. Yet Toni Morrison (1992) states that the dominant narrative commonly called the 'American Dream', associated with the promise of freedom and prosperity offered to those coming to the USA, is an American invention perpetuated to set America in a powerful and dominant position, over a subordinate 'Other'. It is partly this idea of America's

superiority that determined Ifemelu's departure for the US, as it was perpetuated at all levels of the Nigerian social ladder (Ifemelu's parents, her school friends, Obinze and even the hairdressers in America). However, later on, it is through the postcolonial process of deconstructing America's values of colorism and white supremacy that Ifemelu realizes she does not support this set of values anymore, finally wishing to return to Nigeria and reconnect with its values.

7. The synthesis of the dual identity

However, the return to her homeland is also associated with challenges, as Ifemelu is still influenced by a set of Eurocentric values acquired during her American stay. Thus, Ifemelu goes back to her homeland as a "serious Americanah" who looks at things "with American eyes" (p. 385). What is interesting to observe is the gradual and perpetual balancing movement between the two identities (Nigerian and American), depending on the context and personal development of the character. In order to achieve identity harmonization, however, the character must achieve the synthesis of this dual identity, in order to achieve the identity reconciliation representing modernity. The combination of all the experiences in the South and the North and the creation of a hybrid personality ultimately counteracts the vision of a separate world based on unequal cultures and power relations. For Homi K. Bhabha, there is never a "stable identity" (or unchanged sense of self). In his book *The Location of Culture* (1994) (one of the founding books of postcolonial thought), Bhabha advocates above all to see the world as an integral human world in order to fight against unequal systems and to not perpetuate categorizations such as 'First World' versus 'Second' or 'Third World'. For Bhabha, the divisions between 'West' and 'East' or 'North' and 'South' are unstable and unsustainable. In order to bridge these conceptual oppositions, he introduced the concept of hybridity, which refers to the idea that identities are constructed based on all the cultures with which they have been in contact. Accepting the idea of a hybrid identity also actively counters the reductionist thought of an homogenous 'Other'. Most importantly, it constitutes itself as a third space, bridging cultural differences through a postcolonial stand. Nonetheless, hybridity comes into play when referring to the idea of "home" and belonging somewhere. Yet, even after she becomes an American citizen and buys a property, the idea of "returning home" keeps lingering in her mind. This again explores the question of what 'home' really is. It is interesting to note that Ifemelu does not at this point formulate the hypothesis of a temporary return to the country: she considers

this as a long-term, final return to what constitutes "home". However, her decision arouses astonishment and lack of understanding among her family and friends. Her parents even doubt that she would be able to readjust to Nigeria after such a long absence: "[they] seemed to think that she might not be able to 'cope' with Nigeria" (p. 17). After announcing her wish to return to Nigeria, Ifemelu's state of 'Americanization' is deemed "too advanced" by some, who doubt her ability to readjust to Nigeria: "*Will you be able to cope?* – and the suggestion, that she was somehow irrevocably altered by America, had grown thorns on her skin" (p. 17). In the Trenton hair salon scene, Ifemelu is also judged to be more American than Nigerian by the hairdressers. Her sense of belonging is again questioned when the hairdresser asks her if she speaks Igbo. Ifemelu then openly takes offense, feeling her Nigerian identity challenged. Her answer is: "'Of course I speak Igbo,' Ifemelu said, defensively, wondering if Aisha was again suggesting that America had changed her." (p. 40). Before returning to her native country, she does not conceive those 13 years in the United States could have changed her identity, and she fiercely defends herself against this idea, emphasizing her Nigerian identity above all. Once back in Nigeria, the opinions of outsiders will again partly determine Ifemelu's perception of herself. Indeed, as soon as she returns, she is called an "Americanah". It is clear that her perception of things and her set of values have changed after living and studying for thirteen years in the United States: her friend Ranyinudo tells her "You are looking at things with American eyes. But the problem is that you're not even a real Americanah. At least if you had an American accent we would tolerate your complaining!" (p. 385). Again, the hybrid nature of her identity is reminded to her, in this case, directly related to her lack of American accent. The term 'Americanah', in the Nigerian context, emphasizes the hybrid aspect of her identity, but more especially the American part of it. However, the lack of American accent makes it even more disturbing to people in Nigeria, who have trouble understanding the different facets which make up her identity. In a way, Ifemelu has brought the United States back to Nigeria, and the nickname she is given reflects this. In an interview she gave to the publishing house Gallimard, Adichie explained that:

'Americanah' is a Nigerian word that means "a person who's gone to the US and comes back to Nigeria and suddenly has all of these affectations, and pretends not to understand Nigerian languages, speaks with an American accent. It's well-intentioned, it's not derogatory. I thought it would be fun and interesting to have that as the title of the book, because obviously it's different, and it's not really a word in the dictionary. (...) And for me, 'Americanah' doesn't just mean the character, it means the idea that America... is an idea, is central to this book. Because

America is a place that represents something to this generation of Nigerians, who... they're not hungry, they're not dying of AIDS or poverty or war. But they're dreaming of America as this "extra-place", where magical things happen. They all want to go to America.

However, the term 'Americanah', used in Nigeria in a semi-affectionate, gently mocking way (a term Ifemelu could have used herself), indirectly refers to the concept of 'outsider within'. Yet, Ifemelu is not exactly an outsider, having lived a great part of her life in Nigeria. However, her prolonged absence and her time in the US have changed her perspectives and she now sees certain aspects from a more Westernized and Americanized point of view (a significant part of her identity). Even after returning to Nigeria, Ifemelu continues to maintain her connection to the United States through the Nigerpolitan Club, a club that brings together former expatriates (mostly from the US), who have returned to live in the homeland. But most of these meetings consist of criticizing Nigeria and lamenting about what they miss about the US. Again, Ifemelu feels torn between both cultures and both aspects of her identity, as she enjoys taking part in these meetings, but also feels embarrassed by the content of the discussions that take place in that context. However, Ifemelu still finds it difficult to admit that she has changed during her time in the United States. Even Obinze, her former lover she meets back after 13 years, confirms that she has indeed changed:

"I really don't think I've changed that much, tough."

"Oh, you've changed," he said with a certainty that she instinctively disliked. (p. 432)

As a result of the migration process, we can see that Ifemelu does not cease to face a constant struggle and need for (re)adaptation, having to reconfigure her identity in numerous occasions. The migratory process goes along with the constant feeling of not fully belonging to any of the cultures, always somehow standing out and being placed in a position of 'otherness'. However, dealing with questions of cultural identity also relates to facing the challenges of self-definition and 'being', which transcend the sole geographical and cultural aspects. Furthermore, her unique hybrid position allows her to gauge both cultures with equal parts admiration and critical outlook, not overvaluing one culture over another and therefore bridging the traditional demarcation between North and South. Additionally, this constitutes a postcolonial approach to the question of cultural identity and sense of belonging.

Chapter 3: Resistance and coming to voice

As we saw it previously, Ifemelu had associated the United States with freedom and prosperity in all aspects, including personal development, and in particular with regard to freedom of speech. Indeed, as a woman in Nigeria, some specific societal expectations were placed on her and Ifemelu's outspokenness was often criticized. This raises the question of freedom of speech - what a woman should or should not say - and of finding her own voice to express herself freely, unhindered by gender-based discrimination. From a very young age, Ifemelu had a very analytical mind, which captured details of individual and collective behavior and felt free to share her thoughts. However, in the Nigerian society, it is not conceivable for a girl to openly share her opinion in the public sphere, let alone to criticize the Nigerian society. In her home country, it is gender-related constraints that limited her speech. In the US, she finds more freedom to express her opinions, through her blog. This tool allows her to express herself freely, to find her place in society and to assert her identity on that specific platform. However, she soon realizes that the American society is still very much ruled by racism, which obviously poses obstacles to the personal development of an immigrant protagonist of color. Because of the prevailing racism, Ifemelu is not able to express herself as freely in the public sphere as she does on her blog. In the US, it is no longer her gender that prevents her from expressing herself freely, but rather her skin color, which forbids her from freely addressing the issue of race in public.

1. Understanding the intersectional discriminations at stake

However, in the quest to affirm and accept one's identity in its entirety, without discriminatory constraints, "people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history" (hooks, 1989, p. 42). This goes hand in hand with not leaving narrative power solely to traditional (including academic) institutions of power but reclaiming it and placing oneself as the subject and expert of one's own experience and history. The self-defined position of a subject, however, is constantly transgressed by forms of discrimination, such as combinations of racism, sexism and/or foreign domination like colonialism and neo-colonialism, all being intersectional forms of inequality (Kilomba 2010, p. 42); "within racism we thus become incomplete subjects" (Kilomba 2010, p. 45). bell hooks adds that becoming an incomplete subject through forms of discriminations takes away the 'self' and makes the person

not only 'other', but also an 'object': "As objects, one's reality is defined by others, one's identity created by others, one's history named only in ways that define one's relationship to those who are subject" (hooks, 1989, pp. 42-43). hooks also states that in order to counter this process and become fully a subject, the person needs to undergo a moment of 'coming to voice' (ibid, p. 12). This constitutes a self-affirmatory process which takes back the power of narrating one's own story and shifts the individual's status from 'object' to 'subject' as it is right. As an 'object', one is being defined and seen through the dominant gaze, without any say in the process; the person is rendered made passive and obedient, and his/her experiences and traumas are made invisible. By coming to voice, the individual then becomes capable of telling himself/herself in the way they desire, countering the stereotypes and power moves which would otherwise be applied on them. However, the first steps of gaining a voice is becoming fully aware of the intersectionality of discriminations applied on Black women living in the US, as their experiences are shaped mainly through sexism and racism; "In this process [of self-definition] Black women journey toward an understanding of how our personal lives have been fundamentally shaped by intersecting oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and class" (Collins, 2009, p. 125). It is therefore through the understanding of how these factors intersect that the subject will be able to create a comprehensive discourse on their specific position. However, as much as the intersectionality of forms of discrimination is indeed oppressive in the majority of cases, as Diallo points that it is at times more advantageous to be a woman of color than a man of color. Indeed, Diallo explains that being perceived as an 'exotic' woman of color can open doors that are not open to men of color, including in the workplace, because men of color can be perceived as threatening. While this has a pernicious and terrible effects, it has already allowed Diallo herself to be the guest of color on television shows and conferences, for example. Similarly, in the novel, Ifemelu may also have been invited to speak on issues of race precisely because of the combined factors of her skin color and gender. However, these considerations where being a woman of color may be beneficial are minimal in comparison to the everyday discriminations experienced. Thus, according to Diallo, Black women experience racism and sexism in combination through very simple considerations of everyday life, such as with regard to the maintenance of frizzy hair. On one side, mainstream hairdressers are not trained in frizzy hair, a shortcoming in their training which already invisibilizes women with these characteristics, as if they did not exist. As a result, in order to get their hair done, these women must go to specialized salons, intended for Afro-descendant populations. Furthermore, the salons are often located in minority neighborhoods, which contributes to the marginalization of these experiences.

2. Initial steps of resistance

It is therefore by gaining critical consciousness of the pressures that are applied on them that they can later create a discourse countering these factors and promoting self-empowerment through the elements which were setting them as 'other' in the first place. As seen previously, Ifemelu's journey in the US is marked in turns by adaptation and resistance against hegemonic norms. Among one example of resistance, which sets the track for the rest of them, was her going back to her Nigerian accent, which marked "the day that she returned her voice to herself" (p.180). Almost metaphorically, taking back her native accent and way of speaking was the initial process of her 'coming to voice' development, setting herself back as a self-defined subject.

Another point through which Ifemelu asserts her resistance is through her body, specifically her hair. As Ifemelu herself says in her blog that hair is a metaphor for race. The link between hair and race is not new, however, especially within the Black community, for which the link dates back to the slave era. Indeed, whereas curly and kinky hair was glorified in West African societies, it became a symbol of inferiority once the slaves reached America. Since then and until modern-days, and despite several resistance movement, hair still matters in Black communities, and it matters differently for women and men. Indeed, the first consequence of slavery was the appropriation of the Black body: the reappropriation of this body is therefore essential to overcome relationships of racial domination. For Black women, what is deemed desirable is still based on white standards of beauty, which include long and straight hair. In other words, a type of hair which is not naturally present in Black populations. Furthermore, both the general population and Black communities express a preference for the straight type of hair, therefore establishing a hierarchy of body and hair types. Once again, one's perception of their 'Blackness' is intimately related to racial constructions in the US. As Rokhaya Diallo explains it during the conference *Caféministe#12: L'afroféminisme*:

Beauty is a historical and social construction. Beauty is the product of historical power relationships of domination. What is defined today as beautiful is what corresponds to the attributes of people who are in a situation of domination, in a situation of power. The canons of beauty rather favor people of white color, therefore we rely on racial criteria to define beauty.⁷

⁷ Our translation.

In the following section, we will address the issue of hair, as we believe that social and cultural tensions between different racial communities in the US are expressed through (among other factors) the relationship to bodies.

3. Resistance through the body

Diallo, like Adichie, has chosen to address in her writings the subject of hair, which she considers as eminently political (as she explains it during the *Caféminisme* conference). The question of hair and its subjective beauty is linked to a history of oppression, namely the colonial and slavery periods, which have conditioned the exclusion of Afro-descendant people from the field of beauty. As a result, Afro-descendant women often feel pressured to transform their hair in a permanent way (by using chemical products that straighten it) or in a temporary way (by brushing or through other means), in order to get as close as possible to these beauty criteria. What is striking for Diallo is that these subjects belong to a group where most of its members never show their hair as it really is. These considerations are not only aesthetic, as it says a lot about the degree of acceptance of minorities in the public sphere, as well as the aesthetic injunctions which are applied on women from these minorities. As a non-White woman, the challenge is to free oneself from the imposed criteria of beauty and to deconstruct the notion of beauty which was inherited from an oppressive colonial system. But the difficulty for a woman from a minority background is that by birth she is already so different from these criteria of beauty, to which she is constantly compared and which constantly weigh on her, that it is quite difficult to assert oneself in this respect. The most important step of the process is therefore to go beyond these injunctions of beauty standards, and to reclaim them. It therefore constitutes a desire to assert oneself in a positive way, with perhaps different canons of beauty, and above all, to show oneself as one truly is, without undergoing transformations in order to get closer to biased beauty standards. To assert oneself in one's own type of beauty is already a step towards emancipation and self-empowerment.

An interesting episode is when Curt, Ifemelu's white boyfriend, points to a women's magazine that features only Black models, which he says is racist. Ifemelu goes to show him that the rest of the women's magazines show almost only White models and offer beauty tips adapted to this population only, which are absolutely not adapted to the skin and hair of Black

women. The reason why the magazine which initially shocked Curt only shows Black models is because the rest of the women's magazines have set a highly ethnocentric and non-inclusive standard of beauty. It is thus because of the ambient racism, which is also carried through aesthetic codes, that minorities are obliged to create their own spaces create content specially designed for their own needs, as the dominant groups do.

4. The liberation of hair as a symbol of self-empowerment

In the novel, Adichie uses the trope of Black hair as a metaphor for the prevailing societal oppression in the United States, but also in Nigeria, where white beauty standards have also become predominant. By freeing herself from this societal weight and liberating her hair, letting it regain its naturalness, Ifemelu takes another step forward in her liberation from the dominant dogma. However, the singularity of Ifemelu's standpoint is that she does not wish to anchor her movement of self-acceptance and subsequent return to natural hair in a dynamic of resistance or large-scale militancy; she does it for herself.

However, this first step of self-empowerment and coming to voice leads to another one: the creation of her own blog, where she tries to gather a community concerned by common issues. With the blog (unlike her hair), her approach is more engaged, and seeks, on the contrary, to be part of a community movement. Through her blog, Ifemelu progressively carries on with her emancipation, and is able to express herself freely through this medium. She even comes to be considered as a reference in matters of racial issues, as she is referred to as "The Blogger". Moreover, through the blog, Adichie illustrates a contemporary reality: the massive use of social networks by feminism, and in particular by intersectional feminism, in order to get a message across to a community with the same interests and struggles. It is therefore through these two tools of emancipation, namely the return to natural Afro hair and the launch of her blog that Ifemelu anchors her resistant and intersectional fight. The two phenomena are directly linked: it is after having bridled her hair for a very long time and having realized the lack of representation of women of color in the public sphere that Ifemelu wrote an email to her friend Wambui, who had also immigrated to the USA for her studies, telling her "about the bookstore, the magazines, the things she didn't tell Curt, things unsaid and unfinished. It was a long email, digging, questioning, unearthing." (p. 295). Wambui sees the relevance of her testimony and encourages her to continue to speak out on this topic: "This is so raw and true. More people

should read this. You should start a blog" (p. 295). Thus, Ifemelu launches her blog, entitled *Raceteenth or Curious Observations by a Non-American Black on the Subject of Blackness in America* (p. 296). Her goal then becomes to bring together a community that is concerned with the same issues; to express her experiences and observations in the US since her arrival; and to hear the stories of other immigrants with similar conditions, particularly Black immigrant women who have experienced complex and specific discriminations at the intersections of patriarchy and sexism. For Ifemelu, it is a matter of getting out of the silence in which she felt locked during all those years, when she was trying to fit in the social norms of the USA. It is also a way to provide means for fellow Non-American Blacks to understand and navigate the cultural and racial specifics of the US. The blog also serves as a guide for newcomers, a tool that Ifemelu herself would have appreciated upon her arrival in the US to guide her through the subtleties and discrepancies of the American society.

The question of hair is present throughout the novel, as a thread reflecting Ifemelu's state of mind and presenting itself as an indicator of her positioning in the tension between adaptation and resistance towards the Western norms. The novel opens straight away with a capillary scene that links several facets of Ifemelu's identity, at a moment of her life that also represents a crossroads, when she is about to return to Nigeria after long years of absence. Before returning home, she decides to have her hair braided – a symbolic moment, representing the transition between the USA and Nigeria. To do so, she has to go to Trenton, because there is no afro salon in Princeton. "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 she wondered why there was no place where she could braid her hair." (p. 3). Already, the protagonist makes an explicit link between hair and Blackness. Ifemelu thus finds herself in Trenton, in "Mariama African Hair Braiding [...], in the part of the city that had graffiti, dank buildings and no white people" (p. 9). Adichie introduces her subject in a subtle way: Ifemelu's racial and social difference is suggested through this journey to find a salon where hair like hers can be styled, a journey that clearly takes her inevitably into the underprivileged and ghettoized areas of New Jersey's capital city. The racial difference is hinted in this way: she belongs to the academic community of Princeton (therefore to the upper social class), but going to get her hair done brings her closer to the immigrant and uneducated class. Once she arrives at the salon, Ifemelu must quickly stand up to the African hairdressers asking her about her choice of not relaxing her hair. She also has to explain to the hairdressers how to take care of natural hair

("slipping into the coaxing tone of the proselytizer that she used when she was trying to convince other black women about the merits of wearing their hair natural" (p. 12)), as even them have lost this knowledge. This is because the hairdressers have also internalized the Western norm of straight, tamed hair. It appears that Adichie uses this hair metaphor as a true indicator of her character's identity evolution on the road to empowerment: the hair journey that Ifemelu undertakes throughout the story is indicative of her progressive increase in awareness and affirmation of herself as a non-American Black woman. The long hours involved in the braiding process give Ifemelu opportunity for introspection as she has just made the decision to return to her native country. Looking back on her childhood, she recalls growing up "in the shadow of her mother's hair. It was black-black", "thick", "sprang free and full, flowing down her back like a celebration. Her father called it a crown of glory." (p. 41). Passersby would marvel at such hair and Ifemelu envied her mother as her own hair "remained bristly and grew reluctantly" (p. 41). This reminds her of a time when Black, frizzy, natural hair was valued by society and those around her. However, her migration to the United States changed her relationship to her hair and the part of her identity that it represents. Ifemelu's first moments in the US are already linked to an anecdote about hair: Aunt Uju picked up Ifemelu at the airport when she first arrived in the US, appearing with "her roughly braided hair" (p.104). Ifemelu was then shocked to see her appear like this, and she says: "The old Aunt Uju would never have worn her hair in such scruffy braids. [...] America had subdued her." (p. 110). Ifemelu's thought captures the fact that hair is a revealing part of a woman's image and of her sense of self and identity: through a woman's hair, it is possible to get a lot of information. In the case of Aunt Uju, part of her personal journey can be observed through the variations in her hairstyle marking her life steps, from being the General's mistress in Nigeria (a financially comfortable status) to immigrating to the US, to being a student and a single mother, and finally a licensed doctor in America. Aunt Uju was forced to migrate to the US after a social decline in Nigeria following the General's death, which in turn shows in her capillary appearance. Furthermore, even Aunt Uju, who becomes a doctor in the US (and thus benefits from a high social status) also needs to relax her hair to be deemed professional, and advises Ifemelu to do the same, as it will give her more chances of being hired. In Aunt Uju's words: "You are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do if you want to succeed." (p. 119) Upon hearing those words, Ifemelu wonders if Aunt Uju has not "left behind something of herself, something essential" (p. 119): Ifemelu already associates relaxing hair with losing a part of one's identity at that moment. Some time later, an African-American career counselor also recommends Ifemelu to straighten her hair before going to a job interview: "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." (p. 202). With these words, Ifemelu internalizes the fact that straight hair is synonymous with professionalism and competence. As discussed earlier, being Black in the US is associated with low socioeconomic class. Anything that can be done to move away from this stereotype is a good way to increase one's prospects and chances for employment. For a woman, that means relaxing her hair. Upon her arrival, Ifemelu had not taken this advice seriously when it was given to her by Aunt Uju, finding it impossible to believe that getting a job would depend on such a trivial criterion. However, she changes her mind with time. The fact that she needs to find a job very soon after graduating, as her visa depends on a fixed contract in the US, also represents a decisive push for that choice. Ifemelu, who had never relaxed her hair before, finds herself having to change her nature (not only physically, but also in terms of her identity and sense of self), in order to conform to an external standard and increase her chances of getting a job. The section where she recounts the straightening of hair is revealing of the physical suffering that women of color must endure to in order to get closer to white standards of beauty: "needles of stinging pain shot up from different parts of her scalp, down to different parts of her body, back up to her head." (p. 203). Afterwards, satisfied with the work accomplished, the hairdresser tells her: "Just a little burn. But look how pretty it is. Wow, girl, you've got the white-girl swing!" (p. 203). This comment sends Ifemelu the message that beauty and femininity exist only through the white standard, and that she should aim to get as close to it as possible. However, authors William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs state in their book *Black Rage* (1968) that although hair straightening is considered a step for Black women of "achieving womanhood", women will end up appearing "more acceptable", but not yet beautiful according to the standards (they will appear "whiter, but not quite yet"). However, the consequence of straightening is not only a physical burn: Ifemelu expresses that she no longer feels like herself after changing the nature of her hair - everything in the description of the scene indicates that her nature has been tamed: "Her hair was standing down rather than standing up. [...] The verve was gone. *She did not recognize herself*. She left the salon almost *mournfully*; while the hairdresser had flat-ironed the ends, the smell of burning, of *something organic dying* which should not have died, had made her feel a sense of *loss*." (p. 203, our italics). Ifemelu goes to the extent of saying that something organic has died inside her, referring to the very essence and nature of her 'self'. The burning of her hair represents the violation of the Black body and Black standards through the imitation of the white body and the assimilation to White norms. Through her hair and her "fighting body", which "suffers, rejoices, and dies", Ifemelu carries out her struggles and interacts with the world (Boaventura de Sousa, 2016, p. 26). However, as

María do Mar Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan put it (2020), the process of transforming the non-White female body into a White one takes a violent toll on the body. Giving in to the internalized postcolonial and racist standards equates to harming one's 'self'. In the novel, Ifemelu fortunately receives valuable and symbolic support following this defining moment in her journey. Indeed, the reaction of Curt, her white boyfriend at the time, counterbalances the weight of white societal norms, by regretting the loss of her hair as well as the fact that she had to force it on herself in order to be deemed professional and beautiful. For Ifemelu, this white male support at this crucial stage is very important: "she had never felt so close to him as she did then" (p. 204).

"Why do you have to do this? Your hair was gorgeous braided. And when you took out the braids last time and just kind of let it be? It was even more gorgeous, so full and good."

"My full and cool hair would work if I were interviewing to be a backup singer in a jazz band, but I need to look professional for this interview and *professional means straight is best*⁸ but if it's going to be curly then it has to be the white kind of curly, loose curls, or, at worst, spiral curls but never kinky. "It's so fucking *wrong*⁹ that you have to do this." (p. 204)

The support and confirmation of the beauty of her hair by her romantic White counterpart subverts the pressure of the standards that have been imposed on her. It is beneficial that this White man, who could embody these harmful norms for a woman of color, criticizes them and denounces the harm they cause to Ifemelu's well-being. However, when Ifemelu gets the job she wanted, she wonders if it would have been the case if she had kept her frizzy hair, and she continues to straighten it until she starts to lose her hair. She tells about it to Wambui, one of the African friends she had met at university, who is sure that the chemicals in the relaxers are to blame : "Do you know what's in a relaxer? That stuff can kill you. You need to cut your hair and go natural" (p. 208). Wambui adds: "Relaxing your hair is like being in prison. You're caged in." (p. 208). Wambui thus draws up a critical assessment of the situation in relation to relaxers: they are not only a means of social oppression, but they also harm the health of those who use them (the danger is therefore twofold). She suggests to free Ifemelu from this capillary restriction by cutting her hair so that it can grow back in its natural state, a step which constitutes a symbolic renewal and a renewed consideration of her own self. However, at the sight of her new haircut, Ifemelu's dismay is great, as she does not recognize herself and feels

⁸ Our italics.

⁹ The author's italics.

incomplete ("she looked unfinished, as though the hair itself, short and stubby, was asking for attention, for something to be done to it, for *more*." (p. 208)). The words chosen are very strong, and Ifemelu again emphasizes the link between hair and femininity – the loss of hair being correlated with a loss of femininity, in her opinion. For several days, Ifemelu does not go to work, she does not dare to show herself like this, because she needs some time to come to terms with this new image of herself and to reconfigure a new identity. She eventually returns to the office and her colleagues ask her if she has become a lesbian or if it constitutes a political gesture. Not only is hair associated with gender, but in this case, it is also associated with the idea of a political act that she would pose as a woman of color. Hair then fully takes its power as an intersectional symbol, combining struggles and stereotypes carried by women. This reflects Ingrid Banks' words, "Black hair and hairstyling practices can never escape political readings." (Banks 2000, p. 197). Her colleagues' questioning reflects the public sphere's reaction to her gesture, which could appear to carry a political message. Fortunately, to help her in the process of self-acceptance of this new image of herself and the part of her new identity, Ifemelu finds online a "natural hair community" of Black women, on HappilyKinkyNappy.com:

They had long trailing dreadlocks, small Afros, big Afros, twits, braids, massive raucous curls and coils. [...] They were done with pretending that their hair was what it was not, [...]. They complimented each other's photos and ended comments with hugs. They complained about Black magazines never having natural-haired women in their pages, about drugstores products so poisoned by mineral oils that they could not moisturize natural hair. They traded recipes. They sculpted for themselves a virtual world where their coily, kinky, nappy, woolly hair was normal. And Ifemelu fell into this world with a tumbling gratitude. (p. 212)

The discovery of this online community is very important to Ifemelu, who finds a supportive and allied female community that helps her in the self-acceptation process. On this website, women post photos to create new imageries around natural hair and Black beauty, bringing together a group of women who advocate a set of values that go against the dominant norm.

5. Feminist and resistant use of social media

Ifemelu's discovery of the online natural hair community introduces her to a world of online communities which provide support and promote both personal and global acts of resistance. This first online experience will later prove to be a determining step for the creation of Ifemelu's own blog. It also raises the question of female solidarity in modern web space, which can also represent a dynamic of global female empowerment. Indeed, thanks to the media, it is now possible to create new types of global communication, attracting the attention of the masses to thematic messages in a world which is digitalized, globalized and multicultural by nature (Flores Farfán & Holzscheiter, 2015; O'Dowd, 2017). Through media platforms such as social networks and personal blogs, it is thus possible to discuss acute social problems on a large-scale, and a single issue verbalized in the virtual space can reverberate throughout the Internet and bring a topic to the foreground. Keeping a blog is a contemporary process, which links it to contemporary issues and anchors it in a relationship with technology and globalization, that makes it possible to spread one's message faster and further than at any other time in human history. This approach also corresponds to a new wave of feminism, known as the "fourth wave of feminism" (or "cyberfeminism"), where a new generation of feminists seize technological progress and social media in order to launch mobilization through these networks. For activist movements, technology has allowed new kinds of organization and mobilization, as well as new ways of sharing ideas and practices linked to issues of discrimination and collective identity. As such, cyberfeminism allows for a collective approach of an issue, through a renewed sense of community and solidarity, creating opportunities for discussion and shared awareness. The online context, globalized and multicultural, is also a favorable ground to keep on expanding feminist activism. The advantage of the Internet is that it allows for the confrontation of personal and collective arguments belonging to people of all genders, races, sexual orientations, but also, belonging to very diverse locations. This allows for a multitude of expressions and arguments, giving a voice to societal actors who may normally be marginalized, but who get online a unique stage, diversity of platforms and safe spaces where they can express themselves and let their voices be heard. In addition to these reasons, the accessibility of the blog and/or social networks, allowing access to this medium to a large number of Black women from different social classes, makes it the privileged medium of intersectionality. Similarly, the accessibility of writings was already a major issue for Black feminists, who considered it important that the dissemination of their ideas be possible to Black women of all social classes.

Such community networks, based on solidarity, cooperation and freedom of speech, play an important role in triggering action and broader involvement in the field of women-related issues, by creating dialogues and constructing collective conversations on topical social issues. These new social networks thus give a voice to those who have not always had it historically and who do not manage to make themselves heard otherwise, as traditional media do not allow them a voice. It is interesting to see that by first adopting the codes of social networks and using them to gather a community around specific themes, it then becomes easier for these communities to create a breakthrough in the public space, as it is the case for Ifemelu with her own blog. This is what author Rokhaya Diallo characterizes as a democratization of the public space through the Internet. Ifemelu probably goes through the same thinking process: it seems difficult for the feminist and anti-racist movements in their entirety to be directly accepted in the public sphere. However, the movements can first gain momentum through other means (such as the Internet), waging a subversive struggle and targeting an audience potentially interested in the fight. In *Black feminist thought*, Patricia Hill Collins (1999) emphasizes the importance of Black women finding safe spaces where they can speak out and develop an awareness of themselves as individuals. Collins (1999) outlines three spheres where Black women have been able to express themselves freely: sisterhood, the blues, and writing. The blog therefore creates an opportunity for women to come together in a spirit of sisterhood and share their experiences through the blog. The combined safe space therefore embodies a place where Black women gather to make sense of their daily experiences by sharing them, thus establishing a common standpoint, which is an essential step in resisting the intersectional discriminations they face. In the case of the blog, the safe space is created by and for Black women as a virtual space of exchange, encounter and self-definition, all important factors in the process of both individual and collective empowerment. On a side note, in the current news in France, the idea of safe spaces was recently being debated: should these spaces be open only to those concerned, or should they be easily accessible to everyone? Through the vision of the blog proposed by Ifemelu, we realize the usefulness of such spaces as points of convergence for common experiences, giving room and voice to marginalized subjects who rarely find models close to their experiences in mainstream society. In this sense, with regard to the issue of identity construction, it is essential to offer spaces of free speech, whether physical or virtual, in order to allow for this sharing of experiences as well as to create new collective norms and a storytelling that resembles the subjects concerned. This also allows them to find their own voice and to assert themselves on a societal scale, taking an unprecedented place in the sociopolitical sphere, influencing debates and impacting in turn the following generations of feminists. It is

by allowing them to find their place in a positive environment that these people will be able to identify with the similar experiences and questions of their peers, which will in turn allow them to assert themselves more, on a personal and societal level. Eventually, through these platforms, members of minority groups will be able to gain visibility and strength. The fact that Ifemelu and the other authors of the blog need this safe space to talk about a return to natural Afro hair shows a need to reconnect to a freer self, as well as a desire to define new standards corresponding to their reality, far from White diktats. It is therefore essential to create a space where Black women can express themselves freely about the intersectional experiences that only they live and can understand. It is the intersection of being female and Black, in the context of the US, that allows for the understanding of these everyday struggles. This environment of free speech requires a space away from the daily discriminations and the societal gaze placed on their bodies, far from the requirements of pseudo-normality imposed by society. In this parallel space, these women have the power to re-define themselves and create a social order different from that imposed by the surrounding society: this is where the full potential of empowerment, in its broadest sense lies: that of being able to redefine oneself and establish the minority group and its values within society. For Ifemelu, it was a significant step, coming across this online community going through the same experiences as her, accompanying her in her natural hair journey. This community offers a safe space for Black women, a space where they can share their discoveries, vulnerabilities, ask questions and express themselves freely in the journey of going natural. Furthermore, through the interactions with this online community, Ifemelu is able to forge a sense of identity by identifying to the shared experiences and through the sense of belonging to a group. Moreover, the natural hair journey is seen as a 'coming to voice' experience, going against a long-established form of racial oppression. In the end, with the support of the HappilyKinkyNappy.com community, Ifemelu not only accepts her hair, but also feels love for it, and on a larger scale, reconnects with her body:

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

Ifemelu also writes her first posts on "HappilyKinkyNappy.com": "Posting on the website was like giving testimony in church; the echoing roar of approval revived her." (p. 213) Adichie's

choice of the word "revived" is significant, suggesting that Ifemelu feels more alive than she was before, through interactions with members of this community she has recently joined. Collins' opinion also goes along those lines, as she argues that for Black women, "self is found in the context of family and community" (1999).

6. Ifemelu's journey to hair emancipation

Later on, and through the newfound self-confidence provided by the online community, Ifemelu launches her own blog and expresses in it what she wishes she had replied to her colleagues when they were asking about the meaning of her new haircut. Ifemelu therefore writes on the blog: "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." (p. 297) Ifemelu thus claims the right to be herself, without her hair having any particular meaning, be it political, artistic, or ecological. She does not perform an act of resistance through her hairstyle, unlike other resistance movements of the past, such as described by bell hooks (1989): "It was at this time [in the 1960s] that the natural hairdo, the afro, became fashionable as a sign of cultural resistance to racist oppression". Although Ifemelu is aware of the symbolic power of hair in the assimilation or rejection of a series of Western values, she nevertheless desires that her body and personal choices would not be politicized. Self-assertion is shown as Ifemelu rejects the labels that external perspectives can place on her and her body. From the moment she arrived in the United States, outsiders thought they could read certain information on her body (based on her skin color, her accent, the way she looks, the way she dresses up) and categorize her according to specific labels. However, Ifemelu has now reached a point where she has made peace with much of her identity in the US and transcends the issue by refuting any political choice in her physical appearance: her appearance and physical choices are only related to private choices, and thus belong to the private sphere. This in itself constitutes an act of resistance: her body does not belong to the public sphere. By asserting and accepting herself in this way, she also takes back the power of her own storytelling and the power to simply be herself. However, while her primary thought is that her choice is personal, it is difficult to assess that her standpoint really does not carry any political value. It is indeed questionable whether openly accepting and valuing one's own body, as a member of an oppressed minority that does not meet hegemonic standards of beauty, can be seen as a non-militant act. Indeed, as Carolette R. Norwood (2017, p. 13) wrote that: "The embrace of the

natural Black aesthetic is by default a rebellion against the white heteronormative hegemony that promulgates an anti-Black aesthetic." According to Norwood's standpoint, the simple act of valuing natural Black aesthetics (including natural hair) constitutes in itself an act of resistance.

However, this is one more step that Ifemelu takes on the road to self-acceptance and empowerment. And as the hair issue and the identity issue related to it are appeased, Ifemelu can continue her journey and keep growing as an individual, able to tackle other personal or societal struggles, once the issue of physical acceptance is solved. However, we see later that although Ifemelu has made peace with herself on the issue and moved past it, Aunt Uju and Aisha the hairdresser remain stuck in the vision that frizzy hair is less beautiful than straight hair, influenced by internalized standards of White beauty. When Aunt Uju compares Ifemelu's natural hair to jute, Ifemelu replies, "What if every magazine you opened and every movie you watched had beautiful women with hair like jute? You would be admiring my hair now." (p. 216) However, Aunt Uju maintains her opinion: "I am just saying what is true. There is something scruffy and untidy about natural hair." (p. 216). Later, when she returns to Nigeria, Ifemelu notices a different relationship to hair than the one that exists in the US: the afro cut is worn in an eccentric way by the "Americanahs", as a way to distinguish themselves from the Nigerian women who remained in the country. This is what Ifemelu notices during a meeting of the Nigerpolitan Club, "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*" (p. 407). Yet Adichie wishes to differentiate her protagonist from these mundane characters. Once again, Adichie emphasizes the uniqueness of her protagonist by making her aware of the connotations layering the hairstyle choices, which lead to Ifemelu refusing to enter another class conflict related to hair. Although she is aware that wearing the afro could increase the likelihood of her being seen as an Americanah, she nonetheless chooses to wear it, not to adhere to the image of an Americanah or to correspond to any norm, but because that is what she chooses for herself. Therefore, as Ingrid Banks (2000) states in her chapter entitled *Hair and Power*, "the very act of self-definition renders power" . Ifemelu decides to keep wearing the afro cut, despite the risk of certain images being associated to her, because the way she perceives herself has already been established. Once again, Ifemelu makes personal choices, not related to any sort of social views. She does not seek at all costs to differentiate herself or to convey a sociopolitical message, she only wishes to make choices for herself, without external pressures. Adichie thus marks the definitive emancipation of her character who, even when she returns to Nigeria definitely, keeps wearing the hairstyle that best

suits her. To summarize, the norm for Black hair in the US and Nigeria is to have it straight. However, in both cultures, having it braided is an acceptable look. Regarding natural or afro hair, wearing it natural in the US is seen as a political gesture of emancipation from the colonial past, while in Nigeria, it shows social class difference (wealthy classes wearing this hairstyle to distinguish themselves from lower social classes). Through these different capillary moments, experienced in turns in the US and later on in Nigeria, Adichie shows how Ifemelu gradually comes to a stage of self-acceptation and resistance to social norms. She is aware that the common association between feminine beauty and sleek hair comes from the representations largely conveyed by women's magazines and mass media culture. Adichie uses the image of hair as a thread running through the novel, marking her character's evolution towards empowerment. This vision is at the crossroads of feminist and postcolonial perspectives, refuting the White model as the only valid norm. Ultimately, this analysis reveals how the metaphor of hair to signify intersectionality is present throughout the novel. The author draws connections between hair, race, gender, and class to account for Ifemelu's self-empowerment journey as a non-American Black woman throughout the novel. Indeed, upon her arrival in the US, Ifemelu initially questions the connection that many of the women around her have with their hair; while her hair is left natural, marking the protagonist's singularity as a woman who is distinguished by her kinky hair without yet being aware of her difference. At this stage, her hair is a reminder of her Nigerian origins and of the fact that she has just arrived in the country. In a second stage, Ifemelu understands the complex relationship of Black women to their hair, as well as the range and the symbolic power which hair holds. As advised by those around her, in order to appear "professional" in job interviews and to maximize her chances of getting a job after graduation, Ifemelu agrees to relax her hair, knowing the sociopolitical and physical significance of the gesture. In a third stage, Ifemelu opts for the afro haircut and gradually accepts her identity, ultimately publicly affirming it on her blog, yet without turning it into a political act. Finally, in the fourth stage, before her return to Nigeria, she has her hair braided to conform to the customs of her native country, but once she returns in Nigeria, she re-adopts the afro style, thus affirming her own personality outside the criteria of beauty still shaped by Western views inherited from the country's colonial past. In this way, Adichie shows the evolution of Ifemelu's identity in relation to the metaphor of hair in both the US and Nigeria. Ifemelu carries out a mental process of deconstruction of the norms and decolonization of her body and mind, through the reappropriation of her hair. As Carolette R. Norwood states it (2017):

The process of 'going natural' is very much a process of decolonizing both the mind and body (as hair is an extension of the body). It is a process: it occurs gradually; it is a transformation, a rebirth into a new, unknown self. It is not only a physical process, but also an emotional one that requires great personal courage and mental fortitude.

Decolonization is inscribed, as Carolette R. Norwood (2017) states it, as much in one's mind as in one's body and relationship to it, through a questioning of norms and a newfound affirmation of the values guiding one's life. Adichie thus shows a character belonging to a new wave of Black women, free to wear their hair natural without claiming to be part of a resistance or militant movement. Adichie's message seems to focus on Ifemelu's identity building and self-empowerment above all. Norwood (2017) says of this new wave of Black women with natural hair: "Today's natural hair movement is about Black women across social classes making decisions to promote their health and well-being, [...] about cultivating self-love that allows for personal expression without being held to a particular set of politics or hairstyle." However, the different stages and achievements of the self-empowerment process, in relation to issues of race, gender and class, cannot be detached from a form of activism on Ifemelu's side. Although Ifemelu's discourse is that the choices she makes are for herself alone, lacking sociopolitical ulterior motives, the very fact that they reflect an attitude of self-love and empowerment is a strong position from the perspective of the Black feminist movement. Reclaiming the codes of beauty and establishing one's own body as the sole standard of beauty constitutes a subversive movement to overthrow the cult of traditional white beauty, rooted in the history of the Black feminist movement's struggles. Furthermore, as Ifemelu launches her own blog to express her opinion publicly and to point out to the racial oppressions and resistance symbolized by hair, her discourse is therefore not limited to personal thoughts, as it is spread through the blog on a large scale.

7. Resistance, empowerment and coming to voice through Ifemelu's blog

Indeed, it is interesting to note that alongside the image of hair used as an intersectional symbol showing Ifemelu's resistance and progressive empowerment, her blog and act of writing are similar symbols. In a similar way, the blog also serves as a tool of decolonization and empowerment. The simple act of writing allows her to assert and develop herself as she is writing the posts. Indeed, the timing of Ifemelu's launch of her own blog is significant: she does so just after breaking up with Curt, her first, white American boyfriend. The break-up occurs in

part because Ifemelu is unable to tell Curt about certain aspects of her reality as a Black immigrant woman in the US, because by virtue of her skin color and social position, she knows that he would not understand her struggles: "There were, simply, times that he saw and times that he was unable to see. She knew that she should tell him these thoughts, that not telling him cast a shadow over them both. Still, she chose silence." (p. 294). Curt, a white male from a privileged social class, is not the ideal interlocutor for Ifemelu when she needs to talk about the intertwined racism, sexism, and classism she regularly experiences. It is from this lack of a space to share experiences that her desire to create her own safe space to discuss racial issues was born: "she longed for other listeners, and she longed to hear the stories of others. How many people chose silence? How many other people had become Black in America? How many had felt as though their entire world was wrapped in gauze?" (p. 296). It is in this context that she launches her blog named *Raceteenth or Curious Observations by a Non-American Black on the Subject of Blackness in America*. Through her blog, Ifemelu hopes to create a space where she can express herself freely, as well as a safe space where her readers can also express themselves, therefore creating a common discourse. The objective is to offer through the blog a safe space for the author, as well as for the readers. Ifemelu clearly states this intention in the following post: "This is for the *Zippered-Up Negroes*, the upwardly mobile American and Non-American Blacks who don't talk about Life Experiences That Have to Do Exclusively with Being Black. Because they want to keep everyone comfortable. Tell your story here. Unzip yourself. This is a *safe space*." (p. 307, our italics). Ifemelu clearly states her intention to offer a platform of free expression to American Blacks as well as Non-American Blacks, where they can express themselves freely, without being criticized for discussing race issues. Ifemelu knows from personal experience (being a speaker at conferences on issues of race) that talking about race is not accepted in the American society, so she wants to create a space of free speech on this topic. This pivotal moment in the protagonist's life perfectly illustrates what Audre Lorde (1984) has described as "the transformation of silence into language and action", an essential step for Black women on the path to empowerment that Patricia Hill Collins (2009) has called the 'coming to voice' process.

Indeed, blogs appear as escapes from daily discrimination, but also as sources of comfort, virtual places for sharing and meeting. They also generate both individual and collective empowerment, as illustrated by the following quote:

I write blogs for the same reasons that I write auto/ethnography – to make Black girls visible,

and through visibility to affirm them and (possibly) change their lives and worlds in the process. [...] I underestimated the impact that digital social justice work would have on me – expanding my audience from academe to the public sphere, and thrusting me into being recognized in the blogosphere. (Robin M. Boylorn, blogger and professor at the University of Alabama)

Autoethnography is a form of "qualitative research in which an author uses self-reflection and writing to explore anecdotal and personal experience and connect this autobiographical story to wider cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings" (Ellis, 2004). Well-known autoethnographer Carolyn Ellis (2004) also described it as "research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political". Therefore, it is the writing process of connecting the author's personal experience to the world around him/her, in order to create a discourse based on personal interpretations and analyses. In Ifemelu's case, she draws her inspiration primarily from the episodes she had experienced since she arrived in the US. Thus, the instances of discrimination she had experienced will be lived a second time through the prism of writing, as Ifemelu writes her posts based on her personal experiences. The temporal distance between the experience of these events and their analysis also allows Ifemelu to adopt a more analytical and detached perspective, more nuanced. It also allows her to rethink these initial episodes of her immigrant life through the full prism of her knowledge of American culture. When writing the blog posts, Ifemelu thus writes using the sum of experiences accumulated over several years, but also with the benefits of hindsight, looking back with a more assertive and analytical standpoint. It is important to note that by engaging her personal self and creating an original discourse, she becomes fully 'subject' of her narrative, escaping the dominance of traditionally established narratives. By doing so, the subject also 'emerges from the dark', not only making herself visible, but also establishing herself as an indisputable expert of the produced knowledge. In relation to the autoethnographic style, one of the particularities of Ifemelu's blog is indeed the personal, informal and anecdotal tone she uses. However, this style does not diminish the relevance of her discourse and enables people from all social classes to have access to this type of content, countering therefore any kind of domination relationship - as could have historically been the case from the academic world, establishing itself as the only source of knowledge. Moreover, this method relates to the process of formulating hypotheses and theories in the field of social sciences, which are based on a sum of experiences. This is also the strength of this particular form of storytelling: upon reading those personal experiences, one can relate to them and draw his own conclusions and formulate his own reflections accordingly. Reading a series

of personal experiences that may to some degree mirror the experiences of others allows for a questioning and deconstruction of social norms.

By analyzing cultural contexts through her personal feelings, thoughts and anecdotes, and sharing these with her readers, Ifemelu also sheds light on her interaction with the world, defining herself as well as her environment in the process. This process can also be related to the concept of storytelling, as the author uses personal stories to create insightful meaning and reflexive critiques of society. Analyzing reality through a personal and analytical perspective is indeed an act of creative content, as Ifemelu does on her blog, basing her analytical approach in her personal experiences. Her use of the blog reflects the standpoint of Ellis (2004), who stated that: "Reflexivity includes both acknowledging and critiquing our place and privilege in society and using the stories we tell to *break long-held silences* on power, relationships, cultural taboos, and forgotten and/or suppressed experiences." Ifemelu uses autoethnography in the same way, breaking traditional silences through a renewed perspective and coming to voice process.

The creative and reflexive process involved in writing the blog, as well as the professionalization of her status as an author/lecturer, also allow Ifemelu to gain independence, including eventually allowing her to secure a PhD position. Through these positions (blog author, lecturer, doctoral student), Ifemelu set for herself a path where she does not have to conform to social norms and to appear a certain way. Through writing, she can also use her voice freely, not having to conform to rigid social expectations and being able to create personal analytical content. Furthermore, through her blog, she is self-employed, therefore not relying on any kind of hierarchy, truly allowing her to enjoy freedom of speech. The deconstruction process thus begins with analysis and writing, but the culmination comes when Ifemelu gains autonomy and independence due to her professional position, giving her freedom not only over her speech, but over her body as well. Indeed, by being an author and blogger on issues of race, she creates a path for herself away from social conventions, where she no longer needs to relax her hair to appear professional. As can be seen, emancipation from imposed norms and resistance come from the intertwined tropes of liberated hair and writing – it was by liberating her hair that she felt the need to start a blog, which in turn allowed her further freedom. Moreover, by narrating her experience in autoethnographic way, a process close to catharsis occurs and the creative process becomes a tool for personal development. Ifemelu launches her blog to create and rally a community that carries values of feminism and gender equality.

Writing on social networks means delivering an assumed and claimed standpoint, which is in itself a feminist approach. In this context, the Internet serves as a means of education and information, of opening up topics and creating debates: the Internet comes as a platform for both discussions and activism. Furthermore, her approach is inherently feminist. On the one hand, she is socially and financially emancipated through her blog, where she is self-employed, producing knowledge about minorities. Later, she even receives a grant to complete a PhD, again emphasizing her communication skills. The money from her work on the issues of race even allows her to buy an apartment in the United States. Her work as an activist thus allows her to emancipate herself further, which in turn confirms the validity of the freedom of speech that characterizes her writing. Furthermore, through her career as an author and speaker denouncing social injustices, she counters the capitalist and patriarchal system that traditionally oppresses minorities (including women). Through her feminist and anti-racist speaking engagements, Ifemelu effectively challenges the patriarchal order; it is precisely for her "irreverent thoughts" that she is invited to deliver lectures about intersectional issues. Moreover, the cultural content she delivers through her blog follows the perspective of a female character, through her experiences in the US. Thus, having access to Ifemelu's thoughts through her blog posts, the reader is able to relate to the female experience, specifically the female experience of an African immigrant, setting the focus on a protagonist from a minority. Once again, setting the focus on this type of narrative, through the analytical and deconstructing gaze of the protagonist, serves the same principle as the blog itself: offering a perspective that goes against the dominant discourses. It is through the act of writing that Ifemelu consciously questions Western and patriarchal values in regard to issues of feminism, gender, racism and post-colonialism. Through these specific focuses, Ifemelu reconsiders her past experiences and is able to repurpose them into an engaged discourse. Again, in both cases, the act of writing and the power of the engaged voice challenge the asymmetrical power relationships at stake in the American society. Indeed, the blog is not just a tool of personal writing, it is also a portrait of the racial and sociopolitical landscape of the United States as seen by the author. The blog therefore serves a double purpose: individual as well as collective empowerment. This is indeed how Ifemelu uses her blog: bringing together personal and collective arguments, while striving to keep the medium accessible to all in order to create debates and discussions of societal significance. Furthermore, Ifemelu bases some of her posts not only on personal experiences, but also on interactions she has with people she meets in different contexts, including on the street ("she would have started a conversation with him, to see if he would say something she could use in her blog" (p. 4)). Thus, she poses herself mainly as an observer of social events,

which then serve as inspiration for socially engaged content: "Often, she would sit in cafés, or airports, or train stations, watching strangers, imagining their lives, and wondering which of them were likely to have read her blog" (p. 5). For Ifemelu, it is indeed important to know what her readership thinks of what she writes, because she does not want to deliver one-way content, she wants it to have some sort of societal impact. Indeed, Ifemelu seeks to keep her posts accessible to as many people as possible, not writing them in academic style, but in a language and style that are close to her readers, as demonstrated by the sarcastic nature and use of personal anecdotes throughout the posts. Far from an academic discourse dissecting issues from a theoretical point of view, Ifemelu's blog is meant to be the record of a series of personal experiences, as a starting point for broader societal issues. Despite her academic background, Ifemelu's writing is not meant to be one-sided (setting her as an expert, delivering her knowledge to the crowd); what she seeks is to create a dialogue, as she actively asks for feedback and reactions to her posts. Ifemelu particularly realizes the importance of this approach through interactions with her boyfriend Blaine, a professor at university. Blaine's research interests not only include social movements, American voting rights and representation and race and ethnicity in politics, but he also has a blog about "the intersection of academia and popular culture" (p. 308), which seemingly make him the perfect counterpart for Ifemelu. Upon their encounter, Ifemelu says that meeting him on the same day that she recovered her voice (from the previously hindering American accent) must be significant in some way. Indeed, early in their relationship, Ifemelu lets Blaine proofread her posts and suggest edits, thinking his help will allow her to establish her voice even better. She realizes, however, upon reading her posts later again that "her posts sounded too academic, too much like him." (p. 312) Furthermore, Blaine complains that she is "lazy" because she does not go sufficiently in depth in her analyses, arguing that she should include more information about government policy. Ifemelu however replies to these criticisms by saying that she wishes to maintain her posture as an observer and not write as an intellectual. Ifemelu wants to address a broad audience, without using abstract terms and overly complex ideas, as this would again establish a relationship of domination, already traditionally established by academia towards the lower social classes. Moreover, Ifemelu admits it herself: many of the contributors to her blog know much more than she does about the issues evoked, she admits that she is in reality no expert on the subject: "All those readers, growing month by month, linking and cross-posting, knowing so much more than she did" (p. 5). What makes her unique, however, is her particular position in American society as a migrant, as well as the outsider's view she offers as a non-American Black, immersed in the American cultural environment. Another particularity

is simply her courage to broach upon these topics with no constraints. Moreover, although it does not offer direct means of action, Ifemelu seeks to initiate discussions on her platform in order to generate new ideas, with the ultimate goal of having a societal impact. This goes in line with the idea of storytelling as a tool to change worldviews and perceptions about minority groups. The displayed goal is to bring these issues that impact the daily lives of people of color (and particularly Black women) in the public eye. It also shows a will to create a sisterhood community where experiences similar to hers would be shared in order to create a support system to debate and fight together against intersectional forms of discriminations. Thus, inspired by the site HappilyKinkyNappy.com, Ifemelu creates a similar community, where the subject is no longer only hair, but is even more encompassing. It is important to note the relevance of providing an opportunity for individuals from minorities and oppressed groups to come together and discuss issues that directly concern them. As one loyal reader of the blog says about her blog, "You've used your irreverent, hectoring, funny and thought-provoking voice to create a space for real conversation about an important subject." (p. 5) Through this testimony, it is clear that the strength of Ifemelu's posts lies in the subjectivity and personal approach employed by Ifemelu, which constitute her "voice". This single comment reflects exactly what makes Ifemelu's position and approach so distinctive: a liberated voice that creates a safe space for challenging the dominant discourse and launching necessary conversations around issues of race and gender in the modern-day American society. As an example of her thought-provoking writing style, in her blog post explaining to Non-American Blacks what 'Hispanic' means, Ifemelu writes sarcastically:

Hispanic means the chocolate-skinned woman from Peru, Hispanic means the indigenous people of Mexico. Hispanic means the biracial-looking folks from the Dominican Republic. Hispanic means the paler folks from Puerto Rico. Hispanic also means the blond, blue-eyed guy from Argentina. All you need to be is Spanish-speaking but not from Spain and voilà, you're a race called Hispanic. (p. 105)

In this case, Ifemelu ironically shows how this racial concept reduces the reality of the diversity of origins and ethnicities included under this label, thus demonstrating its absurdity. The comment of the reader also serves as an acknowledgement for Ifemelu's use of her voice, confirming that Ifemelu uses it to call for resistance and to create a space for discussions. The reader also says the blog posts triggered "real conversation", meaning without filters and without having to adapt as to please her audience. Just as the reader puts it, Ifemelu writes in

an "irreverent" tone, taking no shortcuts, describing reality as she sees it. Linguistically, the term 'irreverent' (which is used several times when describing Ifemelu's writings) is also a synonym for 'rebellious', 'insubordinate' and 'troublemaker'. In short, all these synonyms show that Ifemelu challenges the established order through her posts. Moreover, she uses terms such as 'Blacks' or 'negroes', which are generally avoided in the public sphere. Several experiences she encounters in the US also show how people seem to pretend not to see skin colors, therefore also turning a blind eye to situations of injustice and discrimination, claiming that Black people have it easy saying that everything is due to race. That is why, early on in her thinking process, Ifemelu questions her own world view: "Did things begin to exist only when they were named?" (p. 158). Not naming social injustices and not using the proper terminology only reinforces the non-addressing of the problem. Her thought therefore shows her intention to describe reality unvarnished, in order to fight oppressions in her own way. As Patricia Hill Collins (1999) said that: "Naming becomes a way of transcending the limitations of intersecting oppressions." All these aspects were part of Ifemelu's intention upon launching the blog, but in this case, she receives direct input from a reader, who comments on the blog and its impact. Having access to the readership's opinion is very revealing, as a discourse is constructed both by the deliverer and by the receiver. It is one thing to think you are having an impact, it is another to have it confirmed by your audience.

Later on, as the blog's audience keeps growing and gaining visibility, Ifemelu is offered new platforms to express herself and to address the subjects that are important to her. Ifemelu is now seen as an activist figure, engaged on issues of race and gender. Not only does this allow her to learn more about herself through her active role in these speaking engagements, but it also allows for these topics to be brought to light. Indeed, her activity enables her to use different platforms (radio, TV shows, conferences) in order to reach a large audience and carry the debate (as well as her own personal opinions) further. Her identity is therefore defined in relation to the community that is created around these speeches. In this case, Ifemelu's role in the public arena is so prominent that she comes to be referred to as 'The Blogger': Ifemelu becomes defined through her function and becomes publicly introduced through her role as a blogger and activist. The title is also very significant, if she is 'The Blogger' (the one and only), then the blog is naturally 'The Blog' and the topics she writes about are therefore of the utmost importance. This reflects on the impact that the blog has taken in the public sphere and establishes Ifemelu as a leading expert on the sociopolitical issues that she addresses in her blog. Indeed, as her blog keeps growing, Ifemelu receives increasing visibility in the press and from this, many speaking

opportunities follow. However, Ifemelu quickly realizes that she cannot use the same tone in her blog (aimed at a supportive readership) as she can in public debates, where the audience is mostly uninterested in these topics. One particularly memorable experience comes from a lecture on the issue of racism entitled "How to talk about race with colleagues of other races", given to a small company in Ohio where the employees are all white. Following the lecture, she receives an email saying: "YOUR TALK WAS BALONEY. YOU ARE A RACIST. YOU SHOULD BE GRATEFUL WE LET YOU INTO THIS COUNTRY." (p. 305) She then realizes that she cannot speak publicly in the same way as she does on her blog.

And so, in the following weeks, as she gave more talks at companies and schools, she began to say what they wanted to hear, none of which she would ever write on her blog, because she knew that the people who read her blog were not the same people who attended her diversity workshops. During her talks, she said: 'America has made great progress for which we should be very proud.' (p. 305)

In her blog, she writes: "Racism should never have happened and so you don't get a cookie for reducing it." (p. 305) Thus, there is a dissociation between the unfiltered posts Ifemelu writes on her blog and the conferences she gives, in which she must hold back, in order to conform to what the public expects of her. French author Rokhaya Diallo also addresses in her writings the antagonist position in which society presents itself as universalist, while individuals still experience daily acts of racism and racialization in their public life. Although the American society claims that racism has been defeated and wants to be congratulated for the progress that has been made, instances of discriminations based on racism are particularly blatant in job hunting and employment situations; her speech at the company would have been useful, but unfortunately, it was not well taken. This is how the issue of identity comes in, linked to intersectional and particularly racial discrimination: the people concerned must configure their identity not as they see themselves, but according to how others see them and which expectations they project onto them. The construction of identity is thus done through this double paradigm: projections imposed quite widely by society, but at the same time, the denial that these projections exist. This is one of the aspects that Ifemelu is confronted with, especially during her first conference on racism. Denial is in itself a powerful form of racism. At the conference, there is a tension between the fact that the assembly is supposed to be gathered to discuss racism, but when Ifemelu exposes the reality of racism within the job market, her speech is not well received: ironically, while she came to draw attention to the latent racism, she is the

one who is called a racist. To illustrate what happens at the famous conference, we will quote directly from Diallo's words, which summarize the problem:

There is a group of people who claim to be anti-racist, a group composed mainly of white people who explain to others, mainly of color, that their anti-racism is not the right one. How can a white person blame others, primarily non-white, for doing a poor job of fighting racism?

What is problematic is that the presence in the public sphere of people of color freely expressing themselves about their realities, conditions, and discriminations experienced, is actually not well tolerated. This of course raises the question of self-definition and identity issues depending on the context and the audience. It also refers to the concept of 'white gaze', which is "the assumption that the default reader or observer is coming from a perspective of someone who identifies as white, or that people of color sometimes need to take into account the white reader or observer's reaction" (reference). Therefore, it requires that one must adapt their tone according to the audience one is addressing (knowing the recipient and adapting one's speech accordingly). Indeed, at certain conferences with a white majority of people, Ifemelu's voice as a speaker is hindered and she has to censor herself on the subject of racism, instead of raising awareness, as was the primary goal of the conference. Indeed, in front of a white audience (representing the dominant oppressive system) that feels uncomfortable to see itself indicated as privileged and still contributing to some extent to the racist system, it is not possible to enjoy full freedom of speech. In the presence of people who are part of the dominant group, it is more difficult to express oneself - one will adapt the speech given to white people so as not to offend them, hurt them and be attacked in return. Also, regarding the issue of non-diverse meetings held by minority groups, these groups seek to meet among peers simply to save time and energy, to not have to explain the basics of the movement every time, as well as to focus on moving the debate forward - primarily within the sphere of the people directly concerned. As Diallo explains it: "These are temporary spaces where people feel safe, without people wanting proof, explanations, because even among the benevolent people there persists a form of suspicion, if they haven't experienced what we are talking about." (*Caféminisme*, our translation) On Ifemelu's blog, starting from common experiences, often shocking, the voices are freed. Ifemelu, above all, expresses herself freely, often with sarcasm. However, by addressing people who have had similar experiences, nobody tells her that she is expressing herself with anger and aggressivity, as it can sometimes be expressed by white audiences. It is probably through the sum of the above-mentioned factors (the lack of awareness of the extent

of discrimination and prejudice experienced by minorities, and the discomfort of being told that one is imbued within this racist social hierarchy) that Ifemelu is in turn called a racist. In fact, an important point can be made about this topic. As Diallo says, for a long time, the anti-racist movement has consisted of using the following schematic statement: "racists are evil". This statement can be analyzed in two ways. In this case, Ifemelu is called a racist because her speech may have seemed harsh and accusatory. However, hearing that one is an actor of racism refers to this vision of perceiving oneself as potentially "evil", which creates a reaction of rejection. However, to withdraw from the discussion is to take a simplistic position, denying that racism is still prevalent in today's society. However, Diallo's speech reminds us that everyone is an agent of the racist system, including people of color, who are themselves caught in this system. It is perhaps from this starting point, of a system that imprisons everyone, even without their knowledge (as can be the case for some white individuals), that the issue can be addressed in a new way.

Nevertheless, when she appears in front of large audiences or in front of crowds already interested in the subject, this allows Ifemelu to regain integrity of speech and to state her opinions freely, without filter. This allows her to feel fully in tune with herself and represents the consecration and accomplishment of her self-assessment: it is the ultimate proof of coming to voice. As a prominent guest, acclaimed as 'The Blogger' and bringing important subjects to the forefront on various platforms, Ifemelu is now proudly carrying her voice and the issues she cares about. Thus, Ifemelu becomes a voice, heard and listened to, a reference with regard to issues of race. Her involvement in these topics is linked with individual empowerment but also collective empowerment, since she draws the public's attention to these issues. However, after some time, Ifemelu realizes the complexity of the task and feels overwhelmed: "she felt subsumed by her blog. She had become her blog. There were times, lying awake at night, when her growing discomforts crawled out from the crevices, and the blog's many readers became, in her mind, a judgmental angry mob waiting for her, biding their time until they could attack her, unmask her." (p. 306) Gradually, a feeling of imposture appears. What had at first helped her to build and assert herself reached a point where the opposite happened. Over time, her for societal engagement became too overwhelming, pressurizing her so much to remain innovative that "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." (p. 5) Because of the pressure she puts on herself, her analytical work gets degraded, and in turn, so does her self-confidence. Adichie explains Ifemelu's decision to close her blog in these terms: "The more she

wrote, the less sure she became. Each post scrapped off yet one more scale of self until she felt naked and false." (p. 5) Whereas for a time she had built her identity around her blog and her involvement on intersectional issues, Ifemelu ends up having to distance herself from the identity she had built, as it makes her question everything she had created. The blog which had initially helped her build her sense of self has come to have her question that very sense of self she had put together. Ifemelu ends up finding herself illegitimate to talk about these subjects, to the point of considering herself "fake". The tool that had allowed her to express herself most freely and which had allowed to openly address the issues of race and gender that had underpinned her migratory experience since her arrival in the US, also becomes the tool of questioning and self-censorship on these very topics. Ifemelu does not feel legitimate to talk about race in the US because of her non-membership in US history and racial issues ("race was not embroidered in the fabric of her history; it had not been etched on her soul." (p. 337)). More generally, Ifemelu questions at the same time her place in the United States, realizing her deep desire to return to her native country after 13 years in the USA. This questioning is symptomatic of the "piercing homesickness" (p. 6) she starts feeling, and her decision to close her blog goes hand in hand with her decision to return to Nigeria. Similar to the fantasies she had nurtured before coming to the US, Ifemelu begins to nurture an imaginary narrative about Nigeria – "shapeless desires, brief imaginary glints of other lives she could be living. [...] They were living her life." (p. 6). The question of her rightful place in the US becomes increasingly latent for Ifemelu, and her doubts culminate in the closure of her blog. In the novel, Adichie has the closing of the blog coincide with the opening of a new chapter: the return to Africa. For Ifemelu, it becomes obvious that Nigeria is the place where she is supposed to be, "the only place she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out" (p. 6), a consideration which through the word "roots", clearly refers to her origins but also to the concept of "home" as discussed earlier. However, although a large majority of her relatives do not understand her choice and believe that she has changed too much to be able to readjust to the Nigerian society, she feels "a sense of rightness that others failed to see" (p. 8). It is through this last movement of resistance (the return to her native country), the certainty of finding a "home" in Nigeria and a resolved identity conflict that Ifemelu decides to return permanently to Nigeria. Following her migration experience in the US, Ifemelu feels that she will feel better in Nigeria, as it is where she truly belongs, therefore defeating the dominant discourses that place the US as intrinsically superior.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have studied the impact of migration, 'Blackness' and gender on a young female's identity construction in the US, building our analysis on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Americanah*.

We have begun by showing the relevance of using literature to deal with migration, and more particularly with the subject of women's migration. Indeed, the theme is still quite recent as it has only started to be addressed in the 1980s. Furthermore, the topic represents a great interest in view of the current events that are still marked by various waves of migration. Moreover, women's accounts of migration are rare, even in fiction. We have also argued that it is important for literature to continue to address societal issues as a reflection of reality, but also to give voice to marginalized subjects who have traditionally had little opportunity to express themselves. We have also shown that literature, through storytelling, can constitute a powerful tool for disrupting the mainstream narrative, a goal pursued both by the novel itself and by the character of Ifemelu through her blog. We have thus studied how a migrant can be directly at the origin of acts of literary creation as well as sociopolitical discourse based on her experience, and we have looked at the unique position that migrant women can assume in this process. We have considered that the discourse produced by Ifemelu, born of her observations in relation to the racial context of the US, is also influenced by the intersectional discriminations she experiences in the US. We have thus defined, through this feminist argument, that women can be discriminated against on the basis of a combination of several factors, such as gender, race, class, sexuality, religion and physical appearance. Based on these considerations, we have focused on Ifemelu's migratory experience, as she considers the American society from an outsider's perspective (albeit influenced by the images traditionally shared by the media and mass culture). Given her outsider's perspective, her propensity to be analytical and outspoken already back in Nigeria, but also given her particular condition as a woman of color, Ifemelu is the perfect subject to analyze American society from a new perspective. Upon arriving in the US, Ifemelu is confounded by certain aspects of American culture; however, she also experiences discriminations through her interactions with various people and communities. After a few years in the US, she launches her own blog in order to produce analytical content about American society, in particular about the intertwined relationships of gender, race and class. Having overcome experiences of discrimination, Ifemelu uses her personal experiences,

but also various external testimonies to create challenging content and question the concept of race and what it means to be Black in the US.

We have also seen how essential the testimony of a female migrant character is for debunking the 'single story'. Indeed, through *Americanah*, Adichie aims to challenge conventional depictions of Africa and America, as well as of the traditionally dominant Western world and the migratory process. We have thus studied how the novel presents a different representation of the female migratory journey, far from the dominant stereotypical portrayal. Similarly, throughout the novel, through Ifemelu's point of view, this approach of deconstructing stereotypical images and norms continues. Indeed, Ifemelu challenges Eurocentric values through the image of a nuanced America, far from the one usually conveyed (that of a land of opportunity, welcoming newcomers warmly). Her perspective, close to a postcolonial standpoint, also questions the historically anchored relationships of domination between the global 'North' and 'South' and its representatives. By observing different communities in the US, particularly White Americans, Black Americans, Non-American Blacks and Nigerians themselves, Ifemelu realizes that the relationships between communities are tense and fraught with racism and hierarchy. Thus, while White people are considered at the top of the social ladder, Black people (without distinction) come last on the race ladder. Moreover, among the African diaspora, a sort of competition is established, favoring those who have settled in the US for the longest time, as they are more assimilated and closer to American cultural standards than the newly arrived immigrants. On the other hand, within the African diaspora, there is a certain fear of losing parts of the African identity and losing some of the native values over time. This would naturally be accompanied by a deprecation of morals, imputable to American standards, leading the immigrant to "lose himself". In the general view, the immigrant could then reach a state of moral depravity close to that of Black Americans. Furthermore, different communities form stereotypes among themselves, categorizing individuals based on these prejudices and expecting them to behave in a certain way. As Ifemelu testifies, this tension between the desire to integrate and the fear of losing part of one's values and identity constantly accompanies the immigrants. Moreover, to integrate means, as Ifemelu discovers, to come closer to a white cultural ideal, while knowing that as an individual belonging to a minority, the convergence will inevitably be imperfect, and the difference will always be emphasized. This tension causes those considered as 'other' by the American society to experience a traumatic situation, deeply impacting the psyche and identity development of

individuals. Thus, through her migratory experience, Ifemelu realizes that the image of the US she had fantasized about does not match reality; she will therefore, through her narrative, show 'the other side of the mirror', that is to say, an American society where it is difficult to be from a minority and thrive in society. For Ifemelu, the instances where it is possible to socially advance are those where she denies part of her identity (what makes her 'other') and tries to change her personal characteristics (her physical appearance, her accent, her way of presenting herself) in order to correspond to the Western norms. However, Ifemelu manages to overcome this tension by becoming fully aware of her own narrative power. Through her cultural hybridity, Ifemelu is able to bridge the opposition between both cultures by producing a critical and reflexive outlook on both of them. It is also by refusing to yield to the pressures of dominant discourses, and by creating her own discourse, that Ifemelu is also able to go beyond the stereotypes and injunctions of dominant discourses. It is first through her body, and more particularly her hair, that Ifemelu displays the first stages of her resistance to the societal expectations placed on Black women. It is through the symbol of hair, a strong symbol for women of color (because it is strongly associated with the concept of 'Blackness' and various forms of oppression) that Ifemelu initiates her resistance; although at this time, she only perceives resistance to a personal degree. It is through her discovery of an online community of Black women journeying together towards a return to natural hair, that Ifemelu discovers the power of social networks, discovering values of support, sisterhood and empowerment. Ifemelu also discovers in this online space a safe space where everyone is free to share their experiences and where various testimonies echo her own experience. It is this first positive experience that makes her want to produce content on subjects that are important to her and to gather a community sharing the same interests. Based on her personal experiences, Ifemelu produces content focused on discriminations based on gender and race in the US. This creative process allows her to come out of the invisibility she might have been confined to as a migrant and a woman of color. It also allows her to define and value herself, valuing her writing and critical skills, which allow her to craft a new narrative. Her skills are also valued in the public sphere, as her posts attract a growing community, eager to not only read Ifemelu's posts, but also to find a safe space where they can share their own experiences. However, Ifemelu is careful to not replicate a dominant pattern, expressing herself in a way that is accessible to all and not setting herself as an authoritative figure on the subject. Indeed, what she seeks is not to deliver one-sided content, but to create a space for dialogue and creation of shared content, with the goal of ultimately changing the dominant narrative on race issues. The blog thus allows her to organize personal but also collective resistance. It also allows her to find her voice as a blogger

and later as a speaker, but also as an individual, letting her assert her identity. However, although publicly acclaimed for the innovative and engaging content she delivers through her blog, Ifemelu continues to face resistance from some parts of the American population who refuse to discuss the issue of racism that still lingers in the US. She understands that it is difficult to express herself freely in the public sphere on the topic of racism. She also understands that the freedom of expression that she thought she had finally acquired is actually not real, because it is only possible for her to express herself freely among peers concerned by these issues. Finally, realizing the scope of the task she had set for herself through her blog, and wanting to return to her homeland after 13 years without going back, Ifemelu initiates the third major step in her resistance movement against the dominant discourses: she chooses to return to Nigeria rather than stay in America. Thus, Ifemelu closes her blog, and again chooses a different way to resist, going against the images that place the US as superior to Africa.

Through our study, we have chosen to investigate how Ifemelu uses her position of cultural hybridity to produce engaged content and denounce dominant discourses that are often at the root of systems of oppression and discrimination. We have also seen how this position of hybridity allows Ifemelu to see the US in a critical light, thereby allowing her to create an innovative discourse. Through writing and bringing together a community of like-minded people, Ifemelu sets forward not only her own voice and experience, but also those of other minority voices. Ifemelu's approach allows her not only to come to terms with her identity and find her voice through a movement of resistance, but also to elicit this in her readers, who can also come out of silence with regard to the difficulties and discriminations they experience. The creation of a community around her blog allows Ifemelu to create a new discourse, one which is rarely put forward in the public sphere and counters traditional narratives.

To reach these conclusions, we have drawn on postcolonial and Black feminist theories; we have also based our research on studies about migration, minority groups, as well as social networks and the safe spaces they can constitute. We have begun by outlining the difficulties that may be experienced by a female migrant character arriving in the US and struggling with notions of race and gender, while attempting to construct her identity through a hybrid cultural experience. In the second part, our research has attempted to highlight the strategies used by the author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (through her character, Ifemelu) to deconstruct the dominant discourses that erect the West as superior to any other culture. We have tried to emphasize the importance of the intersection of sociological research fields (postcolonial,

feminist, storytelling) with the field of literature in order to create a new discourse, opening up new lines of research by creating new stories: more encompassing, more diverse and less stereotyped than before.

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