

HAIR AS A POLITICAL INSTRUMENT IN CHIMAMANDA N. ADICHIE'S *AMERICANAH* AND IN *HOW TO GET AWAY WITH MURDER*

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ABSTRACT

By reflecting upon the political and cultural significance of hair for black women, this paper aims to highlight the discrepancies within the inherent tendency of assimilating other cultures to the American one by making them cancel, somehow unconsciously, their natural somatic traits. I will examine the 2013 novel *Americanah* by Nigerian author Chimamanda N. Adichie, and the TV Series *How to Get Away With Murder* (ABC), for both of their protagonists struggle to accept their natural hair and go through a strenuous journey, despite the dissimilarities. Eventually they both embrace their natural appearance—they do so while making hair a political tool to claim their right to be American and establishing their independence as women.

Keywords: Hair; Assimilation; Blackness; Chimamanda Adichie; Annalise Keating.

INTRODUCTION

In 2013, during an interview for the British network Channel 4 News, Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie discussed her recently published *Americanah* making an unusual yet powerful statement: “Black women’s hair is political.”¹ In the acclaimed novel, the main character Ifemelu starts a blog—*Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*—in which she confronts some of the main race-related issues for black women, always highlighting their political relevance and their role in the empowerment of women. As a Nigerian immigrant in a post-9/11 America, the protagonist struggles enormously to assimilate into US culture, and at the same time she strives to maintain her fluid diasporic identity intact.

¹ Channel 4 News, “Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: 'Hair is political,’” YouTube Video, 5:34, April 10, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ck2034DS64>.

At the core of her strenuous journey is the ultimate goal of feeling part of a new culture, the American one, and of assimilating into a diverse social and cultural context. Inevitably, this process entails a renegotiation of her systemic beliefs, which implies her own self-acceptance and self-awareness. Moreover, such compromise includes learning to accept her hair in its natural style, for, as maintained by Black Studies scholar Ingrid Banks: “hair is another important medium by which people define others, and themselves as well. In a sense, hair emerges as a body within the social body and can reflect notions about perceptions, identity, and self-esteem” (Banks 2000, 26). In Adichie’s novel, hair becomes a political device capable of claiming one’s civil and social rights; thus, it can be considered the most visible tool for confronting and questioning the enduring American myth of the melting pot, which in turn can be described as the idea of “fusing into a common nation and a common culture the immense variety of races, nations, cultures, and customs which have their representatives among us” (Jones 1941, 329). Later on, the pretentious assimilationist idea of the melting pot has been debunked or developed into other terms, such as “salad bowl” (Burgess 2005), which reclaims the idea of multiple subjectivities tossed into one big recipient. Furthermore, the most widespread development of this myth is what Gordon (1964) addressed as “cultural pluralism,” which “suggests that the multiple melting pots in American society point to cultural pluralism rather than to homogeneous Americanness” (Paul 2014, 291). Lastly, there is what is commonly called “multiculturalism,”² which according to Taylor (1994, 25) is to be intended as a dialogical process in which individuals demand a political and social recognition that keeps their singularities intact. The assimilationist presumptions that originated alongside the myth of the melting pot have recently been questioned once again since Barack Obama became the first black president of the US,

² “Multiculturalism, the view that cultures, races, and ethnicities, particularly those of minority groups, deserve special acknowledgment of their differences within a dominant political culture” (Britannica, “Multiculturalism” By Jennifer L. Eagan, accessed February 7, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/multiculturalism>). Recently, the debate on multiculturalism has been extended due to the scholarship on its difference with “interculturalism;” see, e.g., Kastoryano 2018. For another interesting account of multiculturalism seen from the critical point of view of Cultural studies, see also Hall 2019, 95-134.

and, more importantly, since he based his presidency on the idealistic “perfect union” of multiple races in America.³

By reflecting upon the political and cultural significance of hair for black women, this paper aims to highlight the discrepancies within the inherent tendency of assimilating other cultures to the American one by making either immigrants or African American people cancel, or cover-up, somehow unconsciously, their natural somatic traits. This long-lasting variation of the melting pot has nowadays become a popular topic of discussion in diasporic literature and even in commercial broadcast television.

As a matter of fact, besides Adichie’s novel, the other case study which will be discussed here is the well-received ABC’s TV Series *How to Get Away With Murder*, aired one year after the publication of *Americanah*, and concluded in 2020. Similar to Ifemelu, the main character of Annalise Keating, a black lawyer who wears a wig to hide her kinky black hair when teaching and when in court, negotiates important questions of identity and belonging via her hair and the process to accept them in their natural shape.⁴

Despite having to get through an analogous journey involving the acceptance of their appearance, the two women differ in one crucial aspect that is worth examining: Ifemelu is an immigrant who, in the words of Selasi (2005) and Mbembe (2005), can be referred to as an “Afropolitan”;⁵ on the contrary, Annalise Keating is an African American woman, born and bred in Memphis, Tennessee. In some ways, Ifemelu’s process of assimilation as a diasporic individual holds a more detached approach as compared to Annalise’s, who has always known the US framework in which black people have always struggled to be accepted and have their rights recognized. The unavoidable

³ These words were mentioned in the speech (titled “A More Perfect Union”) given by Obama during the presidential campaign on March 18, 2008.

⁴ “Nappy; kinky; ‘bad hair’: Hair that is tightly coiled or curled. This type of hair is referred to as ‘natural’ black hair because it is not chemically altered. Defined in relationship to ‘good hair.’ Although nappy and kinky have derogatory roots that still exist, many blacks have appropriated these terms to describe positive characteristics of tightly coiled or curled black hair. Some natural styles such as the Afro are referred to as nappy or kinky hair” (Banks 2000, 172).

⁵ The expression refers to the new generation of people born in the African continent, whose identity is fluid and does not belong just to one nation: “Finally, how we conceive of race will accord with where we locate ourselves in the history that produced ‘blackness’ and the political processes that continue to shape it” (Selasi 2005).

distance from an historical baggage such as that of slavery and emancipation that Annalise's ancestors had to go through is missing in Ifemelu's experience. Nevertheless, despite their dissimilar backgrounds, both women are emancipated in terms of education, for they both attend college and establish themselves in the academic world. At large, to play a virtuous role in US society they are to engage in a conflict in which they have to surrender to the pressure of becoming, and looking, "American." To go back to the eighteenth century, when the idea of the melting pot was first introduced, Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur stated that to become a true American, one had to leave "behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners," and be willing to receive "new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds" (Crèvecoeur 1997, 44). In other words, one had to deny one's original ethnic roots to merge in a brand-new ethnicity,⁶ and therefore another identity, since, in the newborn independent union of states,

individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world. Americans are the western pilgrims, who are carrying along with them that great mass of arts, sciences, vigour, and industry which began long since in the east; they will finish the great circle. (*Ibidem*)

Throughout the decades, this outline has become systemic in the minds of both Americans and immigrants. Thereafter, in the twentieth century, scholars and artists began to question such beliefs by searching for their theoretical source and its rootedness into US culture, and as a determining factor for what is commonly referred to as American Exceptionalism.⁷ The conviction of American greatness perpetuated by

⁶ The terms 'ethnicity' and 'race' are often interchangeable. However, the difference between the two can be identified as follows: "the term *race* is understood today as primarily a sociological designation that identifies a group sharing some outward physical characteristics and some commonalities of culture and history, while *ethnicity* is a word for something you acquire based on where your family is from and the group which you share cultural, traditional, and familial bonds and experiences with" (Merriam-Webster, "The Difference between 'Race' and 'Ethnicity,'" accessed February 1, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/difference-between-race-and-ethnicity>). For further references see, e.g., Spencer (2014, 40-66), and the pivotal contribution of Michael Novak (2017).

⁷ "The core of that belief is the idea that the United States is not just the richest and most powerful of the world's more than two hundred states but is also politically and morally exceptional. Exceptionalists minimize the

the Founding Fathers carried on the idea that whoever was a foreigner had to behave equally to them, and, more perplexingly, had to look likewise, constraining themselves to adjust their ethnic somatic traits accordingly to the dominant ones: “to gain access to the American dream, one of the first things Blacks had to do was to make White people more comfortable with their presence” (Byrd 2001, 26). External appearance seems to be the most obvious, and maybe most underestimated vehicle through which a woman tries with much effort to be accepted. However, in the 1960s and 1970s, during the Black is Beautiful Movement “hair alteration became a contested practice” (Thompson 2009, 835); from that moment on—also thanks to public figures such as activist Angela Davis and the Black Power Movement—wearing one’s natural hair gained an enormous political significance in reshaping Black beauty standards (Tate 2007, 302).

However, despite the numerous progress made to reevaluate black women’s hair, in popular culture, especially on television, the re-appropriation process was not that easy to maintain. If we consider, for instance, talk show host Oprah Winfrey’s career we notice that her hair has changed throughout the years. When she first appeared on national television, she wore her natural unrelaxed hair; then, when *The Oprah Winfrey’s Show* (1989-2011) aired, she started straightening it more frequently, normalizing her style according to the mainstream beauty standards.

A similar argument can be made for Michelle Obama, the first black woman to ever serve as First Lady of the United States, from 2008 to 2016. During Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign, she always appeared alongside her husband with short straight hair, and even after he was elected she maintained that hairstyle. If we look at her best-selling biography *Becoming*, published in 2018, she appears on the front cover with wavy hair, clearly chemically relaxed. There are very few occasions in which the First Lady

contributions of other nations and cultures to the rule of law and to the evolution of political democracy” (Hodgson 2009, 10).

appeared with either kinky or curly hair, and this fact seems to confirm what is argued in one of Ifemelu's blog posts, titled "A Michelle Obama Shout-Out Plus Hair as Race Metaphor," in which she provocatively states that if Michelle had worn her natural hair, her husband would have lost all of his independent and democratic votes.

[...] *So is it me or is that the perfect metaphor for race in America right there? Hair.* Ever notice makeover shows on TV, how the black woman has natural hair (coarse, coily, kinky, or curly) in the ugly "before" picture, and in the pretty "after" picture, somebody's taken a hot piece of metal and singed her hair straight? Some black women, AB and NAB, would rather run naked in the street than come out in public with their natural hair. Because, you see, it's not professional, sophisticated, whatever, it's just not damn normal. (Please, commenters, don't tell me it's the same as a white woman who doesn't color her hair.) When you DO have natural Negro hair, people think you "did" something to your hair. Actually, the folk with the Afros and dreads are the ones who haven't "done" anything to their hair. You should be asking Beyoncé what she's done. (We all love Bey but how about she show us, just once, what her hair looks like when it grows from her scalp?) I have natural kinky hair. Worn in cornrows, Afros, braids. *No, it's not political.* No, I am not an artist or poet or singer. Not an earth mother either. I just don't want relaxers in my hair—there are enough sources of cancer in my life as it is. (By the way, can we ban Afro wigs at Halloween? Afro is not costume, for God's sake.) Imagine if Michelle Obama got tired of all the heat and decided to go natural and appeared on TV with lots of woolly hair, or tight spirally curls. (There is no knowing what her texture will be. It is not unusual for a black woman to have three different textures on her head.) She would totally rock but poor Obama would certainly lose the independent vote, even the undecided Democrat vote. (Adichie 2017, 296-7, emphasis mine)

Interestingly, this is the first post ever written by Ifemelu on her blog. What emerges here is that the young woman's speculations are the outcome of her experiencing first-hand what it means to be a black person in the States, and the result of years living abroad. In the post, she decisively affirms that hair can be viewed as a metaphor for race in America, and most of all, that she deems it a political tool capable of interfering with the presidential elections. Ifemelu's words are pivotal: they address Obama's attitude towards the delicate matter of race which has been often addressed in academic scholarship. These words also engage the president's "post-race" narrative, which seemed—throughout all his eight years in office—to have abundantly "moved beyond"

race and its discontents” (Mendible 2012, 1) building the foundation for the “colour blindness” myth (Smithers 2009; see also Love and Tosolt 2010, and Bertaux 2010).

Both Oprah and Michelle Obama—as well as Beyoncé—are not average female personalities. Due to their reputation and their role in the public scenario, they have ineluctably been appointed as representatives for black women—and not only—who look up to them as the ideal aesthetic model and paradigm for what it means to be a successful black woman in the US who succeeded in fulfilling their American dreams.

RECLAIMING ONE’S IDENTITY THROUGH HAIR: AMERICANAH

Political remarks concerning women and their independence, along with feminism, have always been at the core of Chimamanda ‘Ngozi Adichie’s work.⁸ In the last decade, and thanks to the novel *Americanah*, she managed to confront the subject of identity from within a transcultural perspective, having lived between Lagos and the United States since 1989. Moreover, she became one of the most important voices of a new generation of novelists, for she provides a fresh look at how women can feel empowered and independent. As anticipated, hair plays an essential role in this transition:

Adichie’s creative skills also allow readers to magnify singular narrative details into political statements of manifesto-like proportions, for better or for worse. Much has already been made in interviews and reviews about the novel’s comments on the politics of black hair—weaves, cornrows, Afros, all carry ideological implications, Adichie emphatically suggests. (Tunca and Ledent 2015, 3)

Americanah begins with Ifemelu, the protagonist, on her way to braid her hair in a black salon in Trenton, NJ. The young woman has decided to return permanently to Nigeria and leave the US after having lived thirteen years far from her homeland. She has concluded that Lagos is the place where she can better express her authentic self, “the

⁸ See, among others, the essay “We Should All Be Feminists,” published in 2014 by *Fourth Estate*, but first delivered as a speech for a TEDx event in Euston, London, back in 2012. Part of the speech has also been included in the 2013 song “Flawless,” by the American pop star Beyoncé.

only place she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil” (Adichie 2017, 6).⁹ Furthermore, she hopes to reconcile with Obinze, who was her first boyfriend, and the reason she had come to America in the first place.

The hair salon emblemizes a space where her diasporic identity is tackled, a place between her native land and her landing ground. There, she encounters other black women, either American Black or Non-AB, with whom she gets into an argument when asked why she does not have any relaxer on her hair since it would make it easier to comb. Ifemelu explains that she likes her hair “the way God made it” (12). Then, the conversation moves on as Aisha, the hairdresser, starts asking all sorts of questions, naively pressuring her about her decision to abandon her respectable life in America and go back to Africa. Ifemelu answers with reluctance, secretly complaining about the other woman’s unashamed behavior. The young woman knows her hair quite well, having “grown up in the shadow of her mother’s hair” (41). She knows what comb best sections her type of hair, and she is well aware of how hard it can be to accept one’s natural hairstyle.

We notice from this segment that Ifemelu is also conscious of how ethnicity bonds with class discourse.¹⁰ Had she not received higher education, or had she not belonged to an upper-middle-class family back in Nigeria, her substantial differences compared to Aisha would probably not have raised such an issue, nor would she have felt so uncomfortable in an environment in which she should, otherwise, feel at ease. Eventually, the distance between the two women increases more and more when the discussion moves on to the Green Card topic, and Aisha soon realizes that “Ifemelu belonged to a group of people whose green cards simply fell from the sky” (363-4).

Then, the novel progresses retrospectively, tackling Ifemelu’s early days back in Lagos, and providing an extensive account of her love story with Obinze. The young

⁹ Here, *authenticity* can be seen as purpose to fulfill to establish one’s independence for, according to Taylor, it “is a facet of modern individualism, and it is a feature of all forms of individualism that they don’t just emphasize the freedom of the individual but also propose models of society.” (Taylor 2003, 46). In Ifemelu’s case, her authentic self will eventually be reached at the end of the novel, when she will go back to Lagos as an independent and free woman.

¹⁰ Further in the novel, Ifemelu will dedicate a blog post to this matter, see Adichie 2017, 166.

man, whom she met in college, was the one to have always nurtured a passion for the US and a longing for a brand-new life far from Nigeria. Unfortunately, he is not allowed to obtain a visa for the US, unlike Ifemelu, who becomes the only one able to cross American borders. When she first arrives, right after 2001, her first encounter with a culture she had only known from books, movies, and other people's stories is rather problematic and displacing. Initially, there is 'appealing America,' the land where dreams come true, where everyone can achieve a career or fulfill a purpose.

When an immigrant arrives in a new nation, a phenomenon called "acculturation" occurs. The term, according to psychologists David Sam and John W. Berry, "refers to the process of cultural and psychological change that results following meeting between cultures" (2010, 472), and "it acknowledges the reciprocity of influences that cultural groups have on each other" (473). Unsurprisingly, this kind of encounter comes with many consequences, one being the inner thrive to find distance from one's ethnic roots: "Assimilation is a strategy used when individuals do not wish to maintain their cultural identity and seek close interaction with other cultures (or in some cases adopt the cultural values, norms, and traditions of the new society)" (476).

This dynamic is exactly what happens to Ifemelu, whose displacement is intensified both by her initial refusal to keep in touch with Obinze and her family, and by coming to terms with her blackness (see Adichie 2017, 220-221). First, Ifemelu feels all the burden that comes with this sort of accomplishment.¹¹ For other immigrants—such as Aisha and the other women from the hair salon—a similar source of acculturation stress is caused by a strenuous effort with the language. In the novel, language plays a critical role indeed: as argued by Leonardo Nolé (2017), one major turning point for the protagonist's growth is when she speaks to a call center and they praise her for her accent: "You sound totally American" (Adichie 2017, 175). However,

¹¹ "[S]erious challenges are experienced and are appraised to be problematic because one is not able to deal with them as easily by simply adjusting to them by changing one's behavior. [...] then acculturation stress results" (Sam and Berry 2010, 474).

for Ifemelu, what is perceived as a feature of anxiety are the continuous external influences trying to assimilate her by the homogenization of her hair and appearance.

This issue is frankly addressed, especially when Adichie discusses the topic of job hunting for black people. One of the first things Ifemelu reflects upon when she first arrives in the US is her Auntie Uju's attitude towards her ethnic identity. Not only does she adjust her accent—which inevitably has a Nigerian inflection—to the American one to increase her chances of assimilation;¹² but she also, the transformation in her hair becomes obvious: “There was something different about her. Ifemelu had noticed it right away at the airport, *her roughly braided hair*, her ears bereft of earrings, her quick casual hug, as if it had been weeks rather than years since they had last seen each other.” (Adichie 2017, 104, emphasis mine).

Auntie Uju's journey radically differs from Ifemelu's. When she arrived in the States many years earlier, with her newborn son and a difficult career as a medical student ahead of her, she did not have anyone to greet her at the airport and give her temporary accommodation. He had to adapt rather quickly to the new environment and the culture just for the sake of her survival. Subconsciously, she modified her attitude, behavior, and, most of all, her appearance, so that she would be able to adapt and be accepted. In the words of Albert Memmi (1991), the oppressor's mentality has been internalized by the oppressed: this behavior has become systemic in Auntie Uju's mind, for not only does she enact it unconsciously, but she also reinforces it when helping her niece adjust to her new life, and then by pitifully justifying her attitude: “You are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do in order to succeed” (Adichie 2017, 119). Seen from an external perspective, such as Ifemelu's, if Uju had not left Nigeria, the young woman maintains, she “would never have worn her hair in such a scruffy braids” and comes to the conclusion that “America had subdued her” (110).

¹² This inherent mechanism defines what an “Americanah” is: “a girl [...] who had come back from a short trip to America with odd affectations, pretending she no longer understood Yoruba, adding a slurred *r* to every English word she spoke” (Adichie 2017, 65).

The verb used by Ifemelu is rather interesting: “subdued.” America, or the idea of it, has grown to exert the power of submission for those who seek a new life, especially for immigrants. Auntie Uju is subdued by class mobility, which is one of the main reasons she left Nigeria for, and one of the primary ambitions for those who arrive in the United States. In relation to that, Hallemeier suggests that Adichie’s political survey of middle-class women’s aspiration

hinges upon a comparative approach that examines the centrality of the United States to a Nigerian middle-class imaginary. The aspirational Nigerian middle class that *Americanah* celebrates, however, is by no means an iteration of its American counterpart. Adichie’s novel challenges a narrative in which the US models class mobility for the world in favor of one in which contemporaneous national histories have produced different potentials and limitations for the individual, and especially for the black woman, who aspires to a normative middle-class life. *Americanah* does not so much speak to the US of the present reality of African lives as it speaks of the US in order to better articulate a desirable Nigerian future. (Hallemeier 2015, 235)

Once again, Adichie contrives to openly politicize every aspect of the women’s process of acquaintance with the new culture. It should not be forgotten that these individuals are immigrants, young women who have left their home countries with unresolved questions and without the certainty of a better future. Theirs are diasporic identities, and they have to confront both the expectations of the landing culture and the mental mechanism that originated when they left home. Whenever an individual leaves their native land, they inevitably begin to construct an “Imaginary Homeland,” as novelist Salman Rushdie first called it (1991). This mechanism leads immigrants to build a misrepresented image of their nation of origin, often idealized and distorted. Therefore, their identity, especially the ethnic one, is deeply challenged. In his clever *Black Skin, White Masks* psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon suggested that

[w]hen the Negro makes contact with the white world, a certain sensitizing action takes place. If his psychic structure is weak, one observes a collapse of the ego. The black man stops behaving as an *actional* person. The goal of his behavior will be The Other (in the guise of the white man), for The Other alone can give him worth. That is on the ethical level: self-esteem. (Fanon 1986, 154)

It can be argued that because Ifemelu's aunt lacked self-esteem, she acted in such a manner. Similar to Uju's is the case of Ginika, Ifemelu's friend from secondary school who had arrived in America before her and tries to help her friend make acquaintance with the new world. When she first meets Ginika in Philadelphia, Ifemelu is bewildered by her transformation: "There was a metallic, unfamiliar glamour in her gauntness, her olive skin, her short skirt that had risen up, barely covering her crotch, her *straight, straight hair that she kept tucking behind her ears, blonde streaks shiny in the sunlight*" (Adichie 2017, 123, emphasis mine). In addition to this, Ginika's makeover extends to her weight loss. Back in Lagos, she underlines, when someone loses weight, this is considered bad and unhealthy, but in America, when "somebody tells you that you lost weight [...] you say thank you. It's just different here" (124).

Given this fact, Ifemelu's way of acting during her first months in the US comes with no surprise, being endorsed and amplified by the models she looks up to. Albeit initially perplexed, Ifemelu seems to be stirred by her aunt's and friend's new *personas*: "Ifemelu stood there for a long time, her body unsure of itself, overwhelmed by a sense of newness. But she felt, also, a frisson of expectation, an eagerness to discover America" (106). Thereafter, she inevitably falls into the same impasse. In the beginning, she used to braid her hair with long extensions, despite their high maintenance and cost, wearing "each style for three months, even four months, until her scalp itched unbearably and the braids sprouted fuzzily from a bed of new growth" (203). Eventually, though, she comes to the decision to relax her hair with chemicals, persuaded by the idea that she would look more "professional," or whiter as she is preparing for a job interview she is about to attend. Later on, she will write a blog post stressing how "whiteness" is what people not belonging to upper-class Americans of European descent aspire to (205). In other words, at this point of her journey, what is still entrenched in Ifemelu's mind is the idea that the only way to succeed in America is to look as white as possible, even if this endeavor results in giving up on her hair's health. Sure enough, a couple of days later she starts losing hair from her temples, forcing her to cut it all short to prevent further damage.

Ingrid Banks, who in the already mentioned “Hair Matters” conducts a fascinating interview surveying a wide demographic of black women, highlights the importance of hair in black communities, adding to the equation the role of hair for women embracing their femininity:

For black women in this society, what is considered desirable and undesirable hair is based on one’s hair texture. What is deemed desirable is measured against white standards of beauty, which include long and straight hair (usually blonde), that is, hair that is not kinky or nappy. Consequently, black women’s hair, in general, fits outside of what is considered desirable in mainstream society. Within black communities, straighter variety and texture are privileged as well. (Banks 2000, 2)

However, the path toward the full acceptance of one’s natural hairstyle comes with major struggles and doubts. In Ifemelu’s case, for instance, the need to find a job forced herself to sleep with a white manager to raise enough money to pay rent. This episode contributed to her feeling of disempowerment and undermined her self-confidence.

Eventually, Ifemelu overcomes these impediments, and she starts accepting her authentic self, without the fear of rejection by the culture she is now part of—also thanks to her boyfriend who manages to get her the long-desired Green card. The pivotal moment can be identified in Chapter 31 (Adichie 2017, 287). During the presidential election of 2008, she finds herself among a group of friends—including her boyfriend Curt—amid a discussion about Barack Obama. Suddenly, a white man argues that if Obama won, he would end racism in America. Ifemelu feels the impulse to answer back with a clever and raw utterance, stressing the weaknesses of the man’s remark. She claims that race still matters and that it is more convenient to deny its existence rather than confront it. After this key moment she settles to open an anonymous blog, and thanks to that she will finally start to speak up, raise her voice and reclaim her own identity, both from a political and social viewpoint.

Needless to say, in the blog, the woman deals with the expectations of the American Society for black people, especially women. Thanks to this newly found instrument and her freedom regained, she also manages to embrace her authentic self—her hairstyle included. It is around the time she opens the blog that she starts to let her

hair be, not treating it with relaxers or other chemicals. She finally accepts her hair in its natural shape and appearance, firmly rejecting to melt into the idealistic ‘pot’ that is America, and the founding myths that perpetuated it. Through the novel, Adichie succeeds in unmasking the American “idiosyncrasies and hypocrisies” of the widespread belief “that race doesn’t matter,” and she “challenges the conventions of the typical immigrant novel, where no alternative to life in America is entertained, as Ifemelu chooses to return home not under any kind of compulsion, but just because she wants to be in Lagos” (Goyal 2014, XII).

Despite being a rather optimistic novel, for its protagonist seems to have accomplished certain stability, both in work and in her social relationships, *Americanah* maintains that the American Dream is no longer worth being pursued. In its place, two other goals are set by Ifemelu: the so-called “Nigerian dream” (Hallemeier 2015, 237), and, above all, the complete acceptance of herself and her hair in its natural form. The ceaseless search for a righteous identity can be completed, but with new terms, and not in the United States.

Nevertheless, a problem still stands. And it makes us question how and why the United States can no longer assure the completion of the dream for an individual who an upper-class American of European descent is not. As Katherine Hallemeier puts it: “*Americanah* modestly, yet perhaps effectively, envisions a global capitalist system in which ethnicity does not exhaustively and exhaustingly delimit the affective bonds that enable financial success. It neither embraces nor rejects the pursuit of wealth, but certainly casts its goodness into doubt” (243).

HAIR AS A SOCIAL MASK: *HOW TO GET AWAY WITH MURDER*

Up to this point, we have discussed the tendency to treat hair directly from its roots, changing its appearance without covering it up. Instead, the case of Annalise Keating in *How to Get Away With Murder* (from now on *HTGAWM*) differs substantially from Ifemelu’s, for the successful lawyer leans toward wigs, rather than chemical relaxers, to cover her natural hairstyle.

When *HTGAWM* first aired in September 2014, much had already been achieved in terms of race-related discussions on national broadcasting networks. The showrunner, Shonda Rhimes, was at the peak of her career, having created the prominent medical drama *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-), and the first political thriller with a black woman as a leading character, *Scandal* (2012-2018). Here, the former White House Director of Communication Olivia Pope—portrayed by the Emmy winner Kerry Washington—succeeds in controlling and maneuvering US politics under the presidency of fictitious Thomas Fitzgerald Grant. What is peculiar about her, apart from her rhetorical and communication skills, is her hair, always straightened and well-groomed.¹³ Despite other relevant topics being tackled in the series, the procedure of arranging her hair freely is not much accomplished nor debated, except for some rare cases I will later refer to. Rhimes, however, alongside the creator Peter Nowalk, will bring the matter under more profound scrutiny through Annalise Keating, the protagonist of *HTGAWM*.

Annalise is a respectable law professor at Middleton University, in Philadelphia, where she yearly chooses top-five students from her Criminal Law course, and challenges them to solve some laborious murder cases. The series explores the dramatic events following the deaths of a young student—with whom Annalise's late husband had an affair—and that of her husband (interpreted by Tom Verica), whose case is being covered up by the attorney herself.

In the first four episodes, the protagonist appears with short straight hair, expensive suits, and loads of makeup, hence always composed and professional. However, at the end of the fourth episode, "Let's Get To Scooping," she is shown in a memorable scene taking off a wig and removing her makeup (Figure 1). The mask she puts on during the day has now been removed, thus revealing her natural, short hair, and, above all, her private self. The close-up shows her in an intimate and vulnerable moment, as she prepares to confront her husband and expose proof of his infidelity.

¹³ For an interesting reading of Olivia Pope's character see, e.g. Brüning 2019.

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Therefore, Annalise does not feel threatened by the vulnerability expressed by her hair, for the situation is very private. Underneath the wig, Annalise's hair appears shaved. This practice, according to Ayana Byrd, goes back to when black people were enslaved, and slave traders would shave off their slave's hair with the intention of erasing their "culture and alter[ing] the relationship between the African and his or her hair" (2001, 10).



Figure 1. Annalise removes her wig (*HTGAWM*, Season 1, Episode 4, 40':36") © Netflix

A similar scenario appears later in the first season. In episode thirteen, "Mama's Here Now," the protagonist is at a very low point in her life; her boyfriend Nate Lahey is in prison, accused of the murder of Annalise's husband. Her mother Ophelia comes to visit, wondering whether her daughter holds any responsibility for Sam Keating's death. The older woman starts calling her with her birth name "Anna Mae," thus infuriating Annalise, who has chosen not to be called by that name, as if she were rejecting her past: "You get rich, you give yourself a rich name—Annalise. Your name is Anna Mae," points out Ophelia.

The only place in which Annalise is willing to show herself in her natural hairstyle is the most intimate one: both with her late husband and her mother she feels comfortable enough not to wear a wig. But the instant she steps outside this protected environment, she puts her habitual mask on. Wearing one's hair straight becomes a synonym for success, and Annalise has well learned the lesson. At the same time, it

seems that Annalise wants to share her slavery heritage of shaving her hair only with the closest people, almost feeling ashamed of it (Byrd 2001, 41). She has by now deeply internalized that, to become a successful lawyer, she has to conform to the beauty standard, the white one: “the way in which ‘white’ is associated with success demonstrates how ideas about hair are linked to ideas that intersect with race, and with economic and romantic success. In turn, these ideas shape black women’s understanding about how they must negotiate their marginal position in a racist and sexist society” (Banks 2000, 63).

Moving forward to the third season, in episode five “It’s About Frank,” Annalise is portrayed going to the hair salon, in a similar circumstance as Ifemelu in *Americanah*. The salon becomes the temple of small talk, where the protagonist can feel at ease around other black women; but at the same time, she feels almost isolated. As a matter of fact, memories from her past come to her mind during the scene, especially from the beginning of her career, when she had first met her husband and she used to wear braided hair. The third season of the series portrays Annalise having a hard time and dealing with personal issues such as alcoholism and the death of one of her students, of which she is accused and for which she is arrested, despite being innocent. The episode titled “Not Everything’s About Annalise” is set in a prison, where the protagonist has to deal with other prisoners who are making her feel miserable by amplifying her sense of guilt until the breaking point.

It goes without saying that in prison she is not allowed to wear wigs, thus, her hair is natural, albeit different from the first season, where she used to wear it short. Here, it is shown much longer than in the past, and seemingly relaxed. Towards the end of the episode Annalise asks her cellmate to give her a blade, and in a dramatic close-up she starts cutting her hair messily until she finally feels relieved from all the pain she is going through.

It can be argued that this moment is pivotal in Annalise’s growth as a self-confident and free woman. However, in terms of her career, she is far from accepting herself and her natural appearance. In relation to that, season four represents an

interesting turning point, thanks to the presence of two strong and independent female characters who will have a major impact on Annalise.

First, there is Tegan Price (interpreted by Amirah Vann), a lesbian black woman who works as an attorney for a large firm. She first stars in the third episode of the fourth season “It’s for the Greater Good,” and what immediately catches the viewer’s attention is her hairstyle, besides her self-confidence and asserting attitude. Her hair is perfectly combed in a hairstyle that enhances its natural state. From her very first appearance, Tegan Price sets an example of a strong and empowered black woman who neither assimilates nor follows the beauty standards imparted by a society where women struggle enormously to fit into. She does not fear to go against them, but she proudly shows her hair in different shapes and styles, such as Bantu knots and Cornrows. Furthermore, Tegan will set a fundamental example for Annalise in terms of accepting her sexuality, for Keating herself is bisexual and struggles enormously to come to terms with this aspect of her identity.

Secondly, the other significant female presence for Annalise is *Scandal*’s protagonist Olivia Pope. The thirteenth episode of the fourth Season—“Lahey v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania”—is a crossover episode aired right after the *Scandal* episode “Allow Me to Reintroduce Myself” (Season 7, Episode 12) combining the two Shondaland TV Series. In the crossover, Annalise needs the help of Pope to bring a class-action suit to the Supreme Court, which aims at obtaining better funding for public defenders so that black people, who in the majority of cases are not able to afford a lawyer, can finally see their right to be defended respected. Thanks to her connections with Pennsylvania Avenue, Olivia Pope is probably the only one capable of providing such help. However, both of them are at a point in their career where their reputation is at stake, therefore, the class-action lawsuit becomes a pretext to regain popularity.

One interesting scene of the crossover episode portrays the women at a hair salon, which becomes a place where the two can bond while getting their hair done. It is important to point out that this is the only moment in both episodes where Olivia and Annalise are shown wearing their hair naturally, compared with the rest of the episode, where both of them have straight and relaxed hair. Therefore, it is no

coincidence that the salon becomes a place to lower their defenses and have their real intention revealed. Especially when Annalise finds out that Olivia is no longer on good terms with the White House.

Annalise: Is it true?

Olivia: I didn't lie. My resignation was complicated.

A: Sounds like more spin to me.

O: You came to me asking for my help –

A: Because I thought you had a bite behind that bark. But instead I found a siddy phony who judged me from the minute she laid eyes on me.

O: I never judged you.

A: Oh, you judged me immediately. Just like a white man in a boardroom looking down on me because my hips are too wide and my hue too dark.

O: Oh, so we're going there. Wow.

A: You think we soul sisters just 'cause you rented out a hair salon for a few hours on the black side of town? Please. I've dealt with plenty of bougie-ass black women just like you. Spent most of your life in boarding school, Ivy League Universities, with a horse between your legs and a silver spoon in your mouth. You're not the only one who knows how to Google. You called me a hot mess, remember? But it sounds to me that despite all of your failed attempts to stand above me on your little pedestal, we're the same. So keep it real, Olivia Pope. Why'd you leave the White House?

O: You know, your skin tone and measurements aren't the reason people don't like you. It's you, Annalise Keating. You are a bully who insults people and then wonders why they won't help you. But hey, you're just trying to keep it real? Right? How's that working out for you? Can't be that great if you had to haul your broke ass on the Megabus to beg for my help. You may think you know who I am and what I'm about, but don't get it twisted. We are not the same. So allow me to reintroduce myself. My name is Olivia Pope. And I don't have to explain myself to anyone. Especially you. [...]

Don't worry about your wash and press. I'll be sure to put that on my siddy-ass, no limit, platinum card.

A: I'll pay for my own damn hair. (*Scandal* Season 7, Episode 12, 22':00"-24':14")



Figure 2. Annalise and Olivia Pope at the black salon (*Scandal*, Season 7, Episode 12, 25':26") © Prime Video

Despite this quarrel, the two will eventually collaborate, and Annalise will succeed in presenting her lawsuit to the Supreme Court, reaching the most outstanding milestone in her career. From this transcript, two interesting points emerge, the first one being the deep-rooted awareness of how black women are perceived by a predominantly white-male-dominated society and workplace, as maintained by Marlene Salzberg: “The problem, however, lies within the prestige that is associated with white people’s hair and the fact that their hair is seen as the hegemonic standard” (64). Further, Annalise stresses how, as black women, they are constantly being judged for the shape of their body rather than for their intellectual skills, thus proving how the dominant culture of American exceptionalism still has a great deal of power over matters such as racism and the gender gap. Up to that point, she always felt prevented from embracing her authentic self because of this bias, thus learning to adapt and adhere to that culture for the sake of her well-being. Eventually, the salon can be seen as a physical “third space” (Bhabha 1994) where the ethnic identities of the two women meet with the reality of American culture. Ifemelu’s experience at the salon in Trenton is in tune with Bhabha’s theorization of the “third space”: because hair is cast at the center of interest and attention, the salon is eventually restaged as the a space where not only the two

dimensions of their ethnicity coexists with their Americanness, but also where women's identity is debated and cast into doubt.

The real turning point and accomplishment in her life occurs in the last season of *HTGAWM*. Specifically, in the last episode of the series, "Stay" (Season 6, Episode 15), Annalise appears in court in a short-cropped natural hairstyle. When her turn to speak finally arrives, she delivers a tremendously powerful speech, finally claiming her independence and her freedom regained:

What I am is a survivor—I survived getting taunted with the n-word in grade school, I survived sexual abuse by my uncle when I was 11, survived losing my first love Eve 'cause I was scared to be gay, the death of my son in a car accident, the murder of my husband, then alcoholism, depression, grief, and every horrible death leading up to this trial. But today, it's just you who get to decide if I survive the hateful conspiracy launched against me by people way more powerful than me. So you decide. Am I a bad person? The mask is off so I'm gonna say yes. But am I a mastermind criminal who's pulled off a series of violent murders? Hell no. who I am is a 53-years-old woman from Memphis Tennessee named Anna Mae Harkness. I'm ambitious, black, bisexual, angry, sad, strong, sensitive, scared, fierce, talented, exhausted—and I am at your mercy. (*HTGAWM* Season 6, Episode 15)

Finally free from all socio-cultural impediments, Annalise Keating can now embrace her own achievements, and embrace her identity as an African American woman who had previously denied her origins.



Figure 3. Annalise stands in court with her natural hair. (*HTGAWM*, Season 6, Episode 15, 27':21") © Netflix

CONCLUSIONS

Despite their inherent differences, both *Americanah* and *How to Get Away with Murder*, debunk the myth of American economic mobility and its reachability through an aesthetic, and not just linguistic, assimilation. Much has happened since Crèvecoeur first wrote about the melting pot in 1782, and about outdated, unrealistic ideas of what makes an American. Nowadays, the multicultural essence of America does not allow the kind of melting as it has been perceived up to this point. Ifemelu and Annalise refuse to surrender to the forces of assimilation; they manage to understand that their identity can be shaped with a beneficial welcoming of what the Other has to offer without having to deny their own identities (Albertazzi 2017, 82). However, the only way to prevent any kind of submission to the hegemonic standards imposed by the American culture is by becoming aware, and, in return, help to raise awareness so that women can free themselves from social beauty standards twentieth-century society continues to impose. With this in mind, choosing one's hairstyle becomes an instrument for political claim embedded within a prominent revolutionary act.

Ultimately, both contribute greatly to raising awareness by politicizing and critically confronting the question of hair for black women. Moreover, they do so by

reaching a strikingly wide audience not only in the US but around the world at large. When Annalise and Ifemelu become conscious of their ethnic identity through their hair, they encourage viewers and readers not only to reconsider the notion of assimilation, but also, and most significantly, to succeed in making them question their own identity.

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