Université de Montréal

Romance, Gender, and Identity in *Americanah*, and *Tar Baby*

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A été évalué par un jury composé des personnes suivantes

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Résumé

Cette thèse explore la façon dont différents personnages de *Tar Baby* et *Americanah* perçoivent et vivent leur « Blackness » dans un contexte diasporique transnational affligé par l'impact de l'origine, de la nationalité, du statut, et de la classe sociale. Cela est principalement fait à travers l'analyse du concept de la romance et de sa connexion profonde avec la négociation identitaire. En tandem avec un contexte social plus vaste, il y est aussi argumenté que la remise en question par Ifemelu et Jadine de leur identité noire et de leur « Blackness » est la résultante d'une volonté d'endoctrinement idéologique de la société hégémonique blanche.

Ceci approfondi et intensifie par le fait même les négociations avec leur identité transnationale et multiculturelle qui se manifestent à travers le langage, le maniérisme et le style cheveux. Cette thèse se base principalement sur la théorie des appareils idéologiques d'État de Louis Althusser et sur le concept de conscience double de W.E.B DuBois. Elle s'inspire aussi de l'œuvre The Coupling Convention d'Anne DuCille lorsqu'il est présenté de qu'elle façon la romance non conventionnelle joue un rôle intégral dans l'affirmation racial et culturelle de soi.

Mots-clés : Romance, Blackness, diaspora, identité raciale, identité Culturelle, Cheveux.

Abstract

This thesis explores how different characters perceive and experience their Blackness in a transnational diasporic context, as inflected by national origin, status, and class in *both Tar Baby* and *Americanah*. This is mainly accomplished through analyzing the concept of romance and its profound connection with identity negotiations. In tandem with the larger social context, I also argue that the (self) questioning of identity and Blackness, is a result of a white-hegemonic society that seeks to ideologically indoctrinate Ifemelu and Jadine. Hence, it deepens and intensifies the negotiations with their transnational, multi-cultural identities, made manifest by language, mannerisms, and hair.

This thesis primarily draws on Louis Althusser's theory of the ideological state apparatus and on W.E.B DuBois' concept of double-consciousness. It also relies on Anne DuCille's *The Coupling Convention*, as I attempt to reveal how the unconventional romance plays an integral part in racial/cultural self-affirmation.

Keywords : Romance, Blackness, Diaspora, Racial Identity, Cultural Identity, Hair.

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Introduction

Both Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* (1981) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) are novels about romance as experienced by Black men and women in diasporic, transnational locations. Fundamental to each work is the exploration – through the motif of travel, migration, or escape – of Black identity, as inflected by era, national origin, and cultural identity. Concurrently, however, each text interrogates Black women's sexual agency, raising questions regarding female beauty and self-esteem, questions related to how women perceive themselves. In my thesis, "Romance, Gender, and Identity in *Americanah*, and *Tar Baby*", I argue that Jadine and Ifemelu, the respective protagonists of each *Tar Baby* and *Americanah*, radically rewrite what it means to be a modern, transnational Black woman. In the process, both texts redefine the body as not only a racialized but profoundly gendered entity; each ultimately dismantles and reconstructs the archetypal love story.

Americanah and *Tar Baby* may not be considered an obvious pairing as they do not belong to the same historical moment in the diaspora, nor do they share the same geopolitical sphere. While *Americanah* plays out mostly in the United States through the eyes of a Nigerian woman, *Tar Baby* is its mirror-image. The events of the novel, although relying primarily on Americans as its main instigators, take place outside of the borders of the United States, precisely in the fictional Isle des Chevaliers, in the Caribbean. Hence, from the onset, the novel subverts the reader's expectations of the African American struggle in the continuous discourse of violence and resistance by forgoing familiar subjects and localities. Yet concurrently, the unconventional setting allows the novel to penetrate a multi-diasporic space. Rogers Brubaker encourages the expansion of the use of the term diaspora "to an ever-broadening set of cases: essentially to any and every nameable population category that is to some extent dispersed in

space" (3). The novel, as such, serves as a bridge between two diasporic categories, namely African Americans and West Indians, "which forsakes boundaries to transcend cultural insularity and promote an inclusive vision of African peoples and cultures" (Hawthorne 100). As in *Americanah*, a critical distance defying borders has been created in order to bring closer two different parts of the diaspora in an attempt to view, in often novel contexts, the African American experience–be that in the mainland United States or elsewhere.

In each *Tar Baby* and *Americanah*, the love story is perceived as central to the events of the unwinding plots. Jadine's relationship with Son, and Ifemelu's with Obinze are key components in understanding the love story from the perspective of liberated Black modern women who represent a crucible of female sexuality, gender identities, cultural backgrounds, and feminism. Sexual agency is represented in the context of novels that challenge the common depiction of women in mainstream media, i.e.- the damsel in distress and/or the trophy, among other stereotypes. The romance in each novel is highly subversive, but with different impacts. Indeed, in *Tar Baby*, the focal point is a singular relationship between Son and Jadine, a torrid love affair, a forceful recognition of one's destabilized racial identity. In *Americanah*, however, there are three major romances, and a much gentler approach to identity negotiations. Indeed, instead of portraying the love story as a site of profound clashes regarding Blackness, *Americanah* uses romance to chronicle Ifemelu's journey is self-reaffirmation and cultural (re)embrace.

It must be noted that the words Black, White and race are used in this thesis, when referring to the skin colour of the different characters in the two novels. In the words of Vinson Cunningham, "for all the word's problematic history, I like 'Black' as a shorthand for African-descended people everywhere precisely because of its indefiniteness, its fluidity, its fealty to no nation" (62). Although the term "African American" is most commonly used, it proves difficult to apply to some of the characters, who are not only American but a crucible of

identities, and national origins. The example of Ifemelu comes to mind. Moreover, as Paul Gilroy argues that the notion of "race" has been constructed solely for the purpose of furthering racism and the White supremacist agenda. He also rightly argues that there is only one race, the human race. Therefore, in this dissertation my use of the word "race" is merely in reference to the skin color. Furthermore, as Anne DuCille explains, American or African American literature could not be confined in terms of White and Black, when exploring their subject matter, or their historical contextualization. "'Cultures are not containable within boundaries.' […] in the face of what are, in fact, complex and interlocking cultural and linguistic phenomena" (9). Therefore, the use of the loaded terms of "White", "Black", and "race", in my thesis, must be taken only at face-value, to denote a skin color.

This thesis aims to explore how different characters perceive and experience their Blackness in a transnational diasporic context, as inflected by national origin, status, and class in both *Tar Baby* and *Americanah.* This is mainly accomplished through analysing the concept of romance and its profound connection with identity negotiations. In tandem with the larger social context, I also argue that the (self) questioning of identity and Blackness, is a result of a white-hegemonic society that seeks to ideologically indoctrinate Ifemelu and Jadine. Hence, it deepens and intensifies the negotiations with their transnational, multi-cultural identities, made manifest by language, mannerisms, and hair. This thesis primarily draws on Louis Althusser's theory of the ideological state apparatus and on W.E.B DuBois' concept of double consciousness. It also relies on DuCille's *The Coupling Convention* as I attempt to reveal how the unconventional romance plays an integral part in racial/cultural self-affirmation. This thesis aims to explore identity through the romance portrayed in the two novels, a notion profoundly affected by race, national origins, status, and class, in transnational locations.

The first chapter of this thesis, entitled "*Americanah* (2013): Romance, Cultural Performance, and Hair", focuses on *Americanah,* particularly on Ifemelu and her journey in (re)claiming her cultural and racial identities. She faces the full force of cultural assimilations, legitimized, partially, by state oppressive apparatuses, and mostly by the ideological state apparatuses. Through interpellation, she feels torn between affirming her identity, or white-washing it. The different romances she fosters, become a signpost in her negotiations with her sense of self. The first section of this chapter aims to analyse the impact her love stories have on her, and how they parallel the different stages of stabilizing her cultural and racial identities. The second section of the chapter is an investigation of the different forms cultural assimilation is manifested, namely through micro-aggressions, and language. Finally, the last section of the chapter will tackle the ways hair can be a sign of protest and resistance against conformity to the White Euro-centric ideals of beauty.

The second chapter, as the title suggests, "*Tar Baby* (1981): A Question of Contemporary Blackness" attempts to explore the meaning of Blackness. Through Jadine's relationship with Son, the reader is confronted with drastically different conceptualizations. Blackness, in this sense cannot be separated from the prism of disparate socio-economic factors. The first part of this chapter will deal with the (re)inscription of romance as a means of examining identity. Through the subversion of the love story, conflicts regarding the meaning of Blackness arise between Son and Jadine. The second part revolves mainly on how each Jadine and Son experience and view their racial identity.

Americanah (2013): Romance, Cultural Performance, and Hair

Americanah can be perceived as a subversive novel that aims to deconstruct the Black experience through the eyes of a Nigerian woman who immigrated to the United States. The novel follows the journey of Ifemelu, a self-assured and culturally-rooted Igbo (a member of a people in south-eastern Nigeria) in her negotiations with African American identity/ies. Her arrival to the United States thoroughly destabilizes her, which results into an identity crisis. In her journey of self-(re)-acceptance, the novel does not recoil in addressing notions such as the archetypal love story, Black/cultural identity, female beauty, self-esteem, and sexual agency. The novel uses the construction of romance to chronicle Ifemelu's negotiations with her sense of self. Especially in the context of relationships in *Americanah*, the gender dynamics are dysfunctional, be that in Nigeria or in the United States. Not only does this constitute a resonant parallel with *Tar Baby*, but the novel also challenges what it means to be a modern Black woman in the diaspora, primarily through Ifemelu's endeavors. Torn between cultural assimilation and resisting it, she strives to reclaim her identity through language and hair, overcoming personal, social and economic challenges, finding success in the United States. The different romances she fosters, coupled with her reclaiming of her Afro-hair, constitute a signpost of her negotiations with her racialized identity in the United States. The first part aims to look at the subversion and re-inscription of the romance—and its tropes—to analyze the gender dynamics and cultural performances, while the second part will address the microaggressions and their effect on multiple characters as an integral part of how Aunty Uju and Ifemelu experience their Blackness in the United States; the third part explores the notion of white-washing vis-à-vis themselves and the coded language widely used, centralizing

language as a marker of cultural assimilation and hegemony; finally, the last section reveals the importance of hair when conceptualizing Ifemelu's experience of Blackness.

1st Section: The Romance as a Signpost of Identity Negotiations

As in *Tar Baby*, the romance plays an integral part in *Americanah,* when drawing the portrait of the protagonists. If it is true that the love story(ies) in *Americanah* is/are subversive, then it a subversion through defamiliarization. Defamiliarization is a literary construct that serves to generate new perspectives on the familiar and the commonplace. Viktor Schklovesky invites the reader "to examine the general laws of perception" and calls for the discovery of secret links between the objects, and/or subjects, in order to perceive them anew (15). Adichie does not disappoint through her depiction of a series of failed relationships, that distort the archetypal love story. According to Carl Jung, archetypes are images, figures, character types, settings, and story patterns that are shared globally, among different cultures. They are a part of a collective unconscious. Northorp Freye expands on these ideas, by maintaining that these elements are not exclusive to the subconscious realm of dreams and could be applied to literature, as well. The romance archetype includes many patterns. For instance, the main love story in *Americanah*, between Ifemelu and Obinze, could be considered as a journey from star-crossed to star-aligned lovers. However, despite Adichie adhering to these tropes, she undermines them by depicting a deeply dysfunctional relationship, exposing unsettling and problematic issues (i.e. the affirmation of problematic gender roles, materialism, corruption, etc). Therefore, not only is the romance subverted from the inside, through the implementation of well-worn patterns, but it is also made unfamiliar by using other unconventional elements – long distance and adultery. The romance, subversive in its oscillation between typical and atypical, serves an important function of chronicling Ifemelu's negotiations with her sense of self.

The novel depicts a picturesque relationship between Obinze and Ifemelu, at the beginning at least. Obinze was a new student to the high school Ifemelu attended, in Nigeria. He was immediately popular and charming. “He was quickly admitted into the clan of swaggering, carelessly cool males, the Big Guys” (Adichie 66). It was expected that he would date the most popular girl in school, with the lightest-skin color, by decree of “the gods, the hovering deities” (66). However, when Obinze saw Ifemelu, it was love at first sight. Obinze was keenly attracted to her self-determination and outspokenness. They soon become inseparable.

> [Ifemelu] rested her head against his and felt, for the first time, what she would often feel with him: a self-affection. He made her like herself. With him, she was at ease: her skin felt as though it was her right size. […]. It seemed so natural, to talk to him about odd things. She had never done that before. The trust, so sudden and yet so complete, and the intimacy, frightened her. (73)

The feelings Ifemelu and Obinze share illustrate a connection akin to that of soulmates. It was an impression shared by both the couple, their friends, and anyone that came into contact with them. They shared similarities in values and opinions, intensifying their relationship. It also foreshadows their inevitable reunion. However, it is important to note that while they were both together in Nigeria, Ifemelu felt the most secure in her identity and heritage, a certain “self-affection”. She admits later on, after many years spent in the Unites states that “[she] 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” (359). Her statement is a clear indication of the extent of how secure she felt regarding her heritage and identity as a Nigerian woman. Questions about her race, her Blackness only arose after she left Nigeria, and Obinze behind.

Indeed, despite being represented as star-aligned lovers, (mis)fortune soon befalls. While Obinze was denied his visa to study in the United States – a long-standing dream of

his—Ifemelu is accepted. Objectively, winning a scholarship, even a partial one at "seventy-five percent off [her] tuition", is an important achievement (123). However, this blessing carries in its folds multiple curses. Distance becomes an important issue is their relationship, disturbing the inner peace of the star-aligned trope. Being apart "puts a lot of pressure on a couple to have memorable times (i.e., 'Pressure for positive/quality time'), which can prove to be a strain on the partners" (Sahlstein 705). This is evident from the very beginning, as they attempt to establish communication lines. There was a pressure to talk and write as often as possible to one another to keep their romance alive. The task is proven to be difficult, however, due to the time-zone difference, and logistics. However, they managed to maintain the romance on the hopes of soon re-connecting, once Obinze obtains a visa – a dream that was long deferred[1]. As such, longs distance destabilizes their relationship and shakes Ifemelu's sense of self. It beacons the loss of selfhood, and of attachment to her homeland.

As a matter of fact, the use of long-distance heralds the reversal of the star-aligned lovers' trope and signals the deep shift in Ifemelu's character. Desperation pushes her to negotiate with core values of independence, strength, and loyalty. Indeed, with only a partial scholarship and a student visa, there were not many opportunities for Ifemelu to earn money and live comfortably. Although she shares rent with multiple roommates in a shabby part of the town, she struggles to make ends meet. Her difficulties establish a moment(s) of trials, testing her character and will. She slowly starts to compromise some of her principles. One time, she had to rely on Obinze to send her some money. "'How can you be sending me money from Nigeria? It should be the other way around,' she said. But he sent it to her anyway, a little over a hundred dollars carefully sealed in a card" (Adichie 178-179). It was a selfless gesture, but without the proximity and reassurances long-distance relationships deny, it was a strike to her conceptualization of herself as an independent woman. Her sense of self is damaged,

[1] It is a reference to Langston Hughes' poem: "What Happens to a Dream Deferred" (1951).

subsequently. Therefore, when she uses the money Obinze sent, her negotiations with her sense of self have taken root already.

Although accepting help cannot be faulted, it was the first crack in Ifemelu's character that transformed into a fracture, when she consents to the violation of her body—an action she never thought she would undertake. In her frantic search of employment, she hears back from a Tennis coach. As soon she visits his office, Ifemelu is immediately frightened and distressed.

> [The man is] short, his body a glut of muscles, his hair thinning and sun-bleached. When he opened the door, he looked her over, mercilessly sizing her up, and then he smiled and said, "Come on in. My office is in the basement." Her skin prickled, an unease settling over her. There was something venal about his thin-lipped face; he had the air of a man to whom corruption was familiar. (176)

Her intuition is proven right when he offers her -- in more words-- the position of a prostitute. She refuses at first, but when she is one week late on rent, pressured and hounded by her roommates, she caves in. The aftermath of their encounter leaves Ifemelu reeling with shame, disgust and uncleanliness. She thinks that no amount of soap will purge her body from the grime left by the man's hands, immediately succumbing to depression. Due to the long distance, Obinze has no way to breach the gap that separates them, understand what transpired, and/ or comfort his beloved. It transforms into a vicious cycle, tormenting both Obinze and Ifemelu. Her guilt and shame obstruct their communication, for she cannot face the betrayals she committed, both of Obinze's trust, and of her own values. She abandons an important anchor to her heritage and identity, by ghosting [2]Obinze, engaging in earnest in the negotiations of her identity. It marks a turning point: from firmly secured, to firmly lost.

[2] According to the New York Times, ghosting is "when someone cuts off all communication without explanation — [and it] extends to all things, it seems. Most of us think about it in the context of digital departure: a friend not responding to a text, or worse, a lover, but it happens across all social circumstances and it's tied to the way we view the world" (par. 3)

Indeed, it is compelling to look at the romantic relationships Ifemelu fosters after disappearing from Obinze's life. The moment her ties with Obinze are portrayed to be severed permanently, she is hired as a babysitter for Kimberley's two children, an affluent White family. Undoubtably, Ifemelu is awed by the wealth and luxury they exhibit. Unlike Jadine Childs – the protagonist of *Tar Baby*—Ifemelu is capable of critically looking at her employers, discerning their natures. She is not inclined to make excuses for them, nor champion them. Although both Jadine's and Ifemelu's situations are similar --taken in by aristocratic White families—their experiences are not quite the same. Ifemelu is not as swept by the glamour of privilege, class and status as Jadine has been, perhaps because of their different complexions, and national origins. However, that is not to say that Ifemelu was unaffected, especially after experiencing dire financial situations. On the contrary, during an event hosted by the family,

> Ifemelu gazed at them. There was a certain luxury to charity that she could not identify with and did not have. To take "charity" for granted, to revel in this charity towards people whom one did not know—perhaps it came from having had yesterday and having today and expecting to have tomorrow. She envied them this. (209)

In fact, during this saga in her life, it can be argued that Ifemelu was at the apogee of uprootedness and loss, in terms of her racial/ cultural identity.

Ifemelu's following relationship with Curt --Kimberley's equally rich cousin— is a testament to that. Her attraction to him "was not merely because Curt was white, it was the kind of white he was, the untamed golden hair and handsome face, the athlete's body, the sunny charm and the smell, around him, of money" (362). Money, (un)surprisingly, becomes a driving motor for Ifemelu. It is understandable, though, considering the dire financial difficulties she underwent. However, accepting money from romantic partners is an action she disparages. In the cultural context of Nigeria, as portrayed in the novel, mistresses are common, where women seek powerful and influential men. Even her Aunty Uju did not escape Ifemelu's

seething criticism when she became a mistress to a high-ranking general. Therefore, Ifemelu's attraction to Curt's money is an unexpected turn of events, when considering Ifemelu's position and previous remarks. She becomes villainous, as it is explicitly mentioned in *Americanah* how desperate Ifemelu, sometimes, feels to hurt Curt and twist his "ray-of-sunshine" optimism. Leaving Obinze, in tandem with her money-problems shakes Ifemelu to her core. As such, her new relationship with a rich White man, creates a space where Ifemelu loses sight of herself, allowing for cultural-domination, and white-washing– both deliberately, and unconsciously.

In this vein of thought, Emmerencia Beh Sih and Peter Caleb De Noumedem, in their article, investigate the impact of interracial relationships on the migrant's identity consciousness, and adaptation to a new host culture and society. Interestingly, they find, through psychoanalytic analysis, in tandem with Frantz Fanon's theories, that the African migrant, Ifemelu in this case, seeks an interracial relationship as a form of escape and protection, usually from the violence of racism. Their understanding seamlessly blends with Ifemelu's experience; she pursues refuge in Curt, from the onslaught of racism, and from money problems. However, the authors argue that the looming presence of the myth of White superiority exacerbate complexes and racial stereotypes -- sometimes even subconsciously. Thus, "it enacts the impossibility of these relationships". The interracial relationship, according to Sih and Noumedem, is doomed from the beginning. In their view, it is a fated destiny considering the immigrant's disillusionment by the interracial relationship, to the extent of "returning home to reconstruct his/her identity". These conclusions perfectly encapsulate Ifemelu's relationship with Curt.

The authors remarks are prophetic in the development of Ifemelu's romantic journeys. Indeed, she grows progressively more frustrated with her then-boyfriend, when he fails to grasp her realities as a person of color in the United States.

> It was not that Curt pretended that being black and being white were the same in America; he knew they were not. It was, instead, that she did not understand how he grasped one thing but was completely tone-deaf about another similar thing, how he could easily make one imaginative leap, but be crippled in the face of another (Adichie 360-361).

Per the investigation put forth by Sih and Noumedem, it is inevitable that Ifemelu would grow resentful, foreshadowing the end of their relationship, and declaring her new journey of reconnection. As she outgrew Curt and is now ready to reconstruct her racial identity and reclaim her cultural heritage, she self-sabotages her relationship with him, for it is not conducive to embark on her self-(re)finding journey. She informs Curt that she has cheated on him. While asking for forgiveness, she relishes his crestfallen face. However, deep down, she knows that Curt would not pardon her betrayal.

Blaine – Ifemelu's third major romantic interest, after Obinze and Curt-- is an African American Yale Professor, who could be described as a Race-warrior, and ethically conscientious, a new stepping-stone for Ifemelu on her path of reconnection with her cultural/racial identity. Ifemelu describes him as "[a] man of careful disciplines" (Adichie 384). These two characters are portrayed as incredibly intelligent, who share many values and interests. Ifemelu admits that she is both "proud" of and "repelled" by his encyclopedic knowledge, for she believes that he elevates her to "a higher level of goodness" (384). This is evident in the influence Blaine has on her. For example, "he frightened her, telling her about the chemicals that were sprayed on crops, the chemicals fed to chickens to make them grow quickly, and the chemicals used to give fruits perfect skin" (384). As a result, Ifemelu now not only religiously scrubs her fruits and vegetables, but she also copies Blaine shopping for organic produce and ethically-sourced meat. Ifemelu puts Blaine on a pedestal: "she thought of him as a person who did not have a normal spine but had, instead, a firm reed of goodness"

(381). The colloquial expression “having a spine” means that someone is courageous and strong enough to stand up for their beliefs, and what they perceive as justice. As an African American, Blaine upholds values of racial justice, and is willing to fight for them. Indeed, when the janitor is accused of theft due to racial bias – despite the university’s staunch denial—he organizes a manifestation in the janitor’s name. Ifemelu, in her endeavor to reclaim her cultural/racial identity, and to process all the micro-aggressions she lives/d, finds a good partner and support system in Blaine. He is a someone with whom she can share her experiences as a Black woman in the United States, and on whom she can rely on to reconnect with herself.

Nevertheless, a rift between Blaine and Ifemelu appears. He is an academic, and a valiant social justice-warrior. In an effort to affect real social change, he starts to influence how Ifemelu writes her blogs. To her dismay, at times she finds herself using his words. He reminds her that “people are not reading [her blog] as entertainment, they’re reading [it] as cultural commentary. That’s a real responsibility. There are kids writing college essays about [this] blog” (386). In this regard, he tries to mentor her and guide her, as would a professor to his student. This dynamic, however, cannot be translated to a romantic relationship. So, when Ifemelu resists his suggestions, he calls her “lazy”, a word he often uses for his students “who did not hand in work on time, black celebrities who were not politically active, ideas that did not match his own”. She comments “sometimes she [feels] like his apprentice” (386). Blaine's role is important in grounding Jadine in her negotiations with her newly-acquired African American identity. He helps and encourages her to come to terms with the implicit and explicit racism she faces. Most importantly, Blaine challenges Ifemelu and her ideas which nudges her towards self-affirmation and cultural embrace. After reaching this step in her negotiations with her sense of self, she decides to return to her homeland, feeling a renewed assuredness in her transnational, multi-cultural identity.

However, Ifemelu's return to Nigeria completely subverts the romance, establishing it as a highly troubling construction, by embracing the corruption stereotypical of the third world elites, the endless materialism and consumerism; the re-inscription of colonial hierarchies; and, the affirmation of problematic gender roles--with women as arm candy and trophy wives. Indeed, when Ifemelu reconnects with Obinze in Nigeria, he is already a married man with a baby girl, no matter how unhappy his marriage was. Although Ifemelu and Obinze were presented as fated soulmates at the start of the novel, their relationship is very problematic on multiple levels. It may be true that their relationship is somewhat unconventional with the elements of long distance, and then infidelity/adultery; concurrently however, it is also profoundly archetypal in the sense of the pretty woman ending up with the prince charming. Unfortunately, the way their love story was presented, Obinze has no choice but to be rich. To acquire his fortune, he had to rely on his female relative to curry favor with a well-ranked officer in the Nigerian government --the only manner, the book seems to suggest, to reach a good-standing in life, in Nigeria. As troubling as that is in terms of affirming the corruption stereotypical of third world countries, and perpetuating a discourse of endless materialism, what becomes especially more controversial, is their love story.

All along the narrative, Ifemelu questions and is being questioned about her decision to move back to Nigeria. But her strong will and previous successes were supposedly her saving grace that will allow her to blaze a trail in Nigeria. Yet, we are presented with her unfulfilling professional life: editing a magazine on the whims of a rich lady in a toxic work environment, where Ifemelu's opinion does not matter, nor is it valued. Instead of acting on her ambitions of starting her own publication and seeing her achieve some sort of ascendence, the novel ends with Obinze knocking on her door. Had Obinze not been rich, with the capacity to fund her dreams, the end feeling would have been drastically different. It will no longer be the stereotypical happy ending, despite being a mistress -- a status she used to have seething

criticism for to the point of writing a blog entry about it. She decides to gloss over it and ignore when she herself occupies that position. Moreover, she seems to present no guilt or remorse in playing what is conventionally known as the "homewrecker" role. This is contradictory to Ifemelu's persona who looks at herself and all those around her with a critical eye. In fact, had Obinze not been rich, then, everybody who challenged her coming back to Nigeria would be proven right. Her return home would be akin to a fall from grace: from the first and free world to an African country-- a deeply politically incorrect conclusion to her story. Consequently, it would leave her feeling miserable, and the gossipy aunties feeling vindicated, an "I-told-you-so stance". In order to circumvent these challenges and give justification to her return, Obinze had to be rich. Looking at it from this perspective, it becomes rather jarring that the strong independent protagonist is now a damsel in distress, one in need of saving by a powerful and influential man, instead of relying on her own efforts to prove herself right. It is rather contradictory to her arc, and more like a poorly placed band-aid.

Ironically, the romance is drastically different in *Americanah* than in *Tar Baby*, yet they are as dysfunctional in both. Both writes tear off the bandages allowed by certain forms of cultural assimilation and respectability politics, but each serves a different purpose. Both romances in each book strive to display what it means to be Black in a diasporic transnational context, as inflected by national origins, status, and privilege. While *Tar Baby* wields the romance as a site of clashing perceptions and understandings on the meaning of Blackness, *Americanah* uses it to chronicle Ifemelu's journey of embracing her transnational Blackness. She succeeds in finding a true sense of her identity. However, the ending does remain deeply unsettling in *Americanah.*

2nd Section: Cultural Performance:

2.1. Micro –aggressions

When analysing Ifemelu's endeavour in finding herself, it is also important to view her progress from the perspective of society at large, and not just from the lens of love. Indeed, the

reader is confronted by an onslaught of microaggressions targeting all the Black characters in the novel. Aunty Uju, for example, is told she is incomprehensible, and Ifemelu is told not to kill her roommate's dog with voodoo, when the pet stole a piece of her bacon. The mundane racism stems in part from the prejudiced construction of the "stereotype threat," a phenomenon with real world ramifications *vis-à-vis* performance, according to American Psychological Association. The experiment revolves around testing the intellectual ability of students in regards to the derogatory racial stereotype of Blacks being less intelligent than Whites. The researchers have made three groups. In the first, they made the stereotype moot, by administering an SAT[3] test, without any reference to intelligence. It was marketed as merely a lab task. The results were evenly matched between the two racial groups. "In the stereotype threat condition, Blacks - who were matched with Whites in their group by SAT scores -- did less well than Whites" (par. 3). The third group simply had to record their race on the paper, "presumably making the stereotype salient". However, the Blacks still scored worse than their White counterparts. The concealed and unconcealed jabs seek to undermine Black intellect, unfortunately, have real evidence-based consequences that further the oppression via the motors of stereotypes. Assuredly, the derogatory categorizations of people of colour implying inferiority have the potential of affecting self-perception, and thus the ability to perform to the best of their capabilities. This conceptualization sheds a new light on Blaine's efforts to tutor as many Black highschoolers as possible. He attempts to even the odds stacked against them. His endeavours do establish Blaine as an advocate of social justice.

Misconceptions run rampant, amplifying the microaggressions to outright hostility/ies, which expedite the divide between Black and White as distinct unequal groups, no matter how unwittingly. Undeniably, the oscillation, between the disparaging instances and the emotional

[3] The Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) is an entrance exam used by most colleges and universities to make admissions decisions , in the United States primarily.

state of the characters, shapes a literary subjectivity depicting a (dis)conjunction between microaggressions and affective impact on those subjugated to the mistreatment. It embodies how some, if not most, African Americans go through their reality facing untoward racially-based challenges, a hurdle their fellow White country people do not seem to even think about in their day-to-day lives. This outcome is illustrated through Aunty Uju's monologue later on in the chapter mirroring this seething tension; she expresses her anger and frustrations because a teacher singled her out, yelling at her in the hallway of the school. The binary opposition of hypervisibility and invisibility colours her every-day.

Aunty Uju's soliloquy, after suffering from multiple micro-aggressions, is highly reminiscent of the tone prevalent in Claudia Rankine's book, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, especially when the author describes Serena Williams's anger against the onslaught of implicit racism, mainly as they both rely on anecdotal evidence to highlight its pervasiveness. Rankine exposes how Black people are conditioned to deal with their all too familiar rage caused by the day-to-day racism. They were "taught to hold [it] at a distance for [their] own good" (25). Aunty Uju echoes this sentiment when she admits that "these people make you become aggressive just to hold your dignity" (270). The amalgamation of what seems to be stand-alone minor incidents evolve and compound into hard-to-bear memories that shape the way people of colour view the world, creating an oppressive state of mind. Indeed, "not everything remembered is useful, but it all comes from the world to be stored in you" and thus, it can make "memory [...] a tough place" to keep inside, as it becomes a lens used to look upon the world (Rankine, 63, 64). As Toni Morrison argues in "The Site of Memory", it is important to excavate those recollections as they form a site of injury that needs to be addressed. She maintains that it is the reason why "memory weighs heavily in what [she] writes, in how [she] begins and in what [she] finds to be significant. Zora Neale Hurston said, 'Like the dead seeming cold rocks, I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make

me.' These 'memories within' are the subsoil of [her] work" (91-92). Hence, it comes important to externalize the legitimate feelings of anger, frustration, disappointment, etc., and not let them compile with no outlet, continuously repressed for the sake of not offending those around, or contributing to the reinforcement of the "angry-Black-person" stereotype. Otherwise, the site of those memories festers, and one can be overcome with the injustice of it all.

Ifemelu, uninhibited by alcohol, unloads years of racism. Perhaps the most direct example is her speech at a dinner party she attended with her then boyfriend Blaine in Manhattan, right after Barack Obama was voted president of the United States. She admits that she and other people have grown too accustomed "to keep[ing] others comfortable, and to show How Far We Have Come," but now, "the words had, once, again, overtaken her; they overpowered her throat, and tumbled out" (359). It should be noted her rhetoric showcases how far Ifemelu came to assert herself in public, when tackling issues of race. This new-found courage, bloomed when dating Blaine, permits her talk about racism in the midst of excitement. The United States has just elected the first Black president in the history of the country, creating a rallying effect, suggesting a post-racial society that left antagonism behind. This effect has been studied extensively; for instance, Monika L. McDermott and Cornell Belcher argue that the "momentous nature of the Obama election and its potential effect [created] a major political event, or a 'rally event'" (451). In this hopeful ambiance, "a large-hipped, stylish poet from Haiti [..., with an] Afro bigger than Ifemelu's," agrees that Obama shall end racism and that race has never been an "issue" for her and her white partner (Adichie, 359). Ifemelu takes this as an opportunity to vehemently contradict her. She enumerates multiple instances where race has been front and centre in her own previous interracial relationship. For example, an Asian aesthetician refused Ifemelu service because she cannot do "curly" eyebrows, but as soon as Curt – Ifemelu's former White lover– intervened, the woman transformed into a "smiling, solicitous coquette," claiming it is only a misunderstanding (361). Furthermore, when she was

seen with Curt in social settings, Ifemelu would notice all the piercing looks they received. It was an "inconceivable" pairing; despite being a beautiful Black woman, "she was not the kind of black they could, with an effort, imagine him with: she was not light-skinned, she was not biracial" (362). Although such occurrences may seem inconsequential or trivial, when they form the bedrock of daily social interactions, their importance rises exponentially, and it becomes harder to interpret them as anything but racial attacks.

In Ifemelu's narrative, racism takes many forms, sometimes hiding in well-intentioned efforts aiming to make her feel more at ease, but alas, it ends up giving the impression of being awkward at best, alienating and racist at worst. This is highlighted on multiple occasions including the time she met Curt's aunt, whom he claims is only "hyperaware of difference, any difference" (363). In an attempt to spare his aunt from the accusation of racism and intolerance, Curt maintains that she would have acted the same had she met a blond Russian instead of her, his Black girlfriend. However, Ifemelu silently points out that had she been white, his aunt would not have gone out of her way to prove, in exaggerated almost comical manner, that she liked her. Indeed, the performativity and the theatrics of the act of welcoming carried out by the aunt results in othering and alienation deeply felt by Ifemelu.

One could get the impression of a farce, highlighted in conjunction with the slew of actions and needless remarks that could be characterised as racist; since at their core, they perpetuated misconceptions about Nigerians in particular, and Africans in general. For instance, Curt's aunt with feet covered in dirt asked Ifemelu whether people of her origins also do not wear shoes. She feels that in Africa, everyone forgoes footwear, because it makes them feel closer to the earth. What is peculiar about this situation is not the fact that her opinion is ignorant of the realities in Nigeria, or in Africa more generally, as it could be explained through her position of privilege. In fact, the aunt's reaction to receiving an answer she did not expect, one that contradicted her preconceived notions, is the most unsettling. Curt's aunt was

disappointed when Ifemelu answered that her mother would have smacked any of her children, had they dared go outside barefoot. Indeed, it is curious that Curt's aunt felt disappointed, because Ifemelu has not met the aunt's expectations of what a Black person should act and be. To put it differently, the aunt, in this instance, places the burden of making herself feel superior, magnanimous, tolerant, and welcoming on the shoulders of Ifemelu; and when she dares to deny her this opportunity, she lashes out and exteriorizes her feelings of displeasure. It is an experience lived extensively by multiple characters across many works of literature.

Tyrone S. Palmer, maintains that the distinctive position of Blackness throws affects as a modality of sociality into crisis, highlighting its deeply racialized structure. He argues that "Black affective responses are only legible as signs of pathology, further reifying Blackness-as-subhumanity; as a sign of both excess and lack" (32). This is evident in the vitriol lacing Aunty Uju's discourse, as well as all Ifemelu's experiences. However, as Adichie describes, they have been either vilified or ridiculed, despite the fact that they were well within their rights to be angry and sad. It is a direct consequence of an ingrained anxiety to not be viewed in a stereotypical way. Palmer adds that:

> The current historical moment has seen an increase in attention to the widespread violence imposed on Black people, yet Black reactions to that gratuitous violence are consistently characterized as inappropriate, exorbitant, and themselves gratuitous. There is a fundamental disconnect between the perception of Black hyperemotionality and irrationality, and the reality of Black feeling. This operates both at the level of "individual" Black people [...] and in terms of structures of feeling. (33)

According to Palmer, Black affect is, thus, rendered inconceivable as it becomes buried underneath an overdetermined discourse that interprets its expression and performance as "always being excessive, insufficient, or both" (33). Therefore, in order to break free from the

"anti-Black paradigm," as Palmer names it, it is important to theorize Black affect from the position of Blackness itself.

2.2 Cultural Performance and Language:

Language in this regard becomes an important signpost when attempting to deconstruct the struggle of rejecting and/or accepting one's identity for the sake of fitting-in. Moreover, it inadvertently critiques the power dynamics governing the novel, which shapes the realities of the multiple Black characters portrayed in the text. Indeed, many instances pertaining to the white-washing of language are in line with interpellation as a constitutive process, a concept put forth by Louis Althusser in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. Althusser argues that interpellation is vital when it comes to ideological indoctrination, a process reliant on the internalisation of a culture's values. According to him, interpellation is functional due to the joint efforts of the ideological state apparatuses, which are private, e.g., family, media, workplace, and the repressive state apparatuses, which are public (controlled by the government), like the police. He maintains that the process of interpellation defines how ideology is assimilated subtly without the person realising it. To put it differently, "ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (256). The social interactions drawn from *Americanah* and enumerated in this essay provide a contextual framework for interpellation. Although the novel does not focus on the repressive state apparatuses, per se, there are nevertheless hints to its looming shadow in the United States. Indeed, it is manifested in Aunty Uju's worry about Dike growing up in the "hood", in the security guard's affront in the library, and in their deliberate repelling of attention in public locals, among many other instances. Be that as it may, the novel focuses primarily on the ideological state apparatuses exemplified jointly by the barrage of mundane casual racism sewn into the fabric of social interactions, as well as the characters' conscious and unconscious (re)actions.

Returning to Althusser, perhaps two of the most telling examples regarding ideological indoctrination are Ifemelu's slip of the tongue, and Emenike's pretension play, despite the latter occurring in the United Kingdom and not in the United States. In chapter fourteen, Ifemelu thinks that Americans have "overused the word 'excited', a professor excited about a new book, a student excited about a class, a politician on TV excited about a law; [according to her,] it was altogether too much excitement" (165). Yet, about two pages later, Ifemelu starts using the word "excited" without sarcasm or derision. "'YOU KNOW you said 'excited'?' Obinze asked her one day, his voice amused. 'You said you were excited about your media class.' 'I did?' New words were falling out of her mouth" (167). Through social conditioning, a person is bound to be affected, but in Ifemelu's case it has reached one of the deepest levels of her identity: her language. According to Judith Butler:

> We do things with language, produce effects with language, and we do things to language, but language is also the thing that we do. Language is a name for our doing: both "what" we do (the name for the action that we characteristically perform) and that which we effect, the act and its consequences. (8)

Although Butler makes this argument in reference to the performativity of language as an act of violence with the power to wound and injure, it alludes to her theory of the constitution of subjectivity as a conceptualization of the materialisation of the social environment. In this context, language becomes a reflection of Althusser's notion of interpellation.

However, theorising Blackness becomes an ambitious endeavour when considering the prevalence of White-washing as a thematic component within the novel. Indeed, little snide remarks that constitute microaggressions, extensively but not comprehensively voiced above, slowly but surely attack one's confidence, as well as one's perception of their worth. It leads to attempts of White-washing in order to be looked at with respect and dignity. An example of this dynamic would be when Ifemelu went to the university and the lady at the reception desk

talked to her so slowly, as if she was addressing either an imbecile, or a small child. Intending to remedy the situation, Ifemelu told her

> "I speak English," [...]
>
> "I bet you do," Cristina Tomas said. "I just don't know how *well*."
>
> Ifemelu shrank. In that strained, still second when her eyes met Cristina Tomas's before she took the forms, she shrank. She shrank like a dried leaf. She had spoken English all her life, led the debating society in secondary school, and always thought the American twang inchoate; she should not have cowered and shrunk, but she did. And in the following weeks, as autumn's coolness descended, she began to practice an American accent. (163-164)

The problematization of White-washing is foregrounded from the onset, the reader is introduced to Ifemelu's father who was beguiled by the Anglophilia nurtured by British colonialism. One could make the argument that he has been indoctrinated by missionaries. Indeed, Ifemelu "sometimes [...] imagined him in a classroom in the fifties, an overzealous colonial subject wearing an ill-fitting school uniform of cheap cotton, jostling to impress his missionary teachers" (58). This cultural assimilation overpowered him linguistically; "his mannered English bothered [Ifemelu] as she got older, because it was his costume, his shield against insecurity" (58). Yet, Igbo, his mother tongue, was not. What is peculiar about this instance is that it reveals an internalised sense of inferiority that has been instilled in him. He has associated English with the language of sophistication and cultural superiority, one that he uses as a means to elevate himself. Yet, in his pursuit, he was riddled by anxiety, according to his daughter's observations, an anxiety she now shares, highlighted when she felt the need to practice her American accent after being shamed by Cristina Tomas.

The linguistic shield of English is prevalent within the novel. The different accents act as status symbols in this regard, with British and American high on the pyramid of hierarchy. Ifemelu notices how her Aunty speaks and acts in the presence of others

> "Dike, put it back." Aunty Uju said, with the nasal, sliding accent she put on when she spoke to white Americans, in the presence of white Americans, in the hearing of white Americans. Pooh-reet-back. And with the accent emerged a new persona, apologetic and self-abasing. She was overeager with the cashier. "Sorry, sorry," she said as she fumbled to get her debit card from her wallet. Because the cashier was watching, Aunty Uju let Dike keep the cereal. (133)

This instance betrays the extent of "othering" Aunty Uju feels, as well as the ingrained feeling of inferiority that comes with it, a clear parallel with Ifemelu's interaction with the receptionist, as stated above. Their demeanour metamorphoses from one exuding strength as a female character who overcame hardships and tribulations, to one of subservience: almost grovelling, excessively, and needlessly apologising. The abrupt change in character sheds light on the nefarious effects of White-washing and the deep-seated need for pretending. In their attempt to erase their accent in order to adhere to what is deemed the socially accepted manner of speech, she too becomes riddled with anxiety, like Ifemelu' father, an outcome stemming from the human desire to be recognized and welcomed, in tandem with the conscious knowledge that she will be rejected if she presents her authentic self. As a matter of fact, she does not adopt the American tilt when she feels secure in her environment, but only in the presence of white Americans does she feel the need to put on a false front. The fake accent is akin to a mask she puts on to protect herself from overt racism and casual microaggressions. Concurrently, however, this instance constitutes a seething criticism of the hypocrisy of a society boasting of its multiculturalism and diversity.

2.3. Resistance of Cultural Assimilation Through Language and Hair.

Even Ifemelu, despite her strong-will, fell victim to this tendency of linguistic washing and erasure, as previously stated --until finally snapping out of it. Only after looking at it with critical eyes did she "feel the stain of a burgeoning shame spreading all over her, for thanking him [, the telemarketer], for crafting his words 'You sound American' into a garland that she hung around her own neck. Why was it a compliment, an accomplishment, to sound American?" (215). Ifemelu wonders as to the reason why someone not detecting her Nigerian accent would constitute be a badge of honour. Getting mistaken as a non-racialized American filled Ifemelu with brief joy, for she escaped for a few seconds the shackles society imposed on her as a Black person (e.g, micro-aggressions, white-washing). This moment is an epiphany for Ifemelu, one that startled her into the action of reclaiming her identity, hence heralding the beginning of the end of her relationship with Curt.

> Ifemelu decided to stop faking an American accent on a sunlit day in July, the same day she met Blaine. It was convincing, the accent. She had perfected, from careful watching of friends and newscasters, the blurring of the *t*, the creamy roll of the *r*, the sentences starting with "so," and the sliding response of "oh really," but the accent creaked with consciousness, it was an act of will. It took an effort, the twisting of lip, the curling of tongue. If she were in a panic, or terrified, or jerked awake during a fire, she would not remember how to produce those American sounds. (213)

Her "act of will," putting on this façade, hiding a significant marker of her identity, is contradictory to Ifemelu's character, which has been extensively portrayed throughout the novel as the complete opposite of impressionable and weak-minded. She felt swayed and swept by the glamour of money and privilege Curt provided to act and behave a certain way, to be praised for how American she is, and how deracialized she sounds. The micro-aggressions and

White-washing were also contributors to this act of will. However, she has to force herself to speak in these intonations, it is not true to her sense of self.

Indeed, she is described as someone who feels pride in her Igbo heritage. Her attachment to her language is highlighted when she traded proverbs with Obinze. Ifemelu is affirmed by their sharing of their native tongue, buoyed by what she learned and their deepening emotional connection. She confesses that "many guys won't even speak Igbo, not to mention knowing proverbs," which was all the more reason for her admiration of Obinze (73). This exchange serves two important purposes. On the one hand, it reveals the pervasiveness of the cultural erasure, not only in the United States, but also in the Nigerian community she grew up in, unveiling that many of her country folk have been mesmerised by the West, and underlining the power of White cultural hegemony. On the other hand, speaking Igbo even in Nigeria becomes in this context an act of resistance and reconstruction of one's cultural and geographical identity. The fact that Ifemelu at times felt ashamed of, and the need to hide her heritage, accent, and cultural identity, can be perceived as an incrimination of the corrosive effect of the power of language and discourse to diminish cultural identity. "Her fleeting victory [successfully adopting the American accent] had left in its wake a vast, echoing space, because she had taken on, for too long, a pitch of voice and a way of being that was not hers" (216). By refusing to pretend to be American-born, and by casting away her linguistic mask and shield, she defies attempts – both internal and societal– that aim to push her into a mould of conformity, one that calls for the adherence to Euro-American ideals.

One of the ways the novel attempts to rethink the concept(s) of Blackness is through hair, constituting one of the most important symbols of resistance in the novel. A point of fact, Ifemelu's hair journey is deeply political, specifically as the intersection of gender and race in her status as a woman of colour in the United States. The importance of hair dates back to well before the transatlantic slave trade and spans into the twenty-first century. In *Hair Story:*

Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America, Ayana Byrd and Lori L. Tharps trace the social, cultural, political, and economic influences of Black hair from the 15th century through the present, addressing issues such as Black identity, spiritual significance, and the political meanings of various styles. They reveal the implications of hair grooming, not only as a beauty aesthetics and self-expression but also as a form of power. Indeed, the common practice of shaving the heads of slaves and confiscating their combs and hair tools was one of the ways power has been exercised through hair. This violence serves a dual purpose of dehumanising and humiliating the enslaved, who often took great pride, and care, in maintaining their hair, but to also alienate them, and rob them of their identity. Hair serves many functions, according to Byrd and Tharps: "by looking at their hair alone, you could indicate a lot of things; a hairstyle could indicate such thing as a person's age; marital status; religion; ethnic identity; wealth, social status and much more" (2). By not allowing the slaves the use of hair products, matting was an often occurrence. The slaver did not spend much time or thought on how to care for their hair, they simply used kettle sheers and carding tools to detangle their hair, a practice that could result in scalp infections, and hair loss. Simultaneously, with efforts to dehumanise Black hair and consider it unattractive, straight hair, resembling that of the Caucasian masters, became the goal. It allowed the slave owners more power as oppressors over their oppressed, who might then struggle to affirm a Eurocentric beauty ideal. With this context in mind, a resonant parallel could be drawn with Ifemelu's own hair journey. Because of an upcoming interview, Ifemelu resorted to chemical hair straightening, which left her with severe burns. Incidentally, looking at herself in the mirror in that state provided a turning point, permitting her to embrace her natural hair. In this regard, the authors conclude that "America was built on the myth of the melting pot, but despite efforts of the powers that be, the ingredients never fully blended." They maintain that is, at best, "a patchwork quilt" of diverse ethnic groups striving to coexist under the umbrella term of the "mainstream culture". Unfortunately, the

stigmatization regarding natural Black hair has lingered; as a result, it is considered on many occasions unprofessional, unkempt, and less attractive in the larger culture via the means of the beauty industry.

The denouncement of Black hair paved the way for social and political movements aiming to reclaim the power taken from them, as well as their identity. During the Civil Rights movement, African Americans, frustrated with the rampant racism and the futility of their efforts to "fit-in", fashioned the natural state of their hair as a form of political resistance against the Eurocentric ideals. To this point, Ifemelu declares in relation to her own hair story: "Relaxing your hair is like being in prison. You're caged in. Your hair rules you. you didn't go running...today because you don't want to sweat out this straightness. You're always battling to make your hair do what it wasn't meant to do" (257). Fighting one's hair, resisting its natural state and forcing it to surrender to alien beauty ideals, not meant for Black hair, speak strongly about how beauty practices are utilised to commodify Black bodies and restrain them. Ifemelu's experience of having her natural hair constantly questioned while in a professional setting, an imbrication of work and leisure, highlights the implicit dynamics of eurocentrism in the everyday. Therefore, the many hairstyles she had to endure until settling on braids embody her own journey of embracing her Blackness.

On more than one occasion, Ifemelu is reminded that her hair is not suitable for the professional world. In a conversation, Aunty Uju informs her that

> "[she] has to take [her braids out for [her] interviews and relax [her] hair. Kemi told [her] that I shouldn't wear braids to the interview. If you have braids, they will think you are unprofessional."
>
> "So there are no doctors with braided hair in America?" Ifemelu asked.
>
> "I have told you what they told me. You are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do if you want to succeed."

> There it was again, the strange naïveté with which Aunty Uju had covered herself like a blanket. Sometimes, while having a conversation, it would occur to Ifemelu that Aunty Uju had deliberately left behind something of herself, something essential, in a distant and forgotten place. Obinze said it was the exaggerated gratitude that came with immigrant insecurity. (146-147)

This conversation illustrates how markers of Black identity and aestheticism need to be reshaped and/or hidden in order to be taken seriously professionally. Aunty Uju attempts to justify the White-centric ideals of beauty that rank her at the bottom of what is acceptable, by saying that one has to do anything to fit-in. Ifemelu believes that perhaps Aunty Uju has forgotten something of herself in Nigeria, while Obinze maintains it is due to immigrant insecurity. However, it is possible that this "something" has not been forgotten, but rather subdued and repressed. Had she stuck her head out to defend her natural hair for the principle of it, she perhaps might not have gotten the job, which would have left her to struggle to support both herself and her son. It was a risk she was not willing to take, regardless of her own views on and relationship with her hair.

Another reason why she could have decided to take down her braids is her desire to portray herself different from the stereotypes that link her natural hair to poverty and delinquency. This link is made clear when Ifemelu points out very early on in the novel that there are no braiding salons in Princeton, where she lives. "The few black locals she had seen were so light-skinned and lank-haired she could not imagine them wearing braids-- [Yet, as she waited for the train in the heat to go to Trenton], she wondered why there *was* no place where she could braid her hair" (1,2). The absence of the African American presence in the affluence of Princeton is underlined. The African hair salons will be in the poorest part of the city "that had graffiti, dank buildings, and no white people" and will carry ethnic names in flashy neon signs displaying, for example, "Aisha and Fatima African Hair Braiding" (10).

The establishment itself will be poorly maintained when it comes to heating and cooling (e.g., too hot in winter and failing air conditioner in summer). It is also common to have babies and toddlers, and sometimes even older children around. Yet, even in spaces that should respect natural hair, and be equipped to handle it, Ifemelu faces push-back. "'Your hair hard,' Aisha said. 'It is not hard,' Ifemelu said firmly. 'You are using the wrong comb'" (49). Ifemelu's statement is rather loaded. It seems that Ifemelu is trying to tell Aisha to stop using the wrong culture and the wrong ideals to evaluate Black beauty, beyond the physical comb. One could extrapolate on this way of looking at things to also understand the systemic disadvantages faced particularly by African American women. Kimberle Crenshaw has constructed a theory of intersectionality, combining race and gender in a dual axis, rather than treating them as mutually exclusive.

Crenshaw focuses on providing a framework that combines race, sex, and socio-economic status in order to understand their impact(s) on the African American woman. She argues that Black females are viewed as a "hybrid", caught in between race and sex (145). In other words, the focus on the most privileged group members marginalises those who are doubly discriminated against on the basis of gender and race, resulting in a distortion of the realities of low-income Black women. These economic realities are displayed when Ifemelu is startled by "what a difference a few minutes of train travel made. [...] She was struck by how mostly slim white people got off at the stops in Manhattan and, as the train went further into Brooklyn, the people left were mostly black and fat" (6). It establishes an economic hierarchy correlating with racial classifications. The well-educated in Princeton, are white, rich and slim while those less-educated, pushed from the centre, are Black, poor, and obese. Hair, in this manner, becomes an indicator of status as well. Only the poor have accessible hair braiding salons which corroborates the prejudicial view on natural African American hair. The rejection of protective and natural hairstyles in affluent and professional spheres further entrenches the

power dynamics governing beauty ideals. Therefore, when Ifemelu decides to "rock" an afro, it stands as an act of rebellion and resistance. Despite the looks and questions she receives, Ifemelu actively defies and subverts the mainstream. Her understanding of beauty and class is rooted in "the Lagos salon, [where] the different ranks of imperial femaleness were best understood", and as such, she decided to go back to her roots" (93). Therefore, she wears her Afro with pride, especially after her horrifying incident with hair relaxers that left her with chemical burns. She resists the societal tendencies to White-wash her appearance; she burned herself for the sake of fitting-in, in a gesture of self-reconciliation.

Ifemelu exhibits a need for reaffirming herself and her Blackness, in terms of heritage, status, class in the affluent, White-dominated spaces, such as Princeton, for example. As a matter of fact, if she allows herself to be White-washed, whether in the form of her hair, her language, her mannerisms, she faces an identity crisis. She loses sight of who she is, and who she perceives herself to be. However, it is important to note that White-washing has societal underpinnings that encourages Black people to change the way the speak and act. While for women, they are also socially pressured to change hairstyles, transforming their natural hair into a harmful, chemically-designed style. These forces are theorized in Althusser's notions of ideological indoctrination, through the process of interpellation. Those who do not belong to the mainstream are called to change how they act and talk, to present themselves as part of the dominant majority, relying on ideological and repressive apparatuses. However, interpellation happens unconsciously, thus exposing the far-reaching effects of White-washing as a concept, as well as the effect of trying to White-pass on the mind and identity. This is coupled with an avalanche of micro-aggressions that points an accusatory finger at differences between the "other" and the mainstream. Then, it demonizes the Black affective response to the gratuitous racial violence. This system does not allow for much space to assert one's differences, hence falling even further into cultural assimilation. Ifemelu, the main character in *Americanah* is a

victim of this vicious cycle that destabilized her identity so thoroughly. Her multiple relationships act as signposts in her negotiations with her identity, while also reflecting her journey of self-reconciliation. Nevertheless, the romance remains a problematic issue in the novel through the subversion of archetypal norms.

Tar Baby (1981): A Question of Contemporary Blackness

Tar Baby (1981), by Toni Morrison, aims to (de)construct what it means to be a Black woman through the interrogation of the life experiences of Black men and women in diasporic, transnational locations. *Tar Baby* follows the journey of Jadine Childs and her negotiations with the construction of her Blackness. Although the novel does not have major conflicts between the main character and society, Jadine Childs is repeatedly destabilized when it comes to her sense of self, challenges that allow for a painstaking growth by the end of the novel. The story follows the Sorbonne-educated protagonist as she grapples with class privilege, racial identity, gender expectations, and cultural alienation. In her journey, romance is perceived as central to the events of the unwinding plot. Indeed, the love story, its appropriation and subversion, is used as a vehicle to address the underpinnings of Jadine's contemporary Black womanhood, mainly through dismantling and reconstructing the archetypal romance and the reversal of the Happily-Ever-After trope. Jadine's relationship with Son offers a window of understanding in terms of how each perceive and experience their Blackness under a prism of disparate socio-economic factors. The first part of this chapter will deal with the (re)inscription of romance as a means of examining identity. Through the subversion of the love story, conflicts regarding the meaning of Blackness arise between Son and Jadine. The second part revolves mainly on how each Jadine and Son experience and view their racial identity.

1st Section: The (Re)Inscription of Romance as a Means of Asking Questions of Identity in *Tar Baby*

1.1. The Subversion of the Romance

Both *Americanah* and *Tar Baby* rely on romance as a tool of asking and answering questions regarding Black womanhood inside the boundaries of relationships, and outside of them. The two novels intersect by capitalizing on two seemingly fiercely independent female protagonists experiencing turbulent love stories. However, each novel rewrites the romance by subverting the coupling conventions in unique ways, particularly in how the characters understand and experience their Blackness. Each Ifemelu and Jadine is affected in different ways by the influence of class, education, and privilege in the construction of their racial identity in a diasporic context. In *Tar Baby*, Jadine is challenged to re-think her Blackness, mainly through the eyes of Son, a Black man who does not enjoy the same social advantages as her. Their relationship destabilizes Jadine and pushes her to confront her unique position in the in-between multivocal [4]space of rich and poor, White and Black, high-class and low-class-- to borrow post-colonial terminology. However, her relation with Son also allows her to have "the story of the formation and assertion of a feminine ego" (Baym as qtd. in duCille 4). The novel undermines the substructure of the conventional heteronormative relationship, in a patriarchal context, by undermining and empowering Jadine. By manoeuvring a subversive love-story, Jadine is also endowed with many privileges conventionally reserved for men,

[4] Mikhail Bakhtin defines multivocality as the "construc[tion of] not the whole of a single consciousness, absorbing other consciousnesses as objects into itself, but as a whole formed by the interaction of several consciousnesses, none of which entirely becomes an object for the other" (18).

including power, money, educational opportunities, and professional status. Nevertheless, she remains restricted by other societal conventions, namely her gender.

Ann DuCille traces the marriage plot to the Victorian era, to Jane Austin specifically, as a coded feminized concept --both White and European--based on economic arrangements between two parties of noble birth and good fortune, but when appropriated by African American writers, it becomes a deeply political construction. DuCille argues that for the Black ethnic minority--who were long denied the civil right of matrimony—the romance as a genre was of a special attraction. It allows them to challenge patriarchal values in the domestic sphere, for the early African American writers. These authors took liberties to make unconventional use of conventional norms of the romance. As DuCille asserts: "Coupling in the modern black feminist text is more often fictionalized as marital horror than as hearthside harmony" (DuCille 145). This reversal of bliss and horror aptly describes the love story between Jadine and Son. In this light, their relationship cannot be read within a vacuum, as subtle hints in the novel reveal the looming shadow and influence of patriarchal values and plantation gender roles in their coupling, and outside of it. One of the most explicit manifestations of punishing female sexual agency takes place when Jadine was a young girl. Indeed, she saw the effects of the patriarchy as clear as the noon sun of that fateful day when she made a conscious decision to suppress her sexuality. On Morgan Street, she saw a female dog in heat, mounted in the middle of the road for all to see. Inevitably, all the male dogs in the vicinity gathered around waiting for an opportunity to pounce. Yet, to get rid of the pack, the female dog was the only one punished with a heavy blow on her back by the store owners. Yelping and limping, she ran off. Moved by the pathos of the scene, young Jadine looked for the poor dog to ease her pain, only to find her mating, undeterred. This series of events revolted Jadine and roused deep disgust that she swore she would always keep her figurative dogs leashed, and never succumb to her desires. Indirectly, she subscribes to the notions of patriarchy where female sexuality is looked

at with aversion and is often met with punishment. Thus, with this context in mind, the novel paves the way for a sordid and subversive romance.

When Jadine first saw the freshly washed Son, with his clean-shaven chin, she felt the dogs she kept on a tight leash escape her grasp, foreshadowing their torrid love affair and her struggle to control her erotic desire. Whenever Son smiles, it brings "once more into view [in Jadine's mind] the small dark dogs galloping on silver feet." Consequently, she becomes both alarmed and determined to "pull herself away" (Morrison *Tar Baby* 113-4). At the beginning, Jadine has internal conflicts; she does not wish to allow herself to be treated like the bitch in the aforementioned story. It is a conflict made worse with long social conditioning to act with the decorum befitting patriarchal womanhood. In the company of Valerian and Margaret Street, her White patrons, and benefactors, she is expected to be cordial, and to smooth out any tensions that may arise. "We're the only women. And Ondine" replied Jadine when prompted by Margaret to take actions to drive Son away, the Black man they found in hiding(128). She, in her capacity as a woman, must act calmly and let the men around her take the actions required to restore the peace. In addition, in their presence, she was also meant to disregard her race and racial identity, or to use it to allow explicit racism. Indeed, Margaret was at a loss of words describing the figure of Son huddling in the corner of her closet, "that.... that..." (128). Jadine, then, magnanimously volunteers the word "Nigger", which Margaret happily uses, only to later compare Son to a "gorilla." Although "Jadine's neck prickled at the description", she made no effort to rebuke or stop the blatant racism; she merely reassured and comforted Margaret that they were all scared. In this sense, not only was this interaction a reflection of plantation dynamics, where the light-skinned servant was kept inside the mansion at the beck and call of the White enslavers, it also reveals the pervasiveness of embracing the racist White rhetoric. Despite enjoying multiple social advantages, Jadine is still burdened by the (de)racialized gendered expectations placed on her to nurture, soothe and comfort in her

capacity as a woman. The constant reminders to be meek and nonconfrontational could explain in part why Jadine felt intimidated into subservience, the first time she met Son.

The power dynamics require further examination. Indeed, during their first private encounter, Son held the vantage point and was in control of the exchange. He barges into her room, unannounced and in too-small-to-fit-properly pyjamas. Jadine, understandably, is very curt and standoffish, but as soon as his smile left his face, her first thought was "this is wrong […] I shouldn't make him angry" (114). The choice of the word "wrong" instead of dangerous, for example, is extremely peculiar. It would be understandable to think that the situation is threatening, and that she needs to tread carefully, considering she is alone in a room with a volatile, unknown man. However, she opts to use a word loaded with moral values. As a woman, Jadine is expected to drudge up smiles and small talk, to make herself look small, less intelligent, and less threatening so the people around her, particularly men, can feel bigger, smarter, and stronger. When she goes against these deeply ingrained values, it feels inappropriate, and perhaps even unnatural or immoral. Audre Lorde posits this ante when she asks: "what does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable" (110-11). In this sense, in the male-dominated world she inhabits, it is a social convention, dictated by the respectability politics of the era, to stroke the egos of men. This system does not create spaces for Jadine to assert herself without feeling -- sometimes subconsciously—the affects[5] of externalized and internalized misogyny.

Yet, the socio-economic advantages she revels in, contribute to the dismantling of the patriarchal heteronormative structures insofar as her relationship with Son is concerned. Indeed, Jadine has more influence and power than Son, socially speaking. This classification

[5] Affect theory is explored in multiple disciplines: philosophy, psychoanalysis, and gender studies. It could be used synonymously with subjective emotions. The theory also finds echoes in Marxist feminism, which links it with the manifestation of particularized, performed, and gendered roles, both cognitive and material.

is made manifest when Sydney, Jadine's uncle, does not hesitate to remind Son of his marginalized position in an already marginal ethnic group. Sydney makes snap judgments about Son, adopting a rhetoric both offensive and racist: "I know you, but you don't know me. I am a Phil-a-delphia Negro mentioned in the book of the very same name. My people owned drugstores and taught school while yours were still cutting their faces open so as to be able to tell one of you from the other" (Morrison *Tar Baby* 163). Sydney references W. E.B. DuBois's book to illustrate the chasm that separates them, in terms of class and complexion, despite belonging to the same ethnic group. *The Philadelphia Negro* is a sociological study regarding Philadelphia's Seventh Ward, demonstrating a nuanced stratification of the class system in the predominately Black neighborhood. DuBois observes clear demarcation lines that divide the district into three major areas. The west is occupied by the well-to-do Whites; the center is inhabited by dense concentrations of Black elites – the teachers, and pharmacists Sydney references -- while the eastern side is populated by what he terms the "submerged tenth" (3). Hence, the eastern side is the poorest, the least educated and the most crime-ridden. DuBois presents his findings to address what he terms the "Negro problem". He challenges the White supremacist views on the collective grouping of Black people as a homogenous entity, while also criticizing the prejudiced judgments that were based solely on how the lowest rung was perceived and viewed. He also implores both Whites and Blacks to find solutions for this issue. Sydney, however, distorts DuBois's message to push Son into the lowest conceivable strata. In the hierarchy Sydney establishes, he implicitly places Jadine as one of the elites, and thus superior to Son.

Aside from her uncle's class rankings, Jadine, in fact, possesses a higher social-standing, considering her prior educational opportunities and upward mobility. She is a cosmopolitan, a Sorbonne-educated art historian, unlike Son, who has had little formal education. Although he travelled, it was never the product of luxury and privilege, but rather

the result of the desperate need to survive. He had to look for odd jobs, one after the next, just to scrape by. On the other hand, Jadine was featured as a model in magazines with jewellery so expensive, it left Son awe-struck. Their standards of living are drastically different: her achievements allow her to earn a lot more, while working a lot less than Son who engaged mainly in labor-intensive, blue-collar jobs. Their juxtaposition creates a stark contrast, which undermines the social order of male superiority; it strips Son of all that signifies (Black) manhood in relationships and society. He does not possess the socio-economic characteristics – the dictates of masculinity and virility in a patriarchal capitalist society— which will allow him to subscribe to the provider/ dominant male archetype. Using the conventions of patriarchal society, Jadine not only thoroughly subverts them, but also emasculates Son. She is the breadwinner and the one wearing the pants in the relationship, to borrow a common colloquialism.

1.2. The Perversive Romance: A Clash of Perceptions

The apparent disbalance in power between Son and Jadine, either in terms of gender or class, paves the way for a deeply dysfunctional relationship. True to the observation made by DuCille, the coupling between these two characters could be described as "marital horror" (145). Bell hooks argues that the descent into violence and succumbing to its urges is directly correlated with the intersectional oppression of Black men. As a matter of fact, she rationalizes the increased propensity for violence by linking it to the effects of patriarchy on masculinity. Hooks maintains that this social system creates an unachievable reality for African American men. It is a standard expectation for all male adults to have stable employment and financial freedom; however, the opportunities to reach these goals are less accessible to Black men due to racial bias, according to J-PAL. To this point, Harry J. Holzer investigates the low employment rates for African Americans. He compares the currently out of work population

between the years 2013 and 2014 based on race. 35% of Black people are unemployed, a higher percentage than their White counterparts at 17%, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employee Situation Reports. As such, his findings corroborate hooks's argument. According to hooks, the emotional dynamic of the couple transforms from a partnership to a competition, one that pits Black men against Black women. Her conceptualization describes Son's social situation, which also foreshadows the ensuing violence.

Blinded by passion, the beginning of their love story is all-consuming in its impulsiveness and fervor. Prior to visiting Eloe, Son's hometown, the couple seemed deeply enmeshed in one another, spending as much time as possible together in New York, and feeling genuinely happy. "Everybody else was ridiculous, maimed or unhappy to them, so satisfied were they with their mutual adoration" (223). They are caught up in the fantasy. However, their bubble soon bursts, hurling them into a cycle of physical and psychological abuse. Jadine has endured a black eye a few times, while Son was peppered with scratches and teeth imprints: "When she came to and touched her jaw he went wild thinking he had loosened one of the side teeth so precious to him. Jadine dressed the bite marks on his face; and they said, 'Ollieballen,' laughing as best they could with the bruises" (264). It should not go unnoticed that he was more concerned with the impact of his violence on her physical beauty, instead of his capacity to commit the violence in the first place. In another instance of physical altercation, Jadine was pushing for Son to pursue an education to become a lawyer or a businessman, and to seek a better future for themselves as a couple, while Son is content with the way things are. Better yet, he would prefer to go back to Eloe, the small, all-Black town where he was raised. During this fight, he almost defenestrated Jadine, holding her by the wrists from a ten-feet high window, until she peed her pants. However, when the cops knocked on the door, they were already back to being "so lovey-dovey the police thought they had the wrong apartment" (265).

The oscillation between love and hate, passion and abuse, is both dysfunctional and frequent that it warrants a closer investigation.

In one of their fights, the root of their conflict is revealed: they are incapable of finding a common vision for their shared lives, a direct product of their divergent socio-economic backgrounds. Son wants to return to Eloe, where he had little but was content regardless due to his experience of a collective Blackness, whereas Jadine wants to save him from himself and instead provide him with worldly and material successes. Their clash could be summarized in the question the narrator asks "mama-spoiled black man, will you mature with me? Culture-bearing black woman, whose culture are you bearing?" (269). However, the question is not as straightforward as it is presented. Son is determined to protect Jadine from subscribing to White societal structures and conventions, by trying to reel her back into her Black identity and roots—as he sees it. At the same time, Jadine attempts to convince Son to assimilate more seamlessly in the mainstream society and urban life. Although it stems from a place of love, it remains a clash of identities and worldviews.

If it is true that their perceptions of what it means to be Black in the United States are different, then their way of trying to enforce these worldviews on one another is highly problematic. To improve their financial straits, Jadine resorts to the use of the tactic of nagging to force her will on Son, by attempting to mold him into the provider archetype. The term nagging is controversial as it denotes misogynistic undertones and gendered stereotypes. According to Diana Boxer, "the speech behavior having the semantic label of 'nagging' is [usually] 'unpalatable' [and] ubiquitous in the domestic context" (49). She also maintains that the topic must be important to the nagger, but significantly less so for the person being nagged. Her perspective is in line with the interactions between Son and Jadine. The latter is relentless in her pursuit of making Son a someone, anyone, but who he is. She wishes him to be a lawyer, a businessman, a shopkeeper, anything as long as it is not in line with "transcendental, Thoreau

crap", a statement she made prior, which illustrates their opposing philosophies in life (Morrison, *Tar Baby* 171). She wants to mold him into a patriarch.

Boxer, however, in her investigation of the concept of nagging, traces its determiners to issues relating to gender, social status, and power. Indeed, nagging is directly associated with power, or lack-thereof, where it could be compared to a conflict between the sexes. A member of a family unit, usually female, is accorded a right to request services from another member with the expectation of having the request fulfilled rather quickly, "if there is perceived power" (Boxer 55). With Jadine's higher social standing in mind, her insistence and growing frustrations are understandable. She should have the socio-economic power to influence Son, coupled with the affective aspect in their relationship. Therefore, having him do her bidding should be of no issue, yet she is met with rejection and resistance. Deborah Tannen remarks that the labelling of women as

> "nags" may result from the interplay of men's and women's styles, whereby many women are inclined to do what is asked of them and many men are inclined to resist even the slightest hint that anyone, especially a woman, is telling them what to do. […] A man who wants to avoid feeling that he is following orders may instinctively wait before doing what [a woman has] asked, in order to imagine that he is doing it of his own free will. Nagging is the result, because each time she repeats the request, he again puts off fulfilling it. (qtd. in Boxer 55-6)

Thereby, Tannen indirectly theorizes the power shifts governing Son and Jadine's relationship. The speech behavior of nagging, according to her, loses effectiveness the more it is used. In other words, nagging is associated with weakness, although it does not start that way. Indeed, if it is true that the nagger holds the power at the beginning, and only at the beginning --where they could impose their will—then this explains in part the reason why Jadine and Son settled in New York for a long while before visiting Eloe. However, the person being nagged, Son in

this case, starts to grow indifferent, and thus, stripping power away from the nagger, Jadine – feminist reservations in mind—who repeatedly relies on a tool that once used to be extremely effective. In turn, it creates a vicious cycle; both Son and Jadine grow increasingly frustrated and resentful.

If Jadine's efforts to help improve their financial situation could be considered as nagging, Son's approach to impose his will could be characterized as brainwashing. His affective maneuvering, when attempting to enforce his perception of what it means to be Black, is equally insidious. It is important to note that although Son loves Jadine ardently, he has seething rage towards her. For example, when he was waiting for Jadine to join him in New York, he started to feel anxious whether she would change her mind and leave him stranded there. While spiraling in worry, he rails against her character. What he thinks of her is revealed when remembering her

> mocking voice, the superior managerial, administrative, clerk-in-a-fucking-loan-office tone she took. Gatekeeper, advance bitch, house-bitch, welfare office torpedo, corporate cunt, tar baby side-of the road whore trap, who called a black man old enough to be her father "Yardman" and who couldn't give a shit who he himself was and only wanted his name to file away in her restrung brain so she could remember it when the cops came to fill out the report. (Morrison, *Tar Baby* 220)

His mental tirade against Jadine reveals his distaste towards how she experiences her Blackness, from his perspective. He reproaches her capitalist gains in the corporate world, as well as her superior status in it. Son disapproves of her power to deny and gatekeep help and respect – as he sees it—to Black folk. He feels bitter when reflecting on her integration in White society, invoking plantation gender roles, and its power structures. By calling her an "advance bitch" and a "house bitch," he likens her to the house slaves. His perception of Jadine is both warped and derogatory. Historically, indoor slaves were typically of a lighter skin-tone and had

a comparatively higher status and standard of living than the field slaves, who were of a darker complexion. However, the comparison ends here. His view remains a bit simplistic, for he dismisses the harsh realities of the house slaves, who were also mistreated and abused physically, emotionally, and sexually. It is only on the surface that they appear to be better off than their counterparts on the field. Nonetheless, Son ignores this aspect in the comparison for it does not serve his distorted perception of Jadine, the one fueling his anger.

Despite his vitriol, Son, simultaneously, considers Jadine as a little defenseless bird in need of his guidance for her to (re)claim her identity as a Black woman. He wishes to envelop her in his Blackness and save her from what he deems White-washed tendencies and character traits. One may argue that his rejection of Jadine could be interpreted as displaced anger for his own marginal class and status. As a matter of fact, Son implicitly identifies with the field slave when he invokes the plantation labor division. In this regard, he shares the same ideology as Malcolm X. In a speech delivered in 1963, "Message to the Grass Roots", he self-identifies with the field slaves, as well, for in his – as well as Son's-- understanding, the house slaves are more resistant to change and freedom-fighting. Malcolm X argues that since they enjoyed more benefits than the field slaves, they were more unwilling to leave the plantation and more indoctrinated to support the White hegemonic power structures lording over Black people. In this regard, Son expresses his resentment against Jadine, as demonstrated by his barrage of insults towards her character. Son's view, albeit on the extreme side, finds its echoes in an interview with Morrison where she commented on Jadine's persona. The author maintains that there is the modern American Black capitalist who epitomizes the integration of Black and White civilizations. In *Tar Baby*, Jadine is the embodiment of this fusion of cultures and ideals. However, Morrison continues "that there is some danger in the result of that production. It cannot replace certain essentials from the past" (qtd. in Hawthorne 2). Son is aware of this disjunction and takes it upon himself to try and push her to reconcile with her racial identity.

Under this light, the role of Son is underlined in helping Jadine come to terms with her Black heritage.

However, his approach could be characterized as problematic for a multitude of reasons. The duality between her perceived haughtiness and fragility creates a dysfunctional dynamic: Son feels an unhealthy obsessive urge to protect Jadine from outside threats to her person – the capitalist White hegemonic society— as well as inner threats to herself – the internalization of the White-washing paradigms. For a while, he succeeds in grounding Jadine, and allowing her a safe space to feel at ease, at home: "Gradually she came to feel unorphaned"; "he unorphaned her completely" (Morrison, *Tar Baby* 229). Outwardly, Son manages to root Jadine as he becomes her family. Although she feels cherished and safe-guarded, she holds some reserves, whether it is wise to not hide anything from him, whether "she should hold back, and keep something in store from him" (229). The scene where she acknowledges her reservation, he attempts, in a rather strange and symbolic manner attempts to brainwash Jadine, in a physical, literal sense. As a matter of fact, he "[opens] the hair on her head with his fingers and [drives] his tongue through the part" (229). His actions are both strange and symbolic on multiple levels.

One may argue that his movement is a deliberate, as well as a literal manifestation of brainwashing. Firstly, the correlation between his licking and her doubts suggests that he is attempting to cleanse her of any worries regarding their relationship. His action seems vampiric in nature; it is reminiscent of Jadine's vision of the "dogs galloping on silvered feet" whenever Son smiles (134-5). Canines typically lick to show affection, to groom, or to tend to a hurt/wound. Therefore, when Son strokes with his tongue the middle part that separates her hair into two, the gesture is open to multiple interpretations. He, in a literal sense, is licking an in-between space in her head, a space of perceived injury. Indeed, as stated above, and as will be argued further, Son scorns Jadine for not embracing her Blackness--as he perceives it. As

such, the part in her hair functions as a sight of hurt for Son, one that he needs to care for. It, consequently, explains his attempts to force his views on Jadine. Furthermore, he is metaphorically licking away a physical allusion to her Whiteness/ biracialism. The scalp is typically of a lighter color than the rest of the skin, as it tends to be protected from the sun by the hair on one's head. In this regard, Son is grooming Jadine, washing away all that may impede her embrace of her Blackness, as he sees it. In other words, he tends to a grievous point of contention – her in-between, ambivalent Blackness— through hair-grooming, veiled in gestures of affection, under the overarching themes of love and romance. Finally, it is also important to note the possible interpretation of Son trying to taste her mind. As someone from a lower socioeconomic stratum, he, metaphorically, samples the knowledge and education he was deprived of, something that was never accessible to him, and the very same thing he wishes to remove from her. In the process, he defiles and degrades her mind, symbolically. It hints that Son experiences a sort of displaced rejection towards Jadine –who, according to him, does not embrace her Blackness -- as result of his own marginal class status. With these multiple levels of meanings and interpretations, the novel foregrounds Son and Jadine as profoundly paradoxical, ambivalent, and symbolic characters.

2nd Section: Blackness as Perceived and Experienced by Son and Jadine

After establishing the dysfunctional dynamics in Son's and Jadine's relationship and tracing it to a root problem of warring perceptions and world views, it is important to scrutinize how each perceives and experiences Blackness. As DuCille argues, the love story, with its subversive nature, revisions the categories of gender norms, pertaining to man and woman, revealing deeper racial and social issues. Indeed, the romance could be conceived as an intricate and layered formation of racial identity, calling forth the theories of assimilation, ethnicity,

class, and stratification, while simultaneously moving beyond them. The novel in this sense, questions the complex realities of being African American, man and woman, in and out of the frontiers of mainland United States. The narrative confronts and highlights notions of (up)rootedness and racial consciousness through the historical contextualization of the characters and use of an innovative style of writing. *Tar Baby* is, consequently, a reworking of racial history and of racial identity using Jadine and Son as proxies.

2.1. (Up)Rooted Son, Son of Son

The root of the conflict between Son and Jadine is their disparate world-views and perceptions regarding the meaning of Blackness, however, Son's understanding requires a closer examination. Son is, seemingly, portrayed as a deeply rooted African American man, in touch with his racial identity. In the novel, he creates clear and rigid demarcation lines between White and Black, refusing to compromise on certain things, which according to him, would blur the lines between these two poles – hence his refusal to go to White persons schools, per Jadine's suggestions/nags. He believes that the worlds of Blacks and Whites should not intermix, a belief he clearly states on multiple occasions. His very name evokes notions of ancestry, while his opinions are reminiscent of the history of slavery – and its afterlife in *Tar Baby*. One could rely on racial formation theory to gain a glimpse into his character.

In the field of African American cultural studies, the term ancestor is a loaded one, and a distinctive feature of African American writing. Michael Omi and Howard Winant offer a theoretical framework addressing racial formation. For them, it is "the process by which social, economic and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories, and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meanings" in a sociohistorical context (61). This

conceptualization serves as a commentary on the differences between Jadine and Son in terms of how each is racially formed. Indeed, their racial common sense is dissimilar, for they did not share the same formative experiences and opportunities despite being socially constructed as racialized people who have dealt with discrimination. As such, they each possess a divergent sense of identity. In Son's case, his character could be compared to an ancestral figure in the novel. The name Son chooses for himself is not only intentional, but also highly evocative. This name is more important to him than his birth one, the latter being most commonly connected with identity. In eight years, Son held many aliases, both documented and undocumented, and in this chaos of multiplicity, he admits that he forgot his birth name. Therefore, he decided to pick a name that was most true to his selfhood, as he perceives it. "Son. It was the name that called forth the true him. [...] The other selves were like words he spoke – fabrications of the moment, misinformation" (*Tar Baby*, 139). His choice is deliberate and requires a closer investigation. The word "son" carries a linguistic function of indicating and establishing genealogical lines to ancestors, and by extension, to African origins.

The name acts as an anchor to his Blackness. Anissa J. Wardi defines the ancestor not as "a singular entity", but one born of a "[blurred] historic body" (40). Indeed, the ancestor connotes history and a desire to return to the origin, to the homeland, and Africa. The ancestor, as such becomes a blurred entity living in the reality of the present, the pains of history, and the dreams of home. Son in this regard could be considered an ancestral figure, for he cannot reconcile with the horrors slavery have inflicted upon his people. This is revealed through his distaste for the Streets, who employ Black servants --a re-enactment of plantation power structures-- and Jadine, who associates with them. Moreover, Son longs for his home, Eloe. The all-Black town can be perceived as his homeland, a micro-Africa, in the sense that it has an ethnic majority of Black people. In addition, the ancestor can materialize in the shape of "a grandfather as in Ralph Ellison, or a grandmother as in Toni Cade Bambara, or a healer in

Bambara or Henry Dumas" (Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" 344). The term ancestor, however, could also be related to the son figure in *Tar Baby*, an homage to Son's chosen name. As a matter of fact, "even though today everybody talks about ancestors in a somewhat lofty way – ancestor this, ancestor that – they are actually very much like one's siblings. [...] Some of them need to be negotiated" (Walker 97). With this context in mind, Son expands on the notion of ancestry, for he does not adopt a name with fatherly connotations; on the contrary, he opts for a name that evokes progeny: siblings and offspring. Nevertheless, despite the degree in the genealogical tree, these figures display similar tendencies and characteristics of the ancestor archetype.

Son is presented in the novel as someone seemingly secure in his identity, a culturally rooted Black man. However, there is more to him than meets the eye. Admittedly, the multiplicity of names/identities indicates a fracture in his sense of self, particularly between how the world views him and how he self-identifies. He is deeply attached to his Blackness, and his past, in which he finds great comfort and pride. Ikenna Dieke argues, regarding different characters in *The Temple of My Familiar*, that those who feel dispossessed and displaced "betray a peculiar passion to reconnect with their past […]. For them, without a principle of continuum of the past merging with the present in a constantly shifting melange, it becomes meaningless to speak of the self," which is in a perpetual flux allowing for relentless negotiations with one's own state of being and identity (509). Even though the observations Dieke reaches are in relation to other characters in a different novel, it corresponds seamlessly with Son and his philosophy in life. Son who is presented as a rooted man, is in fact unrooted. Despite feeling profound belonging to his hometown, he could not go back for eight long years. As such, he could be characterized as dispossessed. Exiled from his country, he travels from one place to another, without ever settling, chasing all sorts of odd jobs. In fact, Dieke's understanding also justifies and explains, to a certain extent, Son's derision of Jadine, whom

he believes has sold her African soul by ingratiating herself with the Streets. Indeed, he, who has had to live on a ship, surrounded by water and away from land --an epitome of uprootedness—clings to his Black roots, while she who had the luxury to stay inland also had the luxury to negotiate her Blackness. Ironically, however, Son's multiple names/identities speak also to his constant negotiation of trying to find himself, after leaving the homeseat of Eloe, although he seems to be unaware of it.

In some instances, he even manipulates the fine line of who he is, and who he projects himself to be, to get the inhabitants of the mansion to accept him. The version he presents to Valerian, for example, is different from the one he shows to Sydney and Ondine Childs, the butler and cook employed by Valerian, who are also Jadine's uncle and aunt. Admitting his primary goal is to be liked, his transformations go beyond mere emotional manipulations in order to get what he wants; he himself is unaware of the different masks he wears. In this sense, he becomes like a chameleon where he fluctuates in between states of being and demeanor. Although Morrison does not mention Walt Whitman, Son's state of consciousness, in its internal fluctuations, is reminiscent of the poet's line in *Song of Myself*, where the speaker asks "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)" (Lines 6-8). In the very same manner, Son is a persona that contains contradictions, as the poet describes. This correlation also accounts for Jadine's observation of Son as a transcendentalist. One can argue that his multitudes are akin to a coping mechanism, or a shield Son erects and maintains to protect what he perceives as a main and shaky – unbeknownst to him– pillar of himself, the link to his Black masculine identity: Son.

In this constant flux, what tethers him is the adjective and noun Son, but it is also, paradoxically, the marker of the fragility of his seemingly secure identity. The first time his name is mentioned, it is through the omniscient narrator, who penetrates Son's thoughts and betrays him by revealing his name to the readers. He is Son, son of son. He embodies the values

of filiality and kinship in *Tar Baby*, through the duality of ancestry, the name he goes by, and his love for his father and home. Notwithstanding, upon closer inspection of his familial ties, contradictions start to appear, and the channels for negotiations are constructed. In fact, his name becomes ironic considering he is not that filial of a son. After unintentionally murdering his first wife, Cheyenne, in a fit of jealousy and betrayal, he had to leave his hometown in Eloe, mainly to evade the consequences of his actions (i.e., his mother-in-law's vengeance, and the law). By doing so, he abandons his elderly, widowed father: "He had not seen Old Man in eight years" (Morrison, *Tar Baby* 248). Although he tries to "do good by him", in the form of sending him money, not much, but all he can spare, Son never contacts his father. Moreover, on his return to the United States, he does not immediately go to him, nor does he ask about him. Instead, Son enjoys his time in New York in the throes of passion. Eventually, when he finally goes to see him, a gap in his construction of self appears.

Their interaction constitutes a jarring realization for Son, for he was not a good son. The male protagonist prides himself in being a good filial son; it is the backbone of his construction of identity. Upon meeting his father, Son was confronted with a contradiction; he discovers his pride is baseless. Old Man cautiously reveals the hurt he has been nursing over all these years. Although it did not have to be explicitly said, Old Man was tormented with worries over his son, whom he heard nothing about for eight long years. His question, at the end, was the only indication he allows for his son to see that wound:

> they [go] in the bedroom [where] Old Man took a White Owl cigar box from under his bed and opened it. There was a thin pile of envelopes bound by a rubber band; some postal money orders held together with a paper clip, and a few ten and twenty dollar bills. Eight years of envelopes.
>
> "These were for you, Old Man. To take care of you."

"They did. They did. But you know I didn't want to be going over there to the Post Office every month, cashin em. Might set folks to talkin and turn the law out on account of that other business. So I just took a few in every now and then. Quiet, you know." [....] "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure. Ask it."

"How come you never put no note or nothing in them envelopes? I kept on lookin for a note."

Son *stopped* [emphasis added]. How hurried all those money order purchases had been. [...] How hurried he had been.

"I guess I didn't want nobody to read em and know where I was …" But it was too lame an excuse to continue with. "Is this why you kept the empty envelopes too?"

"Yeah. They had your handwritin on em, you know. You wrote it, that part anyway. 'Franklin Green.' You got a nice handwritin. Pretty like your mama." (*Tar Baby* 247-8, 250)

Old Man did not care for the money, nor had he much use for it –evidently, since he did not use it all. He longed for a letter, a word that would ease his mind and heart, a note that had never arrived. Therefore, Son's sense of self is doubly not as firm as he portrays and believes it to be, even outside of his ancestral inclination and subsequent oscillations between the past and present. The pillar of filiality and kinship is cracked in Son. It makes for a moment of introspection where Son, son of son, could detect a fracture in his sense of self. Ironically, he comes to the realization that he has not been much of a "son".

1.2 Jadine Childs and the Tar Baby

Jadine, although going by one name and one name only, suffers from a similar, yet dissimilar, identity crisis as Son. As a light-skinned Black woman, her sense of self is

ambiguous. She walks the lines between aristocracy and servitude, privilege and poverty, Blackness and Whiteness, while simultaneously trying to strike a balance between all these contradictions. In the process, she loses sight of herself. This is evident in her conversation with her aunt, Ondine. When discussing what it means to be a woman, a Black woman, Jadine disagrees with her aunt, stating "there are other ways to be a woman" and that she does not "want to be [the] kind of woman [her aunt describes]" (Morrison, *Tar Baby,* 282). Ondine simply responds "there ain't but one kind. Just one" (282). From the onset, Jadine seems to have surrendered different parts of herself to accommodate all the different social spheres she inhabits and is inhabited by. Nevertheless, she seems to have the most trouble negotiating her racial identity. Actually, Mary Thérèse Foucault, the enigmatic laundry-washing woman, often hired by Ondine, advises Son near the end of the novel not to pursue Jadine any longer, for "there is nothing in her parts for [him]. She has forgotten her ancient properties" (305). All of these elements depict her Blackness in the novel as complex, as a site of deep emotional ambivalence, exacerbated by her mixed-race appearance (particularly her wavy hair texture and the relative lightness of her skin), and by the reactions she elicits in other people. In this sense, she is portrayed as a decentered subject with a heterogeneous sense of self, as a result of the plurality and conflict of the different socio-cultural pulls in a nationalist discourse.

The reactions towards Jadine Childs swing between praise and disapproval creating a deeply complex, larger-than-life persona. Usually, the white characters in *Tar Baby*, namely Valerian and Margaret, would complement her on her beauty and hair, and appreciate her manners and education. She is beautiful, easy to talk to, and she never causes disturbances. In other words, she does not challenge the *status quo.* Yet, the contrasting reactions she receives from the other characters lead to an ongoing (self)questioning of her Blackness and racial identity. In a confrontation with Son, he calls her a "tar baby" (Morrison, *Tar Baby* 270). This eponymous adjective constitutes a racial epithet and a folk archetype invoking highly offensive

and racist notions. The Merriam Webster dictionary defines the term "tar baby" as "a contemptuous term for a Black person." According to Bryan Wagner,

> at least since the 1840s, "tar baby" has been used as a grotesque term of abuse, and it continues to feel like an assault no matter the circumstances in which it is employed. At the same time, "tar baby" has operated as a figure of speech suggesting a problem that gets worse the harder you try to solve it. (ix)

This duality exists in the original oral folktale, transcribed by Joel Chandler Harris' 1880 collection, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*, and then appropriated by Disney. This duality is personified in *Tar Baby,* through the character of Jadine.

In this vein of thought, the tar baby (the puppet) constitutes an important symbol in the African American history of slavery. The purpose of the tar in the original fable was meant to entangle Br'er Rabbit. Tar, as is in the oral tale was used to police and hurt Black slaves. Following this thread of thought, it evokes vivid images of a fence made out of tar in the autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. While on plantation, the slave owner, Colonel Lloyd created his version of the tar baby contraption by erecting a tar fence to guard his fruit-bearing trees, so tempting were they for the ravenously starved slaves. Frederick Douglass writes "hungry swarms of boys as well as the older slaves," none of them "had the virtue or the vice to resist it" (15,16). Unfortunately, the tar contraption fulfilled its malevolent purpose. Those covered in its sticky mess, evidence of their infraction, were brutally whipped. "The slaves became as fearful of tar as of the lash [...] They seemed to realize the impossibility of touching *tar* without being defiled." The shadow of slavery and plantation power structures, in the Isles des Chevaliers residence, and Son's rejection of it, coupled with his ancestral characterization, allow for a comparison between Jadine and the tar baby in Douglass's narrative. In this regard, Son's comments could be interpreted in a different manner. He implores her not to content herself with the crumbs Valerian throws, a fraction of what he spent

on his own son. For Son, this investment was his debt to pay to her aunt and uncle, who served him faithfully. Even then, Valerian would still come up short to fully repay their labor. Until she does, the stains of tar would keep her "defiled" and unable to reconcile with her racial identity.

Tar, in this sense, serves a dual purpose; it holds a symbolic importance that resonates across history and different African American narratives on a global scale, it also holds meaningful symbolism for Jadine in particular. Jadine Childs, as a matter of fact, also had an experience with tar, when she fell right into it in the swampy parts of the island: "This was the ugly part of Isle des Chevaliers – The part she averted her eyes from whenever she drove past" (*Tar Baby* 181). When an event forced her to confront her fear in the form of the car running out of fuel, Jadine decided to venture into the swamp for the first time. It was not long before "she sank up to her knees", with only a tree for savior (182). Pressed together in a lovers embrace, she managed to free herself of the slimy mud that looked "like oil" and "felt like jelly" (184). As soon as Son returned with the fuel, he saw that her "white skirt showed a deep dark and sticky hem and hung over the door of the jeep". This scene is peculiar, for it could be read as a metonymy where the state of the white skirt mirrors the situation of the White-passing Jadine: both are delimited by "pitch" (185). Notwithstanding, Son kneels down, lending a cleaning hand for the "drying and sticking" mess on Jadine's legs: "The black stuff was shiny in places and where it was dry it was like mucilage" (184). Similar to the white skirt, the scrubbing of the tar-like substance could be read as an allegory for Jadine, when she tries to reconcile and "[maintain] the color-line, veiling [her] 'blackness' not under the cover of 'broad grins and minstrel antics,' but under a veneer of a constructed whiteness which, while rationalizable, is always open to [her] own profound questioning" (Sheely 406). In this regard, Jadine is no longer the tar figure Son accused her of being, but rather a woman who received multiple antithetic messages regarding her identity. Sometimes, she is treated as a White

person, sometimes as Black. With no consistent input from those surrounding her, she developed what W.E.B DuBois terms as the state of "double consciousness."

Indeed, being a of mixed racial background, evident in her lighter skin tone, or a "yalla" automatically places the female protagonist in a liminal space that dismantles stereotypical categorizations of belonging to certain racial groups. In other words, Jadine does not feel like she belongs to either camp, and consequently, she is "othered" by everyone around her, including her own self-perception. To understand her two-ness, one could refer to the concept of "double consciousness". It is the

> 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. One ever feels his two-ness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two un-reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body. (3)

Only in Jadine's case, these two souls are wrangling in a White-passing body. From this perspective, Jadine's body becomes a battlefield of opposing identities, historical backgrounds, and family values, struggling to coexist. Naturally, she finds herself in a precarious position, unable to conform and unable to choose between Black and White class status and forms of contemporary privilege. Perhaps, this could be the explanation for her night terrors. She is haunted by all the Black women in her life, those who she deems secure in their racial identities, and at peace with themselves: African matriarchs. They come to her in pitch darkness, tormenting her by exposing their breasts to her, imperiously, destabilizing Jadine's sense of self even further.

The novel ends on an ambiguous note, with no real resolution for either Son or Jadine. Indeed, the relationship between them, although rife in conflict, does not particularly change the way each of them views and experiences their Blackness. Son's narration of the Tar Baby tale was a step too far for Jadine. She packs her bags and leaves Son, severing all that ties them

together. She returns to Isle de Chevaliers, to take back some of her material belongings – gifts from her White ex-boyfriend-- thus hinting that Son's efforts to change Jadine were fruitless. However, her later conversation with Ondine marks subtle changes in the way she views her relationship with her aunt, and her Blackness. Jadine simply embarks on a journey, not to learn or be told about who she is, but rather to unbecome everything she is not. Son, on the other hand, finally realizes that Jadine has left for good, scrambles to follow her. He even vows to follow her and change for her sake. He will pursue an education, and will compromise on his values, if it means having her back. As such, he ventures into Isle des Chevaliers, into the jungle part of it, where the horsemen roam the land. Ironically, he is back in the embrace of nature, allowing him the chance to live the life he always wanted: away from the Whites, in nature, with no capitalism, nor rat race. Son is finally given a chance to live the life he always desired. He is at a crossroads. For a character that has always been very sure of himself, who only recently decided to change for his lover, questions naturally arise. One wonders whether Son will give up everything – his identity included—for love, or will he welcome the company of the horsemen. *Tar Baby* leaves the end open for interpretation and guesses as to the fate of both Son and Jadine.

Conclusion

Tar Baby, by Toni Morrison, and *Americanah*, by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, are novels that resonate strongly with one other, in regards to the challenges faced by Black people in Western society, especially when attempting to assert a unified racial and cultural identity. Both novels rely on romance as a vehicle to address what it means to be a Black person in Diaspora. The romance in each novel is highly subversive, but with different impacts. Indeed, in *Tar Baby*, the focal point is a singular relationship between Son and Jadine, a torrid love affair, a forceful recognition of one's destabilized racial identity. In *Americanah*, however, there are three major romances, and a gentler approach to identity negotiations.

In *Tar Baby*, the love story between Jadine and Son serves to reflect their clashing conceptualization of Blackness. Jadine is challenged to re-think her Blackness, through the eyes of Son, a Black man who does not enjoy the same social advantages as her, via a subversive romance. Indeed, their love story undermines the normative construction. Jadine enjoys multiple privileges, that are usually reserved for men (power, money, status, education), unlike Son, who only has his original dime to his name. This coupling compels Jadine to view how her privileges affect her racial identity, in light of Son who has a disparate experience *vis-à-vis* his construction of Blackness. According to Son, Jadine's ambivalent construction of her Blackness is due to her constant oscillations between White and Black socio-economic conventions – a direct result of her many privileges. She is the New Capitalist Black, who cannot place some elements of her racial past. On the other hand, Son, as his name implies, exhibits strong attachments to his African roots. However, his understanding is not as solid as he perceives it to be. His name is transformed into a dramatic irony. Their perceptions of the Black experiences pave the way for a torrid love affair, where violence – both physical, emotional, and psychological—run rampant. The romance, as such, fails in *Tar Baby*, considering the ambiguous ending of the novel. The reader is left to wonder about the

possibilities of a reconnection. However, romance succeeds as a platform for challenging notions regarding the sense of self.

Americanah relies on the romance, subverting it as well, but it serves a different purpose than to be a site of clashing, as in *Tar Baby*. The different romances Ifemelu experiences inscribe her journey in finding herself, regaining her voice, and reclaiming her cultural identity. Indeed, her love stories go hand in hand with her negotiations with her cultural, and newly acquired, racial identity. When she was with Obinze, she was the most secure in herself; however, while pursuing a long-distance relationship with him, her identity starts to fracture. As a matter of fact, the end of their relationship marks the complete loss of her sense of self. During her relationship with Curt, she was the most open she had ever been to the influence of White-washing, and cultural indoctrination. The micro-aggressions she faces, alongside other Black characters, like Aunty Uju, contribute to her cultural assimilation. So, when she decides that enough is enough, and to start resisting the societal onslaught that aims to push her into a mold of conformity, she finds refuge in Blaine, the race-warrior and social justice advocate. With him, she begins to have some bearings over her newly acquired racial identity in the United States. She embraces her Nigerian accent, and her natural hair, wearing either in its natural state, or in a protective hairstyle. She, in this sense, regains her voice. In other words, her relationship with him allows her to complete her self-affirmation and self-reconciliation. The end of Blaine's relationship signals Ifemelu's return to Nigeria. Although the romance succeeds in exploring the difficulties of identity negotiations, it becomes deeply unsettling, when upon Ifemelu's return, the reader is met with problematic gender roles for women as trophy wives and eye-candy. The novel seems to embrace the stereotypical corruption of third world countries.

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