

AMERICAN DREAMS AND BLACK IDENTITY IN THE NEW AFRICAN DIASPORA. CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *AMERICANAH* AND YAA GYASI'S *HOMEGOING*

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*You look me in my eyes but you don't see me
'cause I'm black myself*
(Amythyst Kiah)

The essay examines how the New African Diaspora challenges and expands the notion of black identity (a fluid, communal identity) through the heritage, histories, and the African immigrants' "dreams of America" in the works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Yaa Gyasi.

Keywords: New African Diaspora, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Yaa Gyasi, Black Identity, Ethnic Literature

Sogni americani e identità nera nella nuova diaspora africana. Americanah di Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie e Homegoing di Yaa Gyasi

Il saggio esamina i modi in cui la nuova diaspora africana mette alla prova ed espande il concetto di identità nera (da sempre fluida e collettiva) attraverso l'eredità culturale, le storie e i "sogni dell'America" degli immigrati Africani nei romanzi di Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie e Yaa Gyasi.

Parole chiave: Nuova diaspora africana, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Yaa Gyasi, identità nera, letteratura etnica

Introduction: American Dreams, American Reality

The image of America as the land of opportunity constitutes a problematic yet long-lasting myth and, perhaps, one of the most enduring utopias of the Western world. If utopia is a concept that feeds on our ability to imagine or even postulate a (better) future, then the United States are possibly the champions of utopia in the Western hemisphere. Americans appear to have an inborn and

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unshakable faith in their capacity to progress and craft their own destiny, a faith inherited by those who came to the New world to build a perfect society and who later proclaimed «the pursuit of happiness» as one of the unalienable rights of all men [sic]. Yet, notwithstanding the claims of equality and freedom of the Declaration of Independence, it was immediately clear that a precondition for making the Land of the Free work was precisely that not quite all people were entitled to pursue happiness. As it is well-known, black people used to be, and to a large extent still are, prevented from aiming at the American Dream—let alone achieving it. US highly racialized context, having failed to grant true social equality, challenges and questions not only the scope but the very substance of such myth (Cullen 8; 108-109).

From the very beginning of colonialism, black people seemed to be allowed to exist only in contrast to the whiteness of the Europeans (Fanon 82-83), to the point that their blackness has come to represent «the foil of Humanity» (Wilderson III 13). This condition appears to have had the most long-lasting consequences precisely in US society and was described, among others, by James Baldwin in 1965:

Until the moment comes when we, the Americans, are able to accept the fact that my ancestors are both black and white, that on that continent we are trying to forge a new identity, that we need each other, that [...] I am one of the people who built the country—until this moment comes there is scarcely any hope for the American dream. If the people are denied participation in it, by their very presence they will wreck it. And if that happens it is a very grave moment for the West.

The American Dream's mythology of limitless opportunities and the reality of its unattainability to certain groups of people, notably black people, make the United States the country which better represents the intrinsic ambiguity of the term utopia – as “no-place” and “good place” at the same time. Starting from this ambiguity, I argue that indeed America has always represented a utopian social landscape for immigrants, but with a meaning which varied depending on skin color and race. Historically, the “good place” of the Declaration of Independence was a white-only utopia which turned out to be a non-existent place in the case of the African Diaspora¹, that is, the forced migration of the enslaved Africans who were brought to the United States through the Middle

1 The expression “African diaspora” started being used between the 1950s and the 1960s to designate the people of African descent in the Western world and, more specifically, in the US and it has become increasingly more common ever since; for a more detailed analysis of its usage see Zeleza 32-35.

Passage and the Atlantic slave trade. Theirs was not a utopian journey to the New World, but the beginning of an ordeal of suffering, servitude, segregation, and racism which lasted four centuries, and whose consequences are still far from being settled. This painful history has shaped the identity and consciousness of the descendants of those enslaved Africans, thus affecting the ways in which black culture evolved in the US, developing into African American culture.

My essays examines how the notion of black identity today is being challenged and expanded (Landry 128) by the so-called New African Diaspora, the more recent and voluntary migration of people from African countries to America, through the works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Yaa Gyasi², and drawing from classic and contemporary texts in African Diaspora studies. African immigrants of the late XX and XXI centuries have brought different heritages and histories with them to the United States, as well as hopes and expectations, that is, their personal “dreams of America.” Once there, as Pierre points out, what they find can be upsetting, since

Black/African immigrants have to negotiate different identities in a context where the social and political constructs of race significantly inform the meanings of culture, national allegiance, gender, and other forms of identification. Racialization—involuntary insertion into the United States hierarchy—entails engagement with (and ultimate subordination to) the various structures of power (157).

Americanah and *Homegoing* relate to this experience and show how it contributes to restating blackness as a fluid, collective identity able to cross time and space (Wright 2004: 26), renewing itself each time as in the literary tradition of those texts which operate «at other levels than those marked by national

- 2 The relation between “African diaspora” and “New African diaspora,” can be better understood when considering that “[d]iaspora is simultaneously a state of being and a process of becoming, a kind of voyage that encompasses the possibility of never arriving or returning, a navigation of multiple belongings, of networks of affiliation” (Zezeza 32). Indeed, both the novels examined address this multilayered conception of diaspora already in their titles. In Adichie’s novel, “*Americanah*” is a term mocking those who return to Nigeria from the US, “looking at things with American eyes” (Adichie 2013: 476); in Ifemelu’s case the picture is more complex, since her diasporic identity makes her look at things with *both* American and Nigerian eyes. “*Homegoing*” is an African American term meaning “a person’s death understood as a return to home” (*Merriam-Webster*) – a ritual representing an extreme utopian journey for the enslaved people who wished to be able to go back home to Africa, at least when dead. In Gyasi’s novel, the death of Akua, her homegoing, is connected to her granddaughter’s Marjorie return to Ghana with her friend Marcus, both of them understanding it as a journey back home, though for different reasons.

boundaries» and belong «to the web of the diaspora identities and concerns [...] labelled the Black Atlantic» (Gilroy 218). Perhaps even more importantly, both novels are part of a larger debate on race in contemporary America and on how non-American black immigrants are “exploited” as ethnicized others (Pierre 146-147) by white society in order to perpetuate institutional racism towards African Americans and, more subtly, black people in general – always for the sake of the American Dream (150-153).

Atlantic Crossings: African Blackness in the US

Americanah has been widely praised for its insightful portrayal of immigrant life and race relations in the West through the experiences of Ifemelu and Obinze, two young middle-class Nigerians who leave their country for the US and the UK respectively, and those of the other African immigrants they encounter or who are part of their families and acquaintances. Of the two, Obinze is the one who «had never simply wanted to go *abroad*, as many others did; [...] It had always been America, only America. A longing nurtured and nursed for many years» (Adichie 2013: 288), which grew with him to become almost an obsession as Nigeria fell into the economic crisis, a situation which gradually left young people with no opportunities and caused many of them to look for a future somewhere else. Thus, America, with its widely advertised promises of abundance and success, becomes Obinze’s utopian home away from home, «where he was destined to be» and, when his mother could not afford anymore to buy him soft drinks every day, «America became a place where bottles of Fanta were to be had, without permission» (288). There is more than a touch of irony in Obinze’s childhood dreams of America as a land of countless bottles of Fanta and who knows how many other luxuries, yet their childish pragmatism says more about immigrants’ hopes and dreams than many philosophical and / or political explanations do. Unfortunately, Nigerian men are not welcome anymore in post-9/11 America, so only Ifemelu is allowed to go overseas and live the Dream.

Actually, Ifemelu is more a witness of other immigrants’ American dreams and expectations (starting with Obinze’s) rather than being herself a “dreamer,” and her approach towards US reality seems more objective than theirs, unfiltered by the shiny and blinding veil of a mythical country of opportunities for all (Hsu 38). Notwithstanding, regardless of her relative lack of expectations towards the new country, the years she spends in the US affect her outlook and contribute in shaping her transnational black identity. While in the States, she starts a blog called *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks*

(*Those Formerly Known as Negroes*) by a Non-American Black³ through which she looks at what she calls «American tribalism» (227-228) with the witty irony and sharp eye of the outsider (McCoy 282–283). And yet, she is the kind of outsider who, to borrow from Bryce-Laporte seminal essay on African immigration to the US, «suffer[s] double invisibility, in fact –as [black] and as black [foreigner]» (31). Thus, if blackness can be considered the “Other within” of US society – something which at the same time does and does not belong – African immigrants embody such otherness in a peculiar way, somehow opposite and complimentary to African American blackness. Specifically, Ifemelu’s account of her American life reveals how problematically interwoven class and race are in the US, the latter ultimately defining to which extent an individual is allowed to choose and / or change the former. When working for a rich white family and opening the door to the carpet cleaner one morning, Ifemelu is confronted with the evidence that the man is unpleasantly surprised by seeing a black person in that «grand stone house» (Adichie 2013: 204). But when she makes clear that she is not the homeowner, «[i]t was like a conjurer’s trick, the swift disappearance of his hostility. His face sank into a grin. She, too, was the help. The universe was once again arranged as it should be» (204-205), showing that, in the US, skin color translates into a specific history, that of the descendants of former slaves, which determines one’s entitlement to the pursuit of happiness so that «Sometimes in America, Race is Class» (205).

Like many African immigrants, Ifemelu becomes black once she lands in America⁴ (359), and she must learn how to negotiate the implications of this new and overwhelming feature which, from that moment on, will become the main label through which she will be identified, even if she does not identify as such (Johnson 168-169). Similarly, in Gyasi’s *Homegoing*, the character of Marjorie – born in Ghana from Ghanaian parents but who grew up in the US – feels uncomfortable when a teacher asks her to read a poem about being African American at a black cultural event for her high school. «But I’m not African American», she tries to object, «Listen, Marjorie, I’m going to tell you something that maybe nobody’s told you yet. Here, in this country, it doesn’t matter where you came from first to the white people running things. You’re here now, and here black is black is black» (Gyasi 273). Or, as Ifemelu would put it in her blog:

3 Raceteenth is a pun combining the words “race” and “Juneteenth”, that is, the holiday celebrating the emancipation of slaves in the United States, which is commemorated on June 19.

4 Adichie herself declared that «before I went to the U.S., I didn’t consciously identify as African» (Adichie 2009).

Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop arguing. Stop saying I'm Jamaican or I'm Ghanaian. America doesn't care. So what if you weren't "black" in your country? You're in America now. We all have our moments of initiation into the Society of Former Negroes. Mine was in a class undergrad when I was asked to give the black perspective, only I had no idea of what that was. (Adichie 2013: 273)

There are occasions in which, as a middle-class, well-educated foreigner (200-208), Ifemelu's blackness is regarded as different and «more acceptable» (Landry 142) than that of African Americans, but only as long as she is willing to embody a kind of blackness that feels "less threatening" to white Americans (Pierre 142-143). In those moments, the ostensible attention towards her country of origin is merely superficial, making her the center of an ethnic interest that only serves to underpin white society and undervalue African Americans, whose «issues» (Adichie 207) – and not institutional racism – are to blame for their being unfit for the American Dream.

Moreover, even if white people are not the only people in the country, institutional racism affects negatively the relationships between African Americans and African immigrants so that, in *Homegoing*, Marjorie's black turns out to be «the wrong kind» of black (268) when she tries to interact with her African American schoolmates. As an African-born Black American, she struggles to deal with the hurtful feeling of not belonging anywhere, since «she exists in a liminal space where two antagonistic cultures claim her. Her struggle to identify what place to identify with splits her sense of belonging» (Motahane Nyambi Makombe 28). Something changes when she meets Marcus at graduate school, with whom she develops an intimate friendship and undertakes a journey to Ghana where, unbeknownst to both of them, they share a common ancestry, since Gyasi's novel tells the story of the progeny of an Asante woman, Maame, whose two daughters were separated during the Atlantic slave trade: the descendants of Effia remained in Ghana until Marjorie's parents moved to Alabama, while Esi was deported to America and her descendants lost contact with their Ghanaian ancestry. Marjorie and Marcus are the last of each line and their shared history ideally reconnects and epitomizes the history of the Black Atlantic and the Middle Passage epistemology, which are fundamental to the understanding of Blackness in America (Wright 2015: 14), as Marcus meditates when his PhD research turns from focusing on the convict leasing system (in memory of the struggle of his great-grandpa) to encompassing the whole history of his family:

How could he explain to Marjorie that what he wanted to capture with his project was the feeling of time, of having been part of something that stretched so far back, was so impossibly large, that it was easy to forget that she, and he, and everyone else, existed in it—not apart from it, but inside of it.

How could he explain to Marjorie that he wasn't supposed to be here? Alive. Free. That the fact that he had been born, that he wasn't in a jail cell somewhere, was not by dint of his pulling himself by the bootstraps, not by hard work or belief in the American Dream, but by mere chance. He had only heard tell of his great-grandpa H from Ma Willie, but those stories were enough to make him weep and to fill him with pride. Two-Shovel H they had called him. But what had they called his father or his father before him? What of the mothers? They had been products of their time, and walking in Birmingham now, Marcus was an accumulation of these times (Gyasi 295-296).

«However», as Michelle M. Wright argues, «given the vast proliferation of black identities in the United States alone (differing by gender and sexual identification, national origin, religious affiliation, etc.), one cannot hope to encompass all of them within a linear timeline» (2015: 44), and indeed Gyasi's novel accomplishes the task of crafting a narrative which employs the linear timeline of the Middle Passage while it also transcends it by narrating it from both sides of the Atlantic. In the case of *Americanah*, Adichie's ironic but accurate remarks regarding race in America show the necessity to put the Middle Passage epistemology in conversation with that regarding immigration and citizenship today, in order to properly account for the many African diasporic identities which constitute blackness.

Conclusion: Shades of Black

Today, given the variety of black diasporic subjects and of new instances of racialization of immigrant groups in America, Wright contends that «the only way to produce a definition of Blackness that is wholly inclusive and nonhierarchical is to understand Blackness as the *intersection* of constructs that locate the Black collective in *history* and in the *specific moment* in which Blackness is being imagined –the “now” through which all imaginings of Blackness will be mediated» (2015: 14).

Operating in the heterogeneous landscape of diasporic identities and within the rigid frame of US highly racialized society, the polyphonic narration of *Homegoing* allows for a rethinking of both white and black America's relation with the haunting imagery of slavery and segregation by placing it in the broader context of colonialism and its legacy. Both Gyasi and Adichie succeed in reading, as Goyal suggests, «the postcolonial state and the US racial state» together and, in the case of *Americanah*, «jettisoning the nation as a utopian horizon, showing that race is always about place, and that historical traumas can yield responses other than the sublime» (660). Wright argues that there is an «intellectual tradition of African diasporic counterdiscourses of Black subjectivity that

[...] understands Black subjectivity as *that which must be negotiated between the abstract and the real* or, in theoretical terms, between the ideal and the material» (2004: 3), and indeed, as Ifemelu's American experience shows, the New African Diaspora manages to carry out this negotiation through fictions which «shift diaspora into the realm of quotidian encounters and displacements, no less meaningful for being ubiquitous and ongoing, but still revealing the creativity such mobilities make possible» (Goyal 660). The struggle for visibility of postcolonial, diasporic subjects confirms that post-racial America is definitely still a utopian land, yet American reality is not necessarily a racial waste land, as the fluid and subversive intersectionality embodied by black subjects shows.

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