



Braiding African Identities: Diaspoetic Reading of Black Women in Chimamanda Adichie's Americanah (2013)

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Abstract

This paper offers a diaspoetic reading of the African female characters in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* (2013). It verifies that the African female identities in diaspora are represented in Adichie's novel through two main paradigms: hair and mobility. Through the African hair braiding, Adichie shows that the diasporic identity is an amalgamation of the present and the past like the juxtaposition of African hair braids. Through the paradigm of mobility, Adichie stresses the idea of the fluidity of the African diasporic identity that oscillates between the imagined and the encountered communities in a way that problematizes diasporic awareness and conflicts. In so doing, the paper, methodologically, invests theories on diaspoetics, identity, mobility, and race that have been developed by Mishra, Singh, Hall, Brah, Cresswell, Bhabha, Safran, and Cohen and others. The paper delineates that Adichie's *Americanah* shows that the cultural identities of the African female diasporic subjectivities are braided in mobility to show their oscillating experiences in both homelands and host lands to subvert and undo cultural binarism.

Keywords: *Americanah*; Chimamanda Adichie; Cultural Identity; Diaspoetics; Mobility.

INTRODUCTION

Chimamanda Adichie is of the Igbo ethnicity, having been born in 1977 in Nigeria. At the age of sixteen, she moves to the United States to pursue her higher studies. She wrote three novels: *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), and *Americanah* (2013). Moreover, she published a compilation of twelve short stories entitled *The Thing around your Neck* (2009). Adichie's literary prominence is acknowledged by Abiola Irele (2009) as one of the writers with whom “the novel has entered a new phase and assumed a new complexion in Africa” (p. 11). This paper critically offers a diaspoetic reading of Adichie’s novel, *Americanah* where Adichie does not only represent the African diaspora in America, but also in England. In her narrative, the black woman's identity is braided in transit. Hair becomes an emblem of a gendered racial identity, in which the protagonist seeks to achieve empowerment. In studying Adichie’s novel from the perspective of black female diasporic subjectivities, the paper draws upon theories of Cresswell (2006), Cohen (2008), Mishra (2007), Ponzanesi (2008), Singh (2008), and Braga and Gonçalves (2013). Having established the theoretical focus on diaspoetics, the paper proceeds to analyze Adichie's novel to prioritize diaspoetic aspects that braid the African female identities in diaspora.

The paper first presents the manipulation of the characteristics of the concepts of diaspora and diaspoetics in Adiche’s novel, *Americanah*. It shows the problematic relationship between diaspora and the host society; secondly, it presents the possibility of a peculiar, enriching and creative life in the host land. The study attempts to answer some questions: how does black female body/hair express cultural identity in diaspora? How does mobility in diaspora play a role in molding the identity of the female

diasporic subject? How does the protagonist's dating of a white man influence her identity and worldview? How do the diasporic subject's illusions around the host land prove to be fallacious? Finally, how does Adichie's narrative subvert and undo binarism and dualism, suggested by Cohen (2008)? In so doing, the paper offers a perspective on how aspects of the literary construction of the novel *Americanah* are correlated to the theoretical framework of gender and diaspoetics. Therefore, this paper seeks to establish definitive contours of gendered diasporic identity as manifested in Adichie's novel, *Americanah*.

DIASPORA AND LITERATURE: DIASPOETICS

Diaspora is one of the most intense forms of human mobility. Mobility is linked to the idea of dispersion, of scattering, as, in fact, is observed in the etymology of the term. As a term, it has been conceptualized as “more nomadic than the concept of nomadism” (Peters, 1999, p. 18), “composite formations made up of many journeys” (Brah, 1996, p. 180), “the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity” (Hall, 1990, p. 235) and “a synthesis of everything that operates through states” (Dufoix, 2008, p.32). David Chariandy (2006) refers to “postcolonial diasporas” as “heterogeneous discursive terrains”, emerging out of the process of decolonization. Cohen (2008) argues that the concept has often been associated for a long time with the Jewish diaspora as a model of oppression and victimization. More recently, Kenny (2013) associates diaspora with “exile, suffering, and possible redemption” (p. 5).

Tölölyan (1996), Gilroy (1994), and Kenny (2013) have discussed specific cases of the diaspora. Kenny (2013) questions the major characteristics of diaspora as mobility. He stresses the idea of

the homeland and the notion of return by stressing three characteristics of the diasporic narrative: “Displacement, exile, and longing for a homeland” (p. 3). For Ogbu (2016), diaspora implies displacement as the population “for whatever reason separated from its national territory, and usually its people have a hope, or at least a desire, to return to their homeland at some point, if the ‘homeland’ still exists in any meaningful sense” (p. 181). Ogbu (2016) claims that diaspora “has become complex and controversial given the fluidity of relationships, identities, and interests that exists between homelands and their various offspring living abroad” (p. 179). Fabre and Benesch (2004), distinguish between old and new diasporas in terms of roots and routes. According to them, the new diaspora is transnational, as it draws routes or “the mapping of the complex rhizomatic, cross-cultural itineraries”(p. xviii-xix). They confirm the tension between the fixed and the fluid.

Stressing the idea of mobility and fluidity in the diasporic situation, Cresswell's (2006) talks about the game between “sedentarist” metaphysics and nomadic metaphysics. In sedentarist metaphysics, the world is apprehended through the lens of place, rootedness, spatial order and belonging. In opposition to the sedentarist metaphysics, nomadic metaphysics highlights mobility, discarding notions of attachment to place. Cresswell examines the use of mobility metaphors in Eliot and Raymond Williams. For Eliot, culture “depends on a lack of movement, on stability, rootedness, and continuity” (Cresswell, 2006, p. 33). In the same vein, Raymond Williams views nomads as the representatives of rootless capitalism. Both Eliot and Williams suggest mobility as a threat of chaos. However, Cresswell reinforces the idea that the “mobility turn” has emerged at the end of the twentieth century in cultural and literary studies. To prove that idea, he quotes Edward Said according to whom decolonization does not only produce “new

states and new boundaries” but also “homeless wanderers, nomads, vagrants, unassimilated to the emerging structures of institutional power, rejected by the established order for their intransigence and obdurate rebelliousness” (Said in Cresswell, 2006, p. 44). Nouri Gana (2004) reinforces the idea of mobility in postcolonial diaspora. According to him, the postcolonial diasporas “situate identities in transit”. These in-transit identities evolve out of the mobility of diasporic subjects. Safran (1991) states that diaspora is a type of mobility that involves a dispersion and the myths of homeland and return. Cohen (1996) presents a list of nine characteristics common to diasporas that can be summed as trauma, the search of work, “a collective memory and myth about the homeland”, “An idealization of the putative ancestral home”, a return, group consciousness, lack of acceptance, empathy with co-ethnic members, and the possibility of a “creative and enriching life” (p. 515).

Mishra (2007), Ponzanesi (2008), Singh (2008), and Braga and Gonçalves (2013) engaged in the task of establishing some boundaries for diaspoetics. The concept of diaspoetics is presented by Mishra (2006) as “the meta-critical art, the *techne*, of witnessing the witnesses of the event called diaspora criticism” (p. 14). For Singh (2008), Diaspoetics involves the feeling for the homeland (p. 1). For Mishra (2007), it is the evocation of a trauma that occurred there (p. 12). Ponzanesi (2008), talks about the existence of a diasporic history of the writer (p. 123). According to Ponzanesi (2008), the diasporic narrative is one that (1) focuses on dispersion and relocation through characters, (2) situates the narrative in diasporic times and spaces, (3) presents a diasporic figurative language, and (4) presents a “Fragmented, layered and nomadic” style (p. 123). Braga and Gonçalves (2013) establish the foundations of the poetics of the diaspora, that is, the method of reading and interpretation that enables the identification, analysis

and discussion of the diasporic literary effects that cause a narrative is indeed diaspoetic.

BRAIDING DIASPORIC IDENTITIES

Adichie's *Americanah* is full of intrinsic diaspoetic characteristics in its depiction of the story of Ifemelu, a young Nigerian who immigrates to the United States to study, returning to her country after a few years, in search of answers to the dilemmas that afflict her. The relationship between Ifemelu, and hair is a recurring theme in the plot. The book opens with Ifemelu going to a salon to braid her hair. Most of the narrative is dedicated to Ifemelu's years on America, a time of challenges and difficulties: getting a job for self-support, understanding and dealing with cultural differences and, especially, with the racial problem. But she occupies her place in that society, at first with the help of Nigerian friends and relatives living in the diaspora, then on her own. Ifemelu makes contacts over the years, makes a few friends, and has two romantic relationships. After some time, she becomes famous for writing a blog remunerated by sponsors and voluntary donors. The blog's fame earns Ifemelu invitations to speak at companies and conferences. In the same vein, Obinze, Ifemelu's boyfriend from high school, has his immigration experience narrated in the novel. Both are living in a well-known moment in Nigeria's history, characterized by the lack of opportunities for young people, corruption and poor functioning of institutions, especially those of education. So, like thousands of other young people, Obinze goes to England, but not as a student, becoming an illegal resident. To survive, he is forced to use a false name to work, living under permanent stress. Trying to regularize his situation, Obinze seeks an arranged marriage, as many other immigrants do. On the wedding day, however, he is arrested and, a few weeks later, deported.

It is essential to clarify that the diaspoetic reading of Adichie's *Americanah* reveals many of the common cultural features of identity formation in diaspora. Diaspoetics encompasses characteristics such as the non-linear plot and the fragmented narrative style that parallel the fragmentary identity of diasporic subjects. The cultural identification of the female protagonist is marked by symbolic significance of her hair braiding and her diasporic mobility. *Americanah* provides the reader with the possible ongoing cultural processes of braiding identity in diaspora. This fragmented structure represents the complex processes of identity formation in the diasporic situation. Through this non-linear narrative, Adichie seeks to prioritize alternation and a spatiotemporal juxtaposition as a reflection of the diasporic subject's processes of cultural identification. Moreover, Adichie uses the literary technique *in media res*, to tell his story not from the beginning, but from a point in the middle of it. The technique is to contribute to the idea that the diasporic identity is formed from the amalgamation of the present and the past like the juxtaposition of hair braids.

Americanah is a love story between Ifemelu and Obinze, separated by the need to immigrate and Ifemelu's decision to cut off communication with her ex-boyfriend. In the meantime, the narrative develops through meetings and disagreements on three continents, being deeply intersected by conflicts arising from the immigration experiences of each one, to, in its last part, address the reunion of both in the homeland, between to the attributions of the return. These comings and goings are undeniable representations of the tension between the fixed and the fluid, or in Cresswell's terms, of the negotiation between the sedentarist metaphysics and nomadic metaphysics. The mobility experience associated with Ifemelu and Obinze unfolds into different themes that shape its diaspoetic

narrative: gender, love and family relationships, loneliness, homesickness, identity, African stereotypes. The diaspoetic analysis of the novel consists in reflecting on cultural decolonization based on the hair of black women, one of the most central themes in the narrative. Ifemelu questions the meanings behind the subculture of female hair in the beauty salon and the female models around the character, both in Nigeria and in the United States. Thus, Adichie's *Americanah*, inevitably discusses the gender role of women in diaspora. Ifemelu's posts are reflections on black female identity issues within American society.

The narrative reveals some attributes of the diasporic condition, such as body, language and mobility. It begins with the character going to a beauty salon specializing in Afro hair. It is interesting that the narrative highlights how far the salon is from Princeton, where the protagonist lives. the narrator describes: “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” (Adichie, 2013, p.2). Ifemelu is described in an environment in which her dark skin and hair had no “place” in diaspora. This leads her to seek recognition of her hair in peripheral places. Therefore, the identity of black women is marginalized in the metropolitan city. On her tours, Ifemelu remembers her mother's hair: “Through the years of childhood, Ifemelu would often look in the mirror and pull at her own hair, separate the coils, will it to become like her mother’s, but it remained bristly and grew reluctantly” (p. 37). The mother always kept her hair very straight and the daughter, in turn, also wished that hers were like that. In *Americanah* straight black hair often appears as a way of adapting to a Eurocentric social standard of identity. Aunt Uju, being the lover of a powerful man, transforms her hair: “Aunty Uju laughed and patted the silky hair

extensions that fell to her shoulders: Chinese weave-on, the latest version, shiny and straight as straight could be; it never tangled” (p. 71). Once again, one can see straight hair as status.

After the general's death, Auntie Uju leaves for the United States. Ifemelu moves in with her aunt. Uju, was working at various jobs and taking extremely difficult exams to obtain a license to practice medicine in States. When she receives the approval result, Auntie Uju says: “I have to take my braids out for my interviews and relax my hair [...] they will think you are unprofessional” (Adichie, 2013, p. 112). When challenged by her niece, Uju explains: “I have told you what they told me. You are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do if you want to succeed” (p.112). Therefore, the natural hair of black women is seen as unprofessional and inadequate in the host land. Ifemelu, before going to the United States, had not had her identity marked by race. However, she now comes to perceive herself not only as an immigrant, but also as a black person. This is closer to Hall (1990), who postulates that identities are born out of difference which “keeps on moving to encompass other, additional or supplementary meanings” (p. 229). Years later, when she finds a job, Ifemelu finds herself once again faced with the problem of hair, and following a warning from the university counselor, she straightens her hair “I need to look professional for this interview, and professional means straight is best but if it’s going to be curly then it has to be the white kind of curly, loose curls or, at worst, spiral curls but never kinky” (Adichie, 2013, p. 192). the host country, thus, places straight hair as professional and serious. On the other hand, black curly hair is not seen as professional and, therefore, rejected, as it would distance the protagonist from the labor market and, consequently, prevent her from rising socially. This means that the diasporic identity finds

itself oscillating between “local and global:” in “networks of transnational identifications encompassing ‘imagined’ and ‘encountered’ communities” (Brah, 1996, p. 192).

In terms of resistance and accommodation, Weitz (2001) observes that there are three possible types of positioning women and their hair: resistance, accommodation, and the coexistence of both. According to him, resistance is defined as “actions that not only reject subordination but do so by *challenging the ideologies that support that subordination*” (p. 670). Accommodation, for Weitz (2001), refers to “actions that accept subordination, by either adopting or simply not challenging the ideologies that support subordination” (p.670). The coexistence of both occurs when an action contains “elements of accommodation and elements of resistance” (p.670). Ifemelu adopted resistance strategies earlier when she criticized her aunt for straightening her hair. However, she fell into accommodation when she sought to satisfy the standard socially imposed upon black women's hair. After the straightening process, the narrator recounts the consequences of using chemical processes on black women’s hair. Ifemelu's hair began to fall out. Convinced by a friend, she cuts her hair to go back to using it natural. Having her identity shaken by her short hair, Ifemelu talks about hair transition, that is, the abandonment of chemicals and straightening and the resumption of frizzy and natural hair. Ifemelu starts a process of acceptance of the hair. In one of the posts on her famous blog, Ifemelu wrote about Michele Obama, the wife of former US President Barack Obama, and her hair as a race metaphor. For her, Michele’s natural hair would become an obstacle to her husband being elected for presidency. “Imagine if Michelle Obama got tired of all the heat and decided to go natural [...] She would totally rock but poor Obama would certainly lose” (Adichie, 2013, p. 278).

The narrative expresses, through Ifemelu's blog, how hair is a parameter for social inclusion. The higher the ascension, the more “whitened” must be the identity of the black person. In the case of black women, this “weakening” passes through the hair. Ifemelu is in the hairdresser specializing in Afro hair. The women who work there are mostly immigrants, French-speaking Africans. Aisha, the hairdresser who attends Ifemelu tries to convince Ifemelu to straighten her hair, but she keeps her hair frizzy. She also tries to convince her to dye her hair a darker color, but Ifemelu dyes it a shade close to her natural hair, though Aisha claims that shade made her hair look dirty. Finally, when braiding the hair, the wig makes it very tight, arousing complaints from the client. Ifemelu rejects subordination in one of the resistance actions described by Weitz (2001).

the analysis of Ifemelu's hair is part of the diasporic experience of impasses, conflicts and constraints on the host land. This explains how the tension between the diasporic subject and the host land occurs through the body. The acceptance of the diasporic subject in a host land can be fulfilled through the female body/ hair. Ifemelu has to give in to pressures, such as straightening her hair for a “professional look”, to ward off the indignity of unemployment . Even submitting to these standards, she does not enjoy the feeling of full belonging. Such pressures involve braiding phony female identity, which occurs not only by changing the hair, but by the way of speaking, dressing and behaving.

The diasporic identity is expressed in *Americanah* not only through body/ hair but also through mobility. The narrative describes the departure of the two main groups of characters from their homeland, Nigeria, to form communities in the host land. The plot, interwoven from this mobility experience, is enriched with the

problematization of diasporic awareness and conflicts, very common to these groups. The idea of trauma is a major trait of the diasporic situation in *Americanah* as it is articulated in such a way as to simultaneously represent collective causes and personal opportunities. For Auntie Uju, the trauma has a relevant connection with the political instability in Nigeria. Meanwhile, it comes from her condition as the mistress of a well-known general in the military government. When the general dies unexpectedly in a suspected plane crash, Uju, who lived in comfort, supported by him, is helpless, having to hastily abandon the property on which she lives, aggressively claimed by the family of the deceased general. She flees with her baby, Dike, to the United States, where she goes through a long and painful process to regularize her documentation and be accepted as a doctor. Ifemelu, like many university students, is motivated to leave her country due to the chaotic situation of higher education in Nigeria, a fact that represents a very common phenomenon in the country: “Campuses were emptied, classrooms drained of life. Students hoped for short strikes, because they could not hope to have no strike at all. Everyone was talking about leaving” (Adichie, 2013, p. 92). This situation leads Ifemelu to start “dreaming about America”, where her aunt already lived. She then decides to apply for the difficult student visa and, to her own surprise, is accepted on the first attempt, leaving to live with Uju.

Obinze's departure is also constructed in the narrative from a combination of personal motives and those linked to the Nigerian situation. After losing contact with Ifemelu, now in the United States, the young graduate finds himself frustrated. The absence of a girlfriend is compounded by the lack of jobs that affects the lives of millions of Nigerians in the same age group. Obinze had always dreamed of going to the United States: he read American books and

magazines, watched movies. His desire to live in that country, however, is thwarted by the consulate, which denies his visa application four times. Seeing her son aimlessly, the mother of Obinze, a university professor, registers his name on a visa form for England as her assistant, taking advantage of the occasion when she would attend an academic conference: “See what you can do with your life. Maybe you can get to America from there. I know that your mind is no longer here” (Adichie, 2013, p. 219). The illegal operation causes Obinze to be seriously disappointed in his mother, who had always taught him honesty and ethics. Moreover, her words make him feel like a failure in anticipation. Eventually, he accepted the offer and left with her, staying in England for three years, until he was deported. The cases of Uju, Ifemelu and Obinze clearly explain that diasporic mobility may not be unified or homogeneous, varying in sense and degree of need.

Americanah is populated by characters in a direct relationship with the diaspora, such as family members who remain in their homeland and other fictional diasporic subjects with less participation in the plot. Aisha, Halima and Mariama, hairdressers at the beauty salon in Trenton, come from different countries in West Africa, rejoining their host land to seek their own survival, a situation that is recurrent in diasporas. In London, the Africans that Obinze knows, coming from different countries and bonds. In *Americanah*, the characters Dike, Ginika, Kayode and Bartholomew, along with Ifemelu and Uju, represent a Nigerian diasporic community in the US, while Obinze, Emenike, Nicholas and Ojiugo are the Nigerian diaspora in England. Moreover, the African Americans, Blaine, Shan and their friends are descendants of the old African diaspora. Curt, Kimberly and Laura make up a representative nucleus of white Americans, who have in their ancestry the marks of a European

diasporic dispersion. Finally, *Americanah* represents diasporic returnees, exemplified by Doris and Fred, Obinze and Ifemelu.

Americanah makes a tangle of problematic experiences and achievements of the diasporic subjects. For Obinze, the possibility of a creative life in the diaspora is not realized due to the very adverse conditions he encounters in England, which culminate in his deportation. Aside from a few moments of solidarity and relative tranquility, Obinze's trajectory in that country is marked by tension, fear and discomfort. although Aunty Uju manages to work in the United States legally, the problematic side in the relationship with the land that receives her also predominates, marked by a sequence of challenges that never seem to end. However, in the experiences of Ginika and Ifemelu in the United States as a host society, offers them the possibility of living a better life. Upon her arrival, when she is reunited with Ginika in Philadelphia, Ifemelu is quite critical of her friend's appearance. Ginika becomes thinner, super-smoothed hair, wearing American-style clothes and speaking forcefully, as if she were playing a role. She tells stories as if she taught lessons about America. Later, Ifemelu watches her at a meeting with her American friends, amazed at how similar Ginika has become to them: laughing about the same subjects, using the same vocabulary, and drinking the same drink. For Ifemelu "Ginika had come to America with the flexibility and fluidness of youth, the cultural cues had seeped into her skin, and now she went bowling, and knew what Tobey Maguire was about" (Adichie, 2013, p. 117). Ginika is happy with the life she leads, demonstrating to be, to a large extent, integrated into the environment of the land that received her. She is in the middle of the criterion of a diasporic subject who lives an "enriching and creative life", as Cohen (1996) theorizes.

in *Americanah*, Ifemelu's personal achievements in the diaspora has been established. The job as a nanny at Kimberley's house brings more dignity to her. It is in this job that she meets Curt, Kimberley's cousin, whom she begins to date. The boy is interested in her at the first moment and the relationship brings new paradigms to the girl's life, as Curt has an optimistic way of seeing life: "He believed in good omens and positive thoughts and happy endings to films, a trouble-free belief, because he had not considered them deeply before choosing to believe; he just simply believed" (Adichie, 2013, p. 185). Ifemelu is aware that her boyfriend's way of being is innocent and has roots in the privileged background of his wealthy family. Curt's optimism and enthusiasm wins Ifemelu, leaving her fascinated: "She went hiking with him [Curt], kayaking, camping near his family's vacation home, all things she would never have imagined herself doing before" (p.184). Curt also builds a bridge between Ifemelu and her new job. He makes contacts with a company known to his family that, in addition to employment, forwards the work visa application, starting the green card acquisition process. It is obvious that Ifemelu is grateful, but at the same time, she appraises how Curt manages, with simple phone calls, to "rearrange the world" (p.190), quickly solving what represents a drama for an immigrant: "she was a pink balloon, weightless, floating to the top" (p.190), while her African friends were desperate for solutions for their temporary visas about to expire.

Ifemelu's blog functions as a vehicle for expressing Ifemelu's opinions and developing her creative capacity. It allows her to place herself in the public sphere and forget the oppressive feeling of invisibility. The blog increases her self-confidence, inserting her socially and politically through the discussion of the themes that are most dear to her, also providing her with a greater understanding of

the Americans. Moreover, it helps in Ifemelu's reunion with Blaine, a black university professor she had met eight years earlier. The obvious attraction between the two results in a serious relationship, which brings new experiences for Ifemelu. Blaine is “very American”, as he defines himself: he is methodical, likes organic food, uses regular dental floss, knows a little about all subjects: “He was like a salutary tonic; with him, she could only inhabit a higher level of goodness” (Adichie, 2013, p. 291). Under Blaine's influence, Ifemelu changes some habits, starting to eat and exercise better. In this interaction, Ifemelu also opens her eyes to different nuances of American life that she had not yet been interested in, such as politics and debates on social issues at the university and in her circle of friends.

Ginika and Ifemelu are a fundamental part of what can come to be called a fruitful and happy life in the diaspora, with Ifemelu as the representation of the diasporic subject. The focus of the narrative on Ifemelu's relationships with her boyfriends can give the impression that a woman has to depend on male presence to be successful. However, *Americanah* can be viewed as a representation of a female protagonist who prospers materially and politically in the diaspora by her own effort as the blog is created and developed by herself. Furthermore, it cannot be ignored that a good command of the English language, already brought from her homeland, and her university education in Social Communication are fundamental for the quality of Ifemelu's blog and lectures, being at the base of her success. Thus, the character helps the readers to think of the positive achievements of the diasporic subject as the result of complex factors, a combination of baggage brought from the homeland and personal efforts in the host land. The lives of Ginika and Ifemelu in the diaspora prove successful, but the fact that they pay a “price for success” cannot be ignored. The assimilation that the

diasporic subjectivities undergo can deprive them of their native identities, forcing them to reject themselves.

Safran (1991) and Cohen (1996) clearly state that diasporic communities live a problematic relationship with the host land due to lack of acceptance. Baser (2016) addresses the tensions experienced by the diasporas that may affect their identities and their “diasporic behavior in the host land” (p.45). This creates an inter-ethnic tension as the diasporic subjectivities look “to the possibility of returning to a real or imagined homeland” (Cohen, 2008, p. 167). Cohen (2008) mentions three types of inter-ethnic tension: antagonism, legal or illegal discrimination and violence. It is also possible to broaden the discussion, from Safran (1991), Cohen (2008) and Baser (2016), on the different forms of these tensions that characterize the problematic relationship between diasporic subjectivities and host land, as well as the particularities observed in each diasporic community. Part III of *Americanah* is devoted to Obinze's experience in England. The young man survives from humble jobs, seeking an arranged marriage to legalize his documentation, living in invisibility and in the permanent tension of the risk of being discovered and deported. But it is in the analysis of the female protagonist, Ifemelu, that one can obtain further evidence of the conflicts and tensions in braiding female identities in the diaspora. Ifemelu is an obvious example of how the diasporic subject faces hardships and conflicts in relation to the host land.

It is essential to examine some characters linked to the braiding of the diasporic female protagonist especially Auntie Uju and Dike, who are in constant tension with the Americans. The realization that Auntie Uju is facing problems in America has its first signs even before Ifemelu leaves for the country. At first, her phone calls to her niece are frequent, but contacts are decreasing: Uju needs three jobs

to survive, as she is not yet licensed to practice medicine in the host land. In addition to the heavy workload, Uju has to study for the various exams and necessary steps to be able to practice medicine. However, Uju often encourages Ifemelu to go to America to complete her studies, describing how the American university system is stable, unlike the Nigerian system. On the phone, Ifemelu realizes that Uju is simultaneously strange, excited and absent. She also notes that her narratives about “life in America” are a mix of events that she doesn't quite understand, but Ifemelu comes to believe that her academic life will be better in the US. In this way, she is persuaded to immigrate, although she is not quite sure what she is expecting. But the surprises in relation to her aunt begin as soon as she disembarks: “There was something different about her [...] her roughly braided hair, her ears bereft of earrings, her quick casual hug” (Adichie, 2013, p. 98). In addition to the lack of vanity that has always characterized Uju, Ifemelu is surprised to see how hurried, impatient and cold she is.

Uju overloads Ifemelu with instructions about the house, the food, the child, and how Ifemelu will work with a fake ID. The girl's head spins, and she feels as if an old intimacy between the two has suddenly expired. At night, in the kitchen, Ifemelu watches her studying a medical book while eating a hamburger: “Her skin dry, her eyes shadowed, her spirit bleached of color. She seemed to be staring at, rather than reading the book” (Adichie, 2013, p. 101). Uju and Ifemelu have a sincere conversation in which Uju talks about how exhausted she is, working and studying at the same time and supporting her son alone. She also reports that she had failed one of the medical exams for the first time in her life and had depended on the charity of her Nigerian friends for the first few months when she immigrated. Ifemelu has no words to comfort her; she had imagined that her aunt's living condition in America was better in phone

conversations. But now Ifemelu notices that “Uju would never have worn her hair in such scruffy braids. She would never have tolerated the ingrown hair that grew like raisins on her chin, or worn trousers that gathered bulkily between her legs. America had subdued her” (p.103). The loss of feminine identity, the neglect of herself, are, for Ifemelu, the confirmation of Uju's diasporic subjugation by the host land, as they represent the maximum degree of self-abandonment. In Uju's example, the host land of the diaspora imprisons diasporic subjectivities through heavy, oppressive, and inhuman practices that obliterate their identities. This condition continues even after passing the exams and obtaining a medical license. Uju faces racism at her son's school and difficulties in medical residency and consultations, as there are patients who refuse to be seen by a black doctor.

Uju meets Bartholomew, a Nigerian accountant who has long lived in the United States. During their quick dating, before moving in together, Bartholomew behaves “grandiosely, like a special prize that Auntie Uju was fortunate to have” (Adichie, 2013, p.109). Weakened and believing that a relationship would bring her more tranquility, Uju performs the ritual of the future good wife who knows how to cook, who serves food to her husband and who always agrees with what he says. In vain, Ifemelu disapproves of the possibility of a relationship, saddened to see her aunt deluded by the simple fact that Bartholomew is Nigerian, as if that was enough to make a relationship work. Ifemelu expresses her disgust of the man saying: “In Nigeria, a man like him would not even have the courage to talk to you.” But her aunt replies, “We are not in Nigeria, Ifem” (p.111). Here, Uju describes how her female identity has deteriorated in diaspora. Being away from her homeland, in a social context prevalent with disadvantages that undermine her female identity, makes Uju accept a relationship with a mediocre and sexist man, something that would never

happen if she were in Nigeria, as Ifemelu notes. Ifemelu's predictions come true over time. Bartholomew doesn't like Uju's son, doesn't collaborate with the chores around the house, and demands that Uju should give him all her salary, until the inevitable separation takes place. Thus, Uju and Bartholomew “have never been full subjects of and agents in civil society: in other words, first-class citizens of a state” (Spivak, 2000, p. 249). In such a diasporic relation, one can find that there is strong evidence that women continue to be exploited, as they would be in their homeland or worse.

DIASPORIC ILLUSIONS

The diasporic subjectivities may build illusions around the host land before emigrating there. When Ginika's family is leaving, Ifemelu's parents praise it as “they are fortunate to have that option” (Adichie, 2013, p. 60). At school, Ginika's friend, Priye, told her: “Ginika, seriously, I would give anything to be you right now” (p.60). As the daughter of an American, Ginika has a US passport, something considered by her friend, Kayode, as “the coolest thing” (p.60). This explains the illusions diasporic people have about the prestige of the host land in diaspora. This, in part, is due to the cultural influence of the American movies, TV shows, and magazines. Obinze is fascinated with American culture, knowing more details about celebrities and reading books like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Obinze idealizes the host land of the diaspora as a heaven, something that has a strong influence on his girlfriend, Ifemelu: “Manhattan was his zenith. He often said, ‘It’s not as if this is Manhattan’ or ‘Go to Manhattan and see how things are’” (p.62). It is obvious that diasporic subjects have an over-idealized image about the host land of diaspora. This creates a sense of frustration and disappointment in the diaspora. Such frustrations and disappointments have a devastating effect on the diasporic subject, causing problems to

be felt more deeply. Ifemelu's first moments in diaspora illustrate how such disappointments come as a shock. In her aunt's only two-bedroom apartment, unlike the beautiful, spacious American homes on TV shows, Ifemelu does not even have a bed: "this was America at last, glorious America at last, and she had not expected to bed on the floor" (p.99). The absence of a minimally comfortable bed will represent, metaphorically, the impossibility of rest, the absence of a haven of tranquility for the diasporic subject in the host land.

Ifemelu's disappointment reflects the conflict arisen of the gap between the dreamed or imagined host land and the real one. Throughout her life, Ifemelu thought that winter is the permanent season oversees "and because America was 'overseas,' and her illusions so strong they could not be fended off by reason" (Adichie, 2013, p. 97). So, before traveling, she buys the heaviest coat she can find and, as she leaves the airport, the suffocating heat leaves her terrified. Despite the initial disappointments, in the first summer Ifemelu is still waiting for a supposed encounter with the "real America" that she believes is about to happen, probably when her classes start. It is also the time to try different foods, hamburgers and wraps brought by Uju, flavors that Ifemelu liked one day and disliked the next: "She was disoriented by the blandness of fruits, as though Nature had forgotten to sprinkle some seasoning on the oranges and the bananas, but she liked looking at them, and to touch them" (p.106). Oranges and bananas are metaphors for disappointment. She just likes their appearance. As the narrative progresses, they allude to American way of life and American people Ifemelu knows. American people attach importance to appearance. Ifemelu's illusive perceptions of the host land begins to be shaped by television, in anticipation of an encounter with the real America:" She ached for the lives they showed, lives full of bliss, [...] and in her mind they became the real America" (p.106). This leads

Ifemelu to infer that the “real America” does not exist. “Real America” is made up of idealized representations that are conceived as reality by diasporic subjectivities. Ifemelu chooses to believe in the “beautiful and superficial” because it is easier than facing actual disappointments of everyday life. Furthermore, the commercials that fascinate her are obviously linked to the illusions she had brought from Nigeria, which she was unable to shake off in the early years. Thus, Ifemelu lets herself be seduced by the fantasies about a better life in the idealized host land. These illusions are juxtaposed to new dreams that are created in the diasporic condition itself, based on new perceptions of the host land.

BLACK VS. WHITE: BINARIES IN DIASPORA

Ifemelu's relationship with African Americans comes through the university professor, Blaine and the group of people she meets. Her relationship with Blaine is part of the positive side of Ifemelu's experience in the diaspora, due to the real affection between them and the lessons that dating brings her. However, tensions and disagreements come along with the relationship. Blaine's circle – his sister, friends and fellow professors – is made up of cool, well-dressed and idealistic people. However, even well received, Ifemelu feels “vaguely lost” in their presence, recognizing that, in fact, she does not belong to the group: “Surrounded by them, Blaine hummed with references unfamiliar to her, and he would seem far away, as though he belonged to them” (Adichie, 2013, p. 293). Ifemelu is a black African among black Americans. This makes them all assume that she already knows and already agrees with all the historical causes of African Americans in the country. An example of this can be seen in the protest organized by Blaine and other African Americans in contempt of university library security. He was a black man who, after a phone call from a white official, was taken away and abusively interrogated

by the police as a suspect in drug trafficking. Infuriated, Blaine organizes a protest, which Ifemelu does not go, simply because she does not feel like going. Blaine takes Ifemelu's absence as a very serious offense: "How could principle, an abstract thing floating in the air, wedge itself so solidly between them, and turn Blaine into somebody else?" (p.322). Blaine assumes that Ifemelu would understand the "principle of it" (p.322). Blaine refers to the lack of awareness about the historical racism in American society. Ifemelu's relationship with African Americans is marked by distance: "She recognized, in [Blaine's] tone, a subtle accusation[...] about her Africanness; she was not sufficiently furious because she was African, not African American" (p.322).

Ifemelu's relationship with the white people is more problematic with additional conflicts. After the long job search, Ifemelu starts working as a babysitter at the home of Kimberly and Don, an upper-middle-class couple with two children, Morgan and Taylor. Kimberly's sister, Laura, has racist views against diasporic black subjects. For Kimberly's sister, Ifemelu is a part of a group of privileged and skilled diasporic subjects. Laura claims that she knows a black African woman from Uganda: "She was wonderful, and she didn't get along with the African-American woman in our class at all. She didn't have all those issues" (Adichie, 2013, p. 158). Insulted by the superficiality of the comment, Ifemelu responds that "it's a simplistic comparison to make. You need to understand a bit more history" (p.159). Subsequently, Ifemelu apologizes not for Laura but for Kimberly, who is upset over the disagreement. In this situation, Laura appears to be inferior to Ifemelu who is a university student, has more knowledge and critical thinking. Laura is just a white American housewife. The impossibility of belonging to the African Americans and the constant clashes with the white people exemplify the tensions and conflicts between the diasporic subject

and the host land. However, Ifemelu seems to simultaneously offend the white people and displease the black ones.

Ifemelu's relationship with Curt, Kimberly's cousin, helps her braid her new identity in diaspora. This relation improves Ifemelu's self-esteem and offers her a good job. However, the black-white relationship between Ifemelu and Curt is challenged. On the first day of dating, Morgan classifies the relationship as "disgusting" (Adichie, 2013, p.183), jealous of seeing her babysitter with the uncle she likes the most. Morgan gradually changes her mind. However, the receptionist at a restaurant that offers a table for only one person, seeing only the white Curt and ignoring the black Ifemelu. Moreover, the manager of an inn who checks in only for Curt, belittling Ifemelu's presence beside him. In addition, the white women, who see Curt and Ifemelu holding hands, give Ifemelu a look "of people confronting a great tribal loss" (p.274). Ifemelu regards Curt as a privileged white man establishing the contrast between her and him. This reinforces the indignation of some white people. So, Ifemelu concludes that her relationship with the white Curt bothers the "the guardians of the tribe" because it represents a "great tribal loss" for them. Furthermore, the white girls at the wedding of Curt's cousin are unhappy for seeing him with a black girlfriend: "although she might be a pretty black girl, she was not the kind of black that they could, with an effort, imagine him with; she was not light-skinned, she was not biracial" (p.274). The possibility of seeing the host land as a tribal society is one of the innovative aspects of *Americanah*. A tribe is commonly understood as a set of people, with real or imagined family ties, and therefore brought together by the idea of a common descent, who share the same cultural patterns and traditions. However, it is common, in the Western discourse, to use the term "tribe" to designate the "other" referring to less civilized, inferior or primitive societies. In

Americanah, Adichie reverses the norm and elaborates her critique of American society through this term.

Ifemelu exposes what she regards American tribalism through her blog. According to her, American tribalism is based on four aspects: class, ideology, region and race. She realizes the existence of four binaries in the American society: rich/ poor, liberal/conservative, Protestant/ Catholic, and the North/ the south. According to her, American tribalism is “alive and well” (Adichie, 2013, p.174). For Ifemelu, such tribalism is “so complex” to be understood by foreigners. Ifemelu reveals a paradox in American tribalism: “Many abolitionists wanted to free the slaves but didn’t want black people living nearby” (p.326). Another paradox concerning the Jewish race is revealed by Ifemelu as she cannot understand the scale of racial superiority in which “Jewish is white but also some rungs below white” (p.174). This reminiscent of Bhabha’s (1994) description of the colonialist idea of “almost the same but not quite” (p.86). These paradoxes reveal the racial corruption of the American tribalism that undermines not only blackness but also whiteness. Such paradoxes intensify notions of binaries and dichotomies. The racial binarism is “a process which dictates the specific structural, symbolic and oppositional relationships forged between people deemed White and those socially designated as Black” (Ifekwunigwe, 2003, p.61). Racism and racial binarism in the host land of the diaspora “highlights the dominance of Black/White discourses on ‘race’” (Ifekwunigwe, 2003, p.61). This fact is written by Ifemelu in her blog as she writes: “Of all their tribalisms, Americans are most uncomfortable with race” (Adichie, 2013, p.326). In *Americanah*, the term, “tribe”, refers to the American society as the host land of the diaspora. However, Cohen (1996) contends that tribe refers to the homeland. The homeland is described by Cohen as a “narrow tribal society” (p.513). This

suggests that diasporic subjects come out of less developed societies to achieve “considerable intellectual and spiritual achievements” (Cohen, 1996, p. 513). The analysis of *Americanah*, however, questions this logic, since the host land of the diaspora can also have the same “narrow tribal” traits, even though they are civilized and advanced.

UNDOING THE BINARIES IN DIASPORA

Ifemelu and Curt confront the binaries of American racial tribalism through physical gestures of their bodies. Curt holds Ifemelu’s hand all the time, kisses it several times, as if he wants to prove to the people around him the legitimacy of the relationship. She ends up exhausted by the need for heightened attention and protection on the part of her boyfriend. This occurs in parallel with the looks of disapproval and attitudes of contempt on the part of those who have racial ideologies. However, Claire, a white American and Curt's aunt, overstates how she is not a racist, recounting her travels to Africa and the black friends she has. This attitude also ends up constituting stress for Ifemelu, who just wants to be treated normally: “I don’t need her to over-assure me that she likes black people” (Adichie, 2013, p. 275).

According to Cohen (2008) diasporic experiences are wrapped in a tapestry of a “dual mode [...] being one of creativity and achievement and its weave being one of anxiety and distrust” (p.35). This metaphorical formulation of diasporic tapestry is useful in analysing how binaries are dissolved in the diasporic narrative of *Americanah* to braid the new female African identity. Not all tensions, anxieties and distrust experienced by diasporic subjects in the host land can be configured in the dualistic scheme of binaries, simply because there are other tensions concerning the homeland and

other diasporic subjects. Bartholomew's absurdities in his relationship with Uju are striking as well as the unfair negotiation between Obinze and other Africans in London. Another example is the difference in mentality between the African women in the salon and Ifemelu, who seems to put them in different positions. Moreover, the relationship between Uju and her son, Dike is one of the most significant cases in *Americanah*. At home, Uju is the absent mother, who works several hours a day, with no time to see and understand the identity and social problems of her son. In the few moments in which they interact, Uju's attitudes seem to deprive Dike of any identity-building initiative: "she grabbed his left ear and twisted it, yanked it" (Adichie, 2013, p.102). Uju forces him to wear shirts he considers "really ugly" (p.202). The feeling of being misunderstood, the lack of belonging and the impossibility of self-expression lead the Dike to attempt suicide. The suicide attempt is an internal tension in the diaspora. Adichie emphasizes how Dike's suicide attempt represents a milestone in Ifemelu's life as it comes at the transitional point between Ifemelu's experiences in diaspora and her being back to Nigeria. Reflecting on the racism suffered by Dike, Ifemelu also reflects on herself and, after her cousin improves, she decides to put into practice her return to Nigeria, to ensure her own sanity and the criteria of her own identity.

The young diasporic subject breaks racial binarism to adapt to the diasporic situation. Ginika is more adapted than Uju to the diasporic situation. Ginika immigrates younger and integrates more easily than older ones such as Uju. However, the narrative itself helps to dissolve this binarism by noting that Ginika's mother is American. She is half American, so it is easier for her to adapt in the host land of diaspora. Therefore, she feels at ease amid new friendships in the host land. Uju's confusion is partly due to the contrast between her life in Nigeria as a mistress of a military

general and the new life of a worker in diaspora. Uju's dissatisfaction also stems from the loss of a wealthy lifestyle and the radical change in social class.

CONCLUSION

One can conclude that Adichie, in *Americanah*, proves that cultural identification is a gender issue. The novel contributes to the process of braiding the cultural identity of the female, immigrant, and black protagonists, with typical diasporic conflicts and tensions. Ifemelu is a representation of a female subject who deals with her limitations and setbacks in diaspora, in the way she survives adversity. Furthermore, the focus on the black woman brings out specific aspects for their self-esteem and emancipation. Other aspects of the cultural identity of black women in diaspora include the acquisition of voice and visibility and financial independence. *Americanah* contributes to the reflection on cultural identification by approaching the diasporic situation of African black women.

The novel intertwines the stories of hair braiding and the identities of diasporic African female subjects to infuse a series of cultural meanings in hair braiding. The novel traces a clash between the female protagonist's accommodation and resistance to the tensions suffered in the host land of diaspora. The female hair ends up serving us as a metaphor for the condition of the black woman having to "whiten" to ascend socially. The analysis of the novel shows the way in which one culture seeks to supersede another, erasing the identity traits of cultures originating from marginalized societies, such as those coming from the African continent. Through the analysis, hair braiding, and mobility are introduced as instruments of building African black female identity in transit. The novel addresses the identity formation of the black female diasporic

subjects in terms of body/ hair and mobility. Ifemelu represents the black female diasporic subjects, young and intelligent, who overcome barriers and ends up successful, personally and professionally.

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