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CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *AMERICANAH*:
(RE)OPENING A CONVERSATION
ABOUT RACE AND BEAUTY

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Abstract

The purpose of this dissertation is to comment upon Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013). The analysis of the novel will focus on "race" as a social construction, which will enable to explore how beauty, hair texture and skin colour are connected to the current reality of race in the United States. In order to do that, I will provide a short account of how the definition of "race" has changed through time, and the analysis of the novel will illustrate its connotations in the twenty-first century. The following section will use a black feminist approach so as to examine how Black hair and colourism still matter in terms of beauty and success, and how the social media are a key player in either the reinforcement or the obliteration of images that still promote white ideals of beauty in increasingly multi-ethnic and multicultural environments.

1. Introduction

It was during my last year in my degree in English Linguistic and Literary Studies at *Universidade da Coruña* that I came into contact for the first time with African American literature. In a module titled *Variedades do Inglês*, taught by Prof. Carolina Núñez Puente, the students were introduced to African American English through one of Zora Neale Hurston's short stories, "Sweat." As part of the assessment, I decided to write a short essay on African American English, focusing on Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*.¹ In the paper, aside from describing the linguistic characteristics of this variety of English, I focused on how mixed-race individuals question racial boundaries and race² as sociocultural constructs. This was my first introduction to the topic of race, which was further expanded the following semester in *Literatura Norteamericana nos seus Textos*, taught by Prof. María Frías Rudolphi. The module focused on writings from slavery times (e.g. Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs) and segregation (e.g. Richard Wright and James Baldwin), texts written by African American female writers until the 1970s (e.g. Lorraine Hansberry and Toni Morrison) and Afro-Caribbean women (e.g. Jamaica Kincaid and Edwidge Danticat).

In most of the modules for the Master's Degree in *Advanced English Studies and its Applications* I also decided to focus on texts written by Afro-Caribbean and African American writers. Thus, I wrote about patriarchy, gender roles and sexuality in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, about simultaneity of oppression (gender, class, race, and sexuality) in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*, and, with the topic of my

¹ *The Help*, published in 2009, is about the lives of African American women working as domestics for white people during the 1960s in Mississippi. It was adapted to film in 2011.

² "Race" will be used throughout this essay in order to refer to the term as a concept and the way in which its meaning has evolved over the centuries, whereas *race* will be preferred when dealing with the term as an existing reality.

dissertation in mind, about beauty and race in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*.

Around November 2013 I had already decided that I wanted to work on race and I was then introduced to *Americanah* by my tutor, Prof. María Frías Rudolphi. Through the book, I discovered that there are many more aspects to race that I had not even considered until I finished reading the novel, such as the importance of hair and skin hue for African American women, and the ways in which race can affect a person's life. What finally pushed me to work on the topic of race and beauty was the performance of Kenyan actress Lupita Nyong'o in Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave*,³ and her appearance in numerous television shows and magazines. Most of the articles and news features tie in with the content of the novel in terms of skin colour,⁴ hair and beauty. Nyong'o was named *People's* "Most Beautiful Person of 2014,"⁵ and the meaning of such a mention can only be understood if one is well aware of the relationship that exists between race and beauty, which is why the topic of this research project still matters in 2014; it constitutes an ongoing and controversial conversation in African American media and websites, and also in the social media.

The main purpose of this dissertation is to provide a close reading of some of the topics dealt with in *Americanah*, such as the notions of race, beauty and the relationship that exists between the two. In order to understand how these two terms may be conflicting, I will provide a historical contextualization of how the concept of race developed in the US and how African American and black communities are still affected by centuries-old notions in

³ Nyong'o's performance has been described as "shattering" in *Entertainment Weekly*, since "[s]he goes to a place of private terror and communion beyond pain." The film has been regarded as "stark, visceral and unrelenting, *12 Years a Slave* is not just a great film but a necessary one" (Maclnnes).

⁴ The use of the spellings *colour/color* and *colourism/ colorism* is not due to a lack of consistency on my part, but due to the fact that I write with British spellings and that the bibliography I have used was mainly written in American English, which is why the American spelling only appears in direct quotations from the text.

⁵ Lupita Nyong'o is the first dark-skinned woman to ever be named "Most Beautiful" by *People Magazine*, other women of colour who have been on the cover are Halle Berry, Jennifer Lopez and Beyoncé, all of them light-skinned (Marriott). Nyong'o is also famous for a speech given at an event for *Essence* magazine, in which she explained all the self-esteem problems she had to go through as a teenager due to her skin colour.

their everyday lives, from applying to a job, to buying fashion magazines. Thus, I will start the paper by providing a brief introduction to the author's background and her writings, and a short summary of the novel and the critical reception it has received so far. In section 3, I will provide an account of the developing and changing definition of the concept "race" throughout American history from the times of slavery until late twentieth century. Then, I will shift the focus to the novel, which offers an outsider's perspective on how race works in the US in the twenty-first century, and how it affects the lives of black people, American Blacks and Non-American Blacks. In the last section, I will be commenting on the impact of white standards of beauty within black and African American communities from a black feminist perspective which seeks to analyse how notions of beauty affect black women's self-esteem. The conversation will analyse how physical features such as hair texture and skin colour are loaded with meaning due to the racial history of the US and how the media contributes to either the reinforcement or the demystification of said meanings.

In summary, the aims of my paper are three: first, to examine how the voice of an outsider can evidence race to be a sociocultural construction in the US; second, to analyse how, nonetheless, race is still a reality that impacts notions of beauty and self-esteem; and third, to explore the contributions of the media to the conversation on race and beauty.

2. Why Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and why *Americanah*?

2.1. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has recently become a very popular writer with her short story collection *The Thing around Your Neck* (2009), and her novels *Purple Hibiscus* (2004), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2007) and *Americanah* (2013). She was born in Nigeria and shows a

close connection to her heritage throughout her works. Adichie is also attuned to the important role that Igbo history and language play in her life. She is a great admirer of Nigeria's most renowned writer, Chinua Achebe, and she acknowledges that the way in which she thinks about literature could not have happened without writers like him: "But because of writers like Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye I went through a mental shift in my perception of literature. I realized that people like me, girls with skin the colour of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails, could also exist in literature. I started to write about things I recognized" (Adichie "Danger").

As a writer, Adichie has described her fiction as "social realism" and she adds, "I'm a human being, I live in the world, I'm sort of very politically aware and I have political positions, and surely my fiction reflects that" ("Conversation with Damian Woetzel"). In fact, she is well known because she recreates not only the historical past of her country of origin, but also because she builds her writings around stories told by some of her family members. Thus, *Purple Hibiscus* depicts the postcolonial legacy inherited by Nigeria after its independence from the United Kingdom, while *Half of a Yellow Sun* is set during the Biafra war in the late 1960s, a period with which she became familiar due to the information she got from her father, who experienced the war in his own flesh. Although *Americanah* is not a biographical novel, there are some episodes that relate to the author's stay in the United States, such as her experience of the differences in higher education between the two countries and an awareness of the importance and pervasiveness of the concept of "race" in the US. In Adichie's own words: "It didn't take me very long to realize that in America black was not necessarily a good thing, and that black came with many negative assumptions. And so I didn't want to be black. I'm not black. I'm Nigerian. I'm Igbo. I'm not black. Race was not an identity I was willing to take." ("Conversation with Damian Woetzel"). *Americanah* also constitutes a reflection of her learning process while she lived in the US, because she

became familiar with African American history, and thus came to terms with the meaning of racial identity: “Now... I’m very happily black” (*Tenement Talks*).

In her review of *Americanah*, Emily Donaldson contextualizes Adichie within “Nigeria’s rich literary tradition [which is] now making way for an exciting new wave of savvy, modern and outward-looking writers including Adichie, Igoni Barrett, Nnedi Okorafor and Teju Cole.” Besides, Adichie has been labelled an Afropolitan,⁶ a term applied to a new generation of African emigrants or the children of the former generation, whose family history points towards, usually, middle-class people who have lived, and therefore been raised and educated, both in African and Western countries. The most important feature of this generation is “a willingness to complicate Africa—namely, to engage with, critique, and celebrate the parts of Africa that mean most to them. Perhaps what mostly typifies the Afropolitan consciousness is the refusal to oversimplify; the effort to understand what is ailing Africa alongside the desire to honor what is wonderful, unique” (Tuakli-Wosornu).⁷ As mentioned earlier, Chimamanda Adichie is an author who is well aware of the history of her country and her own family (as reflected in her novels) and very vocal about current issues, such as Boko Haram or Nigeria’s new anti-gay legislation. A reference to Afropolitanism is clearly visible in the novel, albeit in a slightly satirical way, when Ifemelu, also an Afropolitan, is invited to attend a meeting of the Nigeropolitan Club after she returns to Lagos. Ifemelu describes the members of the exclusive Club as:

a small cluster of people drinking champagne in paper cups, at the poolside of a home in Osborne Estate, chic people, all dripping with savoir faire, each nursing a self-styled quirkiness – a ginger-coloured Afro, a T-shirt with a

⁶ A concept whose presence is increasing in international media in order to refer to a group of young cosmopolitan writers whose roots are in Africa. See Lee, Felicia R. “New Wave of African Writers with an Internationalist Bent.” *New York Times* 29 June 2014. Web. 30 June 2014.

⁷ Although penned under the name Taiye Tuakli-Wosornu, the coinage of the term “Afropolitan” is attributed to writer Taiye Selasi, author of the novel *Ghana Must Go* (2013), and member of the Afropolitan generation.

graphic of Thomas Sankara, oversize handmade earrings that hung like pieces of modern art. Their voices burred with foreign accents. (*Americanah* 407)

Adichie has become popular not only because of her novels or her opinion articles about the current reality of Nigeria, but also due to the popularity of her TED Talks:⁸ “The Danger of a Single Story” (2009) and “We Should All Be Feminists” (2013), the latter sampled by singer Beyoncé Knowles in her song “Flawless.” In her first talk, Adichie reflects on the importance of her African upbringing and the way in which the colonial past of Nigeria affected her perception of the world and literature, something that changed when she discovered that there are several sides to the same story. Thus, in order to avoid misunderstandings among people or countries, an understanding of where people come from and the different aspects that affect their lives (cultural, historical, economic, racial, etc.) is needed. In “We Should All Be Feminists,” Adichie reflects on the inequalities that still touch many women and the dangers of gendered education and upbringing, which affect not only women, but men. Adichie also states the importance of self-discovery and identity, which is reflected in the character of Ifemelu, the protagonist of the novel analyzed here, who defies gender expectations and the idea of what femininity should be, for she unapologetically enjoys her sexuality.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is still promoting *Americanah*, and divides her time between the United States and Nigeria, where she teaches a Summer writing workshop. She is currently preparing the release of a short eBook on feminism, in which she draws on her own experience in order to provide an account of how the gender divide still matters in the twenty-first century.

⁸ TED is a nonprofit organization “devoted to spreading ideas, usually in the form of short, powerful talks (18 minutes or less). TED began in 1984 as a conference where Technology, Entertainment and Design converged, and today covers almost all topics – from science to business to global issues – in more than 100 languages. Meanwhile, independently run TEDx events help share ideas in communities around the world” (*TED*).

2.2. *Americanah* (2013)

While the novel has been described by the author herself as an “unapologetically old-fashioned love story” (*Babel*), Adichie has also ascribed her writing within the tradition of social realist fiction. Her claim is justified by the fact that she has decided to discuss aspects of the immigrant reality that do not only include the economic side of it, but also offer a description of the attitudes in the United States towards issues such as race, immigration and beauty, and the impact that such nations have on the psyche of the protagonist, Ifemelu. Thus, the novel focuses on the construction (both individual and societal) of identity in the context of immigration, but also on economic status, skin colour, hair, education and *blogging*. Ifemelu’s experience as an outsider in the US undoubtedly helps to explore all these different issues while enabling a cross-cultural conversation about what it means to be black and African black in America. Indeed, the protagonist of the novel, Ifemelu, an undergraduate student who moves to the US in order to finish her degree, has to learn how to live in a society with a racial reality that was unknown to her in Nigeria. She uses a blog titled *Raceteenth or Various Observations about American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black* in order to reflect the daily strives and some of the racial issues that still very much affect the African American community, and the impact that these have on other non-white minorities, as it will be commented on later.

Americanah was well received after its release by both critics and audiences, and it was awarded the National Book Critics Circle Award in March, 2014, and shortlisted for the Baileys Women’s Prize for fiction in the same year. While some reviewers describe the novel as “pretentious” (Sacks) and “race-blind in its condescension,” or qualify the plot as “an excuse for the venting of opinions – and the opinions carry far more conviction than the storytelling does” (Maslin), the story is generally praised for the way in which it deals with

issues such as race, immigration or identity. Indeed, the majority of critics have described the novel as “a brilliant dissection of modern attitudes to race spanning three continents and touching on issues of identity, loss and loneliness” (Day) or “a brilliant exploration of being African in America” (Annand), while praising Adichie as “an extraordinarily self-aware thinker and writer, possessing the ability to lambaste society” (Peed). One of the most highlighted aspects of *Americanah* is the fact that, unlike most immigrant stories, the protagonist decides to return to Nigeria despite the success that she has achieved in America (Raboteau). The term “Americanah” (cf. “Americana”)⁹ is used in the novel in order to refer to those immigrants who have returned to Nigeria from the United States and have assimilated certain aspects of American culture (e.g. a new taste for food, the importance of customer service, a foreign accent) that are sometimes met with a degree of disapproval by fellow Nigerians.

As a narrative, *Americanah* helps readers, whether black or white, American or non-American, to discover a side to the immigrant’s experience in America and racial issues that still exist today. Furthermore, Ifemelu’s blog has been carefully threaded into the overall narrative structure, and it is used as an outlet by the main character in order to share her experience of blackness and race in the US, which eventually results in self-discovery and a reshaping of her identity. Even though the protagonist points to a general tendency of avoiding discussions on race and to assert that the concept belongs to the past, there are numerous statements found not only on the web, but also on the news and newspapers, that prove that race still matters today. For instance, during the last couple of years, two big productions from Hollywood have dealt with race and they have not escaped controversy. Quentin Tarantino’s *Django Unchained* (2013) was severely criticised because of the way in

⁹ “Americana” is defined in the online version of the Merriam-Webster dictionary as “materials concerning or characteristic of America, its civilization, or its culture.”

which the film deals with slavery, and also because a white director dared to choose such a sensitive event of America's history as a nation. In February, 2014, Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* was awarded the Oscar as Best Motion Picture, an incredible feat for the director and the cast that was not uncontroversial. While some criticized the fact that McQueen is not African American (he is Black-British), and showed a reluctance to face such a turbulent history, others claimed that the film was undeserving of such an award but, had it lost to the other nominees, the Academy would have been thought of as racist. *Americanah*, thus, continues the narrative of race in the US, this time in the twenty-first century, but it proves that the consequences of a racist past can still be felt today, and it also serves as an opportunity to reopen a centuries old conversation about race that is always left unfinished.

Besides, *Americanah* represents a further step in reopening this discussion to wider audiences, since the option rights for its cinematographic adaptation have been acquired by Lupita Nyong'o herself. The novel depicts an identity formation process which is considerably different than the one reflected upon in African American literature and history. *Americanah* deals with the meaning and the reality of being African in America, and the inevitability of having to adopt an individual and racial identity with which migrant populations may not necessarily be familiar or comfortable. Indeed, the novel can work in many levels as a key text in cross-cultural communications, because, even though the context of slavery and racial oppression is discussed in history books and the media, especially when referring to racial discrimination, there are aspects associated with blackness (e.g. colourism or the importance of hairdos) of which non-black people are usually unaware. This is precisely what this novel has done for me: it has opened my eyes to many new realities which are usually ignored from a mainstream, Euro-American standpoint. Therefore, I decided to work on why elements such as different hues or hairdos matter and how they are connected to the concept of race and its perception. The final element that prompted me to work on topics

such as skin colour hair texture, race and beauty is the proliferation of stories related to all these aspects since women such as Michelle Obama and Lupita Nyong'o have gained presence in the media.¹⁰ I believe that their appearance is essential in order to revise, challenge, and redefine beauty (and people's perception of it) on a global scale.

3. Untangling the knots of racial history

This section will focus on the origins and development of "race" in the United States, from its beginnings within the context of colonial slave trade, through its historical development after the Civil War, to the new status of the African American community after the civil struggles during the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s and 1970s. This tour through history will focus on how social and cultural critics have considered and approached the study of "race," from its origins, when it was thought a biological essence,¹¹ to its development as a social construct. Since most of the theoretical framework that will be handled in this section mainly focuses on the period predating the 1960s and the aftermath of the civil movements, the account of "race" in present day America will be

¹⁰ However, Michelle Obama and Lupita Nyong'o are only the latest exponent of the conflict that exists between ideals of beauty and self-esteem in African American communities. Literary texts such as Paule Marshall's short story "Reena," Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, or Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* are examples of the way in which black women have perceived themselves in relation to white beauty standards since the beginning of slavery.

¹¹ Thinking about race as a biological essence was an argument used until the 1960s in order to justify slavery and segregation. In "Of National Characters," David Hume stated: "I am apt to suspect the negroes, and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even an individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufacturers amongst them, no arts, no sciences" (qtd. in Garrett 171-2).

Further evidence of the attempt to classify human beings "in ascending order from apelike to human, African to European, black to white, female to male, savage to civilized" was the display of Saartjie Baartman's body throughout Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century (Harris-Perry 57). Even after her death, Baartman's body was mutilated and displayed in a museum. Her protruding buttocks and extended *labia minora* were used as an argument to prove the animal-like nature of black women in the nineteenth century.

studied by applying the concept of the social construct of race to the testimonies given by Ifemelu in *Americanah* on how race is lived and perceived today by both blacks and whites.

3.1. Historical Background of “Race” in the US

In 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois asserted in *The Souls of Black Folk* that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, America and the islands of the sea” (372). In fact, as proved by reading *Americanah*, one could argue that Du Bois’ statement can be also transposed to the twenty-first century. This assertion is corroborated by Wilkins, who states that “the only shortcoming of Du Bois’s baleful assessment is the implication that this most American of problems might be solved in this century. Today, only someone who consciously turns his back on the multiplicity of ways that race continues both to define and divide Americans could endorse such an optimistic projection” (3). Nonetheless, in order to understand how the colour problem is still a reality in the US today, it is necessary to trace its origins, an account that will start from the times of slavery. Indeed, any study on “race” in America cannot overlook the importance of slavery as the beginning of some of the evils that still ail the African American community and other non-white minorities in the United States.

In the beginning of the 17th century, the first Africans were brought to the new continent, and they had the same legal status as other European migrants who worked as indentured servants in the plantations. However, “by the 1690s Africans were reduced to chattel slavery as a result of numerous laws, customs and labor needs” (Baker 13). Race then became a reality, and it was used as a tool to reinforce the inferior status of enslaved Africans brought to America, thus contributing to the upkeep of an institution that greatly benefited from the work of free labourers. The physical appearance of the Africans, especially their skin

colour and hair texture, was interpreted by most beneficiaries of slavery as a statement of the inferiority, both moral and intellectual, of black slaves. As colours, black and white have always been defined in opposition to the other and were loaded with moral meanings, thus “white and black connoted purity and filthiness, virginity and sin, virtue and baseness, beauty and ugliness, beneficence and evil, God and the devil” (Jordan 7). An association with evil that is evidenced in Phillis Weathly’s poem “On Being Brought from Africa to America” (1773): “Some view our sable race with scornful eyes / “Their colour is a diabolic die.” All of the positive meanings associated with white were then used to describe the white population in the new colonies, whereas all the negative connotations would refer to slaves because of their skin colour (sable, diabolic, scornful).

After emancipation at the end of the American Civil War (1861-65), blacks no longer held the legal status of slaves, but their economic and social conditions were not improved, and most of the freed slaves had to either take part in the sharecropping¹² system of the South or migrate to northern states in order to become unskilled workers in factories. The period ranging from the Civil War to the beginning of the civil protests in the late 1950s constitutes a time in which segregation was rampant throughout the entire nation, and discrimination and violence were the main characteristics of a period in which horrifying actions were committed against the black population. Until the 1960s, segregation was reinforced in most Southern states by the Jim Crow laws,¹³ the actions of the Ku Klux Klan, and the widespread practice

¹² Under the sharecropping system former slaves would not receive wages for working an owner’s land; instead, “black families would rent small plots of land, or shares, to work themselves; in return, they would give a small portion of their crop to the landowner at the end of the year” (*History.com*). It was yet another way of reinforcing economic white dominance over the black population.

¹³ Jim Crow is a term generally used in order to refer to the segregation laws and customs which were put in practice in Southern and border states after Reconstruction and which continued to be practiced until the 1960s. The name comes from a seventeenth-century song performed by a white actor wearing blackface makeup and portraying Jim Crow, “an exaggerated, highly stereotypical black character” (Pilgrim). The term later on became an epithet that referred to any black person.

of lynching.¹⁴ At the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth, only three years after President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, blacks were thus suffering from great racial inequality despite the fact that the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States in 1868 established that "[n]o state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws" ("Constitution").

After almost a century of segregation and subjugation to the abusive Jim Crow system that was operating in the South—but was also echoed to a lesser extent in Northern States—non-violent protests and sit-ins began to take place as a means of claiming full citizenship, the end of segregation, and equal rights to those enjoyed by the white population. Rosa Parks' refusal to sit at the back of the bus, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, or the Greensboro Sit-Ins were some of the final catalysts that ignited the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the Black Power Movement during the 1970s. Even though black people eventually gained full voting rights and legal equality after the end of the Jim Crow laws, discrimination still exists in America, where race is considered a defining aspect of a person's identity and has, to a great extent, an important weight on the socioeconomic status of most people who are classified as belonging to a "racial minority." In *Americanah*, race is described as one of America's tribalisms, along with class, ideology and region (184-5), thus evidencing that race is still an operating factor in today's America.

This account of some of the most well-known events in African American history is a mere overview and may seem rather simplistic. Nonetheless, the aim of this section is to highlight some of the most significant dates and moments of black history in the United States

¹⁴ In *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay toward and Autobiography of a Race Concept*, W.E.B. Du Bois described lynching as "a continuing and recurrent horror during [his] college days: from 1885 through 1894, seventeen hundred Negroes were lynched in America" (575).

in order to give an account of how the concept of “race” originated and evolved throughout time. In the seventeenth century, slavery was also understood as a religious enterprise thought of as a means of saving the souls of the heathen. However, the economic benefits of the institution were soon evident, and the idea of “race” evolved throughout history in order to justify, and later on, reject the notion that the black population is inferior and therefore ought to be enslaved.

In this thread of thought, one of the first theories that attempted to justify the enslavement of both Native Americans and blacks is related to religious missions; slavery was seen as a necessary means in order to convert the heathen in the new continent. Gossett, for example, argues that this argument was of special relevance when slavery was attacked and criticized, especially during the nineteenth century, when the first voices in favour of abolition were being heard. The author asserts that the argument was rarely developed during the eighteenth century, when the institution stayed unchallenged (31). Nonetheless, despite the appeal to the missions that would eventually save the heathen’s soul, the nineteenth century inherited the rationalism of the Enlightenment, and the distinct physical features of the black population began to be studied as a means of accounting for the social differences between blacks and whites. Indeed, “throughout the nineteenth century the term ‘race’ increasingly came to be regarded, even in ordinary usage, as a scientific term” (Appiah 41).

Thus, in the nineteenth century, race started to be thought of as an essence that divided the population of the world into either white—the dominant group—or coloured minorities. Racialism was a key feature of the philosophy of this period, for it was widely believed that human beings could be divided “into a small number of groups, called ‘races,’ in such a way that the members of these groups shared certain fundamental, heritable, physical, moral, intellectual, and cultural characteristics with one another that they did not share with members of other race” (Appiah 54). “Race” was by then being discussed as a biological concept, as an

essence, for all the traits that distinguished one racial group from another were inheritable, whether they were physical or psychological features. A division among the races to which Darwin's theory of the evolution of the species was applied in order to prove that all the slaves that were brought from the African continent were a subspecies of men, thus justifying slave owners' rights to legally possess slaves as chattel.

Even while the institution of slavery was constitutionally legal, miscegenation took place in the plantations, for most slave owners or overseers would sexually abuse black women. In order to protect the economic system and make sure that the property of plantation owners increased, new laws were issued by which the offspring of these sexual encounters would follow the legal condition of the mother; the children would be born slaves. However, after the abolition of slavery, miscegenation increased, especially among freed slaves and poor, rural whites. Intermixing was widespread and those in favour of clearly defined racial lines promoted what is known as the "one-drop" or the "hypo-descent" rule, by which any person with a black ancestor was legally considered black. This was true even when the children presented clearly recognizable Caucasian features such as blue eyes, light skin or long, straight hair. Indeed, as stated by Azoulay, "once skin color lost its significance as a visible indicator of race only legal definitions of race could be relied on to protect and safeguard racial boundaries. Race as a legally binding category had to be reconceptualised and thus invented" (92).

During the first half of the twentieth century, the first voices against a biological conception of race were starting to discuss the term as a socio-historical construction in the United States. Such is the case of Du Bois, who discussed the fact that race was "a matter of culture and cultural history," and that no definition of the term was necessary in the nineteenth century, for it was a time in which society was made up by "mutually exclusive races," and having a black ancestor meant immediate classification as "a member of the

colored race” (*Dusk* 626-7 and 639). Also defending the idea of race as a social construct, writer and social critic James Baldwin claimed colour to be a “political reality” (345), and thus stated that, “the American Negro is a unique creation; he has no counterpart anywhere, and no predecessors” (334). The idea that race in the United States is a construct that functions on a social level is further reinforced when comparing the racial reality of the US to other South American countries that benefited from slavery.¹⁵ For instance, the editors of *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color in a New Millennium* (2013) highlight the fact that the “one-drop” rule is a very American phenomenon, for people in Brazil are not identified with a given racial status because of their ancestors, but because of the colour of their skin, which means that race in Brazil is largely understood as a biological concept and not a sociological one. Legally declaring any person with an African ancestor a Negro with the same legal status as the Africans brought in slave ships

became the basis of the “one-drop rule” [...] and it persists, at least informally, to this day. It has meant that in the United States, no matter how White-looking or White-acting someone of mixed ancestry was, or how little Blackness was actually in the person’s genetic makeup, that individual was to be considered Black. More than anything else this curious law shaped the emergence of an entirely different color-caste system than what developed throughout Central and South America. Its long-standing legacy is summed up by sociologist Edward Telles who has written that “miscegenation tends to whiten the population in Brazil whereas in the United States the same process blackens the population.” (Russell-Cole et al., ch. 1)

¹⁵ Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. explores the racial reality of some South American countries in a four-hour series titled *Black in Latin America*, (2011) where he visits countries such as Mexico, Peru, Cuba, Brazil, Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Professor Gates uses the series as the raw material for a homonymous book.

The previous statement by no means implies that racism does not exist in Latin America, but it does show that race and the history behind its meaning depends on the cultural, political and social reality of the context in which it is defined. Other authors supporting this vision of race as a social construct are Cornel West, Mark M. Smith, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Edouard Machery and Luc Faucher, and K. Anthony Appiah.

It should be pointed out that despite all the efforts of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements to achieve equal status for all US citizens legally, economically and socially, race is still a functioning social category that deeply affects the lives of people who are being discriminated against because of the colour of their skin. Moreover, it should be noted that despite all the claims asserting that the United States is a colour-blind country, the elections to the White House in 2008 proved reality to be otherwise. Indeed, Barack Obama's campaign was affected by comments related to his and his family's being part of the African American community and the stance that the elected president would have on issues related to race. In his autobiography, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, Obama claims that it is "the fissures of race that have characterized the American experience, as well as the fluid state of identity – the leaps through time, the collision of cultures – that mark our modern life" (vii). Obama's statement can be best illustrated when applied to how race becomes a part of someone's sense of identity and the way in which "becoming black" can affect a person's notion of self.

The way in which race is represented and dealt with in *Americanah* is closely connected to the idea of racial categories as being socio-historical constructs. The experience of Ifemelu as an outsider in the United States allows the reader to experience how adopting a new identity imposed by society and how a country's conception of a category such as race can affect the individual. This is reflected in issues related to the identity and sense of self, or

socioeconomic opportunities, but also to notions of self-worth and beauty that are broadcast in mass media.

3.2. Race in *Americanah*: representations of race in the twenty-first century

Americanah is a clear statement that race still matters in nowadays America. While the novel is fiction, it should be stated that some of the issues, especially those related to being black in America, somehow echo the personal experience that writer Adichie lived in the United States as a black person. This section will explore the notion of race as a socio-cultural construct as evidenced in the novel, and it will aim to account what “being black” really means, and the effects and consequences that race may have in (re) shaping a person’s identity.

Since the very beginning of the novel, the reader is already told that race is a key element that will be discussed throughout the text since, as mentioned earlier, Ifemelu writes a lifestyle blog titled *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes*¹⁶) *by a Non-American Black* (*Americanah* 4). The very title of the blog, even though quite long for a blog and not very catchy, already reflects some of the topics related to race that will be dealt with in the story. The name foregrounds a conversation about the racial history and reality of the United States and also about identity and the difference between African Americans (i.e. American Blacks) and American Africans (i.e. Non-American Blacks).

¹⁶ The term used to refer to the black population in the US has changed over time. In the 1970s, the terms “African American” and “black” (especially with the Black Power Movement) were preferred over “Negro” and “coloured.” The epithet “nigger” has risen in usage among blacks, especially within the world of hip-hop, as a way of reclaiming a word that has so many connotations in the racial history of the US (Hill).

Adichie has clarified the definition of both terms in interviews where she has been asked about the difference between the two, to which she responded that she “kind of made it up in the novel, but it reflects a real difference, because African American is a word I would use to describe the person of African descent whose ancestors were brought forcefully to the US as slaves. And an American African is a person of African descent who came, or whose family came, more or less willingly” (Interview “*Americanah*”). While issues related to race affect both groups, the perception most white people have of them is significantly different. African immigrants are grouped as “black” in the United States, notwithstanding the fact that they may come from very different countries, with distinct colonial history, and that even tribal identity may be more important than a national denomination or their identification as “black.” However, it is precisely because Africans who have come “more or less willingly” to the United States have not inherited slavery as the main historical event that constitutes them as a community that they are seen as being less problematic. African Americans and American Africans are racially classified as “black,” yet they are not the same “kind” of black; Africans don’t “have all those issues” related to slavery (*Americanah* 168). For instance, Ifemelu feels that she is allowed to get away with discussing race on her blog because she is Nigerian, which means that “she was not sufficiently furious” in order for her statements to be taken as an attack on the legacy of slavery and its role in American history (345). As an outsider, she is allowed to discuss a topic with which most Americans are uncomfortable, yet, at the same time, she is classified as “black” in a social system where skin colour still matters.

The fact that terminology such as African American and American African exists can be used to prove that skin colour and other physical features are not enough in order to divide a country’s population into clear-cut divisions due to appearance. At the same time, their existence also proves that race in America is indeed a socio-historical construct whose effects

are felt across many different racial and ethnic groups, and even across immigrant minorities. For instance, Ifemelu states: “I came from a country where race was not an issue; I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America” (290). Ifemelu comes from Nigeria, where social class is a relevant operating social category, but that is not the case with race. Nigerian history is marked by colonial struggles and tribal conflicts, but race is not an issue because the country has not experienced racial tensions in the same way other African countries, such as South Africa, have experienced racial discrimination and segregation.

As argued by Machery and Faucher, concepts of race, just like beliefs or reasoning patterns, “are culturally transmitted” (1215). Such is the case of Ifemelu, who quickly learns to adjust to racial expectations after she discovers that race is coded in America. Her process of adapting to “being black” requires that she becomes acquainted with certain ways of noticing race that would have otherwise escaped her understanding. She shares her process of learning what it means to be black in the US in a blog post titled “To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: In America, You Are Black, Baby” that reads as follows:

Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop arguing. Stop saying I’m Jamaican or I’m Ghanaian. America doesn’t care. So what if you weren’t “black” in your country? You’re in America now. We all have our moments of initiation into the Society of Former Negroes. Mine was in a class in undergrad when I was asked to give the black perspective, only I had no idea what that was. So I just made something up [...] So you’re black, baby. And here’s the deal with becoming black: You must show that you are offended when such words as “watermelon” or “tar baby” are used in jokes, even if you don’t know what the hell is being talked about – and since you are a Non-American Black, the chances are that

you won't know [...] When you watch television and hear that a "racist slur" was used, you must immediately become offended. Even though you are thinking "But why won't they tell me exactly what was said?" Even though you would like to be able to decide for yourself how offended to be, or whether to be offended at all, you must nevertheless be very offended [...] Most of all, do not be angry. Black people are not supposed to be angry about racism. Otherwise you get no sympathy. This applies only for white liberals, by the way. Don't even bother telling a white conservative about anything racist that happened to you. Because the conservative will tell you that YOU are the real racist and your mouth will hang open in confusion. (220-1)

The post is written in a rather cynical and sarcastic tone, but overall it evidences many stereotypes associated with blackness in America of which people who were not born or raised in the US are totally unaware. Ifemelu clearly states that, after arriving to America, one "becomes black," and she therefore writes this post in order to help Non-American Blacks understand the process which she had to undergo. She had to learn why terms such as "watermelon"¹⁷ or "tar baby"¹⁸ are racist, and had to change some of her behaviour in order to avoid falling into stereotypes about black people with which she were not familiar, such as the "angry black." Also in the blogpost, Ifemelu shows that race, or at least all the meanings associated with being black in America, have nothing to do with biology, but are, however, part and parcel of the socialization process in the US as a child or an immigrant. Ifemelu argues that race is a reality that cannot be escaped and that has serious social and economic

¹⁷ Watermelons have racist connotations in the US because they are linked to the slave diet and "is the food most associated with the 19th and 20th century depictions of blacks as lazy simpletons" (Johnson). It is an image often represented in caricatures and highly stereotypical cartoons about the black population in the US, such as the "coon cards".

¹⁸ The term "tar baby" was made popular by an *Uncle Remus* story written by Joel Chandler Harris where one of the characters makes a tar doll in order to trap his enemy, since then it has come to mean "something from which it is nearly impossible to extricate oneself" (*Merriam-Webster*). It is a popular figure in African and African American folklore.

consequences, since America places blacks at the bottom of the social and racial ladder, thus conditioning their opportunities at benefiting from education, health care, or even equal employment conditions. Therefore, race in America becomes a reality that, in Du Bois' words, is "thrust upon" many, thus condition and shaping their lives (*Dusk* 573).

Ifemelu addresses the question of race as a construct even more directly when she poses her readers the question "Is race an invention or not?" (302). In another one of her posts, titled "Is Obama Anything but Black?" Ifemelu asserts that, "race is not biology; race is sociology. Race is not genotype; race is phenotype. Race matters because of racism. And racism is absurd because it's about how you look. Not about the blood you have. It's about the shade of your skin and the shape of your nose and the kink of your hair" (337). In this statement it is possible to compare the two attempts to define "race" as a biological reality – which the protagonist rejects – and as a social reality. This is closely linked to Azoulay's assertion about the importance of how a person identifies and is identified by other people in the process of building and consolidating one's identity. According to Azoulay, "[t]he question of physical appearance—phenotype—in the United States has had a significant impact on how people identify and are identified, as evidenced by the laws, social practices, and attitudes affecting people who in the past were involuntarily but officially categorized as 'Negro' or 'Colored'" (8). As suggested by Ifemelu's question in the blog, race may indeed be an invention, or at least it may have started out as an invention in order to justify a religious or economic enterprise and later used as a means to establish a segregated system. Nonetheless, it should be pointed out that the consequences of the "invention" are real and they affect racial minorities in economic, cultural, and social aspects.

Race as a reality affecting the lives of many is further reinforced by the general belief that race is a thing of the past that no longer holds any significance in the current social and political panorama. The fact that the United States is a self-proclaimed colour-blind nation

does in no way match the reality that many of its citizens are forced to experience on a daily basis. Race is an uncomfortable topic to deal with, but avoiding it is not going to make it disappear. Adichie has stated in numerous interviews that the problem of race in America could be better understood by having an honest conversation about race, and indeed this book is a perfect text to reopen such a debate. However, Adichie warns that, in order for the dialogue to be fruitful and informative, engaging with such a conversation requires a willingness to feel uncomfortable with such a topic, but also a willingness to acknowledge one's own privileges (*Chicago Tribune* Interview 10:55). The reluctance to talk about race is felt throughout many layers of American society, but it is urgent to start the dialogue to understand some of the issues that are still damaging and creating conflict within African American and other non-white communities in the US. Undoubtedly, one of the many arenas in which race is really conflicting is the way in which beauty has been represented for centuries as being mainly a white domain. The next sections of this paper will attempt to explore how issues of beauty and race intersect in the media and the collective psyche of America as a nation and its consequences for the self-esteem of a people who have to deal with the legacy of a four-hundred-year-old notion.

4. Reopening the discussion about Black beauty

Even despite the fact that race is discussed as a social construct it is undoubtedly a visual reality that affects the lives of many people who are labelled as being African American or as any other racial minority. As stated by Todorov, “physical characteristics (which, unlike ‘races,’ do exist) – namely, differences in skin color, pilosity, and body structure” are simply visible features to which meaning is attached (371). Assumptions linked

to physical difference stem from the widespread belief during slavery times that dark skin and African features were a sign of lack of intelligence, ugliness and evil, whereas light skin represented purity, civilization and beauty (Keith 27). The following sections aim to explain how all these assumptions about black physical features, as opposed to Eurocentric ideals of beauty, have been assimilated by and still have a deep impact in African American and non-white communities in general, and on black women and their self-esteem in particular. Hair texture, the shade of one's skin or certain beauty practices may seem trivial topics more likely to be dealt with in fashion and beauty magazines rather than academic discussions. Nonetheless, all of these elements partake in broader conversations about race and oppression, and they appear almost on a daily basis in lifestyle magazines such as *Ebony*¹⁹ and *Essence*,²⁰ and in news sites, such as *The Root*,²¹ and the section "Black Voices" in *The Huffington Post*, thus proving that issues related to "Black beauty" still matter today.

The two most visible features that indicate race are skin colour and hair texture, along with other facial features, such as thick lips and broad noses. The former two, however, have acquired significant relevance as elements that signal either race pride or, most often, race shame, and pose indeed controversial questions related to the representation of these features in the media or the marketing of products aimed at smoothing strong physical characteristics. In order to analyse how the meanings associated with race are undoubtedly linked to physical appearance, I will try to provide an account of the social importance that such elements have in terms of beauty representations and its effects on the self-esteem of non-white communities, especially focusing on women. The theoretical framework used in the following

¹⁹ Published for the first time in 1945, *Ebony* is considered "the black equivalent of *Life*" and its "editorial featured African American stars, promoted Black Pride and railed against the notion that black beauty was inferior" (Arogundade, ch. 4).

²⁰ *Essence* is an African American lifestyle magazine that, like *Ebony*, seeks to celebrate black women's beauty" (Arogundade, ch. 6).

²¹ *The Root*, founded in 2008 "under the leadership of Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr.", is a site focused on news, opinion and cultural events that seeks to spark discussion about topics related to the African American community, and it is open to everyone who wishes to submit an essay to the website (*The Root*).

sections about skin colour and hair texture will focus on black and African American feminism as well as on feminist studies on the body.

Barbara Smith was one of the pioneers that have championed black literary criticism by claiming that a “Black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers is an absolute necessity” (“Black Feminist” 9). In the United States, feminism is linked since its very origins to abolitionist movements, for it used the reality of racial oppression and slavery as a means to describe the oppression of middle-to-upper-class white women. It should be noted, though, that black women are subjected to a systematic oppression that does not merely consist in the addition of the effects of different forms of oppression such as gender, race, class, and sexuality, but in the different ways in which they intersect and mark the individual experiences of non-white women.

The tensions between feminism and race are palpable and have been since the beginning of the formulation of black feminist thought precisely because systems of oppression are seen as separate categories and not as intertwined realities that work together. The most recent exponent of this debate, as reflected in *Americanah*, was in vogue during the presidential primaries of the Democratic Party in 2008. Who should black women vote: Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama? Just like Ifemelu, many women were torn between supporting their racial or their gender identity. In the “Introduction” to *Home Girls*, Barbara Smith attempts to demystify some of the myths associated with black feminism, and the main focus is precisely found in the intersection between gender and race. Smith claims: “the concept of the simultaneity of oppression” is one of the most important contributions of black feminist thought and it is still at the core of its understanding of politics (xxxii). In the same

thread of thought, in “A Black Feminist Statement,” The Combahee River Collective²² asserted that

The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face. (261)

Indeed, the stereotypes and images representing black women have always followed a different path than those referring to their white counterparts. The images are usually grounded on race and gender, but most often also include nuances that also reflect class and sexual oppression. Patricia Hill Collins states that, due to “the ubiquitous nature of controlling images, it should not be surprising that exploring how Black women construct social realities is a recurring theme in Black feminist thought” (93). This analysis not only involves exploring how black women construct images about themselves, but also analysing the way in which representations of black women created and transmitted in mainstream cultural environments affect how black women see themselves. To start with, the traditional images associated with black women are the Mammy, the Jezebel, and the Sapphire,²³ which “are meaningfully connected to twenty-first-century portrayals of black women in public discourse” (Harris-

²² The Combahee River Collective was made up of black feminists who have worked together since 1974. Their “Black Feminist Statement” dates April 1977.

²³ In her book *Sister Citizen*, Harris-Perry analyses the origins of these myths and its current presence in the media by analysing how they were used to attack the personal and public figure of Michelle Obama.

Perry 45). These images represent the asexual and devoted servant, the hyper-sexualized, and the angry black woman respectively.

Aside from these so-called mythical images associated to black women, black feminism also seeks to understand the creation and distribution of beauty ideals in the media. Thus, feminist and social activist bell hooks sustains that mass media contributes to “the institutionalization of specific images, representations of race, of blackness that support and maintain the oppression, exploitations, and overall domination of all black people” (*Black Looks* 2). Hence, while white women tend to be represented as the epitome of beauty and desirability both within white and (most) non-white communities, black women are usually measured against images of white beauty. Hair texture and skin colour are the two elements to which most relevance is associated as an impediment for attaining or approximating these beauty ideals. Even though physical features also affect men, they have larger implications for women since, as Hunter argues, “beauty operates as a social capital for women.” In this fashion, [w]omen who possess this form of capital (beauty) are able to convert it into economic capital, educational capital, or another form of social capital” (177). The implications of the importance of skin colour or hair texture are different for black women since they are placed at the heart of a system in which different modes of oppression are operating simultaneously. Gender, race, social class, and sexuality work together in formulating images of black women.

In *Unbearable Weight*, Susan Bordo focuses on the importance of the body as a “text” in which cultural practices can be read, and also as “a *practical*, direct locus of social control” (165). Bordo states that the female body is in pursuit of a feminine ideal, which most often is achieved through “self-modification” in order to accommodate to standards of beauty most highly regarded by mass media: white ideals of beauty. She also highlights the role of the media in promoting traditional gender relations and describing a “contemporary aesthetic

ideal for women, an ideal whose obsessive pursuit has become the central torment of many women's lives" (167). In the volume, she explains that the ideas present in the media have a homogenizing purpose, which "means that they will smooth out all racial, ethnic, and sexual 'differences' that disturb Anglo-Saxon, heterosexual expectations and identifications" (24-5). Furthermore, Bordo goes on to clarify that these ideals function as a mirror image or model "against which the self continually measures, judges, 'disciplines,' and 'corrects' itself" (25). Indeed, as it shall be argued, the fundamental role of images (re)produced by the media is to work as models of what is deemed beautiful and to represent an ideal towards which one can aspire in order to fulfil social expectations of what is deemed beautiful. Indeed, one of the main concerns of black feminism is the representation of females and the female body in popular culture, since it not only evidences oppressive cultural practices, but allows for a deconstruction of unattainable ideals that affect women.

Thus, beauty is not a mere concept that belongs to magazines, advertising or runways; beauty has a real and palpable worldwide impact, and it causes many women to aspire to an ideal that is far from their possibilities. As we have already mentioned, beauty became a prominent feature of black politics during the Black Power Movement of the 1970s under the "Black is beautiful" slogan, attributed to Stokely Carmichael, which promoted a revision of the aesthetics that governed mainstream culture: "Can you begin to get the guts to develop criteria of beauty for dark people? Your nose is boss, your lips are thick, you are black and you are beautiful. Can you begin to do it so that you are not ashamed of your hair?" (qtd. in Arogundade, ch. 5). Even though beauty is said to be in the eye of the beholder, according to bell hooks our perception of the world is shaped by "white supremacist values and aesthetics, a way of looking and seeing the world that negates [women's] value" (*Black Looks* 3). As happens with race, one's notions of what is to be considered beautiful are usually affected by a socialization process that includes the media and the images therein represented. The media

is not the only responsible entity during this process, for family and social circles also transmit the same notions from one generation to the next. For instance, the images of beauty that are still being portrayed in the media were already popular during the nineteenth century, and white skin has always been deemed a marker of beauty and class privilege. The prevalence of white beauty in western history is clearly illustrated in Umberto Eco's *Historia de la Belleza*, where the author does an overview of art history since Ancient Greece until the end of the twentieth century, a period dominated by Eurocentric standards of beauty, as proven by the lack of images representing non-white women throughout the volume. According to Eco, it was not until late twentieth century that mass media stop broadcasting a homogenized ideal of beauty (426).

As I try to show here, beauty is an extremely relevant concept for the African American community because it illustrates one of the aspects that can be associated with Du Bois' concept of the "double-consciousness." Issues of self-esteem are at stake when people have "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (*Souls* 364). Even though beauty is rarely considered a key or even relevant factor in a revolutionary movement such as the Black Power Movement, it became a most necessary statement for a people who had arrived to a new land more than three hundred years ago and were stripped of any sense of self-worth or pride in their "Blackness." A redefinition of the yardstick by which to measure oneself in terms of beauty and the slogan "Black is beautiful" "[were] as revolutionary as most anything could be" (Byrd and Tharps, ch. 3). Thus, the 1970s meant a revolution in black aesthetics and beauty practices, and a new mirror image to which one could be compared. Nonetheless, "within the binary thinking that underpins intersecting oppressions, blue-eyed, blond, thin White women could not be considered beautiful without the Other—Black women with African features of dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky

hair” (Collins 89). Some of the main issues dealt with in *Americanah* prove that the pervasiveness of unattainable, white beauty standards is still an issue in the twenty-first century and that it matters on a global scale. The immigrant perspective offered by Ifemelu proves that women in Nigeria, and by extension any other African country, are also subjected to western standards of beauty, which are mainly due to the country’s colonial past and to the images reproduced by the media.

The role of the media is, therefore, key in order to understand the impact of these widespread images, which are popular and have been assimilated by audiences and readerships worldwide. In *Writing Beyond Race*, bell hooks deals with mass media as taking part in a process of “hidden socialization,” and claims that the media is “the most powerful covert teacher of white supremacy” (12). Indeed mainstream, white-dominated media tends to promote Eurocentric beauty ideals. On the other hand, there are Afrocentric magazines that try to offer alternative images of and to African American communities, such as *Ebony* and *Essence*. The goal of these magazines is to promote a black beauty ideal among the community and eradicate the notion of self-hatred or race shame, so that black people can begin to feel comfortable in their own skin. However, the editorial line clashed against the advertisements found inside said magazines, for a great part of their income came from companies that manufactured and sold either skin-bleaching or hair-straightening products, which came in direct contradiction with the promotion of Afrocentric beauty ideals.

The internet has also played an important part in the diffusion of images that are used to (re)define beauty. For instance, most of the content of printed magazines can be accessed online,²⁴ thus the form of advertising has changed: the different sections in the magazines may promote different products. Also, since most of them are lifestyle magazines, it is more

²⁴ Due to the difficulty and tardiness of trying to obtain paper copies, most of the articles from any of these magazines that will be referred to throughout the paper will be taken from the online version, whose content can now be accessed worldwide in a matter of mere seconds.

than likely that they will advertise or write reviews about certain products destined to hair or skin care, and the comment sections even allow readers to exchange their opinions on the results they obtained from said products. Also, social media and content sharing websites have become a target of advertising companies due to their potential for promoting a certain brand image or a given product to prospective buyers. *Twitter*,²⁵ *YouTube*,²⁶ and blogs²⁷ and the emergence of it-girls,²⁸ as well as music videos and celebrity news are new platforms, some of which try to overcome centuries-old images, while others simply reinforce them.

The next two subsections will attempt to explain how beauty, skin colour, hair, self-esteem, images in the media, and social media converge in *Americanah* in order to discuss a reality that affects many women worldwide. By focusing on skin first and hair texture later on, I will attempt to provide a concise background that explains the importance of said elements in terms of beauty history and culture, and then use resources available through news sites or social media that may illustrate the aftereffects and consequences of media-produced images in today's world.

²⁵ Widely popular microblogging site in which opinions are shared quickly, and it allows for direct contact between brands and consumers, or between the spokespersons or famous people representing a brand and their fans.

²⁶ This video sharing website allows for the search of videos according to topics. Tutorials, short videos in which products are reviewed and the protagonist of the video “selflessly” describes the process and provides advice, have become an important target of brands and companies because of the elevated number of viewers and the possibility to reach a younger demographic.

²⁷ Blogs have become a sort of online journal in which people share their experiences about different topics. In the case of beauty-enhancing products, manufacturing companies may be interested in the reviews and comments of some of the most popular *bloggers*.

²⁸ “It-girls” are highly influential personalities in social media, with a significant amount of followers with whom they share their thoughts and opinions on beauty products, among others.

4.1. Bleaching the dark spots: skin colour

4.1.1. Colourism

Colourism is a term coined by feminist author Alice Walker in her essay collection *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist²⁹ Prose*, in a chapter titled "If the Present Looks Like the Past, What does the Future Look like?" A. Walker defined "colorism" as a "prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color." In turn, Hunter describes colourism as a necessary element, along with racism, in order to maintain a social stratification according to skin colour. Despite the fact that these terms are not interchangeable, they are, nonetheless, interconnected. According to Hunter, she

use[s] the term "racism" to refer to the U.S. system of prejudice, discrimination, and institutional power that privileges whites and oppresses various people of colour, including African Americans and Mexican Americans. Racism is based on a flawed conception of race as a biological, inherent identity, when in fact it is a social construction whose meaning changes over time, history and place [...], and use[s] the term "colorism" to describe the system that privileges the lighter skinned over the darker-skinned people within a community of color [...] The connection between racism and colorism is evidenced in the fact that colorism would likely not exist without racism, because colorism rests on the privilege of whiteness in terms of phenotype, aesthetics, and culture. However, it is also useful to see these two

²⁹ "Womanist" a key concept for black feminism coined by Alice Walker and defined as follows: "From *womanish* (Opp. Of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, 'You acting womanish,' i.e., like a woman." Walker states that a womanist is "[c]ommitted to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female" and that, "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender."

processes as distinct because people of color may experience racism in different ways depending on the color of their skin. (175-6)

In turn, colourism³⁰ or “a pattern of privilege based on skin color” was labelled by Maxine Leeds Craig as “pigmentocracy” (ch. 2). Craig includes notions of power in her definition of colourism because “lighter-skinned African Americans had greater chances in both marriage and employment markets, class stratification within African American communities was intimately intertwined with color stratification.” Historically, the importance of light skin stems from the privileges that lighter slaves had, for they were usually chosen to work in the big house instead of in the fields, and also because in other slave societies, such as the ones in the Caribbean and the French quarters in New Orleans, creoles or people of mixed ascent enjoyed a certain degree of social and economic privileges. Such is the case of Patsey in the film *12 Years a Slave*, who has to work from sunup to sundown in the fields picking cotton, and even though she may not be considered beautiful by her owner, she is still sexually used and abused by her brutal owner.

Since the Middle Ages and until the 1920s, white skin was a sign of privilege, especially among women, for it was used as evidence of the economic power of social groups who did not have to work under the sun. These very privileged ladies were most often taken as models for paintings and the traditional white standard of beauty that favours blue eyes and blond hair can be traced even further back than this period. Along these lines, in *Black Beauty* we find that “[for] centuries porcelain skin had been the paradigm of European beauty and chastity, and right up until the 1920s tanned white skin was associated with poverty and servitude” (Arogundade, ch. 3). However, despite the fact that tanned skin became a popular

³⁰ Colourism is reflected in certain social practices in order to determine whether a person is light enough in order to be considered beautiful or to be admitted into religious groups, for instance. Such is the case of the “paper bag test” which involved “placing an arm inside a brown paper bag, and only if the skin on the arm was lighter than the color of the bag would a prospective member be invited to attend church services” (Russell-Cole, Wilson and Hall, ch. 3).

trend among white women, black women were still subjected to stereotypes related to their skin colour; until the Black Power Movement the words “Black” and “beautiful” had rarely been uttered in the same sentence.

Along with social privileges, and since light-skinned people among the black population were the ones who were closest to white beauty ideals, skin colour became a key element in the definition of notions of beauty and self-esteem within African American and black communities. A documentary film titled *Dark Girls* collects the testimonies of women of colour from different parts of the world and their struggles with the stifling effects that notions of beauty related to white skin and lightness have on dark-skinned women. The film evidences the pre-eminence of the “white supremacist framework,” where colour and one’s approximation to a white ideal matter, is the yardstick used to value physical features around the world. Many of the women’s accounts describe how the media affected their sense of identity and their perception of self, since the images therein portrayed only evidenced the differences in skin colour and other features that existed between the women on the television and the person they saw every time they looked themselves in the mirror. The contrast between the two images only contributed, in most cases, to reinforce an idea of self-hatred, and to boost the marketability and increasing the sales rates of products that promised women they would look like the “beauties” on the screen.

Thus, all of these notions associated to skin colour, beauty and self-esteem are indeed further reinforced by mass media such as the cinema, the television, and magazines. Beauty magazines have become increasingly popular since they offer women advice in different areas such as dieting, fashion, make-up and hair care. However, even though some of the most famous magazines are sold worldwide or within multicultural countries, they sometimes offer a very limited representation of non-white women. Such is Ifemelu’s complaint in *Americanah* when she rebuffs the absurdity of “how women’s magazines forced images of

small-boned, small-breasted white women on the rest of the multi-boned, multi-ethnic world of women to emulate” (*Americanah* 178). She is even rebuked by her white boyfriend because he claims that the issue of *Essence* magazine that she had bought is “racially skewed” since only black women are featured in its pages (294).

In order to disprove his argument, she buys issues from different fashion and beauty magazines and after closely examining the images therein represented she complains: “So three black women in maybe two thousand pages of women’s magazines, and all of them are biracial or racially ambiguous, so they could also be Indian or Puerto Rican or something. Not one of them is dark. Not one of them looks like me, so I can’t get clues for make-up from these magazines” (295). Throughout the argument, Ifemelu explains how she can’t follow most of the magazine’s instructions since she can’t pinch her chicks for colour; the hair products for “*everyone*” are only designed for blondes, brunettes and redheads, but not women with kinky hair; her eyes are not blue, green, or hazel, so she can’t follow make-up tips; the pink lipstick advertised as universal is only “universal if you are white;” and the only progress is the fact that there is “one generic chocolate shade” of foundation, while there are seven different shades for white skin. She concludes her argument by asking “Do you see why a magazine like *Essence* even exists?” (295).

There are two characters in Adichie’s novel *Americanah* that exemplify the importance of light skin for black women, since it the most important physical feature that may define them as beautiful. They are thought of as beautiful because of the hue of their skin. One of them is Ginika, Ifemelu’s friend. She has “caramel skin and wavy hair” and she is voted Prettiest Girl in her Nigerian highschool because she is “a half-caste” (55-56). The other character is Kosi, Obinze’s wife, who is always praised for her beauty and light skin, compliments that result in her taking pleasure “in being mistaken for mixed-race” (22). Unlike Kosi, Ginika is aware of the importance of being mixed-race and claims that other

girls were more deserving of that prize, but all the boys were chasing her because of the lightness of her skin (123-4). Thus, skin lightness does translate into social capital such as being found beautiful and attractive by men, which may result in marriage.

4.1.2. Skin Bleaching

While Ifemelu complains about the absence of a fair representation of women who look like her in the media, she seems to be quite at ease with her skin colour throughout the entire novel, except when it implies racial discrimination. This is not, however, the case of many women, and also men, of colour around the world, who try to escape their blackness by approximating a model emerged from a homogenized idea of beauty. While one of the protagonists of Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, a young little girl named Pecola, who prayed every day to have blue eyes and thus becoming able "to rise out of the pit of her blackness" (138), many women's alternative to prayer is the use of skin lightening products or undergoing skin lightening procedures.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Martinique-born Afro-French psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon deals with issues related to blacks' inferiority complex in the French Antilles and their strives in order to become part of the white world. Fanon already describes the importance of whitening oneself in order to meet white standards and thus force the white man to recognize the black's humanity. This is a process that he describes as "lactification," and it consists not only on the whitening of one's body, but also of one's mind (28-9). Behind this notion, Fanon explores the meanings associated to the adjective "white," which are richness, beauty, and intelligence, whereas the verb "whiten" connotes "saving" or "improvement" of the race. Already in the 1950s Fanon states that "certain laboratories have been researching for a denegrification serum. In all seriousness they have been rinsing out

their test tubes and adjusting their scales and have begun research on how the wretched black man could whiten himself and thus rid himself of the burden of this bodily curse” (91). Today, Fanon’s “denegrification serum” has been transformed into skin bleaching creams and skin lightening procedures that seek to help blacks get rid of all the assumptions that come with the colour of their skin.

These so-called “ethnicity-altering cosmetics” usually obtain results by destroying one’s melanin and thus whitening the person’s skin (Arogundade, ch. 6). However, it should be noted that, despite the results that may be achieved with these products, the consequences for the person’s health may be fatal. Skin bleaching creams used to contain mercury as the primary ingredient, a substance that “inhibit[s] the formation of melanin, resulting in a lighter skin tone” (World Health Organization [WHO]). Even though most of these products containing mercury have been proven hazardous to people’s health and banned in some countries, they are still available to consumers. Now, most skin bleachers have hydroquinone as the main component of the formula, a chemical that “first bleaches the skin, then coarsens it, resulting in black lumps that lead to abscesses and ulcers” (Arogundade, ch. 6). In spite of the warnings from the *WHO* and legislation banning the distribution of said products, “[s]kin whitening products sales grew from \$40 to \$43 billion in 2008 worldwide”³¹ (*Dark Girls*).

Although the nasty effects of skin bleaching procedures are not described in *Americanah*, the novel does reflect the pressure to be as light as possible, which has been

³¹ At the beginning of 2014, Cameroonian pop singer Dencia launched a skin care line named *Whitenicious* that, according to *Ebony*, sold around 20,000 units in only three weeks. While the singer claims that her product does not contain mercury, steroids or hydroquinone, there is not an actual list of the ingredients and chemical substances that were used to manufacture the cream available to prospective buyers who wish to know its chemical composition. Also, despite the singer’s assertion that *Whitenicious* is not a skin bleacher, the very name of the brand somehow seems to evoke the idea that “white” is something “delicious,” something desirable. The interview with the singer was conducted by Dr. Yaba Blay, co-director of Africana Studies at Drexel University. The singer admitted that the cream may bleach one’s skin, but that it was designed to use only on dark spots or hyper-pigmented areas, and not in the entire body. The advertising of the brand clearly shows how the singer is several tones lighter than what she used to be on other photos or videos before the cream, and even though she did not consciously use the “before-after” strategy in order to sell her product, the comparison between the way she looked before and after the cream was inevitable.

proven to be a global phenomenon that affects both males and females belonging to different social classes. For instance, Bartholomew, aunty Uju's Nigerian boyfriend, uses bleaching creams in the US, for Ifemelu notices that "[h]is face is a funny colour. He must be using the cheap ones with now sunscreen" (*Americanah* 117). Most often than not, Bartholomew comes across as someone who uses an American affectation in order to compensate for "a deprived rural upbringing" back in Nigeria (115). Bleaching his skin is, perhaps, another way of trying to forget his roots and accommodate to the United States' standards of acceptability and beauty.

Skin bleaching is also a very common practice in Nigeria. Thus, Uju, Ifemelu's aunt, would "avoid the sun and use creams in elegant bottles, so that her complexion, already naturally light, became lighter, brighter, and took on a sheen" (74). When Ifemelu moves back to Nigeria after a thirteen-year stint in the US, she works at a magazine owned by a woman who "had not been born with her light complexion, its sheen was too waxy and her knuckles were dark, as though those folds of her skin had valiantly resisted her bleaching cream" (391). Both these women bleached their skin in order to look as white as possible and to be able to climb up the social ladder, which in the case of women in Nigeria is usually done by marriage. Uju studied medicine, however, most of the details the readers know about her background is that she was the lover of a high rank general who provided for her hence, physical appearance became the means of obtaining economic benefits from a relationship.

The final factor that contributes to the high sells of bleaching products is advertising. In Adichie's novel, Ifemelu is captivated by the commercials she sees on television: "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 cars and packaged foods" (113). The quotation reflects the deep impact of the advertising of everyday products that become a symbol for the American dream in Ifemelu's imagination. In terms of beauty, the media usually sells high

standards of beauty and the sales pitch of most beauty-enhancing products is the fact that they can, and will, help users look their best. Advertising usually involves the use of celebrities in order to sell those products, and two of the women who have a greater impact in the world of advertising, even if they are not promoting skin bleachers, are singers like Beyoncé Knowles and Jennifer Lopez. Through their portrayal in the media they become the beauty ideal to which most black women aspire to, and they are both light-skinned.

4.1.3. The “Lupita” Revolution

Despite all of the images promoting the notion that light skin is beautiful, since the end of 2013 a new face has appeared on the public scene that is challenging mainstream notions of beauty: Kenyan actress Lupita Nyong’o. In Adichie’s words, the actress “has the looks that the world tells us we’re not supposed to aspire to. And that makes me very proud and very happy, because I think about all the young girls out there in the world who think that they have to look like Halle Berry, and it’s wonderful that they, you know, that Lupita [acts as a role model] and she’s also really stunning” (*Tenement Talks*). Lupita is relevant to the topic of this paper not only because she challenges the prevalence of white standards of beauty and promotes black skin and short kinky hair, but also because Nyong’o will produce and star the film version of *Americanah* (Siegel).

Lupita Nyong’o and fictional Ifemelu share a common story, since they were both raised in African countries, but they have both studied at university level in the US. Ifemelu is clearly concerned with the importance of colour and colourism in the US and Nigeria, and, even though she did not use cosmetics to bleach her skin, she understands the pressures behind those practices, and the importance of being light-skinned and, therefore, beautiful. Nyong’o has become increasingly important, not only as an Academy-Award-winning

actress, but also as a rising celebrity who is praised by her beauty and style. She was named *People's* magazine "Most Beautiful" in 2014. She seems to be opening a conversation about beauty and the need to demystify standards that are unattainable for black women.

Furthermore, Lupita Nyong'o was awarded the *ESSENCE* Breakthrough Performance award and, in her acceptance speech, she wanted to acknowledge the importance of "beauty, black beauty, dark beauty." In her talk, Nyong'o comments on the impact that beauty standards have had on her life while growing up. The Kenyan actress starts her speech on black beauty by quoting a letter she had received from a fan in which Nyong'o was thanked because her appearance stopped that girl from starting to bleach her skin. Lupita talks about her childhood, a time when she, too, felt "unbeautiful," and was teased "about [her] night-shaded skin." Like Morrison's Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, she would also pray to God that she would wake up lighter-skinned, but felt disappointed as soon as she looked herself in the mirror. As a teenager, her "self-hate grew worse" until she discovered Alek Wek: "A celebrated model, she was dark as night, she was on all of the runways and in every magazine and everyone was talking about how beautiful she was [...] I couldn't believe that people were embracing a woman who looked so much like me, as beautiful." Nyong'o finishes her speech by stating that she hopes her presence in the media, on screens and in magazines, may help young girls who are undergoing the same conflicts she had to deal with as a teenager. She wishes that the girl who wrote the letter "will feel the validation of her external beauty but also to get to the deeper business of being beautiful inside. There is no shade in that beauty."

In such a short speech, Lupita Nyong'o has managed to capture some of the key elements that reflect the troubling relationship that most black women have with the concept of beauty. Central to the speech is the idea of self-hatred because of the impossibility of finding relatable images on the media, since the usual representations of beautiful women

involve white women with straight, long hair. Nonetheless, the actress also proposes the solution to put an end to a feeling of inferiority that has affected black women for centuries: a fair representation in the media. Undoubtedly, in her role as an actress, a fashion icon, and the ambassador of the brand Lancôme, she is central to the process of eradicating notions of beauty based on skin colour.

Nonetheless, it should be noted that her success in such a task is bound to Hollywood casting policies. Thus, the question arises: is Lupita Nyong'o the movie industry's latest crush, or has she arrived to stay? So far, she has only participated in a big production, *12 Years a Slave*, and she has been confirmed to play a part in the next *Star Wars* film. However, typecasting may play against her odds at defeating prevalent notions of beauty. There is a tendency in Hollywood to cast dark-skinned women as slaves or sexual objects; there are very few high-budget romantic comedies that choose a dark-skinned woman for the leading role. Nevertheless, social media could play on her favour,³² as well as her charisma and personality. Perhaps she has succeeded in order to prove that racial divides are starting to blur when it comes to incorporating more women of colour in Hollywood films as leading women.

4.2. Meaning Woven into Black Hair

While skin colour is usually defined as being the main visual sign of race, hair is also a physical feature that visually denotes race, and is closely associated to notions of beauty and femininity. The next section aims to explore how hair is especially relevant for black women, and how the assumptions that have been associated to it have a great impact in issues related to self-esteem and beauty. As in the case of skin colour, the media also plays a key role on the

³² Nyong'o has also been severely criticized, especially in the comment sections of websites. An example is the statement of someone under the nick *stopkidding* who asserts that she was "plucked out of the jungle," "a black nobody," "NOT beautiful in any way, shape or form," or "downright ugly ad manly," among many other pejorative comments (*The Wrap*).

reproduction of hairstyles, which may reaffirm or try to demystify weighted representations of Black³³ hair.

4.2.1. Why Hair Matters

Hair is quite relevant and present throughout the overall structure of Adichie's novel, since Ifemelu reminisces about her stay in the US from a hair-braiding salon only a few days before finally leaving for Nigeria. Hair is a big business that moves a lot of money within African American and black communities around the world. Other than the usual assumptions of beauty and femininity that are often used to describe white women's hair, Black hair is also affected by the association of political and racial meanings. Hair, especially when described as long, wavy, straight, or beautiful, tends to become a woman's pride; it is indeed the most visible feature of a woman's appearance. However, the distinction between different hair types and textures usually creates a want or a need in women to approach white standards of beauty by altering their hair.

In *Hair Story; Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*, Byrd and Tharps, contend that Black hair culture exists "in the way that an anthropologist would define it: the learned patterns of behaviour and thought that assist a group in adapting to its environment and include ritual, language, memory and evolution" (Author's Note). Indeed, hair does fulfil all of these uses in black communities. Thus, hair presents a ritualistic aspect, for there is value associated to, for instance, the long braiding sessions among women in their homes, in their porches, or in the hair salons. Black hair also has a language that is used to describe its

³³ I have decided to capitalize the adjective when it refers to hair in order to signal the difference that exists between the hair colour (*black*) and the texture that black people's hair presents (*Black*).

characteristics or specific hairstyles, such as Afro, cornrows, relaxer or perm, kink or nap,³⁴ twists, dreadlocks.³⁵ Also, the aspects related to how people have perceived, and still do, hair is part of the African American experience in the US, and the associations of meaning to different hairstyles has varied through time, such as the meanings of “natural” hair, as discussed below.

Nonetheless, any account of the importance of black hair cannot start without a reference to the distinction between “good” and “bad” hair. As S. Walker highlights, “historically, and still to some extent today in African American culture, hair that would grow long and was straight or wavy was widely referred to as ‘good,’ whereas hair of the extremely curly or kinky variety common among African Americans was often described as ‘bad’ (147). Thus, most of the times “good” hair means straight, long or wavy hair, which is a hair texture that very few black people can have without using hair products to alter its texture or without white or mixed ancestry in the family. Since the definition of beauty according to Eurocentric standards promotes long, blond hair as attractive and desirable, “hair plays an important part in determining beauty” (Byrd and Tharps, ch. 6). Also, it should be noted that the opposition of the terms “good” and “bad” recreates a sort of Manichean duality that attributes moral definitions to hair, which means that “bad” hair can be associated with an evil person, an association to black people’s moral nature that was not uncommon during the times of slavery and segregation.

Also, hair is an essential element in literature written by black women, as seen in novels by Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Paule Marshall, and Adichie’s

³⁴ “Kinky,” “nappy,” or “bad hair” are terms used to describe “[h]air that is tightly coiled or curled. This type of hair is referred to as “natural” black hair because it is not chemically altered” (Banks, Appendix II). Even though “kinky” and “nappy” have derogatory associations (“nappy” is sometimes referred to as the other “n-word”), the terms have also been appropriated so as to describe positive characteristics. One such example of appropriation of the term is bell hooks *Happy to be Nappy*, a picture book for children that celebrates black hair: “Hair for hands to touch and play! / Hair to take the gloom away!”

³⁵ An alternative spelling to “dreadlocks” would be “dredlocs” in which the “a” has been dropped in order to avoid associations with the adjective “dreadful” applied to a particular Black hairstyle (Byrd and Tharps, ch. 5).

Americanah. In the documentary *Good Hair*, late writer and activist Maya Angelou states that, “hair is a woman’s glory [...] but it is not a bad thing or a good thing, it’s hair. If you have it in your head, it’s good; if you have it growing between your toes, it probably isn’t so good.” Despite her assertion that hair is just a thing, there is a fragment from Angelou’s autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), in which the importance of hair as a beauty and race symbol is highlighted:

Wouldn’t they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn’t let me straighten? [...] Then they would understand why I had never picked up a Southern accent, or spoke the common slang, and why I had to be forced to eat pigs’ tails and snouts. Because I was really white and because a cruel fairy stepmother [...] had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair (qtd. in Collins 90).

Angelou was a committed civil rights activist, and the effects of racism and beauty images on her self-esteem are patent in her autobiography. Her relationship with hair is relatable to Chimamanda Adichie’s hair story. Adichie has described in an interview how she, too, felt ugly once she stopped straightening her hair and began to use turbans in order to hide her kinky curls (*Tenement Talks*).

Adichie’s fictional Ifemelu also goes through a journey of her own with her hair. Once she lives in the US, she learns that Black hairdos or hairstyles are usually weighted with meaning that very often, especially in the twenty-first century, are far from representing a person’s ideology. Thus, Ifemelu used to wear braids after her arrival because “small braids” will last for a long time, since it is very expensive to get one’s hair done in the US (*Americanah* 100). However, after she is called in for a job interview, she is advised to “lose

the braids and straighten [her] hair. Nobody says this kind of stuff but it matters. We want you to get that job” (202). It is thus how Ifemelu’s relationship with her hair begins to take a different direction.

Indeed, hair is an essential part of a person’s appearance, which is usually judged according to white standards of beauty and acceptability, and job applicants are expected to look “professional.” The problem with the concept is that the definition of the term is deeply rooted on rules of acceptability in the workplace that do not take into account the reality of Black hair. Thus, straight hair *is* professional, which means that black women have to undergo expensive, arduous, and sometimes painful hair care treatments in order to accommodate to a company’s rules. After being advised to straighten her hair, Ifemelu decides to do so by using a relaxer.³⁶ That is, a chemical substance made of “sodium hydroxide (lye) or calcium hydroxide (no lye) to loosen the curl or coil of tightly coiled or curled black hair. As a result, the hair becomes straight” (Banks, Appendix II). Ifemelu tries to relax her hair at home, since these products are sold at the chemist’s, but she cannot achieve a good result and decides to go to the hairdresser’s. Her excruciating experience with the relaxer reflects other black women’s nightmares: “Ifemelu felt only a slight burning, at first, but as the hairdresser rinsed out the relaxer, Ifemelu’s head bent backwards against a plastic sink, needles of stinging pain shot up from different parts of her scalp, down to different parts of her body, back up to her head” (*Americanah* 203).

Aside from the pain she felt, another consequence of the relaxer is that part of her hair starts to fall out, and, after the debacle of the procedure, she is advised by a friend to “cut [her] hair and go natural” (208). Ifemelu’s friend, Wambui, argues that relaxing one’s hair “is like being in prison” (208). Since a professional relaxer done by a hairdresser is quite

³⁶ Relaxers are popularly known as “creamy crack,” a name that reflects not only black women’s addition to the results of the chemical, but also the damaging effects that it may have.

expensive and needs to be redone fairly often in order to straighten the roots of the hair, many women avoid doing activities that will destroy the effect of the relaxer. Said activities include swimming, sports, and almost anything that involves either water or sweat. Ifemelu then styles her hair into a short crop in order to get rid of the chemicals. However, after her friend leaves she starts to feel insecure about her hair because she thinks she looks “like a boy” (209). It should be noted long hair is “the essential feminine attribute,” and that “short hair was considered masculine, and naturally kinky hair on women was considered shamefully unkempt” (Craig, ch. 6).

Ifemelu eventually learns to love and care for her natural hair, and even though she begins to be comfortable in her own skin again, the reactions to her new hairstyle are proof of the meanings associated to natural hair. She is not the only one to question her femininity after having cut her hair, for one of her co-workers asks her whether she is a lesbian (*Americanah* 211). Not surprisingly, short hair, when associated with a woman’s sexuality, tends to be interpreted as a sign that she is a lesbian, notwithstanding the fact that there is no correlation between hair practices and sexual preferences. At home, her aunt Uju also questions her new hairstyle, since she cannot understand how Ifemelu’s boyfriend “likes [her] looking all jungle like that” (212). At her workplace, she is also asked whether her hair means something political (211), since natural hair or Afros have historically been associated with the Black Power Movement of the Sixties and radical political thinking.

These meanings historically associated to natural hair seem to be clearer than the very definition of the term, for it does indeed take on different meanings when referring to Black hair. According to Ingrid Banks, “[t]he altered nature of relaxed or permed hair is seen as ‘natural,’ whereas natural or unaltered hair is defined as ‘unnatural’” (ch. 1). The seeming contradiction in the meaning of the term “natural” is related to definitions of beauty and appropriate grooming. Thus, chemically-straightened hair is thought of as “natural” due to the

fact that black women have internalized images of beauty that reject natural (kinky hair) because it is thought of as being “unnatural.”

Natural hair and the Afro emerge during the late 1960s and 1970s, “when in an atmosphere of aesthetic revisionism,” it “became a symbol of race pride and political consciousness” (Arogundade, ch. 5). Therefore, the Afro did not originate in Africa, but twentieth-century America, and its status as a symbol quickly spread around the world. The most famous “fro” during the 1970s was Angela Davis’. She states that she is “remembered as a hairdo” (201), and condemns the reduction of a symbol of the politics of liberation to a fashion statement, which is used, along with a leather jacket, as the symbolic representation of the Black Panther Party (204). However, Arogundade argues that “[e]thnic styles were proud expressions of culture, race pride and politics, but they were also fashion statements, and fashions are not built to last” (Epilogue). In fact, the Afro quickly became a commercial fashion statement and, in the 1980s, relaxed hair made a come-back as the hairstyle of preference for most black women, along with wigs and weaves³⁷.

Natural hair has now become a very popular fashion statement within African American and black communities, due partly to the possibility of sharing care routines and products through the internet. Nonetheless, it doesn’t matter what kind of hairdos black women are currently sporting, for “black hair and hairstyling practices can never escape political readings” (Banks, Introduction). Women in power positions like Michelle Obama will immediately be criticized due their choice in hairstyles. Even though the First Lady has never been seen wearing an Afro, she was caricatured wearing this hairstyle, along with military wear and a rifle, on the cover of *The New Yorker* in 2008. In her blog, Ifemelu

³⁷ A weave is a “stay-on wig in which real or artificial hairpieces are applied in strands to the top of the head and interwoven with the person’s natural hair, which is plaited flat underneath in order to form a base. Unlike a conventional wig, once fixed in place, the weave remains *in situ* for the duration of wear, and behaves like real hair. The style provides straight hair without the damage caused by the heated comb or chemical relaxer. (Arogundade, ch. 7)

reflects about the importance of Michelle Obama's hairdo, for she states that if Michelle Obama had decided to "go natural," "she would totally rock but poor Obama would certainly lose the independent vote, even the undecided Democrat vote" (298). The reason why Barack Obama would have lost voters is because the immediate assumption about his wife's new hairstyle would have that she is a radical, and not that she has decided to stop using chemicals or wearing weaves. The post also shows white people's lack of awareness about Black hair, for they seem to be shocked when Ifemelu tells them that the First Lady is sporting a weave, because that is not the way her hair grows out of her head.

4.2.2. The "Natural Hair Revolution"

All the current discussions about black hair, both in academia, and social media and television programmes, have contributed to finally eradicate the taboo that existed around black women's hair, and Black hairstyles and practices. The "Natural Hair Revolution" consists in the promotion of versatile hairstyles that do not use chemicals. Manufacturers of products made of natural substances have managed to carve out a niche in the hair care industry, and have used social media and online lifestyle magazines as a means of increasing their sales. In fact, "by 2013, there were thousands of blogs about black hair. *Twitter*, *Facebook*, and *YouTube* also had countless pages and channels dedicated to discussing its significance, care and versatility" (Byrd and Tharps, ch. 8).

Ifemelu shares her experience with her hair and reviews some of the products she uses in her blog. Daunted at first by her new natural hair, she finds an online community about natural hair called *HappilyKinkyNappy.com* (Americanah 209), and, even though this is a fictitious website, there are many sites of this kind where women can get tips, tutorials and advice on how to deal with their hair. Some examples are:

happyhealthynappycurlykinkyhairtalk.blogspot.com;

curlcentric.com;

blackgirllonghair.com;

naturalhairrules.com;

afrobella.com.

Aside from all the websites dedicated to natural hair, the online version of black lifestyle magazines already mentioned such as *Ebony*, *Essence*, and *O, The Oprah Magazine* also have sections on Black hair, in its natural or relaxed stage, transitioning from relaxed to natural, and also wigs and weaves.

The reviews about products and advice on hair care constitute an important source of advertising for the manufactures. Another source of publicity is *YouTube*, since there are many channels with videos about natural hair (a quick search of “natural hair” provides over two million results on *YouTube* alone). The videos usually consist of a brief description of the product and a review of the results. These reviews started simply as videos in which black women commented on a product, however, if the videos became popular, manufacturers started to realize the potential of the reviews as a means of advertising, so they provide the reviewers with some of their products as a way of promoting them amongst viewers who are interested in the topic.

Relaxed hair and weaves are still great favourites among African American women as shown in Chris Rock’s documentary *Good Hair*. Black hair is big business since the African American community represents 20% of the population, but buys about 80% of imported hair for wigs and weaves (*Good Hair* 04:20), and there are annual shows, such as the Bronner Bros Hair Show, a massive event celebrated every year in Atlanta. However, the sales of relaxers among African American women are “slumping;” sales are reported to have “dropped from \$206 million in 2008 to \$152 million in 2013” (Muther).

Black hair is still a highly controversial topic among African Americans and black communities, and issues such as self-hate, racial pride, and economic repercussions are tangled in the reality of hair. In order to overcome the prejudices about Black hair, Arogundade proposes a redefinition of the terms “good” and “bad” hair: “‘Good hair’ should be whatever hairstyle people choose for themselves, and ‘bad hair’ should be whatever hairstyle a person is told to choose in order to conform to another person’s values” (epilogue). A recent case that illustrates Arogundade’s need for a redefinition is Tamron Hall, a television anchor, who, in June 2014, changed to a natural hairstyle, eliciting surprise and, fortunately, acceptance from most of her audience (Robertson). Hall’s new hairstyle choice was echoed in many news websites due to the surprise generated by the change, which is why an understanding of the reality and issues related to Black hair becomes necessary in mainstream white society, in order to recognize the issues associated with a particular styling choice and not be shocked by it.

5. Conclusion

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is quickly becoming one of the most well-known and best-selling authors writing in English. In her short writing career she has already been awarded several prizes for the good quality of her narrative, and the novels *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Americanah* are increasing in popularity because of their film versions. She is a daring author who does not hesitate in tackling issues that are usually thought of as uncomfortable, such as the Biafran War in Nigeria and race in America. She does not waver to use historical events as the framework for her stories, nor does she apologize for the topics

she has decided to write about. So far she has depicted different periods and historical settings, as well as very engaging topics in her novels, so, who knows where next?

One of the things I enjoyed the most about the novel is the fact that it is opening a possibility for her readers to engage in a cross-cultural conversation, and to finally have that honest talk about America's racial reality. It refers to many significant events from African American history and to the reality of black people in the US, and of black women in particular; it sheds a new light on history books and theoretical texts dealing with race. *Americanah* thus becomes a perfect text in order to explore issues of gendered and racial identity and beauty, and how the intersection of these concepts may create issues of self-esteem among both men and women. As a reader, the novel has helped me understand and realize the privilege of being white and female, as opposed to black and female. I know that no matter how I wear my hair or whether I have tanned skin I will not be accused of betraying my race or being a radical thinker. There meanings and assumptions about black women's bodies that were completely unknown to me until I read *Americanah*, which is why the text has provided me with a new way of interpreting the texts I reader in order to understand where all the not-so-veiled race references come from.

After the evidence and critical readings provided in this work, I can state that *Americanah* is a key text in understanding why race still matters in 2014 and why "the color-line" is still very much a "problem" in the twenty-first century. First of all, Adichie has based Ifemelu's stories on her own experience of race and her way of understanding what "being" or "becoming black" truly means. Indeed, Ifemelu's story proves that race is a social construct in America, for she is too soon given an identity with which she had never identified before, because it was not a reality that mattered for her. Furthermore, the novel provides a truthful account of how race intersects with more issues than simply educational, economic or job opportunities. The discussion on beauty as a fundamental conflictive area within African

American and black communities is evidence that centuries-old definitions of what is deemed beautiful and acceptable have not changed despite the fact that globalization and immigration have contributed to create relation among different nationalities.

Finally, I would like to point out that the media has always had an enormous influence in shaping and moulding our understanding of the world, which is why it is necessary to approach any piece of news critically. Furthermore, the media also creates and broadcasts an image of who we're supposed to be and how we're supposed to look like in order to fulfil society's expectations of success and beauty. It is in the light of such a reality that cross-cultural conversations become indispensable: they are necessary in order to become familiar with "the Other's" background and they also help us get a better understanding of the realities that shape our identities and sense of self. Cross-cultural conversations are the most effective means in order to avoid "the danger of a single story."

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