

Reading the Intersectionality of Race, Gender,
and Diaspora in Contemporary Black
Women's Writing

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and Diaspora in Contemporary Black
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Abstract

This thesis explores the representations of race, gender, and diaspora in contemporary Black diasporic women's writing published between 2010 and 2018. This era that is marked by heated political climate is significant for the recognition of Black women's literary productions. The study is interested in the ways the selected Black women writers negotiate gender and race in their writing and how they use their texts to mobilise diasporic constructs in a transnational context. I build on an intersectional Black feminist approach which is applicable to the race and gender dialogues that I argue the selected texts offer. Along with intersectionality, I develop on diaspora studies to read the ways these writers reflect on Black women's negotiations of cultural heritage and diasporic identities as impacted by the intersections of race and gender. My outlook is transnational as the texts offer us cross-border experiences where writers and their texts move between Black Atlantic spaces of Africa, Britain, America, and the Caribbean. I take formalist approaches to consider the different genres of poetry, fiction, and non-fiction to argue that these writers employ these genres for their significance in diasporic Black women's literary tradition as mediums to convey Black women's marginalised narratives with race and gender. I argue that through alternately different and similar approaches, including reimagining Black women's lives within historical and contemporary settings, and using their own personal experiences, with these intersections, the writers and their texts expose the complexity of gender and race experiences in the diaspora. The texts studied offer us an insight into different Black feminist dialogues that occupy Black women's diasporic writing throughout the many generations in a contemporary context.

Dedication

To the loving memory of my late mother Ouahiba Bouslimani, my first ever teacher in life and my biggest supporter who saw this happening way before I did. Mama, this is for you. To my father Ali who taught me love, courage, resilience, and patience, and from whom I got the strength to do this. It would have not been possible if you had not been there. This is for you Baba. To my sisters Zakia and Khadidja who showed me pride in every way possible. I love you.

To a bright becoming,

To many more achievements.

To my past self who worked hard for this, and to the future me who will continue the hard work.

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Table of Contents:

Abstract	iii
Dedication	iv
Acknowledgment	v
Table of Contents	vii
List of Figures	ix
Introduction	1
1-Black Feminism and Intersectionality.....	13
2-Black Feminism and the Theorisation of Diaspora.....	20
3-Black Women and Citation.....	30
4-Thesis Structure.....	35
Chapter One: Remembering the Middle Passage Within ‘The Wake’ in Black Women’s Poetry	39
Introduction.....	39
1-A Contested Genre: Black Poetic Literary Tradition Between Phillis Wheatley and Oral Songs.....	51
2-The Atlantic Ocean in Diasporic Theorisations.....	56
3-Wake Work.....	62
4-Memory and Rememory Work.....	67
5-The Semiotics of Black Birth in Grace Nichols’s <i>I Have Crossed an Ocean</i>	71
6-Grieving Black Imminent and Immanent Death in Aracelis Girmay’s <i>the black maria</i>	85
7-Black Annotation and Black Redaction in Tracy K. Smith’s <i>Wade in The Water</i>	102
Conclusion.....	117
Chapter Two: Homecomings in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s <i>Americanah</i>, Yaa Gyasi’s <i>Homegoing</i>, and Elsie Augustave’s <i>The Roving Tree</i>	119
Introduction.....	119
1-Black Feminist Theorisations of Home and Migration in the Diaspora.....	134
2-Questions of Blackness, Home, and Return in <i>Americanah</i>	142
3-Reconciling with ‘The Door of No Return’ in <i>Homegoing</i>	160
4-The Search for Home in the Haitian Bildungsroman.....	175
Conclusion.....	192

Chapter Three: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Michelle Obama as <i>The Popular Black Feminists</i>	194
Introduction.....	194
1- Adichie’s Model to Popular Feminism.....	203
2- A Black Woman in The White House	227
3- Michelle Obama Disrupts Controlling Images.....	237
Conclusion.....	245
Chapter Four: The Practice of Life Writing as a Representation of an Intersectional Self in Black Women’s Hybrid Genres	248
Introduction.....	248
1-Black Women’s Life Writing and Autobiographical Performativity.....	251
2-The ‘I’ in <i>Bad Feminist</i> Manifesto.....	257
3-Living at the Intersection of Race and Gender in Morgan Jerkin’s Autobiography.....	264
4-Intersectional Self in Reni Eddo-Lodge’s journalistic Genre.....	272
5-Life Writing in the Self-help Genre.....	280
Conclusion.....	289
Conclusion	291
Researcher’s Publication Output	301
Bibliography	302

List of Figures:

Figure (1): An image of page 26 from Aracelis Girmay’s *The black maria*92

Figure (2): An image of page 19 from Tracy K. Smith’s *Wade in the Water*.....106

Figure (3): An image of page 3 from M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!*.....109

Figure (4): An image of page 4 from M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!*.....110

INTRODUCTION

This thesis springs from my interest in the urgent significance of Black women's literary work that concentrates on key contemporary issues such as racism, gender, and diaspora.¹ For the past ten years the subject matter of these writings witnessed a renewed mainstream visibility as the world continues to be shaped by these factors. Transnationally, this decade saw a rapid change in the political climate with the rise of refugee crises and anti-immigrant sentiment, gender issues, and global protests against racist policies.² Despite the era of globalisation and the celebrated blurring of borders, major political changes caused mass crossings of physical borders met with negative perceptions on immigrants and the passing of anti-immigration policies. Significantly, the 2011 Arab uprising, known as the 'Arab Spring,' due to the political unrest against governing regimes in different countries across the MENA region (North Africa and the Middle East), led to the largest movement of immigrants in millions on EU borders. As Robert Koulish and Maartje van der Woud argue, the influx of refugees across European countries resulted in unregistered immigrants due to their large numbers which led to 'criticism and anti-immigration phobias.'³ America saw a rise of nationalism tides with the former president Donald Trump's policies like the 2017 Muslim Ban that restricts Muslim immigrants from certain countries to enter to the USA, and his 2018 forced separation of children at the U.S Mexico borders and his overall negative sentiments

¹ My intentional usage of the terminology Black with a capital B in this thesis is to refer to the political connotation that the term holds which goes beyond skin colour to describe the collective heritage and the ethnic and racial identity of the people of the African diaspora. The only times it is written without the capital B is when I am quoting other scholars. For a brief overview of the historical effort by Black scholars to ensure that such recognition is established see the writer Lori L. Tharps' concise article 'The Case for Black with a Capital B' published by *The New York Times*. Tharps, 'The Case for Black With a Capital B' (2014), *The New York Times*, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/19/opinion/the-case-for-black-with-a-capital-b.html>> [accessed 06 January 2022].

² See Robert Koulish and Maartje van der Woud, *Crimmigrant Nations: Resurgent Nationalism and the Closing of Borders*, ed. by Robert Koulish and Maartje van der Woud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020).

³ Koulish and Van der Woud, p.12.

against Mexican immigrants.⁴ UK's 2016 vote in the Brexit referendum to leave the European Union led to a subsequent governmental policies and political debates over laws for regulating immigration.⁵ As Maya Goodfellow maintains in *Hostile Environments* (2020), the aftermath of the vote 'showed how embedded anti-immigration politics is' in the UK.⁶ UK's Brexit and America's vote for Trump had influences beyond their borders as they were an indication of major global changes in regards to immigration and the politics of citizenship.⁷

During Trump's era, America witnessed the rise of the #MeToo movement leading to a global outbreak of the hashtag on the different social media platforms in 2017 which sparked an international solidarity among women, putting to prominence conversations on gender inequalities and dynamics of power. The phrase MeToo was originally founded by a Black woman activist Tarana Burke, a sexual assault survivor herself, in 2006 as a safe space for Black women, women of colour and those marginalised who experienced sexual abuse and all forms of violence.⁸ The hashtag gained prominence when it was first posted on Twitter by the American actress Alyssa Milano rising sexual allegations against the Hollywood film producer Harvey Weinstein. Sharing in different languages, women globally felt encouraged to adopt this hashtag to openly voice and disseminate their experiences with sexual violence and harassments to vast audiences on social media. The debates that were brought to the forefront by the widespread of this movement generated immense scholarly interests addressing sexual and gender-based injustices. As Robin E. Field and Jerrica Jordan write that

⁴ Mary Gilmartin, Patricia Burke Wood, and Cian O'Callaghan, *Borders, Mobility and Belonging in the Era of Brexit and Trump*, (Bristol and Chicago: Policy Press, 2018). p.2.

⁵ Maya Goodfellow, *Hostile Environment: How Immigrants Became Scapegoats*, (London and New York: Verso, 2020). pp.8-9.

⁶ Goodfellow, p.9.

⁷ See Gilmartin et al, p.2.

⁸ See Carly Gieseler, *The Voices of #MeToo: From Grassroots Activism to a Viral Roar* (Lanham and London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

this global solidarity ‘created a new subgenre in literary scholarship, shown in the proliferation of conferences, special issues in academic journals, and entire books dedicated to issues of sexual harassment, abuse, and assault.’⁹ While the reception of the hashtag was celebrated, Black women voices rose to demand acknowledging Burke’s ‘overlooked’ work by mainstream feminism, which brought back conversations on the history of marginalising Black women’s activism as initially the name of its originator was largely absent.¹⁰ Though it appeared eleven years before the 2017 hashtag, Burke’s work did not gain any prominence nor shared the same visibility. As Angela Onwuachi-Willig argues that this paradoxical reception ‘reflects the long-standing marginalization and exclusion’ of the experiences of women of colour.¹¹ Among the points of criticism was that though the movement was intended for all sexual violence survivors of all races, as Alicia Boyd and Bree McEwan maintain, ‘it had the potential to disrupt’ Burke’s established work and lead to the ‘erasure of Black voices’ which creates ‘an illusion of inclusivity.’¹² Burke’s own reaction to seeing her phrase ‘used by people outside of the community, was jarring,’ as she believed such mainstream movements had ‘a great lack of intersectionality.’¹³ After the large Black feminist

⁹ Robin E. Field and Jerrica Jordan, *#MeToo and Modernism*, ed. by Robin E. Field and Jerrica Jordan, (South Carolina: Clemson University, 2022). p.2.

For other scholarly works on #MeToo movement see: *The Routledge Handbook of the Politics of the #MeToo Movement*, ed. by Giti Chandra and Irma Erlingsdóttir (London and New York: Routledge, 2021).

Pamela Aronson and Matthew R. Fleming, *Gender Revolution: How Electoral Politics and #MeToo are Reshaping Everyday Life*, (New York: Routledge, 2024).

Karen Boyle, *#MeToo, Weinstein and Feminism*, (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

¹⁰ Katherine Knight Steele, *Digital Black Feminism* (New York: New York University Press, 2021). p.87.

¹¹ Angela Onwuachi-Willig, ‘What About #UsToo?: The Invisibility of Race in the #MeToo Movement,’ in *The Yale Law Journal Forum*, (2018), 105-120, (p.106).< https://www.yalelawjournal.org/pdf/Onwuachi-Willig_h1vexk3y.pdf >[accessed 12 January 2024].

¹² Alicia Boyed and Bree McEwan, ‘Viral paradox: The intersection of “me too” and #MeToo,’ *New Media & Society*, (2022), 1-18, 2. <<https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221099187>> [accessed 20 December 2023].

¹³ Burke quoted in Boyed and McEwan ‘Viral Paradox.’

Burke quoted in Sandra E. Garcia, ‘The Woman Who Created #MeToo Long Before Hashtags,’ (2017), *The New York Times*, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/20/us/me-too-movement-tarana-burke.html>>[accessed 29 January 2024].

and Black women's criticism on social media to acknowledge her, Burke was publicly credited by Milano and made *Time* magazine's people of the year 2018.¹⁴

Few years after the #MeToo, the summer of 2020 witnessed a height of Black Lives Matter protests rising against America's systemic racism following the police killing of George Floyd.¹⁵ As America's racial past and long histories of oppression continue to haunt its present, the protests raised serious questions about the American democracy and demanded an end to police brutality and more constructive solutions to the systemic racism that dominates the social, economic, and political institutions in the country. These protests became an international phenomenon as they sparked a worldwide solidarity especially in European countries that have Black minorities and immigrants still struggling with their colonial legacies.¹⁶ These political tensions brought back global discussions of these nations' past of slavery to the public discourse demanding political change and reparations.¹⁷ The following reaction to the Black Lives Matter movement since 2013 saw a renewed interest in writing about the issue of race and racism not only in the U.S., but also in the UK where conversations around systemic racism have been somewhat less dominant. In Britain such works include

¹⁴ Kadish Morris, 'Tarana Burke: If it weren't for Black Women, I would Not Have Made it,' (2020), *The Guardian* <<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/nov/15/tarana-burke-if-it-werent-for-black-women-i-would-not-have-made-it>> [accessed 29 January 2024].

¹⁵ Black Lives Matter movement is initiated by three Black women Patrisse Khan Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi.

¹⁶ See Guy Davies, 'Death of George Floyd Prompts Reckoning Over Race and Colonialism in Europe' (2020), *abc News*, <<https://abcnews.go.com/International/turning-point-death-george-floyd-prompts-reckoning-race/story?id=72863447>> [accessed 23 November 2022].

See Amna Mohdin et al on the numbers of protests in the UK following the death of George Floyd and the activism of Black Lives Matter, 'How George Floyd's death sparked a wave of UK Anti-racism Protests' (2020), *The Guardian*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jul/29/george-floyd-death-fuelled-anti-racism-protests-britain>> [accessed 23 November 2022]

See Deborah Douglas et al on the international impact of the death of George Floyd 'One Year on, How George Floyd's Murder has changed The World' (2021), *The Guardian*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/may/22/george-floyd-murder-change-across-world-blm>> [accessed 23 November 2022].

¹⁷ Grégoire Sauvage, 'How Black Lives Matter Put Slave Reparations Back on the Agenda,' (2021), *France 24*, <<https://www.france24.com/en/americas/20210418-how-black-lives-matter-put-slave-reparations-back-on-the-agenda>> [accessed 20 January 2023].

Reni Eddo-Lodge's *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* (2017), which the last chapter of this thesis discusses, and in America Ijeoma Oluo's *So You Want to Talk About Race* (2018). This surge of Black women's creative output received mainstream attention as the Black British author Bernardine Evaristo confirms in an article for *The Guardian* that 'these are unprecedented times for black female writers.'¹⁸ Indeed, this period witnessed a shift in publishing and prize culture where more Black women's works are published and getting more recognition. In 2019, Evaristo was awarded the Booker Prize for her novel *Girl, Woman, Other*, which deals with intersectional identities, after long years of writing and publishing, making her the first Black woman and the first Black British person to ever win the prestigious prize.¹⁹ A year later, Candice Carty-Williams won the book of the year at the British Book Awards for her debut novel *Queenie*, also making her the first Black writer to receive such top award.²⁰ With the 2020 political climate and Black Lives Matter campaigns, conversations around such works resurfaced making them top the lists of bestsellers and book charts.²¹ As Evaristo agrees 'the Black Lives movement encouraged people to start reading books by writers of colour' with books by Black authors 'circulating on social media' and Black writers 'topping the charts' which 'never happened before.'²² Reading lists by Black authors were

¹⁸ Bernardine Evaristo, 'These are unprecedented times for black female writers' (2019), *The Guardian*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/oct/19/bernadine-evaristo-what-a-time-to-be-a-black-british-womxn-writer>> [accessed 13 May 2022].

¹⁹ Gwendolyn Brooks is the first African American woman to ever win the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry which is an American prestigious award awarded annually for distinguished and original works of poetry. See <<https://www.pulitzer.org/winners/gwendolyn-brooks>> [accessed 1 August 2022].

²⁰ BBC, 'Queenie Author Candice Carty-Williams wins British Book Award,' (2020), <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-53218235#:~:text=Candice%20Carty%2DWilliams%20has%20said,Oyinkan%20Braithwaite%20and%20Margaret%20Atwood.>> [accessed 1 February 2024].

²¹ Alison Flood, 'Black British Authors Top UK Book Charts in Wake of BLM Protests' (2020), *The Guardian*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/jun/10/black-british-authors-uk-book-charts-blm-bernadine-evaristo-reni-eddo-lodge-waterstones>> [accessed 23 July 2022].

²² Evaristo interviewed by Sirin Kale, 'This Has Never Happened Before!' Bernardine Evaristo and Reni Eddo-Lodge on their history-making year' (2020), *The Guardian*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/dec/24/this-has-never-happened-before-bernadine-evaristo-and-reni-eddo-lodge-on-their-history-making-year>> [accessed 21 December 2023].

shared on the different social media platforms by publishers like the UK publishing company Faber & Faber that posted on Twitter 'in solidarity' with Black Lives Matter 'a range of important books to help educate on racism and white privilege.'²³ The literary agency Aitken Alexander posted a list of works by Black writers including Toni Morrison, Evaristo, Eddo-Lodge, and Afua Hirsch among others for the goal of 'amplifying' the voices of these writers.²⁴ In the same year, history was made when Evaristo became the first Black British woman writer to top paperback fiction chart in the UK, and Eddo-Lodge becoming the first Black British woman author to top the UK's best-seller list since the creation of the chart back in 1998.²⁵

In the U.S., Oluo's *So You Want to Talk About Race* and Michelle Alexander's *The new Jim Crow* made the New York Times bestseller list, though the first was published more than two years before the Black Lives Matter uprisings, and the latter was released ten years prior.²⁶ Months after the eruption of the protests, Amanda Gorman became America's first national youth poet laureate and the youngest poet to deliver presidential inaugural poem *The Hill We Climb* in President Joe Biden's inauguration. Gorman became the first-ever youth poet laureate and the third Black woman poet to deliver a poem for the presidential inauguration of Joe Biden after Maya Angelou and Elizabeth Alexander who presented their poems for Bill

²³ Faber Books, (2020), *Twitter*, <<https://twitter.com/FaberBooks/status/1267828761258409990>> [accessed 2 February 2024].

²⁴ Aitken Alexander, (2020), *Twitter*, <<https://twitter.com/AitkenAlexander/status/1267484800396464128>> [accessed 2 February 2020].

²⁵ BBC, 'Queenie Author Candice Carty-Williams wins British Book Award,' (2020), <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-53218235#:~:text=Candice%20Carty%20Williams%20has%20said,Oyinkan%20Braithwaite%20and%20Margaret%20Atwood>> [accessed 1 February 2024].

BBC, Reni Eddo-Lodge: Author Makes Book Chart History, (2020), <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-52993678>> [accessed 1 February 2024].

²⁶ Kenya Evelyn, 'Black US Authors Top New York Times Bestseller List as Protests Continue,' (2020), *The Guardian*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/jun/11/new-york-times-bestseller-list-black-authors>> [accessed 19 January 2024].

Clinton and Barak Obama's inaugurations, respectively.²⁷ In addition to the mainstream recognition, the new literary productions by Black women across the Black diaspora brought to the literary field revitalised critical and scholarly discussions which I will engage with in the four chapters. My thesis, therefore, is an inquiry into this proliferation of the new critical engagements of the creative terrains Black women's writing has brought to our knowledge about the literature, issues of race and gender, and the legacies of slavery of the Black diaspora. It presents a comparative Black feminist intersectional reading of race, gender, and diaspora in the contemporary texts of a cohort of Black women writers across the Black Atlantic. The texts selected are concerned with similar issues within regards to Black women and offer us more nuanced representations of Black women's experiences in the diaspora. It focuses on contemporary Black women's different characterisations of the intersections of race and gender with an emphasis on their writings and public commentary. It highlights the relationship between location, race, and gender, by drawing from cross-cultural transnational texts through Black feminist and intersectional frameworks. It interrogates how Black women writers mobilise concepts of the Black diaspora and how they draw on the legacies of slavery with an emphasis on gender and explores the conversations between these texts and the shifting dialogues of race, gender, and diaspora.

My interdisciplinary project offers an original contribution to the contemporary scholarship in the fields of Black feminism and Black women's diasporic writing by exploring how the selected texts cross form boundaries to centralise Black women's experiences with race and gender, and the histories of slavery, colonialism, and oppression. The research crosses disciplines and merges different methods and frameworks across Black feminism,

²⁷ Arising number of published biographies on Amanda Gorman such as Marc Shapiro, *Word Up: on Amanda Gorman, an Unauthorised Biography* (New York: Riverdale Avenue Books, 2021).

diaspora studies, postcolonialism and genre studies related to Black women's writing. I borrow from previous established frameworks and put them in conversation with new scholarship to generate new understandings and positions in Black women's diasporic writing. I Build from Black women's diaspora scholarship to engender Paul Gilroy's model of the Black Atlantic using earliest models like that of Carole Boyce Davies along Christina Sharpe's recent oceanic theory. I use Gilroy's model innovatively by employing his chronotope of the ship along Sharpe's theorisation of the ship in her oceanic reading of histories of slavery to examine the representations of these histories in the texts. My analysis blurs the borders between the different genres to study transnational texts ranging between non-fiction, fiction, and poetry of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Michelle Obama, Roxane Gay, Reni Eddo-lodge, Morgan Jerkins, Elizabeth Uviebinené, Yomi Adegoke, Yaa Gyasi, Elsie Augustave, Aracelis Girmay, Tracy K. Smith, and Grace Nichols. With this selection of texts, I am border-crossing in terms of both genre and the geographical location by including Black women writers from across the Black Atlantic: America, Britain, Caribbean, and Africa; thus, presenting an analysis that textually bridges the Atlantic. The texts examined in this thesis are rarely studied or juxtaposed together, and I move beyond the single genre of the novel which most studies on contemporary Black women's diasporic writing focus on. I am examining understudied texts like the Caribbean bildungsroman *The Roving Tree* (2013) by the Haitian America writer Elsie Augustave and less critically approached genres like the Black self-help form by Adegoke and Uviebinené *Slay in Your Lane: The Black Girl Bible* (2018), which I argue is among the texts that mix the genre with autobiographical writing. The thesis reads this selection of texts that are published between 2010 and 2018 during a contemporary time frame that witnessed a heated global political climate with resurfacing debates on migration, gender, and racism that saw a renewed interest in Black women's writing. I engage with a

very recent body of scholarship transnationally in which I put the literary texts in dialogue with contemporary critics in the field to present novel approaches of reading the selected works.

Along with the intersectional reading, my study presents an innovative contribution in the field of contemporary Black women's writing as it approaches the selected texts through formal analysis by focusing on the textual hybridity present in the works entailing the balancing of and between various genres such as journalistic essays, feminist manifestos, novels, autobiographies, memoirs, self-help genre, and poetry. I highlight the texts' mixing of genre and form borders as a significant mode of transgression that reflects the border crossing and the cross-cultural connectedness which marks the contemporary writing of these Black women writers in the diaspora. My attention to the different forms and genres explored in this thesis is beyond considering the range of forms only, instead I investigate the formal experimentations and the crossing of formal boundaries and the boundaries of time and history where these writers move across the past and the contemporary. With the formal analysis, I present innovative and new readings to texts that have not been studied formally through using new and different approaches that have not been used to approach Black women's contemporary writings. I use Christina Sharpe's oceanic model of the wake on the Black diaspora and histories of slavery innovatively, as it is yet to be used for formal analysis on Black women's poetry, to read poetic texts through mobilising her different concepts such as Black annotation and Black redaction to argue these writers are using form and language to reclaim Black histories. To examine the hybrid texts, which I argue borrow form Black women's established tradition of life writing, I challenge the view that this form of writing is a performance by creating a collage of different models on the form of autobiography using Black women's autobiographical theorisations and autobiographical texts to suggest that

these Black women writers include the form in their hybrid texts to write about their intersectional experiences in the diaspora. By looking into form, I argue that the Black women writers' subversion of traditional literary modals and structures allows them to reclaim marginalised histories and permits silenced voices to be heard by breaking the formal borders of poetry and merging life writing with modern forms. I also argue that these writers practice textual hybridity into their writing by infusing oral traditions, folklores, music, rhythm, and languages like creole as bearers of the culture and the history of diaspora and a celebration of the transatlantic traditions. By taking innovative directions in reading these texts' political concerns simultaneously with their formal features that have not been approached in this way, my thesis can inspire the scholarships on the emerging diasporic Black women's writings to follow new ways in examining form.

To offer an original contribution through the comparative analysis, my thesis aims to address a set of different questions throughout the four chapters and conclusion. In the light of the contemporary debates around Black women's writing, which I established early on in this introduction, I consider the relation of the global events to the readership and the publication of Black women's works that focus on these intersections and the reason for this renewed mainstream recognition and interest for writing by Black women. Since the analysis focuses on the formal hybridity, I will look at why and how the texts are subverting traditional literary forms. The body of literary works I consult deal with challenging questions that concern contemporary Black women in the diaspora such as diasporic subjectivity, Black womanhood, racial identity, interactions across national boundaries, and legacies of colonialism and slavery. Therefore, I interrogate how Black women writers approach the intersections of race and gender in their writing; how these intersections affect the lives of Black women in the diaspora; how they depict the Black women's experiences with racism

and sexism in contemporary environments; how Black women writers explore Black feminist themes in their works; how these writers approach the legacies of slavery; how they project the image of home in diasporic settings; how they interrogate Black women's tensions between their cultural heritage and their diasporic identities. To highlight the transnational conversations between the works I consider how and what are the writers borrowing and landing from each other, what are they borrowing from earliest generations of Black women, and what is the conversation between the scholars I consult and these writers. These questions unify this thesis as a meaningful contribution to the current scholarly discussions about contemporary transnational Black women's writing of the diaspora.

This thesis comes from my interest in the histories of oppressions and specifically those related to the histories of colonialism and the particularity of women's experiences. As an Algerian woman who comes from a country with a long history of oppression for almost a century and a half (1830-1962) under the French colonisation with seven years of violent war of independence (1954-1962), in which for over a century France inflicted different forms of violence on the Algerian population, I am inherently aware of the concept of colonial oppression. At the same time, I am aware that I do not share the same historical background nor the identity positionings that the writers in this thesis have. However, I am interested in the creative models that Black women experiment on to reclaim histories of the past on slavery and colonialism thematically and aesthetically. Engaging with the texts selected and the interdisciplinary scholarship I build on encourages urgent questions about what Algerian scholarship on colonialism, colonial oppression and memory can land and borrow from these diasporic models. Looking into how creatively and intellectually other forms of oppression are presented and examined in this study is a learning experience that allows me as an Algerian researcher to broaden conversations on colonial histories and bridge between these

histories and their locations. Comparing the Algerian postcolonial context in Algerian women's writing with Black women's diasporic writing outside the continent can promote for a potential innovation in transnational literary scholarships on women's writings since less studies are dedicated to addressing these traditions together.

My use of the term Black women writers across the Black Atlantic is to refer to African American, Black British, African, and Caribbean writers and poets.²⁸ This transnational selection of Black women writers that represents various geographical locations is key to the understanding of the cultural dialogues surrounding the overlapping relationship between race, gender, and diaspora. I endeavour to make this thesis a space for Black women's different perspectives beyond the narrative of the African American feminism. Therefore, I precisely use the term Black women and Black feminism to move away from this exclusive category of African American women's representations of Black women's experiences with these oppressions and the theorisations of Black feminism.²⁹ Instead, I offer a dialogue between different scholars, feminists, theorists, and writers from different locations across the Black Atlantic to read Black women's works in a transnational perspective. However, in doing so I am aware that the varied bodies of works that I am looking at belong to writers of diverse cultures and cultural legacies with different histories of colonisation, slavery, and racism. The differences present in the works I study suggest that there are significant nuances in the experiences of Black women and their representations of these experiences. Yet, these

²⁸ I follow Paul Gilroy's classification of the Black Atlantic that includes the Caribbean, Africa, America, and Britain. See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (New York: Verso, 1993).

²⁹ One of my aims in the earliest stage of this thesis is to present a discussion of Black women's writing that is not limited to Black women from the U.S and I was inspired by my first readings of one of the Black feminists who helped me think, Carole Boyce Davies's who in her work urges to not limit Black women's experience to what she calls 'US hegemony.' See Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity, Migrations of the Subject* (London and New York, Routledge, 1994). p.4.

works involve shared themes of racism, gender, slavery, and migration that I will explore when looking at the connections as well as differences between the texts in the chapters.

1-Black Feminism and Intersectionality:

In my discussion of the ways contemporary Black women writers theorise and mobilise the concepts of Black feminism differently from the earlier generations of Black feminists, I rely heavily on intersectional readings. By presenting an intersectional reading in this analysis, I refer to the critical examination of the confluence of the complex dynamics of oppression of race and gender as well as migration that shape Black women's lives in the diaspora. Intersectionality is a crucial component in this thesis rather than just a theoretical framework. My use of the intersectional approach to feminism is based on the American lawyer and legal scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw's important paradigm of intersectionality which she first introduces in her seminal article 'Demarginalizing the Intersections of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics' in 1989. Crenshaw emphasises locating race and gender as corelated and interacting injustices which influence the experiences of Black women.³⁰ According to Crenshaw, non-intersectional 'single axis framework' analysis of Black women's experiences with sexism and racism fails to adequately address the particularity of how they are subordinated.³¹ In other words, Crenshaw presents intersectionality as a praxis to study the way race interacts with other positions like gender and class to mould the experiences of Black women.

³⁰ Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and violence against women of color,' in *Stanford Law Review*, 43.6 (1991),1241-1299, (p. 1244). <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1229039>> [accessed 18April 2018].

³¹ Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine', in *Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics, University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 01.8. (1989), 139-167, (p.140). <<http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8>> [accessed 20 April 2018].

Though the term appeared later with Crenshaw, Black women historically have been calling for the consideration of the dual oppression for a long time. Starting with the abolitionist and women's rights activist Sojourner Truth's foundational call 'Ain't I A Woman,' in 1851, Black women scholars and Black feminists throughout generations have stressed the importance of Black women to locate their experiences within the interlocking vectors of race and gender.³² Black feminism agrees that the dual victimised positioning of Black women started with the formation of the Black diaspora at the onset of slavery in America, Europe, and the Caribbean. As bell hooks argues 'race and sex have always been overlapping discourses' that started in slavery as the 'black female slave was not valued as the black male slave.'³³ Thus, the social hierarchy that white people established during slavery, as hooks continues that was 'based on race and sex,' positioned 'black women last.'³⁴ In 1981 Angela Y. Davis reminds us in *Women, Race and Class*, that Black female slaves were regarded as 'genderless' when exploiting them was 'profitable,' however, 'when they could be exploited, punished and repressed in ways suited only for women, they were locked into their exclusively female roles.'³⁵ The double bind of oppression inflicted upon Black women during slavery created a systematically inherited unjust social and cultural context for Black women in the diaspora.

Later, in her 1991 essay *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color*, Crenshaw stresses that the purpose of intersectionality is to 'denote the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple

³² I am referring to Sojourner Truth's influential speech in 1851 at the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio.

³³ bell hooks, *Yearning, Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), p.57. hooks, *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (New York and London: Routledge, [1981] 2015), p.15.

³⁴ hooks, p.52-53.

³⁵ Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (Vintage Books, New York: 1994), p.9.

dimensions of Black women's [...] experiences.'³⁶ However, in this essay Crenshaw further expands intersectionality not only to look at how race and gender interact 'in the context of violence against women of color' but also as a model that 'might be more broadly useful as a way of mediating the tensions between assertions of multiple identity and the ongoing necessity of group politics.'³⁷ Soon after its coinage, intersectionality was mobilised beyond legal theory to become a key praxis to scholars in different fields significantly those in feminist theory, queer theory, social sciences and other studies on race, gender and sexuality as it offers a paradigm that permits scholars to understand how identities function within multiple combined social positionings including gender, race, class, religion, sex, sexual orientation, ableism, and age. In a 2017 interview when asked about the current usage of her paradigm in conversations about sexuality, Crenshaw expressed her refusal of applying her model on a single axis position stressing that:

Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It is not simply that there's a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LGBTQ problem there. Many times, that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things.³⁸

Though Crenshaw originally focused on the particularities of Black women's experiences with race and gender, her concern was to refuse focusing on one social category separately.

³⁶ Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins,' p.1244.

For more on Intersectionality and academia see Jennifer C. Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After intersectionality* (Duke University Press: Durham and London, 2019).

³⁷ Crenshaw, p.1296.

³⁸ Crenshaw quoted in, 'Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality, More than Two Decades Later,' in *Columbia Law School* (2017) <<https://www.law.columbia.edu/news/archive/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality-more-two-decades-later>> [accessed 18 March 2024].

Prior to Crenshaw's model, the activist, self-defined 'lesbian Black feminist,' writer, essayist, and poet Audre Lorde was an early voice who had presented intersectional debates.³⁹ As early as the 1970s and early 1980s, Lorde articulated and identified different systems of oppression that crossed boundaries in relation to sexuality not only in her critical essays, but also in her poetry such as *The Black Unicorn* (1978) and her novel *Zami: The New Spelling of My Name* (1982). In her 1980 essay 'Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,' which appears later in her 1984 collection of essays *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Lorde introduces the 'theory of difference' where she stresses is for the recognition of identity differences focusing on race, gender, sexuality, and class among others, arguing:

Certainly there are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex.

But it is not those differences that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behaviour and expectation.⁴⁰

Though the term intersectional was never mentioned in her essay, Lorde calls for the necessity to look at oppressions such as gender, race, sex, age, and class as combined social positions stressing that '[r]effusing to recognize difference makes it impossible to see the different problems and pitfalls facing us as women.'⁴¹ Lorde criticises second wave feminism that disregards race, gender, class, and sexuality as overlapping structures that contribute to the oppression of Black women maintaining that 'white women focus upon their oppression

³⁹ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (California: The Crossing Press, 1984), p.114.

⁴⁰ Lorde, p.115.

⁴¹ Lorde, p.118.

as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class and age' which she maintains presents 'a pretence to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word sisterhood that does not in fact exist.'⁴² Lorde thus, warns against the failure to recognise difference of race, gender, sexuality, age, and social class as this dynamic reinforces power structures. Lorde's role in forging these intersectional debates and her work in 'exceeding the limits of identity politics,' to use Kaisa Ilmonen's words, is celebrated by scholars as being crucial for the emerging intersectional scholarship on sexuality and identity politics.⁴³ In celebrating Lorde's work on sexuality and lesbian identities, Barbara Smith for example argues that Lorde presents 'Black lesbian experiences with both verisimilitude and authenticity.'⁴⁴ Lorde's conversations on sexuality and lesbian identities that challenge the notions of fixed exclusionary identities allowed the expansion of intersectional scholarships and debates on sexuality. Contemporary feminist writers and scholars working on intersections like sexuality, race, gender, and class are drawing from Lorde's works in contemporary settings and positionings like Sara Ahmed whom I will refer to below.

Patricia Hill Collins's 1990 ground-breaking *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, also expands intersectional debates by analysing how oppression impacts Black women and focusing on how interlocking paradigms of race and gender are organised within societies. In the second edition of *Black Feminist Thought* (2000) Collins broadens her analysis 'beyond race, class, and gender and include[s] sexuality as a form of oppression' as 'sexuality signals another important factor' that impacts

⁴² Lorde, p.116.

⁴³ Kaisa Ilmonen, 'Identity Politics Revisited: On Audre Lorde, Intersectionality, and Mobilising Writing Styles,' in *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 26. 01 (2017),7-22, (p.10). <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506817702410>> [accessed 10 February 2024]. See her article for the scholarship's recognition of Lorde's work on pushing identity politics.

⁴⁴ Barbara Smith quoted in Ilmonen 'Identity Politics Revisited,'p.9.

Black women's 'varying responses to common challenges.'⁴⁵ Collins argues that 'intersections of race and gender or of sexuality and nation [...] remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice.'⁴⁶ Looking at 'class factors' is as 'equally important' as racial and gender discrimination, Collins stresses, in addressing how these institutionalised oppressions are organised, since the struggle of working class Black women expresses 'a distinct character.'⁴⁷ Black women's intersectional status quo is the consequence of the histories of slavery as Collins asserts 'the convergence of race, class, and gender oppression characteristic of U.S slavery shaped all subsequent relationships that women of African descent had within Black American families and communities.'⁴⁸ To use Lorde's phrasing in *Sister Outsider*, Black women are 'born into a society of entrenched loathing and contempt for whatever is Black and female.'⁴⁹ Therefore, within the complex nature and history of race/ gender discourse as hooks stresses 'the struggle to end racism and the struggle to end sexism were naturally intertwined, that to make them separate was to deny a basic truth of our existence, that race and sex are both immutable facets of human identity.'⁵⁰ Therefore, race has always been the marker of the basis on which Black feminism stands; thus, it is crucial for Black feminists that Blackness be positioned between race and gender and not to allow these factors to function independently. For Black women, gender that is a marker of identity functions within a convergence of multiple hegemonies that deny Black women agency or renders them liable to discrimination, a complex interplay that intersectionality addresses.

⁴⁵ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought Knowledge, consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd edn (New York: Routledge, 2000). p. xi.

⁴⁶ Collins, p.18.

⁴⁷ Collins, p.59, p.28.

⁴⁸ Collins, p.4.

⁴⁹ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, p.70.

⁵⁰ hooks, *Ain't I A Woman*, p.13.

The British feminist of colour, activist, scholar, and writer Sara Ahmed whose works focuses on lesbian feminism and issues of race and gender, borrows from the grounding works of such African American scholars significantly Lorde, hooks, and Collins in her contemporary scholarship on intersectionality. In her 2017 *Living a Feminist Life*, Ahmed states she is following hooks in arguing that ‘intersectionality is a starting point [...] from which we must proceed if we are to offer an account of how power works.’⁵¹ In her recent 2023 *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook*, Ahmed acknowledges intersectionality as resulting from Crenshaw’s ‘important work [...] to capture how discrimination works.’⁵² Echoing Lorde’s affirmation of her intersectional identity ‘[m]y fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am,’ Ahmed also confirms ‘I am not a lesbian one moment and a person of color the next and a feminist at another. I am all these at every moment.’⁵³ In such works, as a lesbian and a woman of colour, Ahmed presents herself as a ‘feminist killjoy’ which she defines as a feminist ‘who kills feminist joy’ by ‘willing to speak about sexism and racism.’⁵⁴ The feminist killjoy for Ahmed disrupts feminist conversations that do not address the intersection of different social categories such as race, gender and sexual oppression highlighting that the latter ‘cannot be separated from racism.’⁵⁵ Ahmed thus argues ‘if talking about racism within feminism gets in the way of feminist happiness, we need to get in the way of feminist happiness’ and sexual oppression.⁵⁶ As Ahmed maintains feminism must address the overlapping of such oppressions ‘feminism will be intersectional,’ otherwise it will not serve to subvert systems of powers that enable these intersecting

⁵¹ Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017). p.5.

⁵² Ahmed, *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook: The Radical Potential of Getting in the Way* (New York: Seal Press, 2023). p.120.

⁵³ Lorde, p.120., Ahmed, p.230.

⁵⁴ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, p. 177, p. 38.

⁵⁵ Ahmed, p.5.

⁵⁶ Ahmed, p.177.

systems. While putting it together in conversation with the earlier debates, Ahmed's works present an intersectional discussion in contemporary settings that work with the selected texts' contemporaneous representations, and offer a transnational outlook, that my thesis presents, beyond the focus on African American debates on intersectionality.

2-Black Feminism and the Theorisation of Diaspora:

Integral to this thesis's theorisation of intersectionality of race and gender is diaspora, diasporic identity, and migration. Together these interlocking factors shape the lives of Black women's experiences in the diaspora. My approach to the concept of migration and diasporic identities stems from my personal interest in these constructions as a woman and a minority migrant. Theorising diaspora provides a medium for the understanding of movements and cross-cultural interconnections across the Black Atlantic. It allows for the consideration of migratory movement responsible for the diasporic formations such as colonial histories and transoceanic passages. One of the path-breaking works in diaspora studies is Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993). Gilroy proposes the concept of the 'Black Atlantic' as an alternative to the ethno-centric models of identity:

The specificity of the modern political and cultural formation I want to call the black Atlantic can be defined, on one level through this desire to transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity.⁵⁷

Gilroy presents his model of the Black Atlantic by focusing on 'black expressive culture' such as music and literature, to maintain that the Black diaspora is marked by the culture of the

⁵⁷ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (New York: Verso, 1993), p.19.

Black Atlantic that includes the African, American, Caribbean, and British cultures that cross the boundaries of nationality to shape 'double consciousness.'⁵⁸ Gilroy presents the concept of 'double consciousness' which he borrows from W.E.B. Du Bois to argue that being 'both European and black requires some specific forms of double consciousness.'⁵⁹ These identities which are made to 'appear to be mutually exclusive' by 'racist, nationalist, or ethnically absolutist discourse' need what he suggests 'a provocative act and even oppositional act' of 'occupying the space between them.'⁶⁰ Bringing attention to diaspora consciousness that troubles and is troubled by 'the nation state' allows for alternate spaces for subject formation.⁶¹ This particular view renders Gilroy's concept as relevant to frame and unite Black literature of the diaspora arising from different diaspora locations, thus creating transnational links.⁶²

One of the major aspects that this thesis investigates, is the way Black women writers of the diaspora draw on the legacies of slavery to address contemporaneous issues specifically racism with an emphasis on gender. In his 1990 article 'Identity, Meaning, and The African-American,' Michael Hanchard argues that:

[...] for if the notion of an African diaspora is anything it is a human necklace strung together by a thread known as the slave trade, a thread

⁵⁸ Gilroy, p.120, p.1.

⁵⁹ Gilroy, p.1.

⁶⁰ Gilroy, p.1.

⁶¹ Gilroy, p.7.

⁶² To present his idea of Blackness as hybrid identity existing between spaces, Gilroy uses the imagery of the chronotope of the ship as his framework. This oceanic framework of the Atlantic is further discussed in chapter one.

which made its way across a path of America with little regard for national boundaries.⁶³

Hanchard's theory of the Black diaspora positions the Black diasporic displacement in a direct link to slavery and eliminates geographical boundaries. Different from Hanchard who disregards geographical particularity, Gilroy formulates his model with a specific geographical location with understanding the Atlantic as a route of travel and traveling cultures. A central element in Gilroy's discussion of the Black Atlantic and its diaspora is slavery. In his 'concern with the Atlantic' Gilroy perceives slavery 'as a cultural and political system [which] has been forced on black historiography and intellectual history by the economic and historical matrix in which plantation slavery [...] was one special moment.'⁶⁴ Gilroy critiques 'the dialectic of Enlightenment which has not always been concerned to look at modernity through the lenses of colonialism and scientific racism.'⁶⁵ The 'Eurocentric rationalism' Gilroy further argues 'banishes the slave experience from its accounts of modernity while arguing that the crises of modernity can be resolved from within.'⁶⁶ Thus, since he perceives this 'terror of slavery' as the heart of the transatlantic Black identities as well as how the modern world conceives Blackness, for Gilroy this 'modernity' must be understood with taking into account the experience of Black people with slavery.⁶⁷

In his attempt 'to rethink the concept of tradition' in 'Living Memory and the Slave Sublime,' Gilroy criticises the way the African tradition 'Africentric project' views slavery.⁶⁸

⁶³ Michael Hanchard, 'Identity, Meaning, and The African- American,' in *Social Text*, 24 (Duke university, 1990), 31-42 (p.40) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/827825>> [accessed 22 January 2022].

⁶⁴ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, p.15.

⁶⁵ Gilroy, p.54.

⁶⁶ Gilroy, p.54.

⁶⁷ Gilroy, p.27.

⁶⁸ Gilroy, p.188.

Gilroy argues that in this Africentric tradition '[s]lavery is the site of black victimage and thus of tradition's intended erasure.'⁶⁹ Furthermore, he clarifies that 'the emphasis shift' of this view 'towards the elements of invariant tradition that heroically survive slavery' renders the 'desire to remember slavery' as 'something of an obstacle.'⁷⁰ Gilroy continues that within this tradition 'slavery and its location within modernity has to be actively forgotten if a clear orientation to tradition and thus to the present circumstances of blacks is to be acquired.'⁷¹ Thus, he warns against the 'danger that, apart from the archaeology of traditional survivals, slavery becomes a cluster of a negative associations that are best left behind.'⁷² In addition, he maintains that rather than focusing on the plantations and sugar mills the African tradition urges Black people:

[I]f not to forget the slave experience which appears as an aberration from the story of greatness told in African history, then to replace it at the centre of our thinking with a mystical and ruthlessly positive notion of Africa that is indifferent to intraracial variation and is frozen at the point where blacks boarded the ships that would carry them into the woes and horrors of the middle passage.⁷³

Therefore, Gilroy's view is that this African approach fails to see that slavery is the root of the Black diaspora and the Black transatlantic identity. Gilroy's call to view slavery as the core of the diaspora and Black people's movement which creates transnational networks and cultural exchanges, is essential to my readings of the works.

⁶⁹ Gilroy, p.189.

⁷⁰ Gilroy, p.189.

⁷¹ Gilroy, p.189.

⁷² Gilroy, p.189.

⁷³ Gilroy, p.189.

It is from such specific positionings that I am approaching Black diasporic literature by arguing that it shares slavery as the mode of displacement which creates borderless connections among the people of the Black diaspora transnationally. In addressing this, I do not intend to provide an in-depth study of slavery or its representations in the history of Black women's writing, my focus is on its different presences in the contemporary works of the selected writers. I also would like to clarify that it is not my intention in any ways to homogenise all Black women writers' backgrounds, instead I maintain that the legacy of slavery has a shared currency in all their writings. I argue that the writers I address are aware of the history and the legacy of slavery as well as its representations in the writers of earlier generations. Therefore, using an intersectional optic, I study how they depict such legacies similarly or differently from the models presented by earlier generations of Black women specifically those of the twentieth century.

While Gilroy's model of diaspora is useful as a conceptual background to understand how literature moves transnationally and transmits Black diasporic identity, it falls short regarding the aspect of gender for which it has faced wide feminist criticism.⁷⁴ I argue that the aim of Gilroy's model cannot be accomplished without a focused gendered analysis of the Black diaspora. To achieve this goal, I rely largely on Black feminists and diaspora scholarship by women of colour.⁷⁵ Therefore, in the first chapter I offer a Black feminist criticism of Gilroy's model using Black women's diasporic models. As a contribution to such established criticism to engender Gilroy's Atlantic, I present a new Black feminist reading of his chronotope of the slave ship in juxtaposition with Christiana Sharpe's novel oceanic approach that engenders

⁷⁴A thorough discussion of feminist criticism of Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* is presented in chapter one.

⁷⁵In my earliest readings for this thesis writers such as Gay Wilentz inspired my theoretical scope within Black feminism as an acknowledgment of their work. See Gay Wilentz, *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992).

the ship and the Middle Passage to read the literary representations of these histories in poetic texts. The thesis engages with the following engendering discussions that contribute to creating an inclusive model of the Black Atlantic as a transnational space that is continuously evolving. Few months after Gilroy's work, with less critical reception, the Caribbean-American scholar Carole Boyce Davies introduced a model that discusses the same issues as that of Gilroy's, yet with a more nuanced outlook on the role of gender in the negotiation of identity in the diaspora and the diasporic literature in *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (1994). Davies's effort to engender the Black Atlantic in her model is to protect the Black women's intellectual productions from what Joy James calls 'flowed historiography' by male theorists of the Black diaspora and to expand cultural knowledge about Black women's experiences of the Black Atlantic.⁷⁶

Davies's work that results from her own 'experience of navigating a range of communities' centres migration in the formation of diaspora: '[m]igration and fluidity of movement which it suggests or displacement and uprootedness which is often its result, is intrinsic to New World experience, fundamental to the meaning of the (African) diaspora.'⁷⁷ For the main thesis of her model, Davies proposes the concept of 'migratory subjectivity' that focuses on movement to approach Black women's writing transnationally throughout the U.S and the African diaspora:

If we see Black women's subjectivity as a migratory subjectivity existing
in multiple locations, then we can see how their work, their presences

⁷⁶ Joy James, *Transcending the Talented Tenth: Black Leaders and American Intellectuals* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p.57.

⁷⁷ Carole Boyce Davies, *Caribbean Spaces: Escapes from Twilight Zones* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), p.61
Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity, Migrations of the Subject* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p.128.

traverse all of the geographical/ national boundaries instituted to keep our dislocations in place. This ability to locate in a variety of geographical and literary constituencies is peculiar to the migration that is fundamental to African experience as it is specific to the human experience as a whole. It is with this consciousness of expansiveness and dialogics of movement and community that I peruse Black women's writing.⁷⁸

Maintaining that migration is a central aspect of the human experience instead of national affiliation, Davies reads Black women's writing 'as a series of boundary crossings and not as a fixed, geographical, ethnically or nationally bound category of writing.'⁷⁹ Thus, Davies encourages for a 'cross-cultural or comparative approach' in studying Black women writers 'as an important way of advancing our understandings' of their writing.⁸⁰ For Davies, Black women's identities as migratory subjects are not fixed like their writing that crosses boundaries. At the same time, Davies sees that for Black women writers the diasporic space is 'a desired location out of which they can create' as disconnection from home allows them to critically perceive it in their writing.⁸¹

Davies's approach 'promotes a way of assuming the subject's agency,' which in this case the subject is the Black woman, a migratory subject that refuses 'to be subjugated.'⁸² The Black female migratory subject that can be conceived 'in terms of slipperiness [and] elsewhere-ness' instead of in terms of 'domination, subordination "subalternization,"' indeed

⁷⁸ Davies, *Black Women*, p.4.

⁷⁹ Davies, p.4.

⁸⁰ Davies, p.33.

⁸¹ Davies, p.114. Davies' discussion of home and Black women's writing is mainly visited in the second chapter.

⁸² Davies, p.36.

‘asserts agency as it crosses the borders, journeys, migrates and so re-claims as it re-asserts.’⁸³

In other words, Davies suggests that for the Black woman the existence in the diaspora permits for the act of reclaiming her denied agency as she is able to assert a new identity away from subordination and subjugation. In addressing the overlap of race and gender, Davies writes:

If following Judith Butler, the category of women is one of performance of gender, then the category Black woman, or a woman of color, exists as multiple performances of gender and race and sexuality based on the particular cultural, historical, geographical, class communities in which Black women exist.⁸⁴

The Black woman for Davies is located within a performance that is multi-layered with race and gender as well as culture. What I find particularly relevant is that her ‘Black feminist approach is a cutting across geographic boundaries in order to present a much more trans-cultural/trans-local awareness of Black women’s writing communities.’⁸⁵ It allows for a gendered understanding of the contemporary Black women’s writing of the African diaspora across different geographies. In my thesis I build on and push forward Davies’s theorisation by putting it in conversations with new diasporic discussions to apply it to contemporary settings with texts exploring contemporary Black women’s experiences of the diaspora to explore new models of migratory subjectivity in these Black women’s texts. To achieve this, I will be joining her framework with the discussions of other Black feminists including Patricia

⁸³ Davies, pp.36-37.

⁸⁴ Davies, *Black Women*, p.8.

⁸⁵ Davies, p.128.

Hill Collins, bell hooks, and recent scholarship by Black theorists such as Christina Sharpe, to reflect current discussions.

Recent scholarly works that I engage with which follow Davies's path and borrows from the work of such African American scholars to engender the Black Atlantic, include Christina Sharpe's 2016 *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* which will be discussed in the first chapter, and Dionne Brand's *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (2011). While Sharpe's work is theoretical, Brand uses prose and poetry to offer new critical perspectives on the Black diaspora. However, both works engage with gendering the Black Atlantic that has been excluded in the early models like that of Gilroy's and extend geographical boundaries to include Canada. Literary scholarship such as Samantha Pinto's in *Difficult Diasporas and Diasporic Women's Writing of the Black Atlantic* (2014) edited by Emilia Maria Durán-Almarza and Esther Álvarez-López, build from such expansion. Both build on Davies's work and present literary analyses of Black women's writings with a focus on engendering the Black Atlantic as a response to Gilroy's masculine centred account. Pinto's work 'challenges' Black men's theorisations of diaspora 'to transform the very readings and questions' of the field with a feminist analysis.⁸⁶ Similarly, writing within the awareness of *The Black Atlantic's* impact 'on the production of knowledge in and about black communities,' the collection of essays in *Diasporic Women's Writing* position gender at the centre of the Atlantic to 'redefine narrow interpretations of Black cultures and experiences,' allowing transnational definitions of the Black Atlantic.⁸⁷ However, in their discussions on engendering the Atlantic through working with literary representations, these scholars

⁸⁶ Samantha Pinto, *Difficult Diasporas: The Transnational Feminist Aesthetic of the Black Atlantic* (New York and London, 2013), p.6.

⁸⁷ Emilia Maria Durán-Almarza, *Diasporic Women's Writing of the Black Atlantic: (En)gendering Literature and Performance*, ed. by Emilia Maria Durán-Almarza and Esther Álvarez-López, (New York: Routledge, 2014), p.1, p.3.

largely focus on the novel which my analysis departs from to focus on other forms such as poetry to argue that the Black women poets' contemporary works offer an engendered representations of these histories.

The use of postcolonial optic alongside diaspora studies helps to answer questions about diasporic identity, the concept of home, and the role of location in the writings of contemporary Black women.⁸⁸ In analysing the texts in order to present different reading practice, I apply a plethora of concepts and ideas from a variety of scholars from this field in the chapters. To maintain an interdisciplinary reading, I weave from different postcolonial and feminist postcolonial scholars who are also concerned with the issues of race, gender, nations, and the relations of power. Therefore, I rely on postcolonial feminists, transnationally, whose works pressure the field of postcolonial theory to constantly take the issue of gender into consideration. Here I draw from relevant approaches by Black women, women of colour and postcolonial feminists whose contributions are a site of resistance such as Avtar Brah, Rosemary Marangoly George and many other scholars whose works will be unfolded throughout this analysis. Yet, the body of my discussion acknowledges the work of significant male figures in postcolonialism such as Homi K. Bhabha and his frameworks on the diasporic identity and diasporic locations. I use his concepts to approach questions of home and diasporic identity as a modern condition and how Black women writers that write different locations deal with this in their fiction. However, I must stress that one of the limitations of this thesis is that it does not centre colonialism despite its imperative role in shaping Black women's diasporic experiences of certain locations.

⁸⁸ To disambiguate between the use of postcolonialism and the hyphenated term post-colonialism, I will be following postcolonial scholars in using the first to designate the field of critical study (including literature) and the second to designate the period after the era of colonialism. See Ato Quayson, *Postcolonialism: Theory, Practice or Process?* (Cambridge: Polity press, 2000), p.1.

3-Black Women and Citation:

My thesis joins the calls to Cite Black Women, initiated by Christen A. Smith in 2017, which urges for the acknowledgment of Black women's intellectual productions transnationally.⁸⁹ As a response to this I have put an effort to make this thesis as a space to acknowledge the work of as many Black women writers and intellectuals as possible including a return to the works of early Black women who influenced the development of every genre I discuss in this study. Reflecting on Black women's intellectual productions necessitates a revisit to one of the contemporary Black women literary giants, the novelist, essayist, editor, and Professor, Toni Morrison, whose legacy continues to inspire younger generations of Black women writers. Morrison's historic legacy goes beyond her majorly discussed eleven published novels through which she revolutionised the African American novel. In *Toni Morrison and Literary Tradition: The Invention of an Aesthetic*, Justine Baillie argues that throughout her career, Morrison engages 'in a project for a recovery and reconstruction of African-American history.'⁹⁰ This project continues Baillie, consists of the 'creation of a literary aesthetic' where 'she exposes hegemonic and ideological uses of language and knowledge in the construction and obfuscation of American history.'⁹¹ Thus, Morrison's role in the definition of Black aesthetic as key in the African American literary tradition must continually be deemed central. The aesthetic that Morrison presents through her writing could be situated within Baillie's argument that Morrison's 'confrontation with history' specifically that of Black versus white history in America 'necessitated the development of oppositional forms of language that

⁸⁹ For more on Cite Black Women see <<https://www.citeblackwomencollective.org/>> [accessed 15 February 2022].

⁹⁰ Justine Baillie, *Toni Morrison and Literary Tradition: The Invention of an Aesthetic* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p.1.

⁹¹ Baillie, p.1.

function to negate the damage inflicted by racially and ideologically specific language.⁹²

Morrison's work addresses the white definition of the history of Black people in America using language particular to the Black experience.

The centrality of Morrison's legacy in the Black aesthetic is also attached to the specificity of the approach Morrison takes in developing her aesthetic. As many scholars such as Linda Krumholz agree, Morrison's Black aesthetic has 'philosophical roots in black culture as well as in the perspective of the oppressed [which] make[s] it more apparent and available to black people.'⁹³ Morrison's Black aesthetic in novels such as *Tar Baby*, argues Krumholz, shows the definition of Blackness where it renders 'visible the often invisible and inescapable ideologies of race' and reveals how 'struggles over racial meanings have real consequences in the world.'⁹⁴ In studying the same novel, Yogita Goyal stresses that 'the idea of tradition is central' to Morrison's fiction where her writing underlays 'a different way of understanding [...] the importance of memory, heritage, and history of African Americans.'⁹⁵ Indeed, Morrison's work forges an aesthetic in American literature that is purely African American, a fact she urges to clarify in her 1984 essay 'Memory, Creation, and Writing.' In this essay Morrison justifies the necessity of her Black aesthetic when she is speaking on memory, arguing 'I cannot trust the literature and the sociology of other people to help me know the truth of my own cultural sources.'⁹⁶ Morrison stresses that her aim is to produce a literature that is 'irrevocably, indisputably Black' which takes 'as its creative task' and seeks 'as its credentials

⁹² Baillie, p.1.

⁹³ Linda Krumholz, 'Blackness and Art in Toni Morrison "Tar Babay" in *Contemporary Literature*, 49.2 (2008), 263-292, (p. 266), <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/27563793>> [accessed 09 November 2020].

⁹⁴ Krumholz, p.266.

⁹⁵ Yogita Goyal, 'The Gender of Diaspora in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*' in *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 52. 2, (2006), 393-414, (p.39) <<https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2006.0046>> [accessed 20 September 2022].

⁹⁶ Toni Morrison, 'Memory, Creation, and Writing' in *Thought*, 59. 235 (1984), 385- 390, (p.386) <<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/2b6a/2ccb202827767e5d8d7f11e094d37e5c6273.pdf>> [accessed 09 November 2020].

those recognized and verifiable principles of Black art.⁹⁷ Thus, demanding the need as clarifies Dana A. Williams for ‘the characterization of her work as distinctly’ African American.⁹⁸ Indeed, her emphasis on the importance of her Black roots in her writing and the nature of such aesthetic is acknowledged and celebrated in the scholarship about her work.

Part of the significance of Morrison’s legacy is the political dimension that her writing engages with in various settings. Morrison affirms that the ‘thrust’ of every work of art ‘must be political’ and that ‘the best art is political, and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time.’⁹⁹ Morrison candidly emphasises that the role of the artist is ‘to either bear witness or effect change’ and as a novelist she believes a novel ‘has to be socially responsible.’¹⁰⁰ The bulk of Morrison’s fiction bears witness to all the social concerns of the ‘community’ that is in itself political and affected by politics. One of the major issues that Morrison’s fiction addresses is the intersection of race and gender which made significant Black feminists like Collins testify that Morrison is one of the intellectuals whose works ‘foster Black women’s activism.’¹⁰¹ As Baillie maintains, Morrison used her 1970 Black female centred novel *Bluest Eye* to highlight the significance of the intersection of race and gender which was ‘absent in the literature and criticism of more vocal proponents of the Black Aesthetic’ during the Black Arts Movement era the time her novel was published.¹⁰² With her belief in the social power of novels, Morrison’s fiction

⁹⁷ Morrison, p.389.

⁹⁸ Dana A. Williams, ‘To Make a Humanist Black’ in *Toni Morrison: Memory and Meaning*, ed. by Adrienne Lanier and Justine Tally (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2015), p.5. <DOI:10.14325/mississippi/9781628460193.003.0004> [accessed 2 November 2020].

⁹⁹ Toni Morrison, ‘Rootedness: The Ancestor as a Foundation’ in *Black Women Writers (1950-1980) A Critical Evaluation*, ed. by Mari Evans (New York: Anchor Press, 1984), pp.339-345, (p.344-345).

¹⁰⁰ Morrison quoted in Jill L. Matus, *Toni Morrison* (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 1998), p.13.

¹⁰¹ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p. 3.

¹⁰² Baillie, *Toni Morrison and Literary Tradition*, p.44.

underpins all that is politically specific to the Black community in America which puts to the centre the African American narrative.

During her work as an editor for Random House, Morrison maintained the same focus to bring to the centre the marginalised productions of the Black intellectuals. As Williams argues, Morrison played as 'a bridge, and a 'conduit for this bridge' between 'the radicalism of the Black Arts Movement and the mainstreaming of the Black Aesthetic' in order to shift the Black texts from non-Black influences.¹⁰³ Thus, Williams continues, Morrison's editorship has a role in shaping the African American culture in Black printed texts in the way that she assures that 'her cultural and aesthetic sensibilities influenced the texts she chose to edit and, correspondingly, how they represented Blackness.'¹⁰⁴ Certainly, the bulk of scholarship on Morrison's major contribution to the African American and American aesthetic and literary tradition which scholars such as Conner witnesses as being indeed 'vast and impressive,' is, I maintain, beyond the limits of the current analysis.¹⁰⁵ However, the fraction of such scholarship discussed above is a brief testimony to the many ways Morrison's legacy revolutionises not only African American literature but also Black literary tradition, which continues to serve as an influence on the consecutive generations of transnational Black authors across the diaspora.

Morrison's legacy as a literary landmark in Black literature is inspiring to younger generations of contemporary Black women writers and poets transnationally. Many Black women writers including many of the writers I study testify to the influence of Morrison's influential body of works for opening the door for them to write Black lives and to write

¹⁰³ Williams, *Toni Morrison*, pp.1-2.

¹⁰⁴ Williams, p.5.

¹⁰⁵ Baillie, p. xi.

unapologetically about slavery. For example, Tracy K. Smith stresses that without Morrison's fiction Black women writers would have not had 'the vocabulary for contemplating the impact of slavery upon contemporary selfhood and nationhood, let alone for speaking publicly about it.'¹⁰⁶ The contemporary writer Yaa Gyasi acknowledges Morrison's impact on her writing admitting not realising 'there was space for people who looked like me in the world of literature until I started reading Toni Morrison' which encouraged her to write about Black people after starting her career writing on white protagonists.¹⁰⁷ Evaristo argues that in reading Morrison's works such as *Beloved* 'not only was I connecting to Black history, but also to the more unsavoury aspects of British history.'¹⁰⁸ Evaristo acknowledges 'Morrison was instrumental in my own development as a young writer and became a role model' for the way she 'interrogated cultural memory and society' through her 'craft' and uncompromisingly political writing.¹⁰⁹ These testimonies on the literary genius of Morrison are only a fraction on the substantial space she occupies in African American literature and world literature and her role in inspiring the coming generations of Black women globally to continue occupying the same space.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Tracy K. Smith in 'How We Weep for Our Beloved: Writers and Thinkers Remember Toni Morrison' (2019) *The New York Times*, < <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/06/books/remembering-toni-morrison.html> > [accessed 28 September 2022].

¹⁰⁷ Yaa Gyasi Quoted in Cathy Covell Doubling, 'Generational Doubling as Eth(n)ic Narrative Strategy: Annie Proulx's *Barkskins* and Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*,' in *Migration, Diaspora, Exile: Narratives of Affiliation and Escape*, ed. by Daniel Stein, Cathy C. Waegner, Geoffry De Laforcade, and Page R. Laws (London: Lexington Books, 2020), pp.43-58, (p.55).

¹⁰⁸ Bernardine Evaristo, 'Bernardine Evaristo on Lessons Learned from Toni Morrison' (2022), *Literary Hub*, <<https://lithub.com/bernardine-evaristo-on-lessons-learned-from-toni-morrison/> > [accessed 19 September 2022].

¹⁰⁹ Evaristo, 'Bernardine Evaristo on Lessons Learned from Toni Morrison.'

¹¹⁰ The timelessness of Morrison's fiction is not only manifested in young authors following this literary Giant, but also for the continuous scholarly interest in reading her works through innovative approaches. See Emily Zobel Marshall, 'Toni Morrison: Brer Rabitt Reclaimed,' in *American Trickster: Trauma, Tradition and Brer Rabbit*, pp.123-131, (London and New York: Rowman Littlefield International, 2019). For Recent scholarship see: Maureen E. Ruprecht Fadem, *Objects and Intertexts in Toni Morrison's Beloved: The Case for Reparations* (New York and London: Routledge, 2020). See also Nadra Nittle, *Toni Morrison's Spiritual Vision: Faith, Folktales, and Feminism in her Life and Literature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021).

4-Thesis Structure:

This thesis is divided into an introduction and four chapters followed by a conclusion to address the complex and varied representations of the intersectionality of race and gender in a diasporic context. The four chapters are organized with respect to their thematic concerns rather than chronologically or by location. This structure allows me to analyse links in Black women's writing in a geographically fluid dimension that achieves the aim of this study to be transnational. All chapters make a theoretically informed close reading of texts based on an intersectional analysis gleaned from different scholars and Black feminists. Each chapter examines a selection of works that belong to a specific genre: poetry, fiction, life writing and feminist texts with the exception of Michelle Obama's memoir that I approach as a Black feminist text. Therefore, in the chapters I briefly refer to the significance of each genre in the literary history of Black women's writing. To do so I draw heavily from the material that studies early Black women's writings such as that of Henry Louis Gates Jr. which I find myself indebted to for helping me discover unrecognized texts by Black women.

Chapter one, 'Remembering the Middle Passage Within 'The Wake' in Black Women's Poetry,' examines the poetic representations of the legacies of slavery, particularly the Middle Passage, the Atlantic Ocean, and the ship in the poetry collections of Grace Nichols's *I Have Crossed an Ocean* (2010), Aracelis Girmay's *the black maria* (2016), and Tracy K. Smith's *Wade in the Water* (2018). I focus on the imagery of water for the significant symbolism of the Atlantic Ocean in Black cultures and histories of the diaspora to explore the different meanings and employments they offer in their poems of this oceanic symbolism. I Follow Black women's model of the Black Atlantic, specifically Christina Sharpe's theory of 'wake work' that she introduces in her seminal work *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016)

where she argues that contemporary Black diaspora transnationally is living the extension of the history of slavery. Building on Sharpe's analysis of the wake, I examine the ways these poets approach contemporary anti-Blackness in relation to the historical legacies. I argue that the poets enact memory and rememory work as tools that help them invoke the elements of the Middle Passage and remember undocumented histories.

Chapter two, 'Homecomings in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*, and Elsie Augustave's *The Roving Tree*,' explores the concepts of home and return in three diasporic journeys of different Black women characters in the novels. Together these writers turn our gaze to the border crossing contexts that move beyond fixed nations and identities and transcend national boundaries. The three texts, however, present distinct diasporic trajectories where Adichie's novel offers us Nigerian migration in the age of globalisation, Gyasi presents a multigenerational historical novel that reclaims the history of slavery in Ghana and America, and Augustave's debut is a Haitian adoptee's bildungsroman navigating three locations. Within these different trajectories, the texts share the diasporic space of America and journeys of return to Africa. Therefore, I am interested in exploring the specifics of each diasporic experience and thus the character's explorations of home. The writers present Black women narratives that also focus on the subjects' diasporic identities while navigating America's racial hierarchies and legacies of slavery which I investigate to examine the influence of these oppressions on the processes of establishing home and belonging. To read these works, I build on Black women's different theorisations of diaspora that concentrates largely on Black female experiences of home and migration. This includes Carole Boyce Davies' migratory subjectivity and other Black feminists such as bell hooks, Saidiya V. Hartman, and Myriam J. A. Chancy to offer new insights to the diasporic readings of these texts.

In the third chapter 'Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Michelle Obama as *the* Popular Black Feminists,' I explore Adichie's feminist texts *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014) and *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (2017) and propose to read Obama's memoir *Becoming* (2018) as a Black feminist text to discuss how they approach the intersection of race and gender. Obama being a First Lady and Adichie a renowned feminist, I am interested in the type of feminism their texts proliferate as I investigate the positioning of Adichie and Obama as the contemporary models of Black feminism. The chapter firstly compares the feminist conversations that Adichie opens in both of her works and questions the extent to which she takes an intersectional approach in her model of feminism. In the second section I investigate how Obama writes about her own experience as a Black woman in her memoir *Becoming* where I problematise the scholar's labelling of her as a traditional Black feminist.

The final chapter 'The Practice of Life Writing as a Representation of an Intersectional Self in Black Women's Hybrid Genres' looks to the works of Black British and African American feminist writers Roxane Gay's *Bad Feminist: Essays* (2014), Morgan Jerkins *This Will Be My Undoing: Living at the Intersection of Black, Female, and Feminist in (White) America* (2018), Reni Eddo-Lodge's *Why I am No Longer Talking to White People about Race* (2017), and Yomi Adegoke and Elizabeth Uviebinené's *Slay in Your Lane: The Black Girl Bible* (2018). In this chapter I analyse these texts, which belong to different genres, as life writing to argue that these writers adopt this autobiographical form to express their personal experiences with the intersections of race and gender to problematise Sidonie Smith's 'autobiographical performativity' which argues that autobiographical writing is a performance. I examine the practice of life writing that these writers use to write about their experiences with the intersections of race and gender by focusing on the aspect of the 'I' as a tool towards the

performance of selfhood. I will also examine the extent to which these writers' interrogations of the intersections of race and gender take a similar or different approach from that of the earlier generations of Black feminists.

CHAPTER ONE

REMEMBERING THE MIDDLE PASSAGE WITHIN 'THE WAKE' IN BLACK WOMEN'S POETRY

Introduction:

This chapter takes an intersectional Black feminist approach to the reading of Grace Nichols's 2010 *I Have Crossed an Ocean*, Aracelis Girmay's *the black maria* (2016), and Tracy K. Smith's *Wade in the Water* (2018). The analysis moves away from the traditional form of the novel to compare and juxtapose poetic texts representing the histories of slavery, the intersections of race and gender, and Black identities that have not been studied together in the scholarship on contemporary Black women's writing. By comparing the work of a Black British poet to those of younger African American poets, I present an intergenerational and transnational discussion to highlight the different representations of these histories in different sides of the Atlantic and how each work addresses the memories of the Middle Passage. The chapter offers an original reading of these texts through building on Christina Sharpe's oceanic theoretical concept of 'the wake' that views contemporary Blackness as an extension of the histories of the Atlantic chattel slavery to read the poets' representations of the legacies of slavery particularly the Middle Passage, the Atlantic Ocean and the ship. I use Sharpe's approach, which has not been used to study Black women's contemporary poetry, innovatively both as a theory and for formal analysis by mobilising her different concepts to show how these poets together disrupt the traditional poetic forms with oral culture, language, and erasure form to allow the visibility of these histories and Black people's silenced voices. Studying these texts together will advance the understanding of the ways in which these poets borrow from each other in terms of form disruption to celebrate diasporic traditions and share the concern of writing slavery to assert and reclaim histories and memories of the past. In the analysis I read the poems differently from what other

scholarships on these texts present by focusing my reading on the imagery of water as a shared practice in these texts for the significant symbolism it has in the culture and history of the Black diaspora. By examining the oceanic elements, I show how the three poems present the image of water with different meanings in their poems. Following Sharpe's oceanic model is also a contribution to the Black feminist scholarship that urges for an engendered model of the Black Atlantic in diaspora studies. My chapter contributes to such scholarship by presenting a feminist criticism of Paul Gilroy's genderless model of the Black Atlantic and his chronotope of the ship and juxtaposes his theorisation to that of Sharpe's to argue for the necessity of a gendered approach in the Black diaspora scholarship. With this gendered approach I show how these texts present a continuation and a response to such historical calls by Black women scholars to engender such histories by their representations of Black women's silenced voices.

The main reason for reading poetic texts in the first chapter of this thesis is primarily for historical chronology, as poetry is the earliest literary form published by a Black woman in the diaspora, and as an acknowledgement for its significant role in the development of the Black literary tradition. The chapter is divided into two parts, theoretical and analytical, with each part encompassing subsequent sections of related discussions. I open this chapter with introducing the poets and their works while contextualising the timeframe of publication for each poem. The following section looks at the current debates around the origins of the Black literary form in America between Phillis Wheatley and oral songs which I present as an acknowledgment of Black women's role in the establishment of this literary tradition. The first section in the first part addresses oceanic theorisations of the Black Atlantic significantly Paul Gilroy's model. It also addresses Black feminist theorisations of the Black Atlantic and the importance of an engendered model of the Black Atlantic and lays out the discussion and

usefulness of Sharpe's analytic of 'the wake.' The following section visits memory and Toni Morrison's rememory which I argue are tools through which the poets invoke the histories of chattel slavery. The final part consists of three sections each dedicated to the discussion of the poems where I explore the representations of the legacies of the Middle Passage using the different meanings and examples of Sharpe's wake work.

Grace Nichols is a Guyanese-born poet who has been living in the UK since 1977 and has been writing poetry that reflects on her Caribbean upbringing and the transatlantic links between Britain and her Guyanese culture from the point of view of a Caribbean Black woman immigrant. Nichols's *I Have Crossed an Ocean* is a selection of poems that cover the span of 25 years of poetry writing including a range of early poems. Significant republished pieces from her early collections include the celebrated *I is a Long-Memored Woman* (1983) and *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* (1984).¹ However, firstly contextualising the period around which these poems were produced is crucial in understanding Nichols's poems. Both collections are published in the 1980s during Margaret Thatcher's era, one that, despite her political impact, as Sarah Lawson Welsh argues, witnessed 'a shift toward the more inclusive, if rather flawed, ideology of multiculturalism, and the encouragement of 'ethnic minority' arts.'² This decade in Britain witnessed political turmoil with Thatcher's divisive and controversial policies around minorities and immigrants.³ The early 1980s in Britain also saw

¹ With this collection Nichols became the first Caribbean woman poet to receive the Commonwealth Poetry Prize.

² Sarah Lawson Welsh, 'Black British Poetry' in *The Cambridge Companion to British Poetry, 1945-2010*, ed. by Edward Larrissy (New York: Cambridge University Press), pp.178-196, (p.187).

³ Such as her infamous statement about Britain being 'swamped' by immigrants, Margaret Thatcher quoted in Simone Peplow, *Race and Riots in Thatcher's Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), p.40. Such as the 1981 British Nationality Act that added more restrictions on immigration. While no ethnicity or race was named The British Nationality Act passed in 1981 put restriction on the right to abode in Britain for Black and ethnic nationals and restricted automatic citizenship to these minorities born in Britain. See Peplow p.40.

See also Davis Dixon, 'Thatcher's People: The British Nationality Act 1981,' in *Journal of Law and Society*, 10.2, (1983), 161-180. <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1410230>> [accessed 17 June 2022].

race riots carried out by Black protesters in different cities against police violence and political racial discriminations.⁴ However, later the same decade witnessed the celebration of published works by different women minority authors in Britain such as the large anthology of Black women poets *Watchers & Seekers: Creative Writing by Black Women* (1987) that included a number of Black women and other poets from various ethnic backgrounds.⁵

This decade is also marked by transformative gender and racial discourses advanced by Black feminists in both sides of the Atlantic. In the U.S the 1980s saw an African American collective cultural and literary activism carried by key Black feminist figures such as bell hooks, Angela Davis, and Toni Morrison. At the same time, in Britain there was, as Amina Mama puts it ‘an emergent Black feminist culture accompanying the increased gender awareness that has characterised black politics in Britain since the 1980.’⁶ In fact, as Mama stresses, it was during this decade that ‘the coming together of black women as a movement’ became apparent in Britain.⁷ As Heidi Safia Mirza argues that, in the 1980s Black feminists in Britain including Hazel V. Carby, Maureen Stone, and Mama, through writing of different Black

⁴ The 1981 riots started during the weekend of April the 10th in Brixton in the south of London where hundreds of protesters mainly Black youth clashed with the Metropolitan Police. Later in the summer similar riots took place in other big cities such as Manchester and Liverpool. These riots resulted in hundreds being arrested and others being injured including the police. In 1985 race riots continued as confrontations with the police took place in cities like London, Birmingham and Liverpool where the police arrested 230 protesters and reported 230 injuries and 742 crimes. Thatcher’s government responded to these riots as “‘law and order issues’” instead of being approached as racial issues. See Earl A. Reitan, *The Thatcher Revolution: Margaret Thatcher, John Major, Tony Blair, and the Transformation of Modern Britain, 1979-2001*, (Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2003), pp.107-109.

For a discussion of the 1981 riots as Black people’s response to discrimination policies in Britain See Peplow’s *Race and Riots in Thatcher’s Britain*.

For a discussion on Thatcherism and Race see Jenny Bourne, “‘May We Bring Harmony’? Thatcher’s Legacy on ‘race,’” in *Race & Class*, .55.1 (2013), 87-91. <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396813489247>> [accessed 13 June 2022].

⁵ Other collections published during that era include *News of Babylon: The Chatto Book of Westindian-British Poetry* edited by David Dabydeen in 1984 that includes the works of male and female poets of different ethnicities.

⁶ Amina Mama, *Beyond the Masks: Race, Gender and Subjectivity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p.154.

⁷ Mama, p.153.

women's concerns, 'resisted the overarching imperial mission of white feminism' and asserted their agency and challenged the stereotypes inflicted upon Black women by invoking literary and scholarly works that 'revealed the hidden world of migrant and Black British women.'⁸ It is such Black feminist cultural and political conversations that were prominent during the 1980s that Nichols's both collections are reflective of.

Nichols's first collection discusses the legacies of what she calls the 'Black Triangle,' the triangular slave route between Africa, Europe, and the Caribbean to shed light on the histories of the slave trade in the Caribbean.⁹ Using oral traditions and Afro-Caribbean folklore, Nichols presents a chronological account of the experience of an anonymous Black woman starting with her capture and enslavement, her physical abuse and trauma during slavery, to the reclamation of herself by connecting spiritually with her ancestors. Bartosz Wójcik argues that, in these early collections Nichols offers 'meditations upon ways of commemorating the Middle Passage.'¹⁰ The different poems in *I Have Crossed an Ocean* as the title evokes are linked with the imagery of water and the Atlantic Ocean. Nichols builds on the memories of the Middle Passage to write about the influence of the oceanic journeying on her cultural history as a Black Caribbean woman, on her Caribbean culture that is marked by oceanic crossings, and on her life in the diaspora between Britain and Guyana. Many of her poems, write of Britain's colonial legacy that brought enslaved Africans across the Atlantic to Guyana and the Caribbean.¹¹ The use of water in her poems includes the repetitive use of different

⁸ Heidi Safia Mirza, *Black British Feminism: A Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p.11.

For a list of Black British feminists works during the 1980s see Mirza p.11.

⁹ Nichols, *I Have Crossed an Ocean*, p.186.

¹⁰ Bartosz Wójcik, "'Here to Stay": Black British Poetry and the Post WWII United Kingdom,' in *A Companion to Contemporary British and Irish Poetry, 1960-2015*, ed. by Wolfgang Görtschacher and David Malcolm (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2021). pp.305-318, (p. 309).

¹¹ For a discussion of the early history of Guyana see David Hollett, *Passage from India to El Dorado: Guyana and the Great Migration* (London: Associated University Press, 1999).

water metaphors and direct invocation of the memories of the oceanic passages of the enslaved as well as the indentured labourers brought with British merchant ships to the Caribbean after the abolition of slavery in the Caribbean in the early 1800s. To achieve this, Nichols's poems navigate two languages, the English language and Creole, which is a significant feature in her poetry. In her 1990 essay 'Battle with Language,' Nichols stresses the importance of the confluence of English and Creole in her poetry 'I like working in both standard English and Creole. I tend to want to fuse the two tongues because I come from a background where the two worlds, Creole and English were constantly interacting.'¹² Thus, *I Have Crossed an Ocean* poems are a celebration of her Afro-Caribbean background as they present a mix of different writing styles incorporating musicality with free verse with vivid imagery influenced by the African heritage and the Caribbean myths and spirituality.

Nichols's reference of her Caribbean culture and the thematic concerns of slavery and subverting Black women's stereotypical images that dominate her poetry are the central concern of many of the critical scholarships discussing her early work. For example, Magali Cornier Michael reads *I Is a Long Memored Woman* as Nichols's attempt 'to write an alternative history of slavery' to reclaim the unvoiced experiences of enslaved Black women.¹³ More recently Pilar Sánchez Calle reads some of Nichols's poems as 'synthesizing force' between her different identities as a Caribbean Black woman living in Britain.¹⁴ While my analysis of her works remains within the same historiography that scholars tend to focus on,

¹² Grace Nichols, 'The Battle with Language,' in *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference*, ed. by Selwyn Wright R. Cudjoe. Wellesley, (Massachusetts: Calaloux, 1990), pp.283-289, (p.284).

¹³ Magali Cornier Michael, 'Telling History Other-Wise: Grace Nichols' *I Is a Long Memored Woman*,' in *Reclaiming Home, Remembering Motherhood, Rewriting History: African American and Afro-Caribbean Women's Literature in the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Verena Theile and Marie Drews (New Castle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), pp.210-232, (p. 211).

¹⁴ Pilar Sánchez Calle, 'Grace Nichols,' in *A Companion to Contemporary British and Irish Poetry, 1960-2015*, ed. By Wolfgang Görtschacher and David Malcolm (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2021). pp.561-571, (p.564),

Nichols's return to the ocean to write these histories allows me to offer a different reading by approaching her poetry within the current interest of oceanic frameworks within Black diaspora studies that insist on linking the afterlives of slavery to the oceanic journey, significantly Sharpe's 'wake work' that I discuss below. I read a selection of poems from the 2010 collection in particular as it encompasses Nichols's significant poetry that invokes water within provocative intersectional representations of the legacies of slavery that allows it to be read next to the works of the two contemporary poets from the other side of the Atlantic that I discuss in this chapter.

Aracelis Girmay is an African American poet with a Puerto Rican and Eritrean heritage whose 2016 book of poetry *the black maria* presents a contemporary take on Black migration, remembering Black death, and police violence in America.¹⁵ The collection of poems invokes the long struggle of Black people with racism by weaving the poems with the memories and tragedies of Black life and Black survivals interweaving the past and the present. The work is published during the Obama era that witnessed the rise of Black Lives Matter Movement in 2013 and many public actions against systemic racial violence. The police brutality and racial profiling against Black people that caused the death of many Black men and Black women led to a strong street action such as the Ferguson riot in 2014 carried out by Black communities across the U.S after the shooting of Michael Brown. Such racial scene also brought the call to give attention to the particular experiences of Black women against police violence that was exemplified in the launch of hashtag #SayHerName in 2014.¹⁶ In her Ted Talk in TEDWomen 2016 entitled 'The Urgency of Intersectionality' Kimberlé Crenshaw addresses the urgency to

¹⁵ Girmay is the winner of the 2015 Whitening Award for poetry.

¹⁶ According to The African American Policy Forum (AAPF) the Hashtag was launched by the (AAPF) and Center of Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies (CISPS) in 2014. The purpose of this campaign is to highlight the unrecognized stories of Black women who are victims of racial police violence. See The African American Policy Forum, #SAYHERNAME CAMPAIGN, <<https://aapf.org/sayhername>> [accessed 10 September 2020].

remember the names of Black women who are ‘implicated’ and ‘victimized’ by the violence of systemic racism.¹⁷ This act of naming and remembering I argue is present in Girmay’s work in a series of poems named ‘Estrangement’ that are a tribute to the victims of police violence.

Structured in two sections, the first collection of poems ‘elegy’ is inspired, as Girmay explains, from both an elegy, which is a poem to lament the dead, and the ‘elelelele’ from the ‘ululatory sounds’ that some people in Africa make to express joy and grief.¹⁸ The musicality and rhythm inspired from her Eritrean heritage, I will illustrate, dominate many of these poems to transmit to the reader her own joy and grief in addressing death and survival. In a connected series of poems Girmay plays with the form to remember the Eritrean colonial history and those Eritreans who died in the sea and who connect Eretria to its European and American diaspora. After the decades of colonialism many Eritreans attempted to emigrate through sea routes, however, many of these immigrants died during the sea journey.¹⁹ In poems entitled *to the sea*, the water imagery becomes prevalent and urgent for Girmay to remember and to talk to the sea. In the opening of the first set of poems Girmay explains in prose the ‘you’ she remembers ‘*unless states otherwise, the dead,*’ and lists all the seas she invokes including *the Caribbean Sea* and *the Atlantic Ocean*.²⁰ Girmay laments the bodies of water who died in the sea by interweaving memories of slave ships and the Middle Passage with contemporary Eritrean immigrants’ boats across the Mediterranean to remind readers of the continuous wounds that occur with every new body of water. In poems entitled *Luam*,

¹⁷ Kimberlé Crenshaw, TEDWomen 2016, *The Urgency of Intersectionality*, <https://www.ted.com/talks/kimberle_crenshaw_the_urgency_of_intersectionality/transcript?language=en> [accessed 10 September 2020].

¹⁸ Girmay, *the black maria*, (New York: BOA Editions, 2016), p.108.

¹⁹ Eretria became an Italian Colony in 1890 and in 1941 it became under the British Military Rule. See Mohamed Kheir Omar, *The Dynamics of an Unfinished African Dream: Eretria: Ancient History to 1968* (Lulu Publishing Services, 2020) (E-book) <<https://bit.ly/3yaQktZ>> [accessed 21 June 2022].

²⁰ Girmay, *the black maria*, p.11, p.13.

Girmay relies on different voices to tell the stories of four Black women in Eretria and beyond the seas.

Girmay opens the second section by explaining the inspiration behind *the black maria* as a title of this section and the entire book. Girmay writes that Maria is the plural of the word sea in Italian which refers to the ‘flat dark areas [...] on the surface of the moon.’²¹ Girmay continues that Italian ‘astronomers thought the lunar features were seas when they first saw them through telescopes. These dark basins were referred to as “black maria.” basins and craters misidentified as seas.’²² In her interview with Claire Schwartz, Girmay stresses that this mistake is what led her to think of Black ‘misidentification.’²³ Maintaining the same grief of ‘elegy,’ the poems in ‘the black maria’ focus on the memory of contemporary racism such as the story of Neil deGrasse Tyson, and police violence victims such as Ranisha McBird and Jonathan Ferrell. Girmay presents the poems as numbered ‘estrangements,’ where she names the estranged while presenting water or ‘the maria’ as a link to their misidentification. With invoking the Middle Passage and its histories and contemporary violence against the Black diaspora in a book based on water and memories, *the black maria* presents a case in point to my study of Black women’s poetic representations of Black lives in relation to the Middle Passage.

The twice American Poet Laureate Tracy K. Smith’s collection *Wade in the Water* echoes similar aspects that the previous poets invoke in their works including the history of slavery,

²¹ Girmay, p.71.

²² Girmay, p. 13.

²³ Girmay in conversation with Claire Schwartz, *Benington Review*, <<http://www.beningtonreview.org/girmay-interview>> [accessed 30 May 2020].

racism, and immigration.²⁴ The poems cover America's past and present including poems about the US Civil War and contemporary violence against Black people using free verse and erasure poetry where she takes an existing text and erases proportions from it to create a new and different text. The collection was published during Donald Trump's administration that witnessed intense anti-Black sentiment and hate speech that in turn caused for the rise of Black Lives Matter activism. As Barbara Ransby holds, Trump's administration 'challenged and impacted the movement in unexpected ways, catapulting it into a new phase of activity focused on board-based united front and coalition work.'²⁵ Smith reflects the scene of the movement's activism in many of her poems such as 'Unrest in Baton Rouge' inspired from the Baton Rouge protest in 2016.

From its title, *Wade in the Water* suggests water imagery and the history of slavery. In an interview with Eleanor Wright, Smith explains the inspiration behind the title and the poem under the same name that is dedicated to '*the Geechee Gullah Ring Shouters*':

While working on the book, I had the experience of attending a ring shout and feeling so deeply moved and shaken by the performance of "Wade in the Water." After that evening, I suspected that "Wade in the Water" was going to be the title of my book.²⁶

²⁴ U.S Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry is appointed by the Library of Congress, which is the official research library that serves the Congress of The United States. The Poet Laureate is named by the Librarian of Congress to draw attention to the importance of writing and reading poetry. See: Library of Congress website <<https://www.loc.gov/about/awards-and-honors/>>[accessed 2 June 2020].

Smith is the receiver of the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for her work *Life on Mars*.

²⁵ Barbara Ransby, *Making All Black Lives Matter: Reimagining Freedom in the Twenty First Century* (California: University of California Press, 2018), p.9.

²⁶ Smith's Interview with Eleanor Wright (2018), *Washington Square Review*, <<https://www.washingtonsquarereview.com/blog/2018/4/3/interview-excerpt-with-tracy-k-smith>> [accessed 2 June 2020].

According to the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission, the Geechee Gullah come from an African enslaved ancestry who came from the West African regent and were isolated on cotton and Indigo plantations on the lower Atlantic coast.²⁷ Due to their isolated enslavement, they created their own culture which was rooted on African traditions and the 'ring shout' is one of the features of their unique culture.²⁸ As Sterling Stuckey writes, the ring shout is a 'counterclockwise dance ceremony' performed by the enslaved in which 'the dancing and the singing were directed to the ancestors and gods.'²⁹ Goerge Worlasi Kwasi Dor argues, the Gullah Geechee Ring Shouter groups are devoted to symbolising 'the living repository and perpetuators' of their ancestry's religious culture.³⁰ Invoking the ring shouts exemplifies Smith's celebration of the African tradition and the slave spirituals in her collection.

In the erasure poems, Smith invokes another moment in Black history by reviving the memory and the voices of the enslaved who died in America's Civil War during the 1860s. In an interview with Ezra Klein, Smith declares that while reading the American Declaration of Independence document that she uses to create a poem called 'Declaration,' she listened for 'another line of reasoning beneath the surface voice of that text. It started out as a wilful act: if I deleted these words, then my sentence veers in this other direction.'³¹ The result of this

²⁷ Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission, <<https://gullahgeecheecorridor.org/thegullahgeechee/> > [accessed 26 August 2020].

²⁸ Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission.

²⁹ Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.11.

For more on the Gullah Geechee tradition see Amy Lotson Robert and Patrick J. Holladay, *Gullah Geechee Heritage in the Golden Isles*, (Charleston: History Press, 2019).

<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=wGijDwAAQBAJ&pg=PT7&source=kp_read_button&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false> [accessed 27 August 2020].

³⁰ George Worlasi Kwasi Dor, *West African Drumming and Dance in North American Universities: An Ethnomusicological Perspective* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), p.18.

³¹ Smith, Ezra Klein 'Pulitzer Prize-Winning Poet Tracy K. Smith on the Purpose and the Power of Poetry' (2020) *Vox*, <<https://www.vox.com/podcasts/2020/2/27/21154139/tracy-k-smith-poet-laureate-the-ezra-klein-show-wade-in-the-water>> [accessed 18 December 2020].

rereading as Smith continues ‘was a story about the nature of black life in this country from the very beginning.’³² In an interview with Jill Owens, Smith comments on her use of these post-war dispositions ‘the more I read, the more I realized there is nothing I needed to add’ because ‘curating a chorus of these voices [...] seemed so urgent.’³³ The urgency of these voices Smith continues comes from their relevance to the contemporary lives of Black people in America:

I imagined my Civil War poem would be a one-time exploration of its time period, but when I came back few years later to writing poetry, the concerns I found myself wrestling with were rooted in similar questions of history, race, compassion, and justice.³⁴

It is Smith’s response to this urgency and the links between the past and the present of Black lives by featuring slave tradition and water imagery that makes *Wade in the Water* an important text to approach in the study of the poetic representations of contemporary Blackness as the wake of the Middle Passage.

Reading Nichols, Girmay and Smith’s works comparatively allows me to explore the different ways the Middle Passage and the legacies of slavery are invoked to approach contemporary Blackness. Though the selected works respond to different political moments, they can be studied side by side as they exemplify writing about shared themes of slavery, colonisation, migration, and racism while returning to the Middle Passage and the oceanic journeying. By placing a British poet with two American poets I am aware that I am looking at

³² Klein ‘Pulitzer Prize-Winning Poet Tracy K. Smith on the Purpose and the Power of Poetry.’

³³ Smith in conversation with Jill Owens, Powell’s Interview ; Tracy K Smith, Author of ‘Wade in the Water’ (2018), *PowellsBook.Blog* <<https://www.powells.com/post/interviews/powells-interview-tracy-k-smith-author-of-wade-in-the-water>> [accessed 21 May 2020].

³⁴ Smith in conversation with Jill Owens.

bodies of works coming from different cultures. The African American poetic tradition as I argue below traces its origins to oral tradition of slave songs while as a Caribbean-British poet Nichols is influenced by her ancestral tradition and colonial past.³⁵ It is not my intention to present the Black British diasporic experience as similar to that of the African American. Yet, to fulfil the aim of this thesis to be transnational I am offering a discussion between these texts that are not often studied together in current scholarship about Black women's poetic representations of the legacies of the Middle Passage. To study their works, I rely on Black diaspora scholarship that builds its theories on the Atlantic Ocean. However, I will first address discussions around the Black poetic tradition of the diaspora originating with oral tradition brought by enslaved Africans across the Atlantic. I will use the experience of African American literary tradition as it consists of the first ever published Black woman poet.

1-A Contested Genre: Black Poetic Literary Tradition Between Phillis Wheatley and Oral Songs:

Discussing the origins of Black poetry remains a complicated task, therefore, I will briefly attempt to illustrate the complex history of this tradition and how it is marked by violence. Within a genre that is deemed matriarchal, I am also highlighting the historical judgments put on Black women's literary productions. Almost a century before the first-ever published autobiographical novel by a Black woman, which is Harriet Wilson's 1859 *Our Nig: Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*, the former enslaved woman Phillis Wheatley's book of poetry *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral by Phillis Wheatley, Negro Servant to Mr John*

³⁵ As Jane Dawson and Alice Entwistle argue, Grace Nichols is one of the Caribbean poets who 'deliberately position themselves in a poetic tradition which can be retraced to Una Marson.' This Jamaican poet who is 'sometimes called the first Caribbean woman poet' has collections of poetry that discuss significant issues for Black women such as race and gender which Nichols's poem manifest as I will further illustrate. See *Jane Dawson and Alice Entwistle, A History of Twentieth-Century British Women's Poetry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.205.

Wheatley of Boston, in New England was published in London in 1773. In *Six Women Slave Narratives*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. stresses that '[t]he birth of the Afro-American literary tradition occurred in 1773, when Phillis Wheatley published a book of poetry.'³⁶ Gates continues that Wheatley's poems that 'gave birth to the genre of black poetry,' announced the launch of 'two traditions' simultaneously, 'the black American literary tradition and the black woman's literary tradition.'³⁷ *Phillis Wheatley: A Biography of a Genius in Bondage* by Vincent Carretta, also reiterates Wheatley's role as 'the founding mother of African American Literature.'³⁸ The significance of Wheatley's poetry as Gates argues, lies in the fact that 'all subsequent black writers have evolved in a matrilineal line of descent.'³⁹ Such a fact, Gates stresses, 'seems to have escaped most scholars' which renders the works of Black women such as Wheatley and Wilson as 'lost or unrecognized' despite their role as the founders of the tradition.⁴⁰

However, other scholars urge that tracing the origins of this genre should start earlier than Wheatley. Prior to what is commonly known as the first published poetry collection, an enslaved woman under the name of Lucy Terry composed a poem entitled 'Bars Fight' in 1746 which was preserved orally until its publication in 1895.⁴¹ In *Black Sister: Poetry by Black American Women, 1746-1980*, Erlene Stetson declares that 'the history of black women's poetry in the United States began' with Terry's poem that was published 'long before' the

³⁶ Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Six Women Slave Narratives*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates Jr., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p.vii.

³⁷ Gates, p.xi, x.

³⁸ Vincent Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: A Biography of a Genius in Bondage* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2011), p.1.

³⁹ Gates, *Six Women Slave Narratives*, p. x.

⁴⁰ Gates, p. xi.

⁴¹ For a short biography, the full text of her poem and for information on where it was first published see *Black Sister: Poetry by Black American Women, 1746-1980*, ed. by Erlene Stetson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), p.3, p.12.

work of Wheatley.⁴² In *A History of African American Poetry*, which addresses the tension around the origins of this tradition vigorously, Lauri Ramey returns to what predates the publication of Wheatley's work, 'slave songs,' as the foundation and 'earliest largest canon' of the African American poetic tradition.⁴³ Ramey considers 'the African American poetic tradition to have started with the slave songs forged from African survivals, synthesised with the trauma of the Middle Passage, and radically impacted by the experience of enslavement in American plantation culture.'⁴⁴ As Ramey argues, these 'founding documents' of the African American poetic tradition encompass 'religious songs or "spirituals," "folk seculars," and "field songs" created and chanted by unknown enslaved people to convey their stories under bondage.'⁴⁵ One of the famous slave songs that express the suffering and the loss that the enslaved experienced due to slavery is 'Sometimes I feel Like a Motherless Child' or 'Motherless Child': 'Sometimes I feel like a motherless child / Sometimes I feel like a motherless child/ Sometimes I feel like a motherless child / A long way from home.'⁴⁶ These slave songs are not only religious songs but as Ramey stresses 'convey protest, resistance, anger, impatience, social and political critique, sexuality and social interaction,' however, due to the nature of such songs they have been intentionally absented from the known collections of slave songs.⁴⁷

Wheatley, who remains widely accredited for this tradition as the first Black woman to ever publish poetic work and to be acknowledged for it, has been widely criticised by white

⁴² Stetson, p.3.

⁴³ Laurie Ramey, *A History of African American Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p.61.

⁴⁴ Ramey, p.4.

⁴⁵ Ramey, p.12.

⁴⁶ This slave song appears in different resources with different versions. It has been composed performed and recorded widely. I use it as it appears in Ramey's *A History*, p.65. This song is later composed by Harry Burleigh which illustrates the rhythmic pattern of the song.

⁴⁷ Ramey, *A History*, p.14.

thinkers. This has created a dilemma among scholars on which tradition should be regarded as the originator, especially that Wheatley's work has been deemed unauthentic and too 'western.' As Ramey agrees Wheatley's 'ability to work within English poetry's conventions has generated negative comparisons.'⁴⁸ Abducted at a young age and enslaved by a white family, Wheatley found interest in reading western literary giants, this includes as Honorée Fanonne Jeffers mentions in her poetic work *The Age of Phillis*, the works of 'Homer and Terence.'⁴⁹ Despite her talent, Wheatley was criticised by male Enlightenment scholars as Gates notes in *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley (2010)*, such as Thomas Jefferson who claimed her work to be 'below the dignity of criticism.'⁵⁰ For a BBC Sunday Feature Podcast *Dear Phillis*, Gates stresses that this young poet 'was one of the first victims of anti-Black in the Enlightenment republic of letters' as Black people were not considered to be 'intellectually equal' to white people.⁵¹

During the sixties, Wheatley's poem 'On Being Brought from Africa to America' received strong criticism. As Gates argues, the Black Arts Movement poet Amiri Baraka claimed Wheatley's "'pleasant imitations of eighteenth-century English poetry are far and, finally, ludicrous departures from the huge black voices.'"⁵² However, as Black women scholars such as Jeffers believe, Wheatley's poem should be read within the context of being 'torn from her parents in Africa, and her trauma on board a slave ship.'⁵³ In this particular poem, Wheatley writes 'Twas mercy brought me from my *pagan* land, / Taught my benighted soul to

⁴⁸ Ramey, p.5-6.

⁴⁹ Honorée Fanonne Jeffers, *The Age of Phillis* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2020), p.167.

⁵⁰ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley: America's First Black Poet and Her Encounters with the Founding Fathers*, (New York: Persues Book Group, 2003), p. 25. In this work Gates lists the early criticism that Phillis' work has received.

⁵¹ 'Dear Phillis', *Sunday Feature*, BBC Radio 3, 3 October 2021, Podcast, <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m001078w> > [accessed 5 October 2021].

⁵² Gates, *The Trials*, p.47.

⁵³ Jeffers, *The Age of Phillis*, p. 171.

understand / That there's a God, that there is a *Saviour* too: / Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.⁵⁴ Despite Wheatley's apparent focus on Christianity 'mercy' that is received by disdain, Jeffers considers that this is Wheatley's 'angriest poem' in the way that she 'uses white people's language against them to claim her own humanity.'⁵⁵ In 'To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth' Wheatley describes what could be read as her own kidnap and traumatic experience of the Middle Passage: 'I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate / Was snatched from Africa's fancy'd happy seat: / What pangs excruciating must molest, /What sorrow labour in my parent's breast?'⁵⁶ As an abducted young child, her poetry bears witness to the horrors that are integral to the African American history and culture. Jeffers reminds us that with her poems, Wheatley as an African woman 'carried the weight for black people(s) on this side of the Atlantic.'⁵⁷ As Jeffers also maintains, 'there are a lot of tears [and] water' in Wheatley's works resulting from the traumatic experience of separation from her family in Africa.⁵⁸ Indeed, what Wheatley speaks to and speaks from is occupied by the water of both mourning the disconnection from her roots, and the oceanic journey of the Middle Passage.

I would like to conclude this brief discussion by agreeing with Ramey's argument on the need to consider slave songs and Wheatley as equally foundational. Ramey argues that proposing the African American poetic tradition as starting exclusively with 18th century texts that are 'imitative of contemporaneous British exemplars,' means denying 'the African values,

⁵⁴ I use Wheatley's poem as it appears in: Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (Cosimo Classics: New York, 2005), p.13.

The collection of poems *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* was originally published by AMS press in 1773.

⁵⁵ 'Dear Phillis', *Sunday Feature*, BBC Radio 3.

⁵⁶ Phillis poem quoted in Jeffers, p.176.

⁵⁷ Jeffers, *The Age of Phillis*, p.185.

⁵⁸ 'Dear Phillis', *Sunday Feature*, BBC Radio 3.

practices, traditions, and memories that are the birth right of African Americans.⁵⁹ By presenting figures like Wheatley as the 'sole originators of this tradition' renders other traditions like the slave songs which also have 'equal claim to be foundational to the canon,' as marginalised.⁶⁰ Extending the canon to what predates Wheatley opens the space for recovering the canon for those who are overlooked, especially that both traditions are equally marked by violence and misrecognition. While its roots remain contested and complex, the poetic tradition of the African diasporic literary scene is constantly regenerated.

2- The Atlantic Ocean in Diasporic Theorisations:

While Paul Gilroy's model of the 'Black Atlantic,' especially the chronotope of the ship as I discuss below, offers a basis for my engagement with the contemporary poetic representations of Blackness in relation to the Atlantic Ocean, I will focus on engaging with Black women's oceanic conceptualisations for the reason that his Black Atlantic model disregards the role of gender. Therefore, I build on Christina Sharpe's ground-breaking model in her seminal *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), for the way it's 'wake' work reanimates the legacy of the ocean by approaching Blackness as afterlives of slavery and the Middle Passage by building on Black feminists' models of the Black Atlantic. Though Sharpe never returns to Gilroy's model, both of their works share a common trope, as I illustrate below, of the Atlantic Passage being the point of departure for the construction of Blackness in the diaspora. With these frameworks combined, this chapter presents oceanic theorisations as an emerging framework that remains relatively under-considered in the scholarship on Black women's poetry of the diaspora. Prior to the analysis I will first introduce

⁵⁹ Ramey, p.65.

⁶⁰ Ramey, p.62.

my frameworks and engage with key Black feminist discussions on the importance of a gendered model of the Black Atlantic.

To present his model of the Black Atlantic focusing on 'black expressive culture,' Gilroy maintains that the Black diaspora is marked by the culture of the Black Atlantic that includes the African, American, Caribbean, and British cultures that cross the boundaries of nationality to shape 'double consciousness.'⁶¹ To focus on Blackness as hybrid identity existing between spaces, Gilroy refers to the imagery of the chronotope of the ship as his framework.⁶² Gilroy uses the chronotope of the slave ship, 'in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean' to denote the slave ship 'as a central organising symbol' of the diasporic condition and the 'starting point' of understanding the contemporary existence of the Black Atlantic.⁶³ Gilroy holds, this 'living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion' is significant since:

Ships immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artefacts.'⁶⁴

⁶¹ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, p.120.

Gilroy presents the concept of 'double consciousness' which he borrows from W.E.B. Du Bois to argue that being 'both European and black requires some specific forms of double consciousness.' These identities which are made to 'appear to be mutually exclusive' by 'racist, nationalist, or ethnically absolutist discourse' need what he suggests 'a provocative act and even oppositional act' of 'occupying the space between them.' p.1.

⁶² Gilroy employs Mikhail Bakhtin's concept 'chronotope' which he presents in *The Dialogic of Imagination* in an essay entitled 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel.' Bakhtin defines the chronotope which refers to 'time and space,' as 'the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature.' For Bakhtin, the chronotope's main focus is that time and space are closely connected, or what he terms 'the inseparability of space and time.' See Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays, 1895-1975*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Carly Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p.84.

⁶³ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, p.4.

⁶⁴ Gilroy, p.4.

The ship which consolidates his construction of the idea of hybridity and Black modernity, establishes both the passage of people and ideas across the Black Atlantic. Gilroy takes the ship as a marker of movement between continents and as a link between the cultural roads of the homeland and the host country. He maintains that ships 'were the living means by which the points within that Atlantic world were joined.'⁶⁵ The ship's crossing borders offers cultural and political transnationalism for the Black diaspora and its motion demonstrates movement between cultural and political locations. While this chapter is indebted to Gilroy's framework on the slave ship as the starting point of the Black diaspora, it turns to Black women's gendered approach to Blackness that is absent in Gilroy's work.

Despite being widely accredited in Black diaspora studies, Gilroy's model of the Black Atlantic and the chronotope of the ship are marked by silence on gender which generated scholarly and Black feminist criticism.⁶⁶ What problematises Gilroy's exclusion of gender is neglecting Black women who crossed the Atlantic and who were 'the bearers' of cultural knowledge as Angelyn Mitchell puts it, and whose bodies became the site that reproduces Blackness.⁶⁷ Samantha Pinto who acknowledges Gilroy's 'transnational turn that complicated definitions of blackness,' in *Difficult Diasporas: The Transnational Feminist Aesthetic of the Black Atlantic* (2013), refers to the 'near silence on women's writing and cultural expressions' in his theorisation.⁶⁸ Despite being published within the wake of Black feminist thought with texts such as those of Carole Boyce Davies and Patricia Hill Collins,

⁶⁵ Gilroy, p.16.

⁶⁶ For an overview of the main responses and criticism on Gilroy's work see Lucy Evans, 'The Black Atlantic: Exploring Gilroy's Legacy' in *Atlantic Studies*, 6. 5, (2009),255-268, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14788810902981308>> [accessed 17 November 2020].

⁶⁷ Angelyn Mitchell, *The Freedom to Remember, Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), p.24. I will discuss this idea of Black reproduction below with Sharpe.

⁶⁸ Samantha Pinto, *Difficult Diasporas: The Transnational Feminist Aesthetic of the Black Atlantic* (New York: New York University, 2013), p.6.

Pinto argues his work 'left out women altogether in its focus on the ship as chronotope— a sexless, ineffable Middle Passage on one route and the possibilities of free black masculine labour on the other.'⁶⁹ Earlier than Pinto, in her 1998 'Gendering the Oceanic Voyage,' Elizabeth DeLoughrey maintains that Gilroy's work does not consider 'how gender and class inform and define transoceanic travel.'⁷⁰ Thus, she urges to question the extent to which 'Gilroy's masculinist black Atlantic obscures the impact experienced by women who are left behind, thereby uncritically validating male transience.'⁷¹ DeLoughrey further argues that in Gilroy's model 'gender privilege is unmarked' for the reason that the experiences of the women related to the Black thinkers and writers whom Gilroy bases his theory on, are 'completely erased.'⁷² Black feminist scholars contend Gilroy's disregard of the intersectional parameters in Black women's experiences with diaspora.

Michelle M. Wright points out in *Becoming Black* (2004), the 'limits' in Gilroy's work that is based on 'masculine norms' arguing that 'the category of race can never be fully divorced from the related categories of gender and sexuality.'⁷³ Earlier than Wright, Joy James argues that Gilroy's discussion about Black identity 'renders black women invisible.'⁷⁴ James further warns against 'deleting' Black women's intellectual contributions from 'the African American political thought and radicalism' which is 'a fairly common practice that produces a flawed historiography and political analysis.'⁷⁵ James locates Gilroy's work as an example

⁶⁹ Pinto, p.6.

⁷⁰ Elizabeth DeLoughrey, 'Gendering the Oceanic Voyage: Trespassing the (Black) Atlantic and Carribean,' in *Thamyris*, 5.2 (1998), 205-231, (p.206) <<https://english.ucla.edu/documents/ThamyrisArticleBIAtlantic.pdf>> [accessed 25/11/2020].

⁷¹ DeLoughrey, p. 206.

⁷² DeLoughrey, p.217.

⁷³ Michelle M. Wright, *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), p.6.

⁷⁴ Joy James, *Transcending the Talented Tenth: Black Leaders and American Intellectuals* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p.57.

⁷⁵ James, p.57

of such practice, by strongly arguing that his *Black Atlantic* 'fails to discuss the prominent African-American women activists- intellectuals who also crossed the Atlantic.'⁷⁶ Thus, this patriarchal myopia that defines Gilroy's work disregards the intellectual crossing of African American women as well as the intellectualism of other Black women across the Atlantic and the women who made the literal crossing of the Passage.⁷⁷

Following Gilroy's gender myopic approach, many Black feminists' works such as that of Carole Boyce Davies, became a transformative power in extending the consideration of the Black Atlantic through the lens of gender and Black women's literary works such as that of Toni Morrison. In *Black Women*, Davies's engagement in the 'reworking' of Black women's writing in the theorisation of the Black Atlantic 'redefines [Black] identity away from exclusion and marginality' that marks Black women's 'writing' and 'existence' in the masculine Black Atlantic's cultural discourses.⁷⁸ The push towards refuting masculinity as the definition of the collective Black identity allowed for the expansion of Black feminist criticism on the Black Atlantic which since then has become a significant part in the cultural and literary criticism in the African diaspora studies.

Black women's accounts of their journeys across the Atlantic are undocumented which contributes to the ungendering of the Passage. As Sadiya Hartman holds in 'Venus in Two Acts' (2008), the archive of 'African narratives of captivity and enslavement' silences Black women as there is 'not one extant autobiographical narrative of a female captive who survived the Middle Passage.'⁷⁹ As a response to this absence, in a historical study of the

⁷⁶ James, p.57.

⁷⁷ James, p.57.

⁷⁸ Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migration of the Subject* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.4.

⁷⁹ Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts,' in *Small Axe*, 12.2, (2008) 1-14, (p.3), <<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/241115>> [accessed 27 June 2022].

Middle Passage entitled *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex and Sickness in the Middle Passage* (2016), Sowande M. Mustakeem works to unveil the untold stories of those categories of the enslaved who remain historically unknown such as the elderly, children and women. As Mustakeem argues ‘the metanarratives of black men’ about the histories of the slave trade ‘confines black women and girls to plantation, marking the slave ships as untraditional spaces where bonded females are rarely found, unexplored, forgotten, and therefore left out of the central story.’⁸⁰ Mustakeem continues that on board of ships, enslaved women were sexually violated by the seamen who used ‘their hands, strength, genitals’ to force women into ‘fear and compliance.’⁸¹ Enslaved women were also subject to other forms of violence in which they found themselves unable to ‘protect their infant children from murder’ often times because mothers were forced to be separated from their children since sea captains saw that infants were ‘worthless’ and ‘unproductive.’⁸² Thus, as Mustakeem stresses ‘[w]idening the gaze’ to include silenced women’s stories ‘help to fully humanize the histories of slavery’s horror.’⁸³ Due to the undocumented stories of enslaved women, many Black women writers and poets such as Morrison and Nichols took on the burden to use the creative process to reimagine and restore these silenced stories which brings me to the premise of this analysis.

This chapter builds on this momentum of scholarship that calls for scholars to engender studies of the Middle Passage and the Black Atlantic and concurs with these Black feminists to continue to engender the Black Atlantic experience. Many of contemporary studies that focus on the engendering of the Black Atlantic tend to focus on the genre of fiction by Black

⁸⁰ Sowande M. Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), p. 8.

⁸¹ See Mustakeem, p.41, p.88.

⁸² Mustakeem, p.77.p.41.

⁸³ Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea*, p.41.

women writers.⁸⁴ Though the genre of fiction remains a significant contribution to the scholarship on the Black Atlantic, Black women's contemporary poetry is a genre rich with the potential of broadening discussions on the engendering of the Black Atlantic. While I look at the three poets' representations of the Middle Passage, I view their works as literary continuation of this early gendering project of the Black Atlantic considering that they belong to a tradition where Black women's diaspora literature played a major role in reclaiming the Black Atlantic studies to become Black women's intellectual territory.⁸⁵

3- Wake Work:

Moving across the works of different Black feminists, theorists, and writers including Hortense J. Spillers, Toni Morrison, Dionne Brand, and Saidiya V. Hartman, Sharpe joins their investigation of 'the on-going problem of Black exclusion' to introduce her concept of 'the wake.'⁸⁶ Sharpe's ground-breaking model of the Black Atlantic is a new approach that builds heavily on the elements of the Middle Passage such as the slave ship and the ocean to situate the present of Blackness as conditioned by the past of enslavement. Scholars interested in Black studies testify to the way Sharpe's innovative approach revolutionised the field. In her oceanic approach to Black and native studies, Tiffany Lethabo King maintains that Sharpe's wake work 'came at the perfect-right-time and created a moment that awakened me to other registers of attending to black life and death.'⁸⁷ In *Black Cultural Mythology* (2020) Christel N. Temple acknowledges Sharpe's 'philosophical and cultural perspectives on memorialization'

⁸⁴ see Pinto, *Difficult Diasporas*, and Emilia Maria Durán-Almarza et al, *Diasporic Women's Writing of the Black Atlantic: (En)gendering Literature and Performance*, ed.by Emilia Maria Durán-Almarza and Esther Álvarez-López, (New York: Routledge, 2014).

⁸⁵ See Davies's *Black Women* who uses key literary texts by Black women writers such as that of Morrison's to theorise the Black Atlantic.

⁸⁶ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), p.14.

⁸⁷ Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), p.xviii

as an 'interdisciplinary cadre' for scholars interested in 'Africana cultural memory studies.'⁸⁸

A number of recent scholars working in Black studies and literary criticism are building on and engaging with Sharpe's monumental model that calls on scholars to apply 'wake work' to attend to the different interdisciplinary questions on Blackness.⁸⁹

Contrary to Gilroy's chronotope of the ship that does not see continuity in slave ships, Sharpe connects the histories of the slave ship to contemporary migrant ships to argue that the state of contemporary Blackness is located within 'the wake.' As Yogita Goyal maintains that the interest of Gilroy's model is 'mining contemporary culture for coded and potentially transformative vision of justice' derived mainly from the chronotope of the ship.⁹⁰ Goyal continues that Sharpe 'connects such meditations on the slave ship to contemporary black life' using the example of African migrants which I discuss later in the analysis of the poems.⁹¹ In describing her approach of the 'wake work,' Sharpe explains it as:

A method along the lines of a sitting with, a gathering, and a tracking of phenomena that disproportionately and devastatingly affect Black peoples any and everywhere we are. [...] I am interested in plotting, mapping, and collecting the archives of the everyday of Black immanent and imminent death, and in tracking the ways we resist, rupture, and disrupt that immanence and imminence aesthetically and materially.⁹²

⁸⁸ Christel N. Temple, *Black Cultural Mythology*, (New York: State University of New York, 2020), p.256.

⁸⁹ See Paula Von Gleich, *The Black Border and Fugitive Narration in Black American Literature*, (Berlin and Boston: Walter De Gruyter, 2022).
Samira Spatzek, *Unruly Narrative: Private Property, Self-Making, and Toni Morrison's A Mercy*, (Berlin and Boston: Walter De Gruyter, 2022).

⁹⁰ Yogita Goyal, *Runway Genres: The Global Afterlives of Slavery*, (New York: New York University Press, 2019), p.6.

⁹¹ Goyal, p.6.

⁹² Sharpe, *In the Wake*, p.13.

Sharpe's wake work presents a new methodological tool to deal with the archives of slavery and its legacies and proposes that 'to be in the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery's past as yet unresolved unfolding.'⁹³ Sharpe invokes Hartman's framing of the lasting effect of slavery and its legacies that continue to shape Black life as 'the afterlife' of slavery which she presents in her (2006) *Lose Your Mother*, here Hartman argues that:

Slavery had established a measure of man and a ranking of life and worth that has yet to be undone. [...] This is the life of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment. I too, am the afterlife of slavery.⁹⁴

Sharpe uses Hartman to refer to the ways Black lives are constantly 'swept up in the wake produced and determined [...] by the afterlives of slavery.'⁹⁵ Sharpe's 'wake work' as 'a theory and praxis of Black being in the diaspora' asks us to consider Black life as an extension of the Atlantic chattel slavery.⁹⁶

Sharpe uses 'the wake in all of its meanings as a means of understanding how slavery's violences emerge within the contemporary conditions of spatial, legal, psychic, material, and other dimensions of Black non/being as well as in Black modes of resistance.'⁹⁷ Sharpe explains that the meanings of the wake are 'the keeping watch with the dead, the path of a ship, a consequence of something, in the line of flight and / or sight, awakening, and

⁹³ consciousness is one of the meanings of the wake that Sharpe uses to argue that 'rather than seeking a resolution to blackness's ongoing and irresolvable abjection, one might approach Black being in the wake as a form of *consciousness*.' p.14. (Italics in original).

⁹⁴ Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), p.6.

⁹⁵ Sharpe, p.8. p.4.

⁹⁶ Sharpe, p.19.

⁹⁷ Sharpe, p.14.

consciousness.⁹⁸ To be in the wake, for Sharpe, is to identify ‘the wake, the ship, the hold, the weather’ as the categories of ‘the ongoing locations of Black being.’⁹⁹ Sharpe maintains that the hold is ‘the slave ship hold; is the hold of the so-called migrant ship; is the prison; is the womb that produces Blackness.’¹⁰⁰ The hold is the room where Black people wait to be taken to the slave ships and the dark spaces they occupy in the ship during the journey. Prior to Sharpe, Spillers uses a similar analogy of the womb and the hold in *Lose Your Mother* to describe the way slave traders saw the dungeon as ‘a womb in which the slave was born.’¹⁰¹ Sharpe uses this notion of the womb-hold giving birth, to argue that as a result of the repetition of the logic of the hold Black people ‘inhabit and are inhabited by the hold’ as violence on Blackness continues.¹⁰²

Unlike Gilroy who neglects gender as a category of analysis, Sharpe thinks about the way gender and sexuality played a role in the transatlantic construction of Black subjectivity. Sharpe argues that both the Middle Passage and Black woman give birth to Blackness: ‘the Middle Passage, the coffle, and [...] the birth canal’ together work to ‘dis/figure Black maternity, to turn the womb into a factory producing blackness as abjection much like the slave ship’s hold and the prison.’¹⁰³ Sharpe views that similar to the ‘belly of the ship’ which ‘births blackness’ Black women’s birth canal also gives birth to Blackness as this canal ‘is another kind of domestic Middle Passage.’¹⁰⁴ While Black women’s ‘*birth canal remains in,*

⁹⁸ Sharpe, pp.17-18.

⁹⁹ Sharpe, p.16. Each category occupies the concern of a specific chapter in the text and the four chapters are named after these categories.

¹⁰⁰ Sharpe, p.27.

¹⁰¹ Spillers, *Lose Your Mother*, p.111.

¹⁰² Sharpe, p.69.

¹⁰³ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, p.74.

¹⁰⁴ Sharpe, p.74.

and as, the hold,' Sharpe argues Black women still give birth to children with inherited non/being-ness:¹⁰⁵

Living in the wake of slavery is living “the afterlife of property” and living the afterlife of *partus sequiture ventrem* (that which is brought forth follows the womb), in which the Black child inherits the non/ status, the non/being of the mother. That inheritance of a non/ status is everywhere apparent *now* in the ongoing criminalization of Black women and children.¹⁰⁶

Sharpe echoes Spiller’s view that notes that ‘enslavement relegated [Black women] to the marketplace of the flesh, an act of commodification so thoroughgoing that the daughters labor even now under that outcome.’¹⁰⁷ By referring to the birth canal, the womb, the Middle Passage and the coffin, Sharpe stresses that to recognise the objectification of the Black female body as reproducing non/ status, is to recognise that the consequences of the ‘long dehumanizing project’ of enslavement is present to those living in its wake.¹⁰⁸

The last category that Sharpe discusses is the weather which refers to ‘all kinds of weather’ that slave ships ‘came and went from’ during their journeys back and forth the Atlantic Ocean.¹⁰⁹ Since Black people are in the wake, the weather Sharpe clarifies ‘is the totality of our environments; the weather is the total climate; and that climate is antiblack.’¹¹⁰ For Sharpe ‘antiblackness is pervasive as climate. The weather necessitates changeability and

¹⁰⁵ Sharpe, p.74. (Italics in original).

¹⁰⁶ Sharpe, p.15. (Italics in original).

¹⁰⁷ Hortense J. Spillers, ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,’ in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 203-229, (p.206). see more in this essay on Spiller’s theory of the flesh.

¹⁰⁸ Sharpe, p.74.

¹⁰⁹ Sharpe, p.104.

¹¹⁰ Sharpe, p.104.

improvisation; it is the atmospheric condition of time and place; it produces new ecologies.’¹¹¹ Sharpe reflects on the difficulty of navigating such ecology as a Black individual where the dominating climate is anti-Blackness. Sharpe stresses that ‘[a]t stake is not recognizing antiblackness as total climate’ to warn against the danger of overlooking the ways anti-Blackness has shaped and continues to shape Black lives, and how anti-Black racism is foundational to social institutions in the U.S and other parts globally.¹¹²

4- Memory and Rememory Work:

To write the wake of Black life Nichols, Girmay and Smith invoke the legacies of transatlantic chattel slavery through enacting the work of memory and rememory. In her 1987 essay ‘The Site of Memory’ Toni Morrison discusses the importance of employing memory in her writing. As a Black woman writer who has been historically ‘seldom invited’ to participate in the discourses around Black people, Morrison argues that she needed a different approach to move ‘that veil aside’ by depending on her ‘own recollections’ and the ‘recollections of others’ to writes of this history.¹¹³ Morrison maintains that ‘memory weighs heavily in what I write, in how I begin and in what I find to be significant.’¹¹⁴ As Angelyn Mitchell argues in *The Freedom to Remember* (2002) that memory ‘functions [...] as an imaginative recovery of the historical past.’¹¹⁵ The skill within which Morrison recollects the past is prominent in many of her works significantly *Beloved* (1987), where she revisits the legacy of slavery through

¹¹¹ Sharpe, p.106.

¹¹² Sharpe, p.21.

¹¹³ Morrison, ‘The Site of Memory,’ in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, ed. by William Zinsser, 2nd edn (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), p.91.

<https://blogs.umass.edu/brusert/files/2013/03/Morrison_Site-of-Memory.pdf> [accessed 27 June 2020].

¹¹⁴ Morrison, pp.91-92.

¹¹⁵ Angelyn Mitchell, *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women’s Fiction* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002), p.12.

chronicling the story of a former enslaved woman named Sethe who is haunted by the memories and the horrors of her enslavement.

In *Beloved*, Morrison presents her concept of 'rememory' for the first time through the recollections of her protagonist Sethe:

Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there [...] What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened.¹¹⁶

Morrison describes 'rememory' as repressed memory moments that happened in the past but are difficult to forget. As Claudine Raynaud puts it, Morrison presents 'rememory' as 'the workings of memory' and 'a combination of forgetting and traces.'¹¹⁷ Mitchell maintains Morrison's rememory is 'the process of remembering not only what one has forgotten but also what one wants to forget and cannot.'¹¹⁸ Morrison uses Sethe's rememory to remember a past that is yet forgotten and to re-write and recover the absented narratives of these histories. Sharpe locates Morrison's rememory as part of being in the weather of the wake by arguing that what Sethe 'remembers, rememories, and encounters in the now is the weather of being in the wake.'¹¹⁹ Following Sethe, Sharpe further argues that 'memories

¹¹⁶ Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Vintage, [1987] 1997), p.36.

¹¹⁷ Claudine Raynaud, 'The Pursuit of Memory,' in *Toni Morrison: Memory and Meaning*, ed. by Adrienne Lanier Seward and Justine Tally (Mississippi: University of Mississippi, 2014) <DOI:10.14325/mississippi/9781628460193.003.0006> [accessed 13 July 2020].

¹¹⁸ Mitchell, *The Freedom to Remember*, p.12.

¹¹⁹ Mitchell, p.12.

reanimate the places and spaces of slavery post nominative emancipation.’¹²⁰ With invoking Morrison’s concept of rememory, Sharpe signifies that within this weather even if there is an attempt to forget, ‘it is the atmosphere’ of ‘slave law transformed into lynch law, into Jim and Jane Crow and other administrative logics’ that ‘remember the conditions of enslavement’ after the end of the event.¹²¹

Morrison draws connection between water and the work of memory and its relation to the process of writing in her reading of the Mississippi River in her 1987 essay ‘The Site of Memory’:

[T]hey straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and liveable acreages. Occasionally the river floods these places. “Floods” is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original places. It is emotional memory—what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our “flooding.”¹²²

¹²⁰ Sharpe, p.105.

¹²¹ Sharpe, p.106.

¹²² Morrison, ‘Site of Memory,’ p.99.

The term ‘site of memory’ is first adumbrated in the collection of essays *Les Lieux de Mémoire* (1984-1992) edited by the French historian Pierre Nora, where he notes in ‘Between Memory and History’ that there are ‘*lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environment of memory.’ Nora argues that memory used to constantly exist as there were *milieux de mémoire*, environments of memory, such as ‘the disappearance of peasant culture’ which was a ‘repository of collective memory.’

Morrison suggests that water is bound to remember its original place, the same way Black people continue to remember their history. As Anissa Jenine Wardi argues Morrison's 'flooding' advances 'the notion that humans, like bodies of water are capable of flooding and that rivers, like humans, are creatures of memory.'¹²³ What aids this act of remembering is the imagination which for Black writers is the 'flooding' who due to the undocumented stories use imagination to give voice to the enslaved whose memory is bound to erasure.

The nuances of Morrison's flooding analogy is present in Sharpe's wake work that is both a work of memory and water and about the memory of water. Sharpe argues when explaining the meaning of the wake as the path of the ship that:

Wakes are processes; through them we think about the dead and about our relations to them; they are rituals through which to enact grief and memory. Wakes allow those among the living to mourn the passing of the dead through ritual; they are [...] the disturbance caused by a body swimming, or one that is moved, in water; the air currents behind a body in flight; a region of disturbed flow.¹²⁴

Sharpe's analytic conjures the wake of the slave ship and enacts thinking of the dead through the rituals of connection, mourning and memory. Sharpe asks us 'in what way do we remember the dead, those lost in the middle passage, those who arrived reluctantly and those still arriving' and then refers to Elizabeth Deloughrey who in turn quotes Gaston Bachelard's

However, only history and *lieux de mémoire* or sites of memory persisted, where different social groups redefine their identity through recuperating their history in a form of sites of memory.

see Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,' in *Representations*, 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter Memory, (1989) 7-24, (p.7-8), <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2928520>> [accessed 04 July 2020].

¹²³ Anissa Janine Wardi, *Water and African American Memory: An Ecocritical Perspective* (Florida: University Press of Florida, 2011), p.5.

¹²⁴ Sharpe, p.21.

“water is an element ‘which remembers the dead.’”¹²⁵ Sharpe associates water with Black loss and the memory of the millions dead in the Middle Passage and the omnipresence of this loss in post-enslavement through anti-Black violence and illegal migrants boats that I will refer to further in the analysis. Sharpe’s discussions of memory and the focus on water and its relation to Black death, the stages of the wake and all the epistemologies she theorises makes of ‘the wake’ a valuable analytic for approaching the selected poems. I use wake work with all its meaning, examples and processes to position Nichols, Girmay and Smith’s poems as an articulation in and of the wake. Using Sharpe, I argue that their works write the present of Black life within the wake by enacting the memorialisation of slavery through images of water, the Middle Passage, and the slave ship.

5- The Semiotics of Black Birth in *I Have Crossed an Ocean*:

In the opening of the first poem in the collection entitled *I is a Long-Memored Woman*, Nichols demands that we remember the legacy of the oceanic passage in the Caribbean which waters are tainted by colonisation, slavery, and conquest. Nichols describes the ‘inspiration’ behind writing the poems of *I is a Long-Memored Woman* as a dream she had of ‘a young African girl swimming to the Caribbean with a garland of flowers around her.’¹²⁶ Nichols interprets the dream as the girl’s wish to ‘cleanse the ocean’ from the pains her ancestors suffered during ‘the traumatic transatlantic crossing.’¹²⁷ Nichols reflects on this dream in an untitled short poem:

even in dreams I will submerge myself

¹²⁵ Sharpe, p.20. see Elizabeth Deloughrey, ‘Heavy Waters: Waste and Atlantic Modernity,’ in *PMLA*, 125.3 (2010), 703-712, (p.704), <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25704468>> [accessed 16 January 2023].

¹²⁶ Nichols, *I have Crossed and Ocean*, p.185.

¹²⁷ Nichols, p.185.

*swimming like one possessed
back and forth across that course
strewing it with sweet smelling flowers –
One for everyone who made the journey*¹²⁸

The aquatic hauntology in Nichols's poem recalls Sharpe's concept of 'residence time,' which she defines as 'the amount of time it takes for a substance to enter the ocean and then leave the ocean,' to argue that 'Black people, exist in the residence time of the wake.'¹²⁹ Sharpe argues that '[t]his is what we know about those Africans thrown, jumped, dumped overboard in Middle Passage; they are with us still, in the time of the wake, known as residence time.'¹³⁰ The 'atoms' of enslaved Africans' bodies thrown into the sea during the Passage, Sharpe notes, 'are out there in the ocean even today' cycling in the water.¹³¹ Like Sharpe, Nichols' reminds us that the traces of the pains of the Passage are still in the Atlantic in the resident time of the wake where Black generations in the Caribbean continue to be haunted by the legacy of their ancestral traumas. Yet, Nichols's poem is also a celebration of those who survived the passage '*with sweet smelling flowers,*' thus celebrating the Black diaspora in the Caribbean while memorialising loss, a notion she maintains throughout the collection.

In 'One Continent to Another' Nichols uses an omniscient narrator to tell the story of an enslaved Black woman who is the main persona in the poem to focus on the voices of enslaved Black women in the Caribbean. Nichols uses imagination to revive the memory of Black women who survived the Passage and to reconstruct their undocumented histories by creating a poetic narrative as a survival account that describes the interior life of a Middle Passage survivor. Nichols channels Morrison's craft of the 'flooding' to 'extend, fill and

¹²⁸ Nichols, p.12.

¹²⁹ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, p.41.

¹³⁰ Sharpe, p.19.

¹³¹ Sharpe, p.19.

complement' slave narrative by using memory and imagination to reconstruct a past that continues to inform Black experiences.¹³² In the original poem, Nichols imagines the arrival of this woman on the Caribbean shore as a metaphorical birth process by describing the woman as a '[c]hild of the middle passage womb' who came 'into the new world/ birth aching her pain/ from one continent/ to another.'¹³³ In the extract of this poem in *I Have Crossed an Ocean*, Nichols describes the unreadiness of this woman to the birth to her new life under enslavement:

Like the yesterday of creation morning
She had imagined this new world to be
Bereft of fecundity.

No she wasn't prepared
for the sea that lashed
fire that seared
Solid earth that delivered
her up.¹³⁴

Using birth imagery with words such as 'bereft of fecundity,' 'earth that delivered,' 'child,' and 'womb' to depict the Passage recalls Sharpe's parallel of Black women's birth canal and 'the belly of the ship' that give 'birth to blackness' in the diaspora.¹³⁵ This form of 'forced (re)birth' to use Anne Brüske and Caroline Lusin's phrasing, signifies this Black woman's multiple births, first from the mother's womb, from the dungeon and then violently from the belly of the slave ship and the birth canal of the Passage.¹³⁶ As Françoise Charras argues for the Black diaspora in the Caribbean the 'memories of the horrors of transportation' give 'way

¹³² Morrison, 'Site of Memory,' p.120.

¹³³ Nichols, *I is a Long- Memoried Woman* (London: Caribbean Cultural International Karnak House, 1983), p.5.

¹³⁴ Nichols, *I Have Crossed an Ocean*, p.13.

¹³⁵ Sharpe, p.74.

¹³⁶ Anne Brüske and Caroline Lusin, "'One Continent/ To Another": Cultural Flows and Poetic Form in the South Asian and Caribbean Diasporas-and beyond' in *Atlantic Studies: Global Currents*, 13.4 (2016), 433-444 (p.433), <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14788810.2016.1229915>> [accessed 2 July 2020].

to a vision of rebirth.¹³⁷ In 'Each Time They Came' Nichols continues with the birth imagery when this enslaved Black woman becomes the witness of the birth of 'the new arrivals' in the Caribbean who arrive with 'faces full of old incisions / calves grooved from shackles / ankles swollen / from the pain.'¹³⁸ Similarly, in 'Waterpot' Nichols pictures the quotidian life of enslaved men and women and how they were treated after their return from plantations: 'always being hurried / along / like...like cattle / [...] And the overseer sneering / them along / in the quickening darkness.'¹³⁹ Nichols imagining of the enslaved process of arrival to the diaspora and their plantation life is what Sharpe describes as 'the birth of new "black life forms"' that result from the 'dehumaning of the coffle.'¹⁴⁰ The coffle, which is another site of human degradation, as Hartman writes in *Scenes of Subjection* (1997) 'was described by nineteenth-century observers as a domestic middle passage.'¹⁴¹ The Middle Passage morphed into different sites of horrors like the hold and the coffle which together became processes that laboured Blackness that in its wake still labours afterlives of slavery globally through criminalisation of Blackness and anti-Black systems.

Nichols continues with the use of the metaphor of birth in a poem entitled 'In My Name.' This poem is written in free verse and narrated in a form of a prayer by an enslaved Black woman giving birth to her child that she conceived after being raped by a white slave owner in the plantation fields:

my tainted

¹³⁷ Françoise Charras, 'Landings: Robert Hayden's and Kamau Brathwaite's Poetic Renderings of the Middle Passage in Comparative perspective,' in *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage*, ed. by Maria Diedrich et al, pp.57-69 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.62.

¹³⁸ Nichols, p. 16.

¹³⁹ Nichols, p.15.

¹⁴⁰ Sharpe quoting Rinaldo Walcott unpublished, p.74.

¹⁴¹ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.32.

perfect child

my bastard fruit
my seeding
my sea grape
my strange mulatto
my little bleeding

Let the snake slipping in deep grass
be dumb before you¹⁴²

Nichols deals with the theme of Black motherhood and its nature during slavery for the raped enslaved women who give birth to a 'bastard fruit.' While Sharpe holds that slavery disfigures Black motherhood, Nichols refuses this disfiguring despite the conditions of the birth of this child 'in deep grass' of plantations to the non-status of his mother, the Black woman's prayer is hopeful and optimistic as she prepares her 'perfect child' to the new life in the diaspora:¹⁴³

For with my blood
I've cleansed you
And with my tears
I've pooled the river Niger

now my sweet one it is for you to swim¹⁴⁴

unlike Sharpe's approach to water as synonymous to Black death in the wake, Nichols employs fluidity metaphors in a sense that holds as Sánchez Calle phrases a 'positive and liberating potential' that frees the child 'from the negative circumstances of its conception' and suggests 'an upward movement' where the child 'will not drown in an abyss of sorrow but will swim to the surface, to life.'¹⁴⁵ Nichols rejects the figure of the raped enslaved woman as infanticidal as seen in Morrison's *Beloved* where Sethe kills her daughter. Though Sethe's delivery of her child in the water on 'the river bed' signifies new beginning for Sethe and her

¹⁴² Nichols, *I Have Crossed an Ocean*, p.32.

¹⁴³ Sharpe, p.74.

¹⁴⁴ Nichols, p.33.

¹⁴⁵ Sánchez Calle 'Grace Nichols,' in *A Companion to Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*, p.565.

other daughter Denver, whose amniotic water of birth meets the Ohio river waters to mark healing from the shackles of slavery and the start of a new life, it also marks the death of Seth's child Beloved.¹⁴⁶ Instead, in Nichols's poem the woman is optimistic for the birth of her child and uses the image of water in association with the birth metaphor to celebrate the birth of the diaspora in the Caribbean as a freeing potential despite the horrors of the journey to bondage.

In the poems of *Startling the Flying Fish* Nichols recalls the slave ship as a site of violence that marks the memory of the Atlantic Ocean and the history of the Caribbean through the incarnation of Caribbean womanhood. In a poem entitled '*I, Cariwoma Watched History*,' Nichols creates a mythical persona in the present, whose name is an infusion of Caribbean and woman, as a witness of history and a seeing all spirit that tells the readers about the stories that occupied the space of the ocean including the different ships that crossed the Atlantic:

Yes, I Cariwoma watched history happen
like two-headed Janus,
however far apart heads can be.

The first head rose up
from the hammock's languorous belly
and turned towards the winged ships
of Columbus's faith

[...]

The other head rose up
from the misery ship, that other hammock,
and swivelled back, locking
as in the deformity of a duenne's foot
Face as faceless as a duenne,

¹⁴⁶ Morrison, *Beloved*, (London: Vintage, [1987] 1977), p.84.

those bewildered little souls.¹⁴⁷

Mixing the past with the present, Nichol's reflection on the traumatic legacy of slavery invites readers to remember the cultural history of the Caribbean in the wake of the oceanic journey. Sharpe argues that the memory of an unnamed slave ship must not come as singular, instead it stands 'for every slave ship, and every slave crew' as well as 'all the murdered Africans in the Middle Passage.'¹⁴⁸ The 'misery ship' that Nichols invokes is a memory of all the slave ships that made the Caribbean shores and is a mourning of the dead and a remembering of the survived Africans 'bewildered little souls.' In 'Other Ships' Nichols extends the memorialisation of the ship to include those of the indentured labourers' ships that replaced slave ships on the Atlantic route subsequent to the emancipation of enslaved populations in the Caribbean. The Cariwoman continues with a mythic meditation of the sea to capture the arrival of the indentured workers:

But there were other ships
rocked by dreams
and fears and promise

Rolling
with new arrivals
across Atlantic.

[...]

Their indentured mud-
stained feet, soon embroidered
like the slave's instep to the fields

Their song of exile
their drums of loss
all caught in a weaving odyssey
of no return.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ Nichols, p.132.

¹⁴⁸ Sharpe, p.36.

¹⁴⁹ Nichols, *I Have Crossed an Ocean*, p.133.

In addressing the involvement of British colonialism in the Caribbean, Nichols turns to the history of the many indentured labourers who came '[f]rom the fields/of Bengal/and Uttar Pradesh/ From Kowloon/ and Canton/ From Madeira/ and Ireland-' in the 19th century to the Caribbean Islands and forced to replace the African slaves on the British plantations.¹⁵⁰ The ships brought thousands of men and women to the Caribbean to compensate for the shortage of labour on plantations after emancipation. As Bonham C Richardson writes many of these workers received 'harsh treatment that the British Anti-Slavery society asserted that slavery had been reintroduced in a new guise.'¹⁵¹ Nichols positions the indentured ships within the wake of the slave ship and I am here activating Sharpe's meaning of the wake as 'a consequence of something.'¹⁵² Nichols describes the way the workers occupied the wake of the enslaved spaces 'like the slave's instep to the fields' living in the wake of the 'Atlantic', the 'ship' and the 'fields,' that were once the present of Blackness. The indentured lived the wake as an aftermath of enslavement facing similar fates of dispersal 'loss' and 'song of exile.'

Within her representations of the ship and the Passage as sites of violence and slavery, Nichols also presents the Passage as a site of cultural and linguistic exchange in 'Sunris' where she celebrates the carnival. Gilroy maintains that ships 'should be thought of as cultural and political unites' and should be emphasised that 'they were the living means by which the points within the Atlantic were joined together' as well as 'the mobile elements that stood for the shifting spaces in between the fixed places that they connected.'¹⁵³ For Gilroy ships serve as a symbol of cultural transmission and border crossing as well as a reminder of the

¹⁵⁰ Nichols, p.133.

¹⁵¹ Bonham C. Richardson, *The Caribbean in the Wider World, 1492-1992: A Regional Geography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p.75.

¹⁵² Sharpe, p.18

¹⁵³ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, p.16.

Middle passage and 'the micro-politics of the slave trade.'¹⁵⁴ This cultural transmission is noted in the cultural features that Nichols uses such as the calypso and the carnival celebrated in the Caribbean which come from the African heritage and has its roots date back to the arrival of the enslaved peoples to the Islands.¹⁵⁵

In her recent collection *Passport to Here and There* (2020), which addresses her own diasporic journeying between the Caribbean and England, Nichols stresses that her cultural 'experiences and textures' and the 'cultural bridges' between Guyana and England have 'helped shape me as a person and as a poet.'¹⁵⁶ In an introduction to *Sunris*, Nichols states 'I wanted to capture some of the features associated with calypso- in terms of tone, directness, bravado, rhetoric and 'big-word' but breaking out at times against the two-line rhyming beat.'¹⁵⁷ The incorporation of the calypso and the carnival in crafting Caribbean writing as Emily Zobel Marshal argues 'offers a means through which scribal, oral and performance cultures can be fused to create new literary forms that express the multifaceted, mercurial and ever-changing shape of Caribbean culture.'¹⁵⁸ Nichols's focus on incorporating the elements of the calypso and the carnival is a reflection of the innovation of form and the way these features are necessary for the representation of the Caribbean cultural heritage. Such

¹⁵⁴ Gilroy, p.17.

¹⁵⁵ According to the *Encyclopedia of African American Popular Culture* the calypso is 'derived from *gayup* or *gayap*, organised communal work and work songs' brought to Trinidad by enslaved Africans working on plantations. Within the calypso's early formation 'the music, both as dance and song, was integral part of the carnival season.' see *Encyclopedia of African American Popular Culture*, Vol. 1, ed. by Jessie Carney Smith (California: Greenwood, 2011), p.229.

According to *The Encyclopaedia of The African and The African American Experience* as edited by Kawame Anthony Appiah and Gate JR. calypso, also popular in many islands in the Caribbean, is a carnival song that originated in Trinidad which 'served as a powerful grassroots medium for expressing social and political protest in Trinidad' and was also used in particular to protest against the British colonialism in the country. See *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*, ed. by Kawame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gate JR. 2nd edn, 5 vols (New York: Oxford University press, 2005), III, p.749.

¹⁵⁶ Nichols, *Passport to Here and There* (Hexham: Bloodaxe Books, 2020), p.11.

¹⁵⁷ Nichols, *I Have Crossed an Ocean*, p.90.

¹⁵⁸ Emily Zobel Marshall, 'Carnival, Calypso and Dancehall Cultures: Making the Popular Political in contemporary Caribbean writers.' In *Caribbean Literature in Transition, 1970-2015*, ed. by Ronald Cummings and Allison Donnell, pp.52-68 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p.58.

features are invoked through the voice of an ‘ancestral believer,’ a Caribbean Black woman ‘who makes the journey of self-naming in the poem’ and ‘swept along by the all-embracing pulse of carnival.’¹⁵⁹ The calypso songs that this persona sings appear in the poem where she talks to different spiritual figures: ‘*and is dih whole island / Awash in a deep seasound / is hummingbird possession / Taking flight from dih ground / in blood beating.*’¹⁶⁰ These lines are repeated three times and written in italics to ensure that the reader understands it is a song.

The rhythm of the Calypso music is present in the way the Black woman talks to the Atlantic Ocean recollecting the memories of Africa and the sea journey. Nichols stresses that the woman uses the calypso as an ‘act of reclaiming the various strands of her heritage’ while engaging ‘with both historical and mythological figures’ thus, ‘like the calypsonian sometimes [she] resorts to verbal self-inflation to make her voice heard.’¹⁶¹ Nichols moves between inserting and discarding punctuations at the end of sentences to assimilate the changes in the rhythms and intonations of the calypso:

If is not Africa herself
Come out to play–
Making dih dance steps
Both of mourning and merriment
On dis Carnival Day.

Africa how to begin
All dis time and water’?
But you know more than me
That spirit must return to spirit.¹⁶²

With remembering Africa, Nichols fights cultural amnesia by stressing that despite the rupture, the African heritage is present in the tradition of the ‘Carnival Day’ to argue that the

¹⁵⁹ Nichols, *I Have Crossed an Ocean*, p.90.

¹⁶⁰ Nichols, p.94

¹⁶¹ Nichols, p.91.

¹⁶² Nichols, p.102.

past is connected and revived in the cultural memory of the Caribbean in the present where 'spirit must return to spirit.' The beat of the calypso is further incorporated textually in the way this woman dances to the rhythm of the sea and calypso music:

Yes, I rippling to the music
I slipping pass the ghost ships
Watching old mast turn flowering tree
Even in the heart of all this bacchanal
The Sea returns to haunt this carnival.¹⁶³

Nichols stresses the significant of the calypso to the 'human experience' of the Caribbean nation in expressions of 'celebration,' 'tragedy,' and 'fantasy.'¹⁶⁴ Nichols's different literary incorporations of the Caribbean transatlantic cultural heritage is what Sharpe refers to as rituals of the wake through which the dead and the past are remembered. As Sharpe argues on the definition of the wake is that it is 'grief, celebration and memory,' and Nichols's poems enact mourning by invoking the memory of the passage and celebrates the Middle Passage by invoking the cultural inheritance that were left in the wake of chattel slavery.

In the same poem, Nichols invokes rememory in the way the Black woman remembers history in the form of water which is given the ability to have memory and to remember the dead:

History is a river
That flow to the sea
Laced with the bone of memory
I riding high her choreography
I paying homage in ceremony.¹⁶⁵

In a direct invocation of Morrison's concept of flooding where she portrays the river as a creature of memory bound to remember its original place, Nichols uses the same view of the

¹⁶³ Nichols, p.103.

¹⁶⁴ Nichols, p.90.

¹⁶⁵ Nichols, p.103.

river as a metaphor for Africa and origins of the Black diaspora. Nichols links the image of water to the need of the diasporic subject to return and remember its past and origins. The idea of granting the Atlantic Ocean the imaginative ability to have memory in the history of the Black diaspora is present in Nichols's latest poetry. In *Passport to Here and There*, Nichols writes a tribute to the memory of the Atlantic in the wake of the Middle Passage in a poem entitled 'Atlantic':

Atlantic—now sleeping in the distance
peaceful as a dog glossed by the morning sun.
Atlantic—now churning up an army of wild horses,
white manes threatening a biblical leaping
or brooding on the ships that bruised your memory—
the nameless bones on the sea-shelves of your history.¹⁶⁶

Nichols anthropomorphises the Atlantic using words such as 'sleeping' and 'bruised' that imply human characteristics to emphasise the connection of Black people to the ocean. This metaphorical remembrance comes linked to the Atlantic which Wardi remind us that for Black people 'recovery of the past' is 'coterminous with a literal or symbolic return' to it.¹⁶⁷ The Atlantic is imagined as a library 'the sea-shelves,' and the 'nameless bones' which refer to the many unnamed Black people who were thrown and killed onboard of slave ships at sea which Nichols portrays as books shelved on the Atlantic's 'history.' Once again Nichols's poem enacts the same sense of Sharpe's 'resident time' to convey that the ocean is still in the wake of the transoceanic passage where the trace of Black existence remains archived in its memory. Like the ocean waters bruised by ships, Black people's history in the diaspora is inherently bruised by the voyage. Such association is used by Nichols to reflect the importance

¹⁶⁶ Nichols, p.76.

¹⁶⁷ Wardi, *Water and African American Memory*, p.6.

of the connection between the past and the present which is a central perspective in the thematic formation of her poetry.

Creole is another form of cultural transmission carried by the Middle Passage which Nichols celebrates in most of her poetry which plays a central role in her identity and her aesthetic. In 'Epilogue' told from the voice of the Black woman of *I is a Long-Memoried Woman*, Nichols describes the linguistic formation of creole: 'I have crossed an ocean / I have lost my tongue / From the root of the old one / A new one has sprung.'¹⁶⁸ Creole is a combination of languages displaced geographically by ships through chattel slavery merging west African languages spoken by the enslaved and languages from the colonies such as English and French. In his 1984 *History of Voice*, the Barbadian poet Edward Brathwaite Kamau refers to the Caribbean English creole as 'nation language' which he defines as:

[T]he language which is influenced very strongly by the African model, the African aspect of our New World/ Caribbean heritage. English it may be in terms of some of its lexical features. But its contours, its rhythm and timber, its sounds explosions, it is not English, even though the words, as you hear them, might be English to a greater or lesser degree.¹⁶⁹

Nichols follows key Black women poets of the Caribbean such as the Jamaican writer and poet Louise Bennett-Coverley and the Canadian-Trinidadian poet NourbeSe Philip whose poetry is a celebration of creole. Philip argues in her 1989 *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*, that during slavery 'the African forged new and different words, developed

¹⁶⁸ Nichols, p.44.

¹⁶⁹ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (London: New Beacon, 1984), p.13.

strategies to impress her experience on the language.¹⁷⁰ Philip continues that this meant subverting 'formal standard language' whereby '[n]ouns became strangers to verbs and vice versa; tonal accentuation took the place of several words at a time; rhythms held sway.'¹⁷¹ Brathwaite argues that 'it was language that the slave was perhaps most successfully imprisoned by his master and it was in his (mis-)use of it that he perhaps most effectively rebelled.'¹⁷² Creole then is an African linguistic heritage that works as a medium for both protest and self-expression.

In the different poems in *I have Crossed an Ocean*, Nichols explicitly mixes English with creole to stress the importance of the historical connections between Africa and the Caribbean for the different Black women personas in her poems. In *Sunris* the Black woman uses creole to talk with the spirits and invokes the Middle Passage: 'spread re-echo / regather / down down / wake dih ear / of the middle passage / drown.'¹⁷³ In her 1989 collection *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman*, Nichols disturbs grammatical structures and uses colloquial language and creole as a medium of resistance in the wake to subvert the stereotypes Black women diasporic subjects face in England. As Myriam Moïse maintains Nichols's 'poetic strategy implies a certain subversion of canonical English by disturbing accepted grammatical categories and given constructs.'¹⁷⁴ In a self-celebratory poem entitled 'Wherever I Hang' a Black woman talks about her feelings of leaving the Caribbean and coming to Britain using

¹⁷⁰ NourbeSe Philip, *She Tries her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press 2014 [1989]), p.83.

¹⁷¹ Philip, p.83.

¹⁷² Brathwaite, *Falk Culture of Slaves in Jamaica* (New Beacon Books: London, 1981), p.31.

¹⁷³ Nichols, *I Have Crossed an Ocean*, p.105.

¹⁷⁴ Myriam Moïse, 'I Ain't I a Woman?' Grace Nichols and M. NourbeSe Philip. Re-Membering and Healing the Black Female Body,' in *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, 40.2, (2018),135-147, (p.144), <<http://journals.openedition.org/ces/303>> [accessed 02 January 2021].

creole: 'I leave me people, me land, me home / For reasons, I not too sure.'¹⁷⁵ The Black woman is asserting her identity that of which is divided between two places:

Now, after all this time
I get accustom to de English life
But I still miss back- home side
To tell you de truth
I don't know really where I belaang

Yes, devided to de ocean
Divided to de bone.¹⁷⁶

With the fracturing of words 'belaang' and 'get accustom to de English life' the Black woman uses both languages to express attachment to her home and her adjustment to England as a home. Such poems vividly represent Nichols' attempt to preserve creole as a significant cultural legacy of the transatlantic and reflects her own desire to celebrate her own cultural identity that is a merge between that of Africa and the Caribbean.

6- Grieving Black Imminent and Immanent Death in Aracelis Girmay's *the black maria*:

Like Sharpe's wake work, I argue, Aracelis Girmay's *the black maria* aesthetically and thematically attends to Black immanent (previous) and imminent (approaching) death. Wake work, Sharpe affirms, attends to 'the contemporary conditions of Black life as it is lived near death as deathliness, in the wake of slavery.'¹⁷⁷ In other words, Sharpe argues that Black life is framed by its proximity to death in the diaspora to emphasise the continuities of anti-Black violence that started with slavery and continues to unfold in the wake. Attending to Black death and to Black suffering echoes throughout Girmay's poems where she returns to the sea as a material space of violence for the past and present of Black people and as a site of Black

¹⁷⁵ Nichols, p.80.

¹⁷⁶ Nichols, p.80.

¹⁷⁷ Sharpe, p.7.

immanent and imminent death. Girmay opens the collection with 'Elelegy' that performs the ritual of the wake of celebration and grief to remember the dead by taking inspiration from her own African heritage. Like Nichols who is influenced by her Afro-Caribbean heritage in the way she employs the rhythmic sound of the calypso, Girmay's writing is appealed by Eritrean music. In her interview with Claire Schwartz Girmay declares that her return to Eritrea led her to reflect about music: 'I was thinking about music—Tigrinya music specifically. And also the dance.'¹⁷⁸ She continues that in 'Guyala dance' which is a traditional Tigrinya dance '[y]ou're going in circle: one, two three, one, two, three. Then, there is a break, and you break it down. I was thinking a lot about those rhythmic structures and adhering to that echoed the dancers.'¹⁷⁹ In preparation to write 'elelegy' in particular, Girmay states 'I asked people [Eritreans] to sing songs and asked them what the songs meant—especially songs that have water in them.'¹⁸⁰ The music and songs in 'elelegy' help Girmay to structurally enact the ritual of grief in the wake.

Girmay stresses that 'elelegy' means 'to place itself in both the English elegiac tradition and the ululatory tradition of grieving and joy in cultures of North and East Africa.'¹⁸¹ As Claire Schwartz maintains in a review of the collection, 'elelegy' is a song 'modulated by violence' which draws together 'bright-alive grief and joy.'¹⁸² Emily Ruth Rutter et al argue that:

Fusing these two traditions—one focused on conjuring and communing and the other on consolation and redemption—Girmay maps a new elegiac

¹⁷⁸ Girmay in Claire Schwartz, 'On the black maria by Aracelis Girmay' (2016), *Kenyon Review*, <<https://kenyonreview.org/reviews/the-black-maria-by-aracelis-girmay-738439/>> [accessed 08 January 2021].

¹⁷⁹ Girmay in Claire Schwartz, 'On the black maria by Aracelis Girmay.'

¹⁸⁰ Girmay in Claire Schwartz, 'On the black maria by Aracelis Girmay.'

¹⁸¹ Girmay, *the black maria*, p.108.

¹⁸² Schwartz, 'On the black maria by Aracelis Girmay.'

path, attentive to the language and forms used for mourning and what they reveal about the perils of black life past and present.¹⁸³

with a language attentive to mourning, fluid and ‘shifting as the ocean,’ to use Schwartz phrase, Girmay grieves victims of slave ships and those dying in the present onboard immigrant boats crossing the ocean from Africa to Europe.¹⁸⁴ Sharpe addresses this presence of oceanic migration through arguing that living in the wake ‘on a global level means living the disastrous time and effects of continued marked migrations, Mediterranean and Caribbean disasters, trans-American and -African migrations.’¹⁸⁵ These immigrants, Sharpe continues, ‘are imagined as insects, swarms, vectors of disease’ and whose Black bodies are ‘weaponized’ and attached to ‘narratives of gender.’¹⁸⁶ In a long poem entitled ‘*prayer & letter to the dead*’ Girmay writes on the weaponised bodies and the disastrous effects of the continued migration in the wake. Girmay remembering the 20,000 immigrants who were in the hold of many immigrant boats and ‘*died at sea making the journey from North Africa to Europe in the past two decades.*’¹⁸⁷ The poem also commemorates a specific immigrant boat with the 300 Eritreans who ‘*died at the sea off the coast of Lampedusa*’ in Italy in 2013 in an attempt to cross to Europe.¹⁸⁸

[M]ore shore than sea, more still
than alive, while the air is now
touching the dark & funny fruit of
your eyebrows where it is quite enough

¹⁸³ Emily Ruth Rutter et al, *Revisiting the Elegy in The Black Lives Matter Era*, ed. by Tiffany Austin et al (New York: Routledge, 2020), p.15.

¹⁸⁴ Schwartz, ‘On the black maria by Aracelis Girmay.’

¹⁸⁵ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, p.15.

¹⁸⁶ Sharpe, p.15.

¹⁸⁷ Girmay, p.10. (Italics in original).

¹⁸⁸ Girmay, p. 10.

for me to hear the small sighing
of your shoes lift up into

the old & broken boat,
while the small hands of water
wave, each one waving
its blue handkerchief, then

the gentle flutter of luck
& tears. We all know

what happens next. Do not go.¹⁸⁹

Elegy is written with a language attentive to the relationship water has in the collective memory of Black people. Girmay uses two-line rhyme that shifts between words like ‘funny fruits’ and ‘tears’ to suggest the contradiction of the ‘elegy’ between joy and grieve. As Schwartz maintains Girmay ‘forges’ her poems in a ‘language of tenderness and rigor.’¹⁹⁰ Through using phrases like ‘[w]e all know / what happens next. Do not go,’ Girmay remembers the deaths and horrors of the journey of the Middle Passage and goes back and forth between the present and the past to suggest that the ocean remains the site where other forms of violence on Black body continue to re-emerge.

The immigrants’ boat that Girmay invokes in her poem recalls Sharpe’s discussion of the ship, where she stresses the contemporary presence of the slave ship semiotics and the recurrence of the commodification of Black bodies as a *cargo*, by drawing a parallel between the slave ship *Zong* and the 2013 migrants ship which carried 500 African migrants and ‘caught fire’ and ‘sank’ on the coast of the Italian island Lampedusa.¹⁹¹ The *Zong* is a slaver that sailed

¹⁸⁹ Girmay, p.15.

¹⁹⁰ Schwartz, ‘On the black maria.’

¹⁹¹ Girmay, p.53.

from Cape Coast (in now Ghana) in 1781 to Jamaica, the same ship that occupies the NourbeSe Philip's 2008 poem *Zong!*, that held 'abducted Africans' twice the number for the ship's capacity and due to 'navigational errors' the ship misdirected, and this error led the crew of the ship to throw many of the enslaved into the ocean.¹⁹² Sharpe argues that in the wake the enforced displacement of the slaves continues in the present in a form of refugee and migration crisis in the Mediterranean:

In the wake, the semiotics of the slave ship continue: from the forced movements of the enslaved to the forced movements of the migrant and the refugee, [...] to those ongoing crossings of and drownings in the Mediterranean Sea, to the brutal colonial reimaginings of the slave ship and the ark; to the reappearance of the slave ship in everyday life in the form of the prison, the camp, and the school.¹⁹³

Sharpe critiques the repeated trope of the oceanic trafficking of the Black body and the laws forged in the U.S and Europe that reinforce traumatic lives for the immigrant boats' survivors who 'face criminal investigation, further containment, and repatriation' and are left near death.¹⁹⁴

Girmay invokes the similarity of the near death routs the immigrants now experience to those crossed by the enslaved before, therefore when she talks about the arrival of the immigrants she enacts the work of care in the wake to promise immigrants with a life and a welcoming land where they are not criminalised: '& with what I know / & do not know, I will try to build / a shore for you here, a landing place, here / where the paper dreams / that you

¹⁹² Sharpe, p.34-35.

¹⁹³ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, p.21.

¹⁹⁴ Sharpe, p.57.

will last.¹⁹⁵ After the imaginings of a therapeutic possibility between migration and Black bodies, Girmay takes the reader back to the violent realities of such oceanic ordeals where the sea emblematises a grave yard 'you are filling the sea (Courages) / and the fisherman drop their veils / into your grave.'¹⁹⁶ Further in the poem Girmay returns to mourning the immanent Black death in a form of a visit to a museum in Italy that exhibits histories of enslavement:

Today, just over a hundred years later,
hundreds & hundreds of these bodies stand

in museums, in books,
on shelves, the dark, wooden bodies

swollen with the rusted & silver scales of nails.
Grief & wounds on display, the dark docent

(is he me?) explains: The coins we pay
to view them will not ever go back to the dead,

& will not go to the living. In their cases
they will gleam like fishes. On another continent.¹⁹⁷

Through the museum, Girmay invokes the legacies of colonialism and the western exploitation of the '[g]rief & wounds' of the cultural memory and histories of Black suffering. Sharpe problematises the works of museums in the wake and with her analytic troubles 'the way most museums and memorials take up trauma and memory' because, she asks, 'how does one memorialize chattel slavery and its afterlives, which are unfolding still? How do we memorialize an event that is still going.'¹⁹⁸ Girmay addresses this intergenerational transmission of trauma where Africans in the now are once again the dead '*Eritreans, as*

¹⁹⁵ Girmay, pp.15-16.

¹⁹⁶ Girmay, p.16.

¹⁹⁷ Girmay, p.21.

¹⁹⁸ Sharpe, pp.19-20.

fishes!? & yet again it is you / on that ship, stuttering across the sea' whereby the colonizing powers' benefit from 'the coins' that 'gleam like fish' from this traumas is still unfolding.¹⁹⁹ While Sharpe problematises the memorialisation of an unfished event, Girmay adds to that the painful merchandising of these histories.

Oceanic imagery is significantly illustrated in a poem entitled '*to the sea (any)*,' one of Girmay's poems that artfully celebrate the theme of loss and water where Girmay herself addresses the sea. This poem structurally attends to Black death and makes us think of the way poetry as a form might attend to patterns of the sea. As figure (1) illustrates, Girmay succeeds to disrupt the poem's structure when she inserts a space between the first five stanzas and the rest of the poem. This blank space, which suggests the ocean as Girmay insures to clarify by adding the word (*sea*) between brackets, is occupied by scattered dots. In a pattern that mimics oceanic circuit, Girmay employs punctuation (.) to mark and name all the Black people who crossed the sea and those who died on the journey and remain in what Sharpe terms the resident time. As Sokunthary Svay agrees, Girmay in this poem 'establishes symbolic uses for punctuation marks as bodies of history.'²⁰⁰ As Svay continues that 'the periods function as reminders, like dots punctured on a map of the African trade route to immortalize those who crossed or died at sea.'²⁰¹ Girmay marks 'obsessively, / the route / the family-piercing / of the map / in place after place' by locating the dots in the sea, and then goes to name some places that signify the Atlantic slave trade route such as the Ethiopian trade point 'Gondar.'²⁰² Girmay uses water language to once again write that similar to the enslaved who are the 'series of wholes' that 'scar the paper with space,' and who were

¹⁹⁹ Girmay, p.22.

²⁰⁰ Sokunthary Svay, '*The Black Maria* by Aracelis Girmay (Review)' in *Prairie Schooner*, 91.1 (2017), 167-187, (p. 186), <<https://doi.org/10.1353/psg.2017.0090>> [accessed 9 January 2021].

²⁰¹ Svay, p.186.

²⁰² Girmay, p.26.

‘flooded’ by the ocean’s ‘blue dimension,’ Black immigrants are still experiencing the passage: ‘our passages / above which, again, / we are the shipped.’²⁰³ The poem continues that those who died from all the crossings went ‘into the sea’s greater silence’ which suggests that the dots in the poem are also to mark these silences. With these silences, the poem attends to the erasure of Black death and rememorialises the stories of those unremembered and remain in the resident time.²⁰⁴

to the sea (any)

I mark, obsessively,
the route,
the family-piercing
of the map
in place after place:

Adi Sogdo, Gondar,
Arecibo, Chicago, Nairobi
Griffin, Santa Ana:

A series of holes
scar the paper with space
nearly flooded by you,
your blue dimension
who seams below
the flat surface of
our passages
above which, again,
we are the shipped.

²⁰³ Girmay, p.26.

²⁰⁴ Girmay, p.27.

Figure (1)²⁰⁵

'*To the sea near Lampedusa*' is another artful manipulation of structure in which the poem imitates tidal rhythm to manifest what Alexander Massoud phrases 'an aesthetic spectacle.'²⁰⁶ The poem marks Girmay's continuous cycle of addressing the 'seas' that she lists in the beginning of 'elelegy.'²⁰⁷ Girmay addresses the Mediterranean Sea, where the dead immigrants were found (near the Italian coast of Lampedusa), as a witness of all the terrors enacted on its waters and still held in its memory:

for the eyes we closed for
safety & distance for
,
the freedom we wasted
on things
,
the terrors our acts lit
into the wet retina of
your memory if you should
,
call it that²⁰⁸

This unconventional poetic form is reminiscent of wave movements as Svay suggests that '[v]isually' the commas 'look like waves' or 'lifelines' which I argue with the collective 'we' connect Black lives to sea and to each other, African immigrants with the slaves.²⁰⁹ Massoud

²⁰⁵ Ibid., p.26. google image.

²⁰⁶Alexander Massoud, *Water, Water, Everywhere: Form in the black maria*, <<http://icstillwater.com/2018-pieces/2018/4/23/water-water-everywhere-form-in-the-black-maria>> [accessed 8 January 2021].

²⁰⁷ Girmay explains that the seas addressed in the whole collection are: '*the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea, the Caribbean Sea, the Atlantic Ocean, the Afterworld Sea/Sea of Death, any Sea.*' p.13.

²⁰⁸Girmay, p.35.

²⁰⁹ Svay, '*The Black Maria* by Aracelis Girmay (Review)' p.186.

also sees that such employment of the comma ‘visually reinforces the poem’s intense theme of loss’ which dominates ‘elelelgy.’²¹⁰ Similar to the wake’s tracks of the ship and like the period in ‘*to the sea (any)*,’ the commas form an oceanic patterns to create a track that helps the remembrance of the memory of the dead below the waves of the sea.

Since ‘elelelgy’ is an amalgamation of joy and grief the punctuation also refers to the influence of music on Girmay’s poetry. The commas are also a reminder of the breaks found in the Tigrigna dance that Girmay admires. In an interview with Christian McEwen where she discusses sonic narrative in Gwendolyn Brooks’ works, Girmay states that ‘[t]he kind of “sonic narrative” that happens underneath a poem is something I’ve been [...] really interested in.’²¹¹ Girmay further links this narrative form in Brooks’ work to Tigrigna music: ‘[t]here’s a kind of music that feels very similar to the sonic narrative, when you don’t quite know what the words are meaning, but you hear the pattern of speech.’²¹² Girmay admits that music is what appeals her in a poem due to the strength that music gives her as a poet: ‘I am struck by that idea of music as giving [...] me [...] courage.’²¹³ This courage she continues is connected to ‘the questions of silence, the silences I’m loyal to’ which suggests that her poem is the consequence of this courage inspired by music to address the silences about immanent and imminent Black death at sea.

Maintaining an attentive language to grief and joy, Girmay celebrates Black diasporic women by using several voices belonging to four *Luams* as the main speakers addressing the

²¹⁰ Massoud, ‘Water, Water, Everywhere: Form in the black maria’ (2018), *StillWater Magazine*, <<http://icstillwater.com/2018-pieces/2018/4/23/water-water-everywhere-form-in-the-black-maria>> [accessed 8 January 2021].

²¹¹ Girmay in Christian McEwen, *Interview with Aracelis Girmay: The Sonic Narrative*, <<https://teachersandwritersmagazine.org/the-sonic-narrative-1343.htm>> [accessed 9 January 2021].

²¹² Girmay in McEwen, *Interview with Aracelis Girmay*.

²¹³ Girmay in McEwen, *Interview with Aracelis Girmay*.

sea. The sea Girmay remind us through the laums that it holds more than water: '[i]nside the water there is more / than sea' as it is 'a graveyard' that is 'built out of history and time.'²¹⁴ Girmay explains the different stories of each Laum: one is a nine years old girl who is the sister of the great-grandfather of the Russian poet, with Ethiopian origins, Alexander Pushkin, who as a girl was sold into slavery and died at sea, another Luam is a 36-year old Eritrean women living in Italy, one Luam is a 36 years old African-American woman living in New York, and the last Luam is another 36 year old woman living in Asmara, Eritrea.²¹⁵ One of these Luams is remembering the dead through talking to the waters in '*to the sea*':

Sea, my oblivious afterworld,
grant us entry, please, when we knock,
but do not keep us there, deliver
our flower & himbasha bread.
though we can't imagine, now what
our dead might need,
& above all can't imagine it is over
& that they are, in fact, askless, are
needless, in fact still hold somewhere
the smell of coffee smoking.²¹⁶

Breaking from the two-line rhyme, Girmay pays homage to the Black women who died at sea which recalls the words of Theodor Schwenk's view, whom Wardi uses in her analysis, that water 'constantly links life and death' and it plays the role of 'the mediator between the two.'²¹⁷ The poem reveals what Julia Bouwsma considers as 'Girmay's careful and haunting

²¹⁴ Girmay, *the black maria*, p.40.

²¹⁵ Luam as Girmay explains in eleelegy means 'respectful' and 'restful' in Tigrinya language which is a language spoken in Eritrea and Northern Ethiopia.p.11.

²¹⁶ Girmay, p.62.

²¹⁷ Theodor Schwenk quoted in Wardi, *Water and African American Memory*, p.4.

repetitions of language, image, and sound' which 'crescendo into an oceanic weaving of human displacement.'²¹⁸ Indeed, Girmay uses words such as 'sea,' 'deliver' and 'dead' to encapsulates the relationship the ocean has with Black people and displacement.

Girmay's connection of sea and Black life-death cycle continues in '*to the sea*' when the Luam asks the sea to grant her and the living Eritrean people in the diaspora entry to the sea. Though, in the first part of this poem Girmay remembers water as a site of violence and death, in these stanzas she writes of water as a possible site of healing:

being water too,
find a way into the air & then
the river & the spring
so that your waters can wash the elders
with the medicine of the trying of
their children, cold & clean.²¹⁹

Girmay disrupts the chronology of time, allowing her poem to play as a meeting point between generations 'so that your water can wash the elders / with the medicine of the trying of / their children.' Water 'river & the spring' as a site of healing I argue is one of the healing rituals for Black women writers which according to Elizabeth Brown-Guillory 'involve water and motion and are intricately connected to re-enactments of the Middle Passage and subsequent voluntary and involuntary migrations.'²²⁰ Like Nichols's reference of water as a site of birth and cleansing, in Girmay's poem the sea performs a healing ritual as it is given

²¹⁸ Julia Bouwsma, *Book Review: the black maria*, by Aracelis Girmay, in *Connotation Press*, 6.10 (2019), <<https://www.connotationpress.com/book-review/2804-book-review-the-black-maria-by-aracelis-girmay#edn1>> [accessed 8 January 2021].

²¹⁹ Girmay, p.63.

²²⁰ Elizabeth Brown- Guillory, 'Introduction: On Their Way to Becoming Whole,' in *Middle Passages and the Healing Place of History: Migration and Identity in Black Women's Literature*, (Columbus: Ohio State University, 2006), pp.1-13, (p.3).

the ability to provide 'medicine' to the Black people who lost their ancestors and now children in the transoceanic migration to Europe. By linking the characteristic of healing to water, Girmay reminds the readers that in the history of the Black diaspora water is paradoxical as it serves as a reminder of chattel slavery and healing, and this is what the fifth poem '*to the sea*' illustrates:

[P]raise the water, now,
praise the last room,
praise the carrying to
& the carrying away,
its salt stitch & always going on
with its back to dominion, & country,
praise the water who helps us to see
our smallness by
not seeing us, who
help us face oblivion [...]²²¹

Girmay confirms her belief in the inherited paradox that water holds for Black people by arguing that 'speaking to the sea is like an ode, and an elegy. I suppose that, in the way I write, they're almost the same.'²²² This meeting between an ode and an elegy resurfaces in the way Girmay uses language of the ode to restore faith in water. Girmay praises the sea for helping Eritrean immigrants to 'face oblivion' as a reference to the need to reconcile with the ocean since it is a crucial site for the Black cultural memory.

While the first section addresses oceanic Black deaths, in the second section 'the black maria,' Girmay focuses on the contemporary deaths and violence against Black people as

²²¹ Girmay, p.65.

²²² Girmay in Conversation with Schwartz.

perpetrated by anti-Black laws and racist systems specifically in America. Girmay opens 'the black maria' with a poem on the relation between the Black basins of the moon and Black people that is based on 'misidentification':

1600s: European ships heave fatly with the weight of Black grief, black
flesh, black people, across the sea; the
astronomers think the moon's dark marks are also seas & call them "the
black maria."
[...] However, pretty the sound, it was a misidentification,
to name the basalt basins & creates the black maria of the moon.²²³

The opening of the poem returns to the slave ship to invoke the histories of slavery and its connection to the systemic violence enacted on Black people by the police and the policing system in America. As Sharpe argues 'the means and models of Black subjection may have changed, but the fact and structure of that subjection remain.'²²⁴ Girmay pays tribute to Black men and women who are victims of structured Black subjection by listing three names of Black death by police violence: 'If this is a poem about mis seeing / Renisha McBride, Trayvon Martin, / Rekia Boyd, / then these are also three of the names of the black maria.'²²⁵ Girmay further names the anti-Blackness in America as an 'act of estrangement' where the Black history, the Black body, the sea and the ocean inhibit the geography and the landscape of misconception in the weather of the wake:

Naming, however kind, is always an act of estrangement. (To put
into language that which can't be
put.) & someone who does not love you cannot name you right, &

²²³ Girmay, pp.73-74.

²²⁴ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, p.12.

²²⁵ Girmay, p.74.

even “moon” can’t carry the moon.

If this is a poem about estrangement & waters made dark with millions
of names & bodies— the Atlantic
Ocean, the Mediterranean & Caribbean Seas, the Mississippi, than these
are also the names of the black maria.²²⁶

Sharpe remind us that Black people in the wake are considered the ‘carriers of terror, terror’s embodiment, and not the primary objects of terror’s multiple enactments.’²²⁷ Girmay addresses the danger of Black people being ‘misidentified,’ like the Black marias, by racist systems that name Black people as the carriers of terror instead of being the victims of terror. The named seas and oceans that float with past and present Black death are also misidentified as for the Black history they are more than an oceanic space, instead they symbolise a ‘graveyard.’

The first poem in the series of estrangements entitled ‘Third Estrangement, in Memory of Jonathan Farrell’ remembers the death of a 24-year-old Jonathan Farrell, a Black college football player killed by a white police officer while asking for help after being in a car accident.²²⁸ Using the first person, Girmay gives a voice to an unnamed speaker who narrates a similar situation to Farrell’s story where a simple act by a Black person can be ‘misidentified.’ The poem starts with the speaker leaving the house ‘to talk about love with my girl’ only to find himself faced with terror:

[...] I heard the hunter whistling to his dogs.
He was near. In the fog’s white heart,
I worried for my legs, their arms,
all of us dark & bare, without oranges

²²⁶ Girmay, p.74.

²²⁷ Sharpe, p.15.

²²⁸ Girmay tells his full story in the ending notes to her collection, p.109.

or flags. I will be mistaken, I thought, for another
animal, one it is legal to kill. A bear or a boar
& none of my noises distinctly human.

Bear me. Bore me.

[...]

I am a farness now, & the moon's black maria.²²⁹

Sharpe argues that '[t]he ongoing state sanctioned legal and extralegal murders of Black people are normative' and is the reality of Black existence.²³⁰ Sharpe further argues that the violence against the Black body shapes the reality of Black lives '[t]his is Black life in the wake; this is the flesh, these are bodies, to which anything and everything can be and is done.'²³¹ Girmay points to the cumulative dehumanisation of Black people and contemplates on how the Black body is a violated territory. The speaker addresses how he was 'mistaken' for 'another animal' that was 'legal to kill,' and though he was 'bare' he became 'a carrier of terror.' The poem ends with the death of the speaker from the brutality reinvigorated on this body and the '*nothingspeaking*' of his pleas that he was 'misidentified' which turns him into another 'Black maria' in a sea of Black death.²³²

In 'The Black Maria I.' Girmay memorialises the biographical story of the astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson who was repeatedly racially profiled by the police when he was a young boy attempting to study stars. A white woman called the police for mistaking his telescope for a weapon:

The Skyview apartments

Circa 1973, a boy is

²²⁹ Girmay, p.74.

²³⁰ Sharpe, p.7.

²³¹ Sharpe, p.16.

²³² Girmay, p.74.

kneeling on the rooftop, a boy who
 (it is important
to mention here his skin
 is brown) prepares his telescope,
the weight & rods,
 to better see the moon. His neighbor
(it is important to mention here
 that she is white) calls the police
because she suspects the brown boy
 of something, she does not know.²³³

With Tyson's story, Girmay refers to the way his body is connected to other 'misidentified' Black bodies. Girmay uses the parenthesis to help the reader identify the scales of power in this situation from which 'misidentification' is enforced by writing that '(it is important to mention here that she is white)' and that '(it is important to mention / that statistically [the police] are also white,' therefore, 'you know that the boy is in grave danger.'²³⁴ With the disrupted structure and a language that pulls the reader to the encounter, Girmay comforts us that 'miraculously in this version / of the story, anyway / the boy on the roof of the Skyview lives.' Girmay imagines a weather of the wake where the boy's dream is not focused only on survival, but instead to look for what is beyond the earth, the 'gloriously un-human mysteries of / the galaxy.'²³⁵ Similarly, in the last poem and the last estrangement 'With a Petition for the Reunion of Jonathan & George Jackson,' Girmay remembers the killing of the Jackson brothers in the 1970s by prison guards when Jonathan attempted to help his brother escape from prison.²³⁶ In this poem, Girmay writes that in spite of Black death and violence 'I know

²³³ Girmay, *the black maria*, p.90.

²³⁴ Girmay, p.91.

²³⁵ Girmay, p.92.

²³⁶ Girmay, p.109.

that death is also real' and 'with knowing what we know / of history & love' we must instead of acts of estrangements 'let us name every air between strangers 'Reunion.'"²³⁷ Girmay ends her collection on hope where the misidentifying of Black people as the 'Black maria' ends, and the structural boundaries and prejudices are challenged.

7-Black Annotation and Black Redaction in Tracy K. Smith's *Wade in the Water*:

Tracy K. Smith's collection *Wade in the Water* shifts between poems she composes and others she recovers using the creative method of erasure that depends on collage, cutting and rearrangement of words from existing documents. I read Smith's work of erasure as a practice of what Sharpe terms as Black annotation and Black redaction which she argues are 'praxis of imagining' and 'examples of wake work.'²³⁸ The 'orthographies of the wake' Sharpe suggests 'require new modes of writing' and 'new modes of making-sensible.'²³⁹ Sharpe writes that the terms annotation and redaction are typically understood as adding notes to a text, and the action of 'putting into a definite form,' respectively.²⁴⁰ Sharpe explains Black annotation and Black redaction as a strategy that offers 'seeing and reading otherwise,' that is, 'reading and seeing something in access of what is caught in the frame' and 'seeing something beyond its visibility.'²⁴¹ Sharpe imagines the work of these modes as an enactment of 'the movement to that inevitable—a counter to abandonment, another effort to try to look, to try to really see.'²⁴² In other words, for Sharpe these modes are 'ways to making Black

²³⁷ Girmay, p.106.

²³⁸ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, p.113.

²³⁹ Sharpe, p.113.

²⁴⁰ Sharpe, p.113.

²⁴¹ Sharpe., p.117.

²⁴² Sharpe, p.117.

life visible if only momentarily,' and Smith, I argue, makes Black life visible by bringing unheard voices forward to draw attention to and reclaim lost narratives.²⁴³

The first section mostly contains Smith's own composed poetry where like Nichols and Girmay, returns to the relationship of water with Black people. In 'wade in the water' Smith invokes the 'Ibo Landing' to focus on the enslaved's use of water as a site of resistance.²⁴⁴ Linda S. Watts explains that Ibo Landing which 'takes its name from Gullah folktale' refers to the West African slaves who arrived in a 'cargo' to Georgia in 1803 and refused to adhere to slavery, thus choosing to return 'home' through walking 'over water rather than submitting to the living death that awaited them in American slavery.'²⁴⁵ Black resistance is the inspiration behind the poem as Smith argues in her interview with Wright that she wanted to reflect the Ring Shout's sense of 'justice and survival.'²⁴⁶ During the performance of a ring shout in Georgia that Smith attends, a woman ring shouter approaches Smith and tells her 'I love you,' and this encounter became a poem. Smith explains that her aim is to 'draw-in the sense of the living spirit at the heart of that night's encounter, and at the heart of the tradition of the ring shout itself.'²⁴⁷ With traditional structure and punctuated stanzas, Smith allows her poem to be read as a story:

²⁴³ Sharpe, p.123.

²⁴⁴ Black writers such as Paule Marshall revive the story of the Ibo Landing in her 1983 novel *Praisesong For the Widow*. The novel which chronicles the life of the widow Avey Johnson and her cultural journey to reconnect with her African roots, celebrates the Middle Passage and the Ibo Landing. For example, Avey is told by her great-aunt Cuney the story of the Ibos who arrived in Tatem, Carolina and 'walked on back down to the edge of the river [...] and walked on away not two minutes after getting here' after 'they got through sizing up the place real good and seen what was to come.' Paule Marshall, *Praisesong for the Widow* (London: Virago Press Limited, 1983), p.39.

²⁴⁵ Lind S. Watts, *Encyclopedia of American Folklore* (New York: Facts on File, 2007), p.211.

²⁴⁶ Smith's Interview with Eleanor Wright,

<<https://www.washingtonsquarereview.com/blog/2018/4/3/interview-excerpt-with-tracy-k-smith>> [accessed 2 June 2020].

²⁴⁷ Smith's Interview with Wright(2018), *Washington Square Review*,

<<https://www.washingtonsquarereview.com/blog/2018/4/3/interview-excerpt-with-tracy-k-smith>> [accessed 2 June 2020].

One of the women greeted me
I love you, she said. She didn't
know me, but I believe her,
And a terrible new ache
Rolled over in my chest.

[...]

I love you in the rusted iron
Chains someone was made
To drag until love let them be
Unclasped and left empty
In the center of the ring.²⁴⁸

Smith interweaves the personal with the collective to honour the courage of her ancestors fight for freedom despite the shackles of enslavement. The recollection of the past presented in the performance of the ring dance and song is also a celebration of Black people's attachment to their cultural heritage in the diaspora. While the poem proceeds to explicitly celebrate the slave song, in a way similar to Girmay's 'elelegy,' Smith mixes the grief of the past with the joy of her encounter:

I love you in the water
Where they pretended to wade,
Singing that old blood-deep song
That dragged us to those banks
And cast us in.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁸ Smith, *Wade in the Water*, p.15.

²⁴⁹ Smith, p.15.

The 'old blood-deep' song that Smith refers to is associated with the abolitionist Harriet Tubman who took the mission to help save enslaved groups escape from the shackles of slavery. According to Arthur C. Jones, this song was used by Tubman to communicate with the fugitives to ensure that they 'Wade in the Water,' so the dogs of the slave owner find it difficult to trace their scent while in the water.²⁵⁰ An improvised version of this slave song that provided instructions of escape appears in Jones book and reads Tubman singing:

*Wade in the water,
Wade in the water, children.
Wade in the water.*

*If you get there before I do,
God's going to trouble the water,
Tell all my friends I'm comin' too...²⁵¹*

Both the original song and Smith's poem testify to water being a significant symbol in the African American history. Smith represents the unity and resistance that is present in this song interwind with a 'love' language that is disregarded in the erasure poems.

The second section of the collection opens with the first erasure poem 'Declaration,' where Smith erases and rearranges words from the original document of the Declaration of Independence of The United States that dates back to 1776. As figure (2) illustrates, Smith redacts the document without adding annotation to allow the invisible to come forward and not be interrupted to asks us to think carefully of what is absent and what is present:

²⁵⁰Arthur C. Jones, *Wade in the Water: The Wisdom of the Spirituals* (Colorado: Leave A Little Room, 2005), p.54.

²⁵¹ Smith, p.15. (Italics in original).

He has
sent hither swarms of Officers to harass our people
He has plundered our—
ravaged our—
destroyed the lives of our—
taking away our—
abolishing our most valuable—
and altering fundamentally the Forms of our—
In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for
Redress in the most humble terms:
Our repeated
Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury.
We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration
and settlement here.
—taken Captive
on the high Seas
to bear—

Figure (2)²⁵²

Though the original declaration is referred to King George III and the colonists, Smith borrows its words to bring to prominence the voices of the enslaved who were erased from this declaration and were not considered as rightful citizens. Danny Heitman sees that ‘Declaration’ is ‘one of the book’s better efforts’ in the way that it ‘refreshes the sense of what these words actually mean, cleverly placing radical activism rests at the core of democratic experience.’²⁵³ Indeed, the phrases and words she restores are not only to form

²⁵² An online image of Smith’s poem ‘Declaration’ from Nichole Vaughan Website <<https://www.nicholevaughan.com/2020/12/25-declaration-by-tracy-k-smith.html>> [accessed 24 January 2023].

²⁵³ Danny Heitman, ‘Wade in the Water’ is Poet Laureate Tracy K. Smith’s Most Overtly Political Collection’ (2018), *The Christian Science Monitor* <<https://www.csmonitor.com/Books/Book-Reviews/2018/0416/Wade-in-the-Water-is-poet-laureate-Tracy-K.-Smith-s-most-overtly-political-collection>> [accessed 16 October 2020].

an aesthetic practice, but also, and more importantly, to make the reader focus on what was in the margin of this democratic document as if written by the enslaved.

Smith's effort to read beyond the visual is celebrated in the way she uses the phrases to allude to the 'circumstances' of the enslaved, and in her way to achieve this she refers to the Middle Passage. Like Nichols and Girmay, Smith carefully chooses the words she wants visible like '*taken Captive/ on the high Seas/ to bear—*' and capitalizes '*Captive*' and '*Sea,*' to invoke the horrors of the Atlantic chattel slavery. The display on the page and the topographical arrangement of the dashes and the blanks suggest a continuation to the 'story;' however, instead of composing other stanzas, Smith allows silences to be part of her poem. Silence for Smith is what demarcates poetry as she argues in an interview with Schwartz: 'I think it's trying to touch the other thing that's bigger than language, that doesn't require language.'²⁵⁴ Smith's erasure that employs both language and silence succeeds in highlighting erased Black life as it turns a document into a testimony. By invoking the ship and the sea, this poem in particular sets the ground for the other poems that present contemporary Black life as an afterlife of the Middle Passage.

Smith follows a tradition that Black women poets such as NourbeSe Philip find significant in bringing the voices of slavery to the present. Philip's 2008 book of poetry *Zong!* delves into the murder/drowning of Africans on a slave ship by the order of the slave ship captain for the purpose of collecting money. Philip uses the legal documentations from the legal trail of the slave ship *Zong* as the basis of her material for erasure.²⁵⁵ The chosen words and short phrases that are taken from these documents and scattered on the pages to form the poem

²⁵⁴ Claire Schwartz and Tracy K. Smith, "Moving toward What I Don't Know": An Interview with Tracy K. Smith', in *The Iowa Review*, 46.2 (2016),143-192,(p.186),< <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26447988>> [accessed 19 December 2020].

²⁵⁵ Marlene NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), p.189.

are for Philip the stories that must be heard. In an interview with Paul Watkins, Philip confirms that her poem starts from ‘the position that [...] the entire story of slavery’ cannot be fully told, however, ‘this doesn’t necessarily mean we shouldn’t try to reconstruct the better to understand what, indeed, did happen.’²⁵⁶ In the essay attached to the poem Philip writes that though the ‘Zong case’ was filed by ‘ship owners [...] against their insurers to recover their loss,’ it is not what her poem highlights. Instead, she maintains that the Zong case ‘is the text I rely on to create the poems of *Zong!* To not tell the story that must be told.’²⁵⁷ The words in her poems do not tell the story of these insurers, rather they are preoccupied with an urgent story of those slaves who were erased by history. Sharpe who returns to Philip’s work in her discussions of Black artistic redaction, reads Philip’s method of erasure to reconstruct the story of slavery as a ‘new language [that] articulates the language of violence in the hold’ where the tongue in this poem ‘struggles to form the new language; the consonants, vowels, and syllables spread across the page.’²⁵⁸ In the opening poem ‘Os’ *Zong!#*, as illustrated in figure (3) and (4), letters and words significantly letters of the word water are scattered across the page.

²⁵⁶Paul Watkins, ‘We Can Never Tell The Entire Story of Slavery: In Conversation With M. NourbeSe *Philip*’ (2014), *The Toronto Review of Books*, <<https://www.torontoreviewofbooks.com/2014/04/in-conversation-with-m-nourbese-philip/>> [accessed 09 October 2020].

²⁵⁷ Philip, *Zong!*, p.189.

²⁵⁸ Sharpe, p.69.

Zong! #1

w w w w a wa
w a w a t
er wa s
our wa
te r gg g g go
o oo goo d
waa wa wa
w w waa
ter o oh
on o ne w one
w o n d d d
ey d a
dey a ah ay
s one day s
wa wa

Figure: 3²⁵⁹

²⁵⁹ Philip, p.3. google image <<https://images.app.goo.gl/FYRcBnuMTPkvhmzB7>> [accessed 20 November 2020].



Figure 4²⁶⁰

Applying Sharpe’s Black redaction, we see that the iteration of the word ‘water’ is a connotation of the slave ship’s crossing the Atlantic. The repetitions of ‘w’ in ‘www/w/a/w’ from the word ‘water’ invokes the drowning of the slaves and the voices they make while drowning. Such sounds continue in ‘Ebora’ where Philip preforms them in a fading ink using words such as ‘underfrom,’ ‘water,’ ‘the oba sobs again,’ and ‘water parts.’²⁶¹ In her interview with Watkins she argues that ‘Ebora’ reflects ‘the degradation of language until at times we are only left with grunts and sounds.’²⁶² Sharpe argues that in Philip’s poem ‘Os’ ‘[t]he mouth tries to form the words of the other-tongue; except for the salty sea, water dis-appears in all of its manifestations: tears, urine, rainwater, and fresh drinking water.’²⁶³ All these manifestations are invoked within the act of drowning to recreate a vivid imagery of the horrors enacted on the Black body during the transoceanic passage. The poem is filled with empty spaces between words and letters which mark the silences on the true meaning of the

²⁶⁰ Philip, p.4. google image < <https://images.app.goo.gl/QD5As7R7mRFHU3uP7> > [accessed 20 November 2020].

²⁶¹ Phillip, p.177.

²⁶² Watkins’ interview with Philip.

²⁶³ Sharpe, p.69.

Zong story, which is that of the drowned. In Philip's poem there is a recurrent focus on the importance of memory and water as a way to the resurgence of the past 'our entrance to the past is through memory. [...] And water. In this case salt water. Sea water.'²⁶⁴ The painful memory associated with water which Philip insists on reviving renders her work 'hauntological' as she states to Watkins: '[t]here has to be a hauntological pedagogy [...] to my work because of the erasures of the histories of the Africans in the so-called New World.'²⁶⁵ Remembering the ancestry is deemed crucial in the Black poet's project as Philip stresses as these ancestors 'find a resting place with us' and only with 'the remembering that we give them peace.'²⁶⁶ This remembrance project is further embraced in Smith's work when she uses this distinct mode to draw attention to underrepresented aspects of the history of slavery through the authentic testimonies of enslaved men and women.

In 'I Will Tell You the Truth about This, I Will Tell You All about It,' Smith uses a series of original letters and statements written by 'African Americans enlisted in the Civil War, and those of their wives, widows, parents, and children.'²⁶⁷ Smith argues that once she read the letters 'it became clear' that 'the voices in question should command all of the space' within her poem 'to highlight the main factors' that affected Black soldiers and their families during the Civil War such as the 'injustices' of their own rights.²⁶⁸ The first poem she restores, is a letter sent by a mother of a soldier to President Abraham Lincoln in 1864 asking for the release of her child from the army:

Mr abraham lincon

I wont to know sir if you please

²⁶⁴ Philip, p.201.

²⁶⁵ Watkins' interview with Philip.

²⁶⁶ Watkins' interview with Philip.

²⁶⁷ Smith, *Wade in the Water*, p.77.

²⁶⁸ Smith, p. 78.

Whether I can have my son relest
From the arme he is all the subport
I have now his father is Dead
And his brother that wase all
The help I had²⁶⁹

Smith remains truthful to the 'original spellings and punctation' of the letter to give the reader access to the social conditions and realities of Black soldiers and their families. To pay tribute to Black enslaved women, Smith redacts a letter sent by an enslaved woman named Annie Davis to the president Lincoln asking about her freedom:

Mr president it is my Desire to be free to go to see my people
on the eastern shore my mistress wont let me you will please
let me know if we are free and what I can do²⁷⁰

These voices, to use Sharpe's terms, are annotated and redacted Black lives, those who are 'blacked-out' in Black history in the diaspora; however, Sharpe argues that within this redaction there is a 'continuous resistance to and disruption of those violent annotations and redactions.'²⁷¹ Smith's centralisation of Black soldiers' voices is a resistance to the redaction of their rights and role in American history.

Many of the repeated letters that Smith relies on to illustrate the redaction of Black lives significantly showcase Girmay 'acts of estrangements' in which many Black soldiers are purposely misidentified by being given different names:

*When I went to enlist the recruiting officer
said to me, your name is John Wilson.*

²⁶⁹ Smith, p.24.

²⁷⁰ Smith, p. 29.

²⁷¹ Sharpe, pp.113-114.

*I said, no, my name is Robert Harrison,
but he put me down as John Wilson. I was
known while in service by that name—*

*[...] My name on the roll was Frank Nunn, No sir,
it was not Frank Nearn—²⁷²*

Another soldier who was deprived of his rights to have the pension for serving in the war writes: '*[m]y full name is Dick Lewis Barnett. / I am the applicant for pension / an account of having served / under the name Lewis Smith.*'²⁷³ The title promises to tell the truth, and Smith delivers this through the naming of the 'chorus of American voices that have gone underheard.'²⁷⁴ In 'Ghazal,' the last poem in the second section, Smith returns to her own composed poetry to speak about the unanswered questions about the fungibility of violence against Black lives in the wake:

History is a ship forever setting sail on either shore: mountains of men,
Oceans of bone, an engine whose teeth shred all that is not our name.

Can you imagine what will sound from us, what we'll rend and claim
When we find ourselves alone will all we've ever sought: our name?²⁷⁵

Smith invokes the image of the ship to characterise history as a 'forever' sailing slave ship to address the continuous cycle of trauma and subjugation that Black people are experiencing in the wake. In a similar imagery of the 'nameless bones' in Nichols's poem, Smith returns to the memory of the victims of the Middle Passage as still present in the ocean or what Sharpe

²⁷² Smith, pp.36-37. (Italics in original).

²⁷³ Smith, p.37. (Italics in original).

²⁷⁴ Smith quoted in Danielle J. Kranchalk, 'Poet Laureate Tracy K Smith Awarded 2019 Harvard Arts Medal' (2019), *The Harvard Crimson*, <<https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2019/5/3/tracy-k-smith-medal/>> [accessed 10 February 2023].

²⁷⁵ Smith, *Wade in the Water*, p.38.

calls the resident time. Smith uses a radif which is repeating the same word at the end of every couplet in the entire poem. Smith repeats the phrase 'our name' and uses it as a question in the second couplet to ask the reader to contemplate on the issue of the recognition of Black people's history and their absence from such histories in the present.

In the third section of the collection, Smith highlights the contemporary violence and the proximity to death that is haunting the reality of Black people in America. In a poem entitled 'Unrest in Baton Rouge,' Smith is inspired by a photograph under the same title taken by Johnathan Bachman. This photograph documents police brutality during the 2016 Black Lives Matter protests in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, that happened over the police killing of a 37-year-old Black man named Alton Sterling.²⁷⁶ It features a Black woman activist Ieshia Evans standing against two police officers offering her arms for arrest. The photograph encapsulates the systemic racism and the racial dynamics that shape Black lives in the wake of the murder of George Floyd which Sharpe remind us is pervasive anti-Blackness. Smith responds to the scene by writing a poem that sees through and beyond the photograph:

Our bodies run with ink dark blood.
Blood pools in the pavement's seams.

Is it strange to say love is a language
Few practice, but all, or near all speak?

Even the men in black armor, the ones
Jangling handcuffs and keys, what else

Are they so buffered against, if not love's blade
Sizing up the heart's familiar meat?

²⁷⁶ Johnathan Bachman's photograph that shows a Black woman standing against a line of police men is featured on a BBC news Article in 2016 'Baton Rouge Killing : Black lives Matter Protest photo Hailed as 'Legendary' <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-36759711>> [accessed 17 September 2020].

We watch and grieve.²⁷⁷

By seeing beyond the image, Smith applies what Sharpe calls ‘photographic redaction,’ as part of her wake work in which she analyses artistic visuals on Black life to think about and ‘think through what they call on us to do, think, feel in the wake of slavery.’²⁷⁸ Smith redacts this exact photograph to highlight Black women’s particular struggle with systemic racism and the violence this dynamic has enacted on their lives in America. It is a reminder of all the Black death to police brutality as it provokes the reader to observe Black lives’ constant proximity to death. As Sharpe maintains in the hold Black people live the ‘present and endlessly reinvigorated brutality’ in and on the Black body that is ‘the sign of immi/a/nent death.’²⁷⁹ Invoking fluid language, Smith speaks about within the current political landscape in America Black bodies ‘run with ink dark blood’ on pavements. Like Girmay’s text on police violence, Smith’s poem sets to put the lens closer on the reality of Black immanent and imminent death.

Smith ends her collection with a poem entitled ‘An Old Story’ which she states is a poem with ‘a mythic tone’ that attempts to ‘write a new myth.’²⁸⁰ The poem encapsulates the past, the ‘old story,’ of American history and describes America as a mythic land that is ‘ravaged’ by the violent legacies:

We were made to understand it would be
Terrible. Every small want, every niggling urge,
Every hate swollen to a kind of epic wind.

²⁷⁷ Smith, p.46.

²⁷⁸ Sharpe, p.118, p.116.

²⁷⁹ Sharpe, p.15, p.71.

²⁸⁰ Smith, Powell’s interview: Tracy K. Smith, Author of ‘Wade in the Water’ with Jill Owens (2018), *PowellsBooks.Blog* <<https://www.powells.com/post/interviews/powells-interview-tracy-k-smith-author-of-wade-in-the-water>> [accessed 12 February 2023].

Livid, the land, and ravaged, like a rageful
Dream. The worst in us having taken over
And broken the rest utterly down.²⁸¹

Smith invokes America as a 'hate swollen' space where as Sharpe argues Black people 'were never meant to survive' and have been 'punished for surviving.'²⁸² Smith then asks a significant question on how to prevent America from reliving the same old story and how to no longer occupy and be occupied by the wake of the past: '[w]hen at last we knew how little / [w]ould survive us—how little we had mended.'²⁸³ Smith is hopeful that America can reconcile with these histories: 'something / Large and old awoke. And then our singing / Brought on a different manner of weather.'²⁸⁴ Yet, the end of the poem holds the mythical sense that Smith argues this poem attempts to convey by writing:

Then animals long believed gone crept down
From trees. We took new stock of one another.
We wept to be reminded of such color.²⁸⁵

Smith urges those in the wake of the history of slavery to look back at 'the old story' and embrace this wake with consciousness to create a new story and not repeat the old one. Smith's poem finishes on a note that suggests that the idea of hope and reconciliation could be a myth as the contemporary weather in America is that of anti-Blackness.

²⁸¹ Smith, p.75.

²⁸² Sharpe, p.130.

²⁸³ Smith, p.75.

²⁸⁴ Smith, p.57.

²⁸⁵ Smith, p.57.

Conclusion:

This chapter has compared three contemporary poetry collections by Grace Nichols, Aracelis Girmay, and Tracy K. Smith. The chapter opened with Black feminist discussions on engendering the Black Atlantic and Black Atlantic studies, and I proposed to work with Sharpe's wake as a significant contemporary model in Black feminist diaspora studies. Using Sharpe's approach of the wake, I illustrated that these poets write the contemporary Black life and racial oppression as an extension of the legacies and histories of enslavement by invoking the different elements of the Middle passage. I argued to a different extent that the imagery of water is invoked by the three poets as a significant site in the Black history and collective memory of Black people in the diaspora. Water appears in the three collections in all its meanings and paradoxes as the poets return to it as a symbol of historical violence for the enslaved as well as a symbol of healing, new birth in the diaspora, and resistance.

Nichols creates a voice of different Black enslaved women to remember and give access to the undocumented Black women's experiences with the Middle Passage and slavery. For Nichols the Atlantic Ocean emerges in her work as a paradoxical site of both Black erasure and as a site of diasporic birth of new histories and cultures. Building on Gilroy's chronotope of the ship as a symbol of cultural movement, I suggested that Nichols's poems focus more on celebrating the Black diaspora and the rich cultural legacies that the ships of the Middle Passage transported to the Caribbean via employing the calypso.

Returning to her Eritrean heritage, Girmay invokes the Middle Passage and the Atlantic Ocean and the sea as sites of trauma and Black death. I argued that in the poems of *the black maria*, Girmay uses artistic structure, language, and water imagery to both grieve and celebrate the memory of the past and present of the Black lives lost at sea. The poem

artistically invokes the wake of slavery by writing on the continuity of the slave ships in the present in the form of the Black immigrants' boats to stress Sharpe's Black immanent and imminent death as the reality of Blackness in the wake. Finally, I suggested to read Smith's erasure poetry within Sharpe's Black redaction and annotation as examples of the wake and techniques that allow the reader to hear the silenced voices in Black history. To do so, Smith relies on the real-life testimonies by marginalised enslaved soldiers during the Civil War. Unlike Nichols and Girmay, Smith invokes the memory of the passage through the ocean as a site of injustice and cultural trauma as well as resistance, and not as a site of healing and rebirth.

CHAPTER TWO

HOMECOMINGS IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *AMERICANAH*, YAA GYASI'S

HOMEGOING, AND ELSIE AUGUSTAVE'S *THE ROVING TREE*

Introduction:

In the previous chapter I have discussed Grace Nichols, Aracelis Girmay, and Tracy K. Smith's return to the Middle Passage and legacies of slavery within Sharpe's ground-breaking analytic 'the wake.' This chapter presents a new transnational Black feminist reading of three contemporary texts where I examine diasporic questions in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's critically acclaimed novel *Americanah* (2013), Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2018), and Elsie Augustave's *The Roving Tree* (2013).¹ While most scholars tend to compare Adichie and Gyasi's novels in studies focusing on diasporic representations by Black women in diaspora, my analysis offers a new addition by juxtaposing their works with Augustave's understudied Caribbean text to highlight the transnational and cross-cultural conversations between these representations and literary traditions.² Though I found Augustave to be less celebrated, I argue her bildungsroman addresses similar key diasporic and postcolonial questions, however

¹ Adichie's Official Website, <<https://www.chimamanda.com/book/americanah/>> [accessed 12 October 2018]. Years after its publication *Americanah* is still an Amazon bestseller in political fiction, <https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/bestsellers/books/590796/ref=pd_zg_hrsr_books> accessed [03 February 2020].

The Roving Tree is featured as Essence Magazine Summer Reading Pick and was South Florida Times's Best Bets For Your Weekend Amazon <<https://www.amazon.com/Roving-Tree-Elsie-Augustave/dp/1617751650>> [accessed 3 February 2020].

Mosaic Magazine considers the novel 'a stunning tale', from *The Roving Tree* Amazon page, <<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Roving-Tree-Elsie-Augustave-ebook/dp/B00CAZ49B4>> [accessed 3 February 2020].

Homegoing was chosen as a Notable Book by *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, from Amazon page, <<https://www.amazon.com/Homegoing-Yaa-Gyasi/dp/1101971061>> [accessed 20 January 2020].

For Gyasi's novel *Homegoing* as neo-slave narrative see Yogita Goyal, Yaa Gyasi, 'An Interview with Yaa Gyasi,' in *Contemporary Literature*, 6.4 (2019), 471-490, (p.472) < <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/773068>> [accessed 18 April 2022].

² Adichie migrated from Nigeria to the USA to pursue higher education and Gyasi was born in Ghana but migrated to America when a child, similar to Augustave who also moved while young from Haiti to America.

focusing on a Caribbean Black woman's experience in contemporary settings, that the more celebrated African writers in America like Adichie and Gyasi present. Therefore, this chapter attempts to inspire emerging scholarly interest on cross-Atlantic literary contexts toward focusing more on understudied minority writers and texts coming from underrepresented locations. The chapter is an extension to the contemporary scholarship on transnational literature by reading together novels by two African writers and a Caribbean author where they follow different narrative models, with Adichie's immigrant genre on contemporary migration, Gyasi's historical novel and Augustave's Caribbean adoption bildungsroman, to depict Black women's diasporic experiences. My study contributes to the scholarship on Black women's diasporic writing in which it offers an analysis that highlights how the texts borrow from each other in presenting a different model of Blackness by portraying transatlantic Black identities via their female characters as opposed to the single definition of Black identities presented in earliest fiction of the diaspora. I argue that Adichie, Gyasi and Augustave's texts offer new representations of diasporic experiences as transformative and productive formations as opposed to limiting the diasporic condition to being alienating, which many studies tend to focus on in reading such texts, that I show through focusing on the shared theme of return. To present these original readings, I build on and put in dialogue a rich selection of transnational diasporic theorisations and models by Black women across the Black Atlantic. Some of the key Black women scholars that I borrow from include works by earlier scholars including Carole Boyce Davies's migratory subject, bell hooks's works on home and Myriam J. A. Chancy's cycle of exile. I position these scholars in conversation with contemporary theorists significantly Saidiya V. Hartman and Dionne Brand's ideas on return. Drawing from these scholars helps to investigate what the young writers are borrowing from such scholars and what they present as a new that accommodates the contemporary settings

like Gyasi that I argue borrows from Brand and Hartman's reclaiming of history but offers a productive narrative of return that their models refuse.

The diasporic issues I propose to explore include African roots, troubled homes, belonging and identity within Black women migrants' Blackness in America in African, African American, and Caribbean context.³ Adichie, Gyasi and Augustave's texts share the theme of a return to Africa; however, each novel explores a different trajectory in writing this relationship to Africa. *Americanah* is a narrative on contemporary diasporic subject that explores the migrants' relationship to Nigeria after experiencing migration to America. *Homegoing* is a historical narrative that follows the project of reclaiming the past of slavery and the impact of this history on Africa and its diaspora in America. *The Roving Tree* is a coming-of-age narrative that represents a Haitian girl's search for her roots and self and explores the triangular relationship between Africa, the African diaspora in the Caribbean, and America. Thus, the premise of this chapter is to explore the texts' different trajectories while focusing

³ I use the term home in this chapter to denote homelands, countries, and geographical locations.

In this chapter I approach the construct of home as a fluid concept as theorised by many diaspora and postcolonial scholars. See John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, 2nd edn (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010). See also Diane Sabenacio Nititham, *Making Home in Diasporic Communities: Transnational Belonging amongst Filipina Migrants* (New York: Routledge, 2017). See Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2000).

In *Domestic Intersections in Contemporary Migration Fiction*, Lucinda Newns offers a concise distinction between migration and diasporic fiction describing migration fiction 'as a kind of genre or a subgenre within the large body of diasporic literature, which includes only those works of fiction that make the experience of migration central to the narrative.' While considering diasporic fiction as a literature 'published in European languages' and written by writers living in Europe who themselves are 'marked by migration, either personally or ancestrally.' Lucinda Newns, *Domestic Intersections in Contemporary Migration Fiction: Homing the Metropole* (New York: Routledge, 2020). pp.13-14.

Newns' study succeeds in presenting a work that moves away from displacement and focuses on the domestic home as anti-colonial and antiracism sits in migration fiction through building her work on intersectional and postcolonial readings.

Since migration is the main concern of the chosen novels, and to avoid the further use of the umbrella term diasporic writing, I will be approaching the fiction in the analysis as a migration fiction and as an immigrant genre, Rosemary Marangoly George writes that what qualifies a certain writing to be an immigrant genre is to belong to writers 'whose personal histories include birth, childhood and possibly an early education in one of the former colonies,' and 'whose work is published and received by western publishing houses and academic (as well as other) readers.' See Rosemary Marangoly George, *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial and Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.172.

on the idea of the return to Africa as a home and the trouble of home making in the diaspora. While addressing the multiple concerns of the diaspora, I examine the way these three writers centralise Black women's experiences with issues of race and gender and portray their characters' struggle in dealing with the legacies of slavery and racism they face in the diaspora. These novels deal with America's legacies of racism and gender issues that trouble the process of home and homemaking. These texts write Blackness, migration, home, race, womanhood, and return by creating a narrative that is controlled by the voice of Black women. Written by Black women writers who experience diasporic journeys, the texts present narratives that explore transnational subjectivities which transcend borders and problematise meanings of a single home and fixed location

Following the introduction, this chapter is divided into four sections with the first section presenting a discussion of the different Black feminist trajectories within diaspora studies that I build on in my readings of the texts. I return to Carole Boyce Davies's 'migratory subjectivity' and bell hooks's discussions on the issues of race and gender in the diaspora and her accounts on the concept of home. For Augustave's text I mainly build on Myriam J. A. Chancy's work that focuses on exile in Afro-Caribbean women's writing. I also return to recent scholarly works that deal with the legacies of slavery and reclaiming these histories in the diaspora. The three remaining sections will follow the analysis of Adichie, Gyasi and Augustave's texts, respectively. However, before I continue with the introduction, I must first disambiguate two of the significant terms that will be repeated in this study. I suggest focusing on the shared theme of homecoming in the novels as a term I use to refer to the protagonists' return to

Africa and to their original homelands, whether that includes a final or a temporary return.⁴ I follow hooks's use of the term belonging in *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (2009) where she connects belonging to a notion of place or what she calls a 'culture of place.'⁵ In this autobiographical essay where she speaks about her journey for a culture of place in and outside her home state Kentucky, hooks writes that belonging is the yearning to find a 'place in this world, to have a sense of homecoming, a sense of being waded to a place.'⁶ hooks further asserts that she had to travel to different places to search for 'the feeling of belonging' or 'the sense I could make home.'⁷ Following hooks, I use this term to argue that in the three novels belonging is troubled as the characters struggle with their sense to belong due to displacement.

In a novel filled with retrospective narrative that is also interrupted by present events, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) tells the migration story of a young Nigerian woman named Ifemelu who migrates to the United States as a student. The novel unfolds with Ifemelu applying for a scholarship to study in America, and with the insistence of her aunt who lives in America and needs the help of Ifemelu to take care of her child while she works. When she succeeds in attaining a visa, Ifemelu arrives in America where her journey as a Black woman migrant in America begins. Ifemelu's experience of migration to America is represented as successful as she succeeds to finish her degree and to obtain a fellowship at Princeton, a green card, and starts a blog which makes her known among American

⁴ It is imperative to note that the term 'homecoming' as it appears in my chapter has already been used by many scholars of diaspora studies. I was inspired to use this term after I read it in a chapter entitled "'I and Jamaica is Who I am': Michelle Cliff's Ambivalent Homecoming's' by Elvira Pulitano. See Pulitano, *Transnational Narratives from The Caribbean: Diasporic Literature and the Human Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

⁵ hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York and London: Routledge, 2009). p.2.

⁶ hooks, p.2.

⁷ hooks, p.2.

readers. However, the beginning of Ifemelu's migration story is not depicted as perfect, as arriving in America raises questions about home and belonging, as well as conversations about race and identity to which Ifemelu was oblivious while in Nigeria. Adichie's novel is an exploration into contemporary Black diasporic subjectivity, America's race relations and the intersectional oppressions that Black women are cast against, personal and cultural identity, critique of Nigerian and American culture, and the effect of displacement and homelessness on African migrants.

In a contrast to Ifemelu's successful story, Adichie interweaves the story of Obinze, Ifemelu's childhood love interest, and his journey as an illegal immigrant to the UK after his visa to America is refused.⁸ Unlike Ifemelu who is a middle-class migrant in the U.S, Obinze struggles as an illegal immigrant cleaning toilets and desperately looking for arranged marriage to secure a visa. Yet, before Obinze proceeds with the fake marriage he gets detained and deported back to Nigeria. Adichie's portrayal of the opposition between the failed story of Obinze as an illegal immigrant and Ifemelu's Americanised green card citizen status is to highlight the complexity of migration and to draw comparisons between privileged migrants and the experiences of the less advantaged African illegal emigrants who struggle with capitalism and the economic and social paradigms in the Western world. Exploring issues of privilege, social and economic factors, the novel evokes the triangular transatlantic route Nigeria-America-Britain connections to histories of slavery and colonisation. Adichie mixes both the genre and the narratives which opens with and moves between third person omniscient narrator and Ifemelu. It also infuses Ifemelu's blog to the

⁸ Since my study focuses on Ifemelu's experience as a Black woman migrant this chapter will not centralise Obinze's story.

For more on the romantic relationship between Obinze and Ifemelu and the role of love and romance in Adichie's narrative see Jennifer Leetch, *Love and Space in Contemporary African Diasporic Women's Writing: Making Love Making Worlds* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

narrative that elevates the novel to address race relations, Blackness, and Black identity politics in America, reflecting Adichie's understanding of the nature of the American racial hierarchy. After 13 years in America, Ifemelu returns to Nigeria Obinze is deported back; therefore, making the ending of the novel about African returnees.

Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016) is a debut historical multigenerational novel that reflects in depth research into the history of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. Gyasi writes her novel within a tradition of Black women's multigenerational historical fiction that represents the reclamation of the past of slavery. Such works include Margaret Walker's 1966 documentary novel *Jubilee* that covers generational story from slavery to reconstruction by following her great-grandmother's story Vvry Brown and her line from plantations to reconstruction.⁹ *Homegoing* starts the reclamation of Ghana's history with slavery by narrating the lives of two Ghanaian half-sisters Effia and Esi who are separated due to slavery and the destiny of seven generations of their descendants from 18th century pre-slavery Ghana to contemporary America. Gyasi uses the structure of two sisters as a metaphorical representation of the two histories and to capture the impact and the trauma of Ghana's involvement in the slave trade and the legacy of chattel slavery and plantations life on the Black diaspora in America. The novel is structured in a form of a series of related short stories told from the point of view of every descendant of each sister that develop chronologically to follow the lives of the multigenerational bloodline in Ghana and America. Each story is presented differently in a form of a myth, a fable and a nightmare where some characters appear in dreams and storytelling. The American chapters deal with key historical moments

⁹ Such multigenerational novels include Dionne Brand, *At the Full and Change of the Moon* (New York: Grove Press, 1999). It tells the diasporic lives of the descendants of a slave named Marie Ursule from 1824 from the Island of Trinidad to the scattered diaspora across Europe, America and Canada. A recently published work that reclaims history following multigenerational family saga is by Honoreé Fanonne Jeffers, *The Love Songs of W.E.B Du Bois* (London: 4th Estate 2021).

from plantations to the Antebellum era, the Jim Crow era and the Civil Rights Movement. In these chapters Gyasi evokes cultural moorings and the loss of roots and cultural identity that those who were sold into slavery suffered from to highlight the horrors of the past and its impact on the lives of modern Black people. The West African chapters address the involvement of African tribes and the British empire in the slave trade and how this violent past contributed to breaking cultural linkages. The novel mainly foregrounds the exigence of reclaiming the past, a project that structures the works of Black women writers like that of Toni Morrison's where she reveals the silences and traumas transmitted from America's past to its present.

The novel opens with the story of Effia that is told in a form of a myth and a folk tale which remind us of the African folklore and the African novel celebrating both Gyasi's craft of storytelling and her connection to the African tradition. The novel's opening is set during the slave trade of the late 18th century in Ghana. Esi is sold into slavery and shipped with many Africans to America where her journey and the lives of her grandchildren start in the southern plantations. Gyasi narrates the violence scenes of Esi's transportation story from Ghana to America to invoke the horrors of the historical sites of the door of no return and the Middle Passage. Each one of Esi's descendant lives through a historical phase in America's history starting from the plantations to the abolitionist movement to the Civil Rights movement. On the other hand, Effia is married to James Collins, an appointed governor of the Cape Coast Castle, a headquarters of the British empire involved in slave trade in one of Ghana's villages as a part of a trade deal between the village chiefs in Ghana and the British soldiers which trades village girls with money and goods. With Effia's narrative, Gyasi draws attention to the involvement of the British imperialism in slavery and the wounds created by British colonialism in Ghana. The novel ends with Marjorie and Marcus, the last descendants of each

sister who both meet in America, swimming in the Ghanaian shore. In her article 'I'm Ghanaian-American Am I Black?' Gyasi explains the purpose of the plot of the two lines and the ending with a meeting of the last descendant of each sister by clarifying that the aim behind her novel is 'to write about diaspora and reckon with the fullness of slavery, not just as it was centuries ago, but what it has left us, Ghanaians and Americans alike, today.'¹⁰ The ending as I suggest is an attempt of reconnection to a lost cultural heritage and a reconciliation between Africa and its diaspora. Therefore, I propose to focus on the character Marjorie, the last Black woman descendant in the novel, as the meeting point between the two spaces and histories.

In the novels' discussions of Black feminist themes parallels emerge between these writers and the forerunners of Black women writers in Africa and the diaspora in the way they centre the voices of Black women. This includes a plethora of works by Toni Morrison, The Barbadian American Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), the Nigerian Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* (1974), and the Ghanaian Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977). These works explore typical diasporic concerns such as migration, nation, location, identity, and belonging from Black women's perspectives and experiences that serve as a connecting route between Black women writers of the diaspora and African women writers. Adichie, Gyasi, and Augustave adapt these concerns in contemporary globalised world that is marked by increased movement and mobility to maintain what Gay Wilentz terms in her 1992 *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora* as 'generational and cultural continuity.'¹¹ As African women writers, I see Gyasi and Adichie's centring of Black women

¹⁰ Gyasi, 'I'm Ghanaian-American. Am I Black?'

¹¹ Wilentz's seminal work is one of the earliest that studies the cultural bonds between African and Afro-American women writers, and it includes some of the early Black women writers I listed here. See Gay Wilentz, *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p.118.

characters in their novels as a continuation of reversing the gender roles discourse that for long dominated the writings of established African male authors such as Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, something their precedent women African writers have worked to achieve in their writings.¹² Emecheta for example is among a cohort of African women writers whose fiction reclaims women's voices that are absent in the works of Achebe, and one of the early African women writers to write about the myriad ways the migrant woman navigates the tropes of migration in diasporic settings.¹³ In a tribute to Emecheta, Adichie writes 'we are able to speak because you first spoke' as an acknowledgement of the late writer's role in centring African women at the heart of African and Black diaspora literature.¹⁴

¹² However, Adichie and Gyasi acknowledge the influence of male authors such as Achebe on the writing of their fiction and this is apparent in the novels. Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* documents the pre-colonial Nigeria and the period during the British colonization and the consequence of this transition on the villagers the novel revolves around. Similarly, Gyasi shortly introduces an example of the lives of the Ghanaians before the British Empire through Effia and Esi's stories in Fanteland and the Asante nation. In an interview Gyasi reveals that her use of the tradition of storytelling is inspired by Achebe 'I liked the idea of these west African narratives that really play on a fabulous mode of storytelling [...] like *Things Fall Apart* by Achebe where you can kind of sense that the writer is telling you a story. So you feel a part of the story.' See Gyasi's Interview in Chicago Humanities Festival 2016 on YouTube <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LoEAWvTvFus>> [accessed 8 March 2020]. On many occasions Adichie regularly refers to the impact of Achebe on the development of Nigerian literature as well as on her as a writer by stating that Achebe 'gave permission' to her and other Nigerian writers. See Adichie quoted in Elleke Boehmer, *Postcolonial Poetics: 21st Century Critical Readings* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p.123.

For an in-depth discussion on the literary relationship between Achebe and Adichie see Daria Tunca, 'Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie as Chinua Achebe's (Unruly) Literary Daughter: The Past, Present, and Future of "Adichebean" Criticism, in *Research in African Literatures*, 49.4(2018), 107-126, <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/reseafritlite.49.4.08>> [accessed 24 March 2022].

¹³ For more on Emecheta and for a brief discussion of Emecheta's work as opposed to that of Achebe see: Pamela S. Bromberg, 'Buchi Emecheta: Storyteller, Sociologist and Citizen of the World,' in *Reading Contemporary Black British and African American Women Writers: Race Ethics, Narrative Form*, ed by. Jean Wyatt and Sheldon George, pp.178-195 (Routledge: New York and Oxon, 2020). For recent Black women scholarship on intergenerational West African women writers See Rose A. Sackeyfio, *West African Women in the Diaspora: Narratives of Other Spaces, Other Selves* (Routledge: Oxon and New York, 2022).

¹⁴ Adichie's Facebook epigraph quoted in Ainehi Edo, "'Thank you for your courage:" African Writers pay tribute to Buchi Emecheta,'" (2017), *Brittle Paper*, <<https://brittlepaper.com/2017/01/african-authors-pay-tribute-buchi-emecheta/>> [accessed 28 March 2022].

For postcolonial Feminist reading of Emecheta and Adichie see: Vivian Ntemgwa Nkongmence 'Navigating Spaces: A Postcolonial Feminist Reading of Buchi Emecheta *Kehinde* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*,' in *The Cultural and Historical Heritage of Colonialism: Interrogating the Postcolony*, ed by. Kennet Usongo, pp.96- 110 (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022).

For Adichie and Gyasi, Toni Morrison is, as Edwidge Danticat asserts, is ‘a literary mother’ of Black women writers for inspiring Black women to write and to position Black women at the centre of their writings.¹⁵ In a conversation with Dolen Perkins-Valdez, Gyasi expresses the influence of Morrison’s work on her novel: ‘I adore Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* was a huge inspiration for me.’¹⁶ In her article for *The New York Times*, Gyasi reveals her interest in the literary links between African writers and Black writers of the diaspora which her novel sustains: ‘I read Toni Morrison and Chinua Achebe and I sensed a conversation between them.’¹⁷ In mourning Morrison’s death in 2019, Adichie writes for *The New York Times*, that:

She was Black and she didn’t apologize for her Blackness, and she didn’t temper the painful reality of Black American history [...] I loved her fiction and her essays. I adored her honesty. I admired the way she occupied her space in the world. I believed her.¹⁸

In *Americanah*, Adichie echoes Morrison’s driving concern in her fiction which is to write Blackness, which led many scholars to compare their works together. For example, Aretha Phiri presents a comparative analysis between Adichie’s novel and Morrison’s *Song of*

For more on an intertextual analysis between Adichie and Emecheta see: Jessie Sagwa, ‘At the Center, Taking Charge: Disruptive Discourse and Female Agency in Buchi Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*,’ in *African Women Under Fire: Literary Discourses in War and Conflict*, ed. by Pauline Ada Uwakweh, pp.23-42 (London: Lexington Books, 2017).

¹⁵ Edwidge Danticat quoted in Hillel Italie, ‘Toni Morrison was a ‘Literary Mother’ to Countless Writers’ (2019), *AP News*, <<https://apnews.com/article/entertainment-ap-top-news-celebrities-toni-morrison-national-book-awards-1cd49bfd899e4ee5be64d963c7a476c6>> [accessed 23 March 2022].

see also Edwidge Danticat, ‘The Ancestral Blessings of Toni Morrison and Paule Marshall’ (2019), *The New Yorker*, <<https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-ancestral-blessings-of-toni-morrison-and-paule-marshall>> [accessed 23 March 2022].

¹⁶ Gyasi in a conversation with Dolen Perkins- Valdez <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVch_Bs0JDg> [accessed 02 March 2020].

¹⁷ Gyasi, ‘I’m Ghanaian-American. Am I Black?’ (2016) *New York Times*, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/19/opinion/sunday/im-ghanaian-american-am-i-black.html>> [accessed 06 March 2020].

¹⁸ Adichie, ‘How We Weep our Beloved’: Writers and Thinkers Remember Toni Morrison,’ (2019), *The New York Times*, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/06/books/remembering-toni-morrison.html>> [accessed 20 March 2022].

Solomon (1977) to argue that Adichie ‘enhances blackness as a matter of politics rather than a common, static cultural condition’ thus expanding ‘black repertoires and discourses’ by forwarding ‘a more expansive vision of blackness’ as established in ‘the foundational premise of Morrison’s work.’¹⁹ Indeed, as I will explore in the analysis of Ifemelu’s blog, Adichie addresses the politics of Blackness in America and the idea of becoming Black as an immigrant in the U.S. Following Adichie’s novel which Gyasi argues discusses ‘the different ways one can be a Black immigrant in America,’ *Homegoing* approaches this process of becoming Black as a migrant through the character of Marjorie.²⁰ In an interview Gyasi addresses the significance of *Americanah* as ‘one of the first books by one of these popular African immigrant writers to engage with diaspora this way’ and expresses her fascination by the novel’s ‘idea of opening up that conversation.’²¹ Gyasi is a testimony to the way Adichie opens the door for other younger Black African women writers to examine the politics of Blackness in the diaspora.

Elsie Augustave’s debut novel *The Roving Tree* (2013) is a bildungsroman, a coming-of-age narrative that explores the story of an adopted Haitian girl named Iris Odys whose hybridised diasporic subjectivity blurs the boundaries between Haiti, America, and Africa. Iris comes from a small remote Haitian village of Monn Nèg born of rape from a poor Haitian maid, Hagathe, and a mixed race French educated father, Brahimi. When Iris reaches the age of five, Hagathe decides to give Iris for adoption to an affluent white American family for a better life. Iris moves with Margret who is an anthropologist and John who is an art gallery owner to New York where she lives with the couple and a sister named Cynthia. The novel’s setting opens

¹⁹Aretha Phiri, ‘Expanding Black subjectivities in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*,’ in *Cultural Studies*, 31. 1 (2016), 121-141, (p.137), <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2016.1232422>> [accessed 19 March 2022].

²⁰Yaa Gyasi quoted in David Peterson Del Mar, *African, American: From Tarzan to Dreams from My Father-Africa in the US Imagination* (London: Zed Books, 2017), p.308.

²¹ Gyasi “Yaa Gyasi: Homegoing/ Her Debut Novel, the Legacy of Slavery and the Importance of History” (2017), *Foyles* [YouTube] < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yax0ojFB92k>> [accessed 24 March 2022].

between two different worlds, Haiti under the rule of François Duvalier, and early sixties America during the peak of the Civil Rights Movement.

Telling her story from beyond the grave, the novel is a first-person account of Iris's migratory experience and her struggle to belong in America as a result of the straddling between her mother country Haiti, her African roots and her country of adoption America. From a young age Iris faces complex identity issues while navigating her Blackness and adapting to the American culture that is shaped by systemic racism. Her quest for identity and her family's home and roots leads her to visit her village in Haiti; however, this quest takes her as far as Africa. Augustave focuses on a narrative that addresses racism and cultural heritage employing folktale, spirits and Vodou mystical rituals.²² In an attempt to reconnect with her heritage, Iris turns to African dancing which she later considers for a career. Her passion for this type of dancing and her curiosity about the continent of her ancestry eventually leads Iris to accept a job as a dance instructor in Zaire.²³ While working in the Art Institute in Zaire, Iris meets a Commissioner of State named Citoyen Bolingo whom she

²² Mambo Chita Tann defines Haitian Vodou as 'the ancestral magical practice of people descended from and/or influenced by the Vodou Priesthood of West Africa.' According to Tann, Haitian Vodou is crucial for Haitians and the Haitian culture, and it is part of their 'living, breathing, [and] growing experience.' Mambo Chita Tann, *Haitian Vodou: An Introduction to Haiti's Indigenous Spiritual Tradition* (Minnesota: Llewellyn Publications, 2012). p.13, p.2. In the literature of the diaspora, many Black women writers have been using religious folklore and Vodou in writing their fiction. One of the early significant names among Black women diaspora writers who have been using Vodou in their writing is Zora Neale Hurston. As several critics agree, Hurston is one of the first Black women whose writing is concerned with folk religion and that she became a source of influence for the coming generations of Black women writers in diaspora. Scholars such as Tammie Jenkins argues that Hurston's writing paved the way for the interest into African-based religions including Haitian Vodou. See Tammie Jenkins, 'Writing Vodou Into Literature: Exploring Diasporic Religious Symbols and Lore in Zora Neale Hurston's "Sweet" and Jonah's Gourd Vine,' in *Journal of Africana Religions*, 4.2 (2016), 215-224, (p.215), < <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/jafrirel.4.2.0215>> [accessed 6 April 2020]. Cathy Peppers maintains that 'it was Zora Neale Hurston (1901-1960) who become the first African-American authority on black folklore,' in which 'her recovery of folk traditions [...] inspired her own influential body of literary writing, establishing a spiritual authority for later African-American women writers.' Indeed, Hurston plays a major role in promoting the use of religious folklore in diaspora Black women's writing. Vodou continues to appear in Black womens's writing such as that of Edwidge Danticat *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) and Augustave's novel. However, for the premise of this chapter I will not be focusing on her use of Vodou in the novel, and I propose her employment of Vodou and folklore tradition as further research.

²³ Zaire is The Democratic Republic of The Congo.

develops a relationship with which leads to a potential marriage. After many events that unfold during their relationship, the novel ends with the death of Iris after giving birth to Bolingo's child Zati in Zaire.

The bildungsroman genre allows Augustave to portray the complexities of her protagonist's experience with grappling multiple cultural identities while growing up as a Black Haitian woman in America. Augustave's work is one of the few novels on Haitian adoptees in America that contributes to the visibility of this marginalised experience in the American mainstream that is not commonly written about in Haitian fiction published in America. This seems to affect the visibility of Augustave's own novel that is not as widely read nor critically studied in comparison to other popular migrant bildungsroman novels written by contemporary Haitian women writers in America such as Edwidge Danticat's *Behind The Mountains* (2002) or her earliest acclaimed text *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994), though *The Roving Tree* has been published almost a decade ago.²⁴ Augustave writes within a genre that has been revised by many earliest Caribbean women writers in America including Merle Hodge's *Crick Crack Monkey* (1970), Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* (1985) and *Lucy* (1990), Michelle Cliff's *Abeng* (1984), and M. NourbeSe Philip's *Harriet's Daughter* (1988). In her 1968 article 'One Mother, Two Daughters: The Afro-American and the Afro-Caribbean Female Bildungsroman,' the Jamaican scholar Geta LeSeur discusses bildungsroman as 'novels of girlhood' as they

²⁴ Edwidge Danticat's work is one of the most studied Haitian Bildungsroman in contemporary literary studies, See Jo Collins, 'Novels of Transformation and Transplantation: The Postcolonial Bildungsroman and Haitian American Youth in Danticat's *Behind the Mountains* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory*,' in *Wasafiri*, 27.4 (2012), 27-34 <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02690055.2012.714117> > [accessed November 4 2022]. For recently published works see Gonçalo Cholang, *Reconfigurations of the Bildungsroman: Taking Refuge from Violence in Kincaid, Danticat, Hooks, and Morrison* (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2022). During the research I have done on Elsie Augustave's text I have found few to non-scholarly articles. The few works done on her text include book reviews which I return to in analysis, dissertations, and online interviews.

normally start with the protagonist childhood to tell narratives about 'growing up black'.²⁵ Later, in *Ten is the Age of Darkness: The Black Bildungsroman* (1995), LeSeur uses the term 'Black bildungsroman' to differentiate between the narratives by white writers and those written by 'African, African American, and African West Indian writers.'²⁶ As leSeur argues, the protagonist of a 'Black bildungsroman' deals with 'dual cultures,' 'the sense of "two-ness," of belonging to a minority group and being female,' and struggle with 'race, color and class' which impact 'the child's consciousness.'²⁷ Augustave's novel addresses the characteristics of the Black bildungsroman with Iris oscillating between different cultures and the complications of living as a Black woman in America.

Augustave's novel turns our sight to the Caribbean, which Carole Boyce Davies' remind us is 'a place of constant new birth, consistent destruction and regeneration, tearing down and making over, an ongoing site of transformation.'²⁸ The novel is set between Haiti, America and Africa and Iris's childhood chapters are set in Haiti during the totalitarian regime of François Duvalier; therefore, understanding Haiti's history is crucial for the contextualisation of Augustave's text. First, I will briefly refer to Haiti's history with the slave trade and its independence from the French colonisation. Prior to its independence in 1804, Haiti was a former French colony under the name of Saint-Domingue. By the late of the 1780s Saint Domingue became the main destination of the Atlantic slave trade with an estimated enslaved population of almost as large as that of America. At the time, as David Geggus describes, Haiti was an economic 'powerhouse' of the Atlantic exceeding the exports of The

²⁵ Geta LeSeur, 'One Mother, Two Daughters: The Afro-American and the Afro-Caribbean Female Bildungsroman,' *The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research*, 17.2 (1986), 26-33, (p.26-27), <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00064246.1986.11414396>> [accessed 6 November 2022].

²⁶ LeSeur, *Ten is the Age of Darkness: The Black Bildungsroman* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1995), p.18-19.

²⁷ LeSeur, 'One Mother, Two Daughters,' p.26.

²⁸ Davies, *Caribbean Spaces: Escapes from Twilight Zones* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), p.33.

United States despite being as big as the state of Maryland.²⁹ As Geggus mentions, the slave uprising (the Haitian revolution) between 1791 and 1808 led to an independent Black State of Haiti, thus becoming the first state after The United States to get independence from a European colonial power.³⁰ During the years of revolution, enslaved Haitians forced the French colonial commissioner to abolish slavery, thus with its unprecedented victory, Haiti became the first slave-owning state to abolish slavery and to illegalise racial discrimination.³¹ The success of the Haitian revolution had a widespread affect as it inspired slave unrest and resistance across the Americas.³² Its impact on the Black diaspora also lies in its precedence in influencing anti-slavery and decolonisation narratives and the future of race and slavery. From Augustave's novel Haiti is an interesting cultural site that plays an important role in the formation of Iris's identity and story.

1-Black Feminist Theorisations of Home and Migration in the Diaspora

Since this study is built on Black feminist intersectional framework, it is worthwhile to first lay out the foregrounding frameworks and trajectories upon which I build my critical thoughts in reading the novels. I will build on Black feminists' critical accounts on diaspora and home in conjunction with those on gender, racism, and slavery. In her 1994 ground-breaking *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migration of the Subject*, Davies presents a model that positions Black women's migrant and diasporic experiences at the heart of the African diaspora studies by focusing on Afro-diasporic women's literature. Davies proposes the notion of 'migratory

²⁹ David Geggus, *The Haitian Revolution: A Documentary History*, Ed by and trans by David Geggus (Hackett Publishing Company: Indianapolis and Cambridge), p. xi.

³⁰ Geggus, p. xi.

³¹ Geggus, p. xi.

³² Geggus, p. xi.

subjectivity' that focuses on movement as a way to approach Black women's writing cross-culturally across the African diaspora:

If we see Black women's subjectivity as a migratory subjectivity existing in multiple locations, then we can see how their work, their presences traverse all of the geographical/ national boundaries instituted to keep our dislocations in place.³³

Davies locates the Black woman migrant's subjectivity beyond fixed locations and national affiliation. She urges to read Black women's writing 'as a series of boundary crossings and not as a fixed, geographical, ethnically or nationally bound category of writing.'³⁴ In relation to Black women's writing and the concept of home, Davies maintains that 'the rejection of home or the longing for home became motivating factors' in the rewriting of home that is caused by 'the desire for home.'³⁵ Davies notes that in discourses of home and exile other categories should be considered including those of race and gender: 'it is the way both home and exile are constructed as flat, monolithic categories that demands the multiple articulations of class, race, gender, sexuality and other categories and identities.'³⁶ Following Judith Butler, Davies addresses the convergence of race and gender by arguing that 'the category of Black women, or a woman of color, exists as multiple performances of race and gender and sexuality based on the particular cultural, historical, geographical, class communities' in which she exists.³⁷ That is to say, such Black women are located within set of structures and identities that are multi-layered with race and gender as well as culture.

³³ Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity, Migrations of the Subject* (London and New York, Routledge, 1994), p.4.

³⁴ Davies, p. 4.

³⁵ Davies, p.113.

³⁶ Davies, p.20

³⁷ Davies, p.8.

Davies's 'migratory subjectivity' helps reading Adichie's novel as it is exemplified in her model on migration that presents a Black woman migrant moving between two contemporary spaces of America and Nigeria. Davies's work allows me to read Adichie, Gyasi and Augustave's text as boundary crossing writings beyond borders and single locations to create conversations between the writers themselves and their works. Therefore, Davies is key to my research because she encourages a 'cross-cultural or comparative approach' in studying these writers 'as an important way of advancing our understandings' of their writing.³⁸ It is therefore, with this comparative approach that brings together different scholarship of intersectional Black feminism, and diaspora studies into conversation that this analysis on home will generate a different reading of these Black women's writings on migration.

Throughout her decade spanning scholarship, hooks frequently addresses the concept of home as crucial to her thinking. In her essay 'Homeplace: A Site of Resistance,' in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (1990) hooks utilises her personal experience to highlight the significance of home as a domestic sphere or 'homeplace' for Black women within their communities:

This task of making homeplace was not simply a matter of Black women providing service; it was about the construction of a safe place where black people could affirm one another and by so doing heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination. [...] This task of making a homeplace, of making home a community of resistance, has been shared

³⁸ Davies, *Black Women*, p.8.

by black women globally, especially black women in white supremacist societies.³⁹

I argue that hooks's view raises a key Black feminist issue that concerns Black women and home which refutes the sexist and racist designation of Black women as domestic 'home serving' providers.⁴⁰ Instead hooks approaches home as 'a community of resistance' since 'Black women resisted by making homes' and this was shared by all Black women in their different diasporic locations.⁴¹ hooks' observation is applicable to my analysis of the texts' representations of Ifemelu and Iris's resistance to the intersectional systems of race and gender that interfere in the process of home making in their new locations.

hooks further addresses the meaning of home for her and the shifting locations, and the influence of displacement on the exact definition of this construct:

I had to leave that space I called home to move beyond boundaries, yet I needed also to return there [...] indeed the very meaning of "home" changes with experience of decolonization, of radicalization. At times, home is nowhere. At times, one knows only extreme estrangement and alienation. Then home is no longer just one place. It is locations. Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and everchanging perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference.⁴²

³⁹ hooks, *Yearning; Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), p.42.

⁴⁰ hooks, p. 42.

⁴¹ hooks, p.42.

⁴² hooks, p.148.

Within this 'nowhereness' of home inflicted by movement, hooks stresses that the return to what one considers to be the home is needed, yet for hooks the idea of home is not exclusively physical instead it is a fluid construct that is influenced by different experiences.⁴³ Similarly, in *Belonging*, sharing her experience of leaving her 'girlhood' home in Kentucky to start university in California, hooks reveals how this experience helped her to understand that her 'sense and sensibility were deeply influenced by the geography of place.'⁴⁴ hooks further reconfirms the idea of home as not being related to one specific location: '[h]ome was the place where the me of me mattered. Home was the place I longed for, it was not where I lived.'⁴⁵ Therefore, this non-connectedness to home, hooks continues, inevitably creates a state of psychological turbulences:

This is what the experience of exile can do, change your mind, utterly transform one's perception of the world of home. The differences geographical location imprinted on my psyche and habits of being became more evident away from home.⁴⁶

In admitting the struggle resulting from movement and the crisis of belonging that the condition imposes on the subject, hooks stresses that '[l]eaving home evoked extreme feelings of abandonment and loss. It was like dying.'⁴⁷ Despite returning to home which is a 'a rite of passage' to confirm that she 'still belonged,' hooks emphasises that these returns to home 'almost always left me torn: I wanted to stay but I needed to leave, to be endlessly running away from home.'⁴⁸ Following hooks, I look at the extent to which home becomes a

⁴³ (Emphasis mine).

⁴⁴ hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, p.9.

⁴⁵ hooks, p.215.

⁴⁶ hooks, p.13.

⁴⁷ hook, p.18.

⁴⁸ hooks, p.17.

representation of multiple places and a flexible space open for different interpretations in Adichie's novel. hooks' discussion of home helps to approach the Black feminist themes in the text significantly the intersections of race and gender and their relation to home making.

I build my reading of Augustave's text from the Haitian Canadian-American scholar Myriam J. A. Chancy who addresses the question of home in her 1997 *Safe Spaces: Afro-Caribbean Women Writers in Exile* which is an analysis of Black female characters in a selection of Afro-Caribbean women writers.⁴⁹ Chancy observes that home is not limited to a specific location, but instead it is a state of mind that the individual returns to for understanding the self.⁵⁰

[H]ome is not only a place but also a state of self-understanding to which we return time and time again in order to see and know ourselves for who we are as we prevail against the erasure implicit in the process of assimilation we are forced to endure in Western societies, which openly violate and denigrate Black women as a class.⁵¹

The exile of Black women as Chancy puts it, can occur for a number of reasons including 'dehumanization because of color [and] gender' in one's homeland.⁵² This means that for Black women migration can be the consequence of racial and gendered oppression in their original communities. However, when they migrate to white Western societies, they are faced with a similar oppression that calls for a 'return time and time again' to what she terms

⁴⁹ Myriam J.A. Chancy is a literary scholar and a fiction writer. Her scholarly work focuses mostly on African-Caribbean women's writing of the diaspora such as *Framing Silence* (1997). Her recent novel *What Storm, What Thunder* was published in 2021.

⁵⁰ Chancy, *Safe Spaces: Afro-Caribbean Women Writers in Exile* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1997), p.2.

⁵¹ Chancy, p. xxii.

⁵² Chancy, p.2.

as a 'safe space' to protect their identities from 'erasure.'⁵³ However, it must be argued that this safe space is not guaranteed with a physical return to home. This is what Chancy further confirms in her study when speaking specifically of Afro-Caribbean women whose condition of the exile:

[I]s decisively *selective* in its assertion of a recuperated and rearticulated identity that is both individual and communal, here and there, of self and other, in ways in which reaffirm origin while the self always remains cognizant of the fissuring, the inability to return to one's homeland.⁵⁴

Chancy argues that there are four features Afro-Caribbean Black women in exile are forced to face which are '*alienation, self-definition, recuperation, and return.*'⁵⁵ Chancy maintains that to resist alienation in the adopted countries these Black women need first to recuperate their history which leads them to self-definition.⁵⁶ Chancy continues that returning home can be 'an actual return to the Caribbean' or a symbolic or a metaphorical return 'achieved through an affirmation of an alternative history.'⁵⁷ Following Chancy, I will argue that Augustave's novel illustrates these four processes to present Iris's journey towards recovering her Haitian and African origins.

Since I argue that Gyasi's novel engages with reclaiming the history of slavery, I turn to Black scholars who have been working on this project like Saidiya V. Hartman and Dionne Brand. As I will illustrate in the discussion, among the tropes of the history of slavery that Gyasi invokes in her novel are the door of no return and the Middle Passage. In her *Map to*

⁵³ Chancy, *Safe Spaces*, p.81.

⁵⁴ Chancy, p.6. (Italics in original).

⁵⁵ Chancy, p.xxi. (Italics in original).

⁵⁶ Chancy, p.xxii.

⁵⁷ Chancy, p.xxii.

the Door of No Return (2011), Brand explores the door of no return 'as a site of belonging or unbelonging.'⁵⁸ Dionne defines this concept as '[t]he door out of which Africans were captured, loaded onto ships heading for the New World. It was the door of a million exits multiplied.'⁵⁹ This door, Brand continues, 'is not mere physicality' but also 'a spiritual location' and 'a psychic destination.'⁶⁰ Brand argues that the return to the gateway that signifies the beginning of rupture is complex: '[s]ince leaving was never voluntary, return was, and still may be, an intention, however deeply buried. There as it says no way in; no return.'⁶¹ In her article 'The Time of slavery' (2002) on 'roots tourism' in Ghana, Hartman questions 'the sufficiency' of using the term 'return' to describe the diasporans' transatlantic journey to Africa arguing that it is a failed concept that 'attempts to mend the irreparable.'⁶² In *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2006) an anti-memoir that reclaims the story of her great-great-grandmother named Polly, an enslaved woman in Alabama, Hartman extends her discussion on return and the rupture between Africa and America. Hartman argues that while there is a hope that the '*return*' to Africa 'could resolve the old dilemmas, [...] the disappointment is that there is no going back to a former condition.'⁶³ In her novel, Gyasi borrows from such scholars whose works reclaim these histories by returning to the tropes of slavery and discussing ruptures between Africa and its diaspora, however, I argue that unlike Brand and Hartman, Gyasi offers a diasporic model that opens possibility of return and reconciliation between Africa and its diaspora.

⁵⁸ Dionne Brand, *A Map to The Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2011), p.6.

⁵⁹ Brand, p.19.

⁶⁰ Brand, p.1.

⁶¹ Brand, p.1.

⁶² Saidiya V. Hartman, 'The Time of Slavery,' in *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 10. 4, (2002), 757-777, (p.759), <<https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/39111>> [accessed 10 September 2022].

⁶³ Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007), p.100. (Italics in original).

2-Questions of Blackness, Home, and Return in *Americanah*:

Adichie's protagonist Ifemelu migrates to The United States to pursue her higher education. Through the flashbacks chapters it becomes clear that Ifemelu's urge to leave Nigeria is mainly influenced by the overall political climate and the state of universities in Nigeria during the 1990s:

Strikes now were common. In the Newspapers, university lecturers listed their complaints, the agreements that would trampled in the dust by government men whose own children were schooling abroad. Campuses were emptied, classrooms drained of life. Students hoped for short strikes, because they could not hope to have no strike at all, everyone was talking about leaving.⁶⁴

Even when the strikes were over Ifemelu 'dreamed of America,' which led her to apply for a visa and join her aunt Aunty Uju in Philadelphia who unlike Ifemelu had to flee during the military rule in Nigeria. Adichie describes the reason for the migration of Ifemelu, Obinze and other characters like their friends Emenike and Ginika who leave Nigeria for better life as 'the need to escape from the oppressive lethargy of choicelessness.'⁶⁵ This means that though people like Ifemelu and her friends were:

Raised well-fed and watered but mired in dissatisfaction,[they were] conditioned from birth to look towards somewhere else, eternally convinced that real lives happened in that somewhere else, [...] none of them starving, or raped, or from burned villages, but merely hungry for choice and certainty.⁶⁶

One of the major points that the novel highlights is that migration for the contemporary generation of Nigerian migrants is connected to globalisations and the nature of the postcolonial state. Adichie presents this context for Ifemelu's migration story to illustrate that Ifemelu is not a representative of African immigration as she is not forced to leave Nigeria

⁶⁴ Adichie, *Americanah* (London: Forth Estate, 2013), p.98.

⁶⁵ Adichie, p.276.

⁶⁶ Adichie, p.276.

due to hunger, war or forced displacement, instead she is seeking a scholarship to improve her quality of life. Adichie's migration experience in America is similar to that of Ifemelu who also is a privileged educated middle-class woman who reaches the 'somewhere else' in America and experiences a successful migration that even after her return to Nigeria is still able to thrive professionally.⁶⁷

Americanah opens in contemporary America where Ifemelu reflects on her decision to return to Nigeria in a hair salon after living in America for thirteen years which results in a career and a green card, making her migration story a successful one in broad understandings of what would constitute success. Despite her advantaged migratory experience, Ifemelu returns to Nigeria as she misses 'home' and because in America she is not able to be her authentic self which felt like a 'cement on her soul' that brought to her:

Amorphous longings, shapeless desires, brief imaginary glints of other lives she could be living, that over the months melded into a piercing homesickness. She scoured Nigerian websites, Nigerian profiles on Facebook, Nigerian blogs, and each click brought yet another story of a young person who had recently moved back home [...] They were living her life. Nigeria became where she was supposed to be, the only place she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil.⁶⁸

The homesickness that Ifemelu feels despite her long years of being in America explains the relationship she has with America as a 'home.' Ifemelu experiences what many scholars term as 'estrangement' that influences her ability to 'sink her roots' in America and live the life she wants which prevents her from feeling a sense of being at home. In her discussion of home as a shifting and contradictory construct that can be a dynamic entity and a series of locations, hooks argues that for the diasporic subject home can be 'nowhere' which creates for the

⁶⁷Adichie quoted in Emma Brockes, 'Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: 'Don't We All Write About Love?' (2014) *The Guardian* <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/mar/21/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-interview> > [accessed 29 December 2022].

⁶⁸ Adichie, p.6.

individual a sense of 'alienation' and 'estrangement.'⁶⁹ Like hooks who presents home for the diasporic subject as fostering a sense of estrangement and dispersal, Ifemelu's relation to home both in America and to Nigeria, when she later returns, is depicted as a paradoxical space of alienation. Likewise, In *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (2000) Sara Ahmed argues that migration 'can be understood as a process of estrangement, a process of becoming estranged from that which was inhabited as home.'⁷⁰ Migrants, thus, become the 'strangers' whose bodies are 'out of place in the everyday world they inhabit.'⁷¹ In the example of Ifemelu the narrative of estrangement is initiated not only by the change of location and culture, but also when she encounters the dominant structures of racism in America with her intersectional positioning as a Black woman. Adichie addresses one of the main points in her novel which is that migration and race are inextricably linked for an African Black woman migrant in America.

Ifemelu faces her first experience with estrangement in America when she discovers her Blackness which she was unaware of while in Nigeria: 'I came from a country where race was not an issue; I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America.'⁷² Davies defines Blackness as 'a color-coded, politically based term of marking and definition which only has meaning when questions of racial difference and, in particular, white supremacy are deployed.'⁷³ Ifemelu's identity instantly becomes racialised, and as George Jerry Sefa Dei argues, the process of racialisation is 'a historical construction' that 'allows for

⁶⁹ hooks, *Yearning*, p.148.

⁷⁰ Ahmed, Sara, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2000), p.92.

⁷¹ Ahmed, p.78.

⁷² Adichie, *Americanah*, p.290.

⁷³ Davies, *Black women*, p.7.

white supremacist systems of power to suppress minorities as unequal and different.⁷⁴ The racialisation of Ifemelu is the main thesis that Adichie engages with to address the African migrants' clash with the legacies of slavery and their instant positioning within America's definition of Blackness.

One of the incidents of racialisation occurs when Ifemelu is working as a babysitter for a wealthy white couple in the suburbs of Philadelphia and a carpet-cleaner mistakes Ifemelu for the owner of the house. Adichie reveals that she inspired the incident from a similar experience that happened to her as a babysitter in Philadelphia.⁷⁵ In the novel, the carpet-cleaner thinks Ifemelu 'was a homeowner, and she was not what he had expected to see in this grand stone house with the white pillars.'⁷⁶ When he realises that she was not the homeowner Ifemelu observes 'the swift disappearance of his hostility' and the way his 'face sank into a grin' comforted that '[s]he, too, was the help. The universe was once arranged as it should be.'⁷⁷ Adichie addresses the practice of discursive stereotyping and the idea of social determinism that positions Black people in the lower class as 'the help,' something she criticises later in Ifemelu's blog on class which I will refer to further. Another example is illustrated in her first encounter in university, this time Ifemelu experiences racism because of her accent by a woman named Cristina Tomas who talks to Ifemelu in a manner suggesting that Ifemelu does not understand English: 'I. Need. You. To. Fill. Out. A. Couple. Of. Forms. Do. You. Understand. How To. Fill. These. Out?'⁷⁸ Ifemelu 'realized that Cristina Tomas was speaking like that because of *her*, her foreign accent, and she felt for a moment like a small

⁷⁴ George Jerry Sefa Dei, *Anti-colonialism and Education: The Politics of Resistance*, ed by. George Jerry Sefa Dei and Arlo Kempf, (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2006), p.10.

⁷⁵ Adichie quoted in Emma Brockes, 'Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: 'Don't We All Write About Love?'

⁷⁶ Adichie, *Americanah*, p.166.

⁷⁷ Adichie, p.116.

⁷⁸ Adichie, p.133.

child, lazy-limbed and drooling.⁷⁹ Ifemelu ‘shrank like a dried leaf’ after Cristina’s mocking reply “‘I bet you do” [...] “I just don’t know how *well*” though Ifemelu confirms with “‘I speak English.”⁸⁰ Ifemelu’s Nigerian accent brings Ifemelu, as Jennifer Terry maintains, ‘face-to-face with her otherness [...] demonstrating the intersection of her designation as non-American with her race.’⁸¹ The resulting estrangement creates within Ifemelu a desire to seek assimilation; thus, following the incident Ifemelu ‘began to practice an American accent’ and dedicated her effort to learn American cultural codes.⁸²

Ifemelu believes that the accent is the barrier between her and belonging in America, therefore, she decides to adopt an American accent. Adichie describes how Ifemelu becomes ‘[h]ungered to understand everything about America, to wear a new, knowing skin right away.’⁸³ Ifemelu eventually succeeds in acquiring the accent to conceal her Nigerian tongue:

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 the lip, the curling of tongue.⁸⁴

The suggestiveness of the title *Americanah*, which circulates throughout the novel to refer to the way the migrant adopts the different cultural aspects of America is manifested first in the

⁷⁹ Adichie, p.113.

⁸⁰ Adichie, p.113, p.134. (Italics in original).

⁸¹ Jennifer Terry, “‘She was Miraculously Neutral’”: Feeling, Ethics and Metafiction in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*,’ in *Reading Contemporary Black British and African American Women Writers: Race, Ethics, Narrative Form*, ed by. Jean Wyatt and Sheldon George, (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2020). pp. 33-50, (p.39).

⁸² Adichie, *Americanah*, p.134.

⁸³ Adichie, p.135.

⁸⁴ Adichie, p.173.

aspect of language. The change of her accent marks what Rose A. Sackeyfio calls the start of Ifemelu's 'conscious *doubling* of her identity.'⁸⁵ The 'double consciousness' that Ifemelu develops as Sackeyfio argues is the migrant's coping mechanism against the vulnerability 'to clashes of cultures, alienation and dislocation.'⁸⁶ Prior to 'Americanising' her tongue, Ifemelu critiques Auntie Uju's way of perfecting her accent around white Americans. Ifemelu describes the way Auntie Uju speaks to her son Dike in front of a cashier:

"Dike, put it back," Auntie 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.⁸⁷

As Homi K. Bhabha maintains in his seminal 1994 *The Location of Culture* that 'the uncanny fluency of another's language' which is part of 'gathering the signs of approval and acceptance' is significant in the migratory experience.⁸⁸ Ifemelu also notes the Americanised way Auntie Uju pronounces her name '*you-joo instead of oo-joo*' which can be understood via Angela Clark-Oates et al's analysis of immigration and 'naming practices.'⁸⁹ Clark-Oates et al observe that issues like racism and racial discrimination 'can also contribute to naming practices [...] in the face of discrimination, immigrants change not only their language, but also their names.'⁹⁰ Clark-Oates et al confirm that 'to use one's name is to use one's language'

⁸⁵ Rose A. Sackeyfio, 'Revisiting Double Consciousness and Relocating the Self in Americanah,' in *A Companion to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie*, ed. by Earnest N. Emenyonu, (New York: James Currey, 2017). pp.213-227, (p.217), (Italics in original).

⁸⁶ Sackeyfio, p.216. Sackeyfio is referring to the work of W.E.B. Dubois's work on 'double consciousness.'

⁸⁷ Sackeyfio, p.108. (Italics in original).

⁸⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York : Routledge, 1994), p.139.

⁸⁹ Adichie, *Americanah*, p.173. (Italics in original).

⁹⁰ Angela Clark-Oates et al, 'Understanding the Life Narratives of Immigrants Through naming Practices,' in *Rhetoric's of Names and Naming*, ed. by Star Medzerian Vanguri, (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp.89-101, (p.96).

as both are 'related to identity.'⁹¹ Though Aunty Uju retains her actual name, the discrimination she faces as a migratory subject affects the way she pronounces it which as a practice of name changing, is a doubling of identity.

Such act of imitation of different aspects of the dominating culture is dubbed in postcolonial studies as 'mimicry.' In his essay 'Of Mimicry and Man,' Bhabha presents a key concept of mimicry in his theory of ambivalence. Bhabha argues that 'the colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference.'⁹² Identity Bhabha asserts, in a colonial context 'can neither be 'original'– by virtue of the act of repetition that constructs it –nor 'identical'– by virtue of the difference that defines it.'⁹³ Thus, referring to the certainty of the struggle of negotiating identity with the presence of dual cultures. As Bill Ashcroft et al simply put it, Bhabha's term 'describes the complex mix of attraction and repulsion that characterizes the relationship between colonizer and colonized.'⁹⁴ Bhabha defines mimicry as 'the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as *a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*.'⁹⁵ In other words, for Bhabha mimicry refers to the colonized subject's imitation and adoption of the culture of the colonizer.

Ifemelu discusses America's racial relations in seventeen controversial blogs that she uses to articulate her views on racism in America. The blog is a significant narrative feature where Adichie uses it as a social and political satire to address and create conversations around the

⁹¹ Clark-Oates et al, p.98.

⁹² Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p.153.

⁹³ Bhabha, p.153.

⁹⁴ Bill Ashcroft et al. *Key Concepts in Post-colonial Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 12.

⁹⁵ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p.122. (Italics in original).

country's complex Intra-racial dynamics. To use Mary Jane Androne's description, the blog discusses 'a litany of the common clichés, myths and stereotypes a black person encounters on a daily basis.'⁹⁶ Ifemelu's position as an outsider within being 'writing from the outside' as a Nigerian and a Black woman who experiences racism, enables her to comment on the constant estrangement Black migrants are positioned within.⁹⁷ The blog, thus, is a form of racial solidarity among those of African descent from the new and the old diaspora. While the blog contains what Yogita describes a 'manual of how to think about racism, ' it signifies Ifemelu's understanding of America's complex social strata.⁹⁸ Ifemelu names her blog '*Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black.*'⁹⁹ The blog which incorporates both '*American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes)*' and '*Non-American Black*' works, as Phiri suggests, to 'enrich, and expand discourse(s) around blackness.'¹⁰⁰ The title alludes to the commemoration of the historical day of the emancipation of enslaved Africans in America known as Juneteenth.¹⁰¹ It indicates the expansion of the notion of being Black to transatlantic Blackness where both Black immigrants and Black people in America occupy the same racial identity.

⁹⁶ Mary Jane Androne, 'Adichie's *Americanah*: A Migrant Bildungsroman,' in *A Companion to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie*, ed by. Earnest N. Emenyonu, (New York: James Currey, 2017). pp.229-243 (p.236)

⁹⁷ Adichie.p.336. for a discussion on the outsider within in *Americanah* see Shane A. McCoy, 'The "Outsider Within": Counter-narrative of the "New" African Diaspora in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013)' in *Journal of the African Literature Association*, 11.3 (2017), 279-294, (p.281).

<[tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21674736.2018.1424389](https://doi.org/10.1080/21674736.2018.1424389)> [accessed 30 January 2020].

⁹⁸ Yogita Goyal, 'Africa and the Black Atlantic,' in *Research in African Literatures*, 45.3 (2014), v-xxv, (p.xiv). <<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/555708>> [accessed 04 December 2021].

⁹⁹ Adichie, *Americanah*, p.4.

¹⁰⁰ Phiri, 'Expanding Black subjectivities,' p.125.

¹⁰¹ Juneteenth is a term that assembles the word June and nineteenth that commemorates the date of the emancipation of enslaved Africans in The United States in 19th of June 1865. See The Historical Legacy of Juneteenth, *Smithsonian* <<https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/historical-legacy-juneteenth>> [accessed 29 January 2023].

Adichie's novel discusses a new model of racial formation that is not exclusive to slavery or the Middle Passage. For example, in 'To my Fellow Non-American Blacks: In America, You are Black Baby' Ifemelu writes a didactic blog directed to Black immigrants about Blackness in America:

Dear No-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 moment of initiation into the Society of Former Negroes. Mine was in a class in undergrad when I was asked to give the black perspective, only I had no idea what that was. So I just made something up. And admit it—— you say "I'm not black" only because you know black is at the bottom of America's race ladder. And you want none of that.¹⁰²

Adichie's transnational take on Blackness 'Non-American Blacks' and 'American Blacks' through the blog creates a circuit between transnational Black identities, thus offering a diasporic dialogue on the meanings of Blackness. Scholars like Phiri sees that Adichie's blog deals with what Gilroy points as 'the problems of racialized ontology and identity-the tension between being and becoming black.'¹⁰³ This is further illustrated in the blog 'Understanding America for the Non-American Black: American Tribalism':

There's a ladder of racial hierarchy in America. White is always on top, specifically White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, otherwise known as WASP, and American Black is always on the bottom [...] (Or as that marvellous rhyme goes: if you're white, you're all right; if you're brown, stick around; if you're black, get back!).¹⁰⁴

With an ironic tone, Ifemelu addresses how race and class are problematically intertwined in America and the way Black immigrants are instantly positioned within this stratification.

¹⁰² Adichie, *Americanah*, p.220.

¹⁰³ Paul Gilroy quoted in Phiri, p.134.

¹⁰⁴ Adichie, p.184.

Adichie's approach to transnational Blackness recalls Davies's call to "representing" Blackness by arguing that Blackness:

[I]n operational terms, has more to do with a sometimes essentialized, tactical assertion as a counterpoint to overwhelming "whiteness" or Eurocentricity, which tries to pose itself as unmarked but its historically linked to technologies of destruction.¹⁰⁵

Davies asks us to question the term 'Black' as it is a white construction marked by historical white supremacy.¹⁰⁶ With the blog, Adichie is offering a dialogue between Ifemelu being African and the 'Blackness' she faces in America in the way that she unreluctantly positions the construction of the latter within the legacy of white 'America's debts' of 'slavery' and 'Jim Crow.'¹⁰⁷

In other blogs, Ifemelu uses everyday personal experiences to write about the microaggressions as a demonstration of Ifemelu's growth of political consciousness as a Black woman and Adichie's understanding of the complex construct of America's socio-racial relations.¹⁰⁸ In 'Sometimes in America Race is Class' Ifemelu states: '*[i]n America's public discourse, "Blacks" as a whole are often lumped with "Poor Whites." Not Poor Blacks and Poor Whites. But Blacks and Poor Whites. A curious thing indeed.*'¹⁰⁹ Ifemelu criticises the American discourse which is restricted within the Black/ white binary for locating Black people within single category of Blackness and being poor. Adichie borrows from the works of previous

¹⁰⁵ Davies, *Black Women*, p.8.

¹⁰⁶ Davies, pp.6-9.

¹⁰⁷ Adichie, p.326.

¹⁰⁸ For a recent general discussion of microaggression see Derald Wing Sue and Lisa Spanierman, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2020).

¹⁰⁹ Adichie, p.166. (Italics in original).

African American feminists' discussions on race and class such as Audre Lorde who argues that in America's economic stratification due to 'systemized oppression,' a group of people must occupy the position of 'the dehumanized inferior' which is 'made up of Black and Third world people, working-class people [...] and women.'¹¹⁰ As Patricia Hill Collins stresses, the problems faced by Black people in America are not only due to racism, 'class factors [are]equally important.'¹¹¹ Acknowledging the overlap of race with class difference, Adichie, as an African woman, presents a transnational model of Black feminism that is aware of the specific African American experience and how it affects contemporary Black immigration. In 'Job Vacancy in America——National Arbiter in Chief of "Who is Racist"' Ifemelu writes:

In America, Racism exists but racists are all gone. Racists belong to the past. Racists are the thin-lipped mean white people in the movies about the civil rights era. Here's the thing: the manifestation of racism has changed but the language has not.¹¹²

As Eva Rusk Knudsen and Ulla Rahbek maintain that such race posts 'function as a wedge between the post-racial American dream and hyper-racialized American realities.'¹¹³ With a similar sarcastic tone Adichie continues to debunk the myth of post-racial America, therefore, insisting on the need to sustain conversations around race:

Dear American Non-Black, if an American person is telling you about an experience about being Black, please do not eagerly bring up examples from your own life. [...] Don't say "We're tired of talking about race" or "the only race is the Human race." American Blacks too, are tired of talking about race, they wish they didn't have to. But shit keeps happening.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, p.114.

¹¹¹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p. 59.

¹¹² Adichie, p.315.

¹¹³ Eva Rusk Knudsen and Ulla Rahbek, *In Search of the Afropolitan: Encounters, Conversations, and Contemporary Diasporic African Literature* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016), p.247.

¹¹⁴ Adichie, pp.325-326.

In her 1995 *Killing Rage Ending Racism*, hooks addresses this idea of ‘the only race is the Human race’ by arguing that ‘the notion that we should all forsake attachment to race and/or cultural identity and be “just humans” within the framework of white supremacy’ means that Black people ‘must surrender their identities, beliefs and values and assimilate by adopting the values and beliefs of privileged-class whites.’¹¹⁵ Contemporary Black women writers such as Ijeoma Oluo reiterate similar Black feminists’ calls from the 90s in her 2018 *So You Want to Talk About Race*. Oluo argues that as Black people ‘we do not experience the world with only part of ourselves we cannot leave our racial identity at the door’ because Black people’s ‘racial identity is a part of them and it is interacting with the situation.’¹¹⁶ As Oluo stresses is that ‘it is difficult, if not possible to talk about race when we can’t even agree that something is about race,’ an argument that Adichie presents in the blog ‘In Understanding America for the Non-American Black: A Few Explanations of What Things Really Mean:’

Americans are most uncomfortable with race. If you are having a conversation with an American, and you want to discuss something racial that you find interesting, and the American says “Oh it’s simplistic to say it’s race, racism is complex,” it means they just want you to shut up already. Because of course racism is complex.¹¹⁷

While encouraging conversations around race, Adichie is aware of the complexity of such dialogues in America. Adichie’s extensive focus on such controversial discourse through an African woman character who addresses key Black feminist issues that have been presented

¹¹⁵ hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995), p.226.

¹¹⁶ Ijeoma Oluo, *So You Want to Talk About Race* (New York: Seal Press, [2018] 2019), p.16.

¹¹⁷ Adichie, p.350.

by African American women, to use Amber Lascelles phrase, represents 'traces of a collective Black feminist solidarity.'¹¹⁸

Adichie positions Ifemelu within the intersecting oppressions of her race and gender by addressing the issue of Black hair; thus, demonstrating Black feminist solidarity as one of the major concerns in her novel. The racial narrative that dominates Adichie's novel is intersectional as it exhibits the focus on the specific experiences of Black women with intersectional oppressions through the eye of a Black woman migrant. Adichie addresses the obligation Ifemelu feels to straighten her hair to be accepted in a job interview as a method of survival and assimilation in a society that has a long history with the politics of Black beauty. Ifemelu explains to her white American boyfriend Curt why it is difficult for her to go to the interview with her natural hair:

My full and cool hair would work if I were interviewing to be a backup singer in a jazz band, but I need to look professional for this interview, and professional means straight is best but if it's going to be curly then it has to be the white kind of curly, loose curls or, at worst, spiral curls but never kinky.¹¹⁹

Adichie's focus on politicised Black hair as Terry argues offers an 'examination of the stratifications within black and immigrant groups and racially structured U.S. society more

¹¹⁸ Amber Lascelles, 'We Should All Be *Radical* Feminists: A Review of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Contribution to Literature and Feminism,' in *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 57.6 (2021), 893-899, (p.897), <<https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2021.1900414>> [accessed 26 May 2021].

¹¹⁹ Adichie, p.204.

broadly.¹²⁰ Aunty Uju also informs Ifemelu on her own experiences with relaxing her hair in her attempts to find a position as a doctor:

Later she said, “I have to take my braids out for my interview and relax my hair. Kemi told me 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 have told me. You are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do if you want to succeed.”¹²¹

Ifemelu later discovers that her Aunty Uju’s knowledge on Black beauty in America is generational when her colleague Ruth advises her to ‘lose the braids and straighten your hair. Nobody says this stuff but it matters. We want you to get the job.’¹²² Ifemelu decides to adhere to the racialised social norms and relaxes her hair, thus, concealing her African identity as opposed to celebrating it. Relaxing her hair is not only about beauty and aesthetics, but for Ifemelu it is a part of her assimilation in the American culture and change of identity.

After losing her hair due to ‘relaxing’ it Ifemelu decides to ‘go natural’ and learns to accept it ‘she looked in the mirror, sank her fingers into her hair, dense and spongy and glorious, and could not imagine it any other way. That simply, she fell in love with her hair.’¹²³ To feel solidarity with other Black women, Ifemelu joins an online community for natural hair

¹²⁰ Terry, “‘She was Miraculously Neutral,’” p.45.

For more on the issue of hair in Adichie’s *Americanah* see Christina Cruz-Gutierrez, “‘Hairitage’ Matters Transitioning & The Third Wave Hair Movement in ‘Hair’, ‘Imitation’ & *Americanah*’ in *A Companion to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie*, ed. by Ernest N. Emenyonu, (New York: James Curry, 2017). pp.245-261 (p.245).

¹²¹ Adichie, p.119.

¹²² Adichie, *Americanah*, p.202.

¹²³ Adichie, p.208., p.213.

'HAPPILYKINKIYNAAPPY.COM' where Black women 'sculpted for themselves a virtual world where their coil, kinky, nappy, woolly hair was normal' with them Ifemelu 'fell into this world with a tumbling gratitude.'¹²⁴ Ifemelu does the same with her accent and decides to 'stop faking an American accent' and speaks with her Nigerian accent after she is praised by a man who tells her '[y]ou sound totally American.'¹²⁵ Ifemelu describes the guilt the compliment made her feel:

Only after she hung up did she begin to feel the stain of burgeoning shame spreading all over her, for thanking him, for crafting words "You sound American" into a garland that she hung around her neck. Why was it a compliment, an accomplishment to sound American?¹²⁶

hooks maintains that 'one confronts and accepts dispersal and fragmentation as part of the construction of a new world order that reveals more fully where we are, who we are, who we can become.'¹²⁷ Ifemelu's 'burgeoning shame' of sounding American reveals her growth of consciousness and understanding of her true self and that her cultural identity can occupy a space in her migratory subjectivity. Within this state of growth of consciousness, Ifemelu decides to close her blog later because '[t]he more she wrote, the less sure she became. Each post scraped off yet one more scale of self until she felt naked and false.'¹²⁸ All these factors and the racial discrimination and estrangement created within Ifemelu 'layer after layer of

¹²⁴ Adichie, p.212.

¹²⁵ Adichie, p.175.

¹²⁶ Adichie, p.175.

¹²⁷ hooks, *Yearning*, p.148.

¹²⁸ Adichie, *Americanah*, p.5.

discontent [that] had settled in her, and formed a mass that now propelled her' to return to live in Nigeria and abandon her successful life in the U.S.¹²⁹

When Ifemelu returns to Nigeria 'happy simply to sit and look at the walls that had witnessed her childhood,' she discovers that being in America away from home made her romanticise homecoming to Nigeria:¹³⁰

[S]he had the dizzying sensation of falling, falling into the new person she had become, falling into the strange familiar. Had it always been like this or had it changed so much in her absence? [...] Now she struggled to grasp the unspoken. When had shopkeepers become so rude? Had buildings in Lagos had this patina of decay? And when did it become a city of people quick to beg and too enamoured of free things.'¹³¹

What Ifemelu is questioning is not the home she finds but the home she builds in her imagination. Ifemelu's condition is a salient characteristic of the diasporic subject as she tries to create meaning of the memories she imagined of home. Ifemelu's notion of home is pushed against the limits of cartographies and nation-states and creates back and forth between the home Nigeria and America. Her condition, I argue, portrays what Bhabha frames as the 'unhomely.' Bhabha maintains that although the 'unhomely' is a 'paradigmatic colonial and post-colonial condition, it has a resonance that can be heard distinctly, if erratically in fictions that negotiate the powers of cultural difference in a range of transhistorical sites.'¹³² In his 1992 essay 'The World and the Home' Bhabha draws on Freud's concept of the 'uncanny' or

¹²⁹ Adiche, p.7.

¹³⁰ Adichie, p.397.

¹³¹ Adichie, p.285.

¹³² Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p.9.

the 'unheimlich' which he presents in his 1919 essay 'The Uncanny.'¹³³ Bhabha uses the term to argue that the unhomely as a word:

Captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world in an unhallowed place. To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the "unhomely" be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and the public spheres.¹³⁴

In other words, for Bhabha 'the unhomely' does not mean the homelessness or that opposite state of having a home, yet it is the state of knowing that the lines between the home and the world become blurred. Ifemelu comments on the 'unhomely' state of Nigerians who after their short visits to Nigeria they return to America and 'fight on the internet over their mythologies of home because home was now a blurred place between here and there.'¹³⁵ Ifemelu's view as an insider on other Nigerian immigrants refers home as being a mythical concept in which displacement creates a new definition to their idea of home, a concept built differently in their minds. However, they carry back the change that was inflicted on their identities by movement; thus, un-romanticising homecoming.

The conversation that Ifemelu has with a group of other returnees discussing food in Nigerian restaurants as a reference to missing American food '[t]hey have the kinds of things we can eat,' brings to Ifemelu a sense of 'unease' because '[s]he was comfortable here, and

¹³³ As it appears in the translated essay used in this discussion, the term 'unheimlich' in its English literal translation means 'the unhomely.' Freud argues that 'the unhomely' or 'the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar.' Freud suggests that the term 'uncanny' describes the feeling of encountering something familiar yet unfamiliar and threatening. See Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans by. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953). pp.219-220.

¹³⁴ Bhabha, 'The World and the Home' in *Social Text*, 31.32 (1992), 141-153, (p.141), <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/466222>> [accessed 23 May 2021].

¹³⁵ Adichie, *Americanah*, p.117.

she wished she were not [...] but she longed, also for the other things she had become used to in America.¹³⁶ Ifemelu and the other returnees find in this restaurant a reminder of their diasporic lives in America, something is not often expected at home because of cultural differences. As returnees or as Adichie describes the way migrants are seen as 'lost' by their people, they became what Davies points as "strangers at home" a home which holds a 'contradictory and disruptive meaning.'¹³⁷ Later on, a friend calls Ifemelu 'Americanah', which refers to those who went to America and fully adopted the culture, and points to her that she is 'looking at things with American eyes.'¹³⁸ Adichie presents Ifemelu as conscious subject who Vida Rahiminezhad and Soheila Arabian agree 'finds her sense of belonging toward her motherland, but it does not happen till the time she finds her true self, which was not the same self she had back in Nigeria, it was her new and true self, as a hybrid character.'¹³⁹ Ifemelu's 'looking at things with American eyes' means that her ambivalent identity continues to manifest itself in Nigeria.¹⁴⁰

The model of migration that Adichie presents in her novel offers the diasporic condition as modern and mobile. Since the world continues to be impacted by movement, the novel insists that new migration narratives need new conceptualisations and representations of the diasporic condition. Adichie's novel rejects and moves away from the previous diaspora definitions that renders diasporic subjects as incapable of homecoming by presenting an example of a successful migrant who leaves America to return to Africa. While it acknowledges Ifemelu's experience of the unhomely as migratory subject, it presents it as a

¹³⁶ Adichie, p.409.

¹³⁷ Davies, *Black Women*, p.114.

¹³⁸ Davies, p.114.

¹³⁹ Vida Rahiminezhad and Soheila Arabian, *Acculturation, Otherness, and Return in Adichie's Americanah: Outside the Homeland* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2018), p.95.

¹⁴⁰ Adichie, p.278.

productive condition where Ifemelu is able to discover herself and learns to inhabit Nigeria as a space within her new acquired diasporic identity. In *Questions of Travel* (1996), Kaplan argues 'I do not believe that we are all rootless, existentially adrift, and limitlessly mobile [...] Nor do I believe that we are all at home, fixed into neat identities, enjoying stable similarities.'¹⁴¹ Thus, migration creates a migratory subject that is not necessarily rooted to one location, or one home nor is she rootless; the subject is in a constant state of negotiating cultural and spatial belongings and identity. Therefore, though Ifemelu returns to her home finds a job and rekindles her relationship with Obinze, she continues to show the effects of displacement on her identity as a former immigrant.

3-Reconciling with 'The Door of No Return' in *Homegoing*:

Yaa Gyasi opens *Homegoing* with invoking both the role the British Empire played in the slave trade and Africa's involvement in selling captured men and women to the British trading company to argue against Africa's idealised past.¹⁴² In the first chapter 'Effia,' Gyasi tells the story of Effia's forced marriage to 'the newly appointed governor of the Cape Coast Castle' James Collins in exchange of 'thirty pound upfront and twenty-five shillings a month in tradable goods.'¹⁴³ The villagers in Ghana were forcing young girls to marry British soldiers for the benefit of the trade '[a]ll the better for our business with them. All the better for the

¹⁴¹ Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), p.26.

¹⁴² In *lose your Mother* Hartman writes 'In the sixteenth century, the British had begun raiding the Gold Coast for slaves and by the end of the seventeenth century they were the foremost slavers in Africa. They Alone were responsible for deporting nearly five hundred thousand slaves form the Gold Coast. Half of these captives were shipped from the Cape Coast Castle, which provided the headquarters of the Royal African Company and its successor, the Company of Merchants Trading to Africa.' See p.111.

¹⁴³ Gyasi, *Homegoing*, p.15.

village.¹⁴⁴ Gyasi reminds the reader that the tribes were complicit in capturing men, women and children and selling them to the British company in a trade for goods:

Effia had known, of course, that there were people in the dungeons.

People who spoke a different dialect than her, people who had been captured in tribal wars, even people who had been stolen, but she had never thought of where they went from there.¹⁴⁵

Gyasi addresses the moral responsibility, and the complex and tangled history Africa has with slavery. While Effia is living on 'the very top floor' of her husband's quarters in the Cape Coast Castle, her sister Esi becomes another 'faint crying sound' held in the 'small holes in the ground' of the castle.¹⁴⁶ From here the story of separation of the sisters starts and with it begins the narrative of the generations of each line in Ghana and America.

Esi's chapter is narrated from the Castle's hold where Gyasi reimagines the scenes of horror and the non-human conditions the enslaved endured before being shipped across the Atlantic. Gyasi focuses on women's suffering in the dungeons through Esi who is captured at the age of fifteen. Gyasi describes the massive number of women's bodies 'stacked into the women's dungeons that they all had to lie, stomach down, so that women could be stacked on top of them.'¹⁴⁷ Gyasi addresses rape in the hold as one of the many episodes of sexual violation enslaved women endured from the hold, the slave ship, to the plantation fields through Esi's rape by a British soldier:

¹⁴⁴ Gyasi, p.15.

¹⁴⁵ Gyasi, p.25.

¹⁴⁶ Gyasi, p.17, p.25.

¹⁴⁷ Gyasi, *Homegoing*, p.30.

She tried to fight him, but the lack of food and the wounds from the beating had left her too weak to even select her saliva and spit at him. He laughed at her attempt and dragged her by the elbow out of the room.¹⁴⁸

Gyasi sets the rape scene in the hold because for enslaved Black women it is the first site of objectification and trauma. Gyasi ends this chapter with Esi being dragged with other enslaved women through the door of no return the passage from the hold to the slave ship: '[t]he scent of ocean water hit her nose. The taste of salt clung to her throat. The soldiers marched them down an open door that led to sand and water, and they all begun to walk out onto it.'¹⁴⁹ Brand describes 'the Door of no Return' as the site that 'signified the end of traceable beginnings' where 'all names were forgotten, and all beginnings recast.'¹⁵⁰ Hartman who visits the physical door of the Elmina castle in Ghana argues that due to the traumatic rift, the return to this site 'could hardly be called a homecoming.'¹⁵¹ While Hartman and Brand are disinterested in the project of return and focus on rupture as the legacy of this site, Gyasi acknowledges the rupture while maintaining recuperative possibility. This is represented with the 'golden-Black stones' that was given to Esi by her mother which she loses at the

¹⁴⁸ Gyasi, p.47.

¹⁴⁹ Gyasi, p.49.

¹⁵⁰ Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return*, p.5.

For more on how Dionne's lyrical text works as a critical theory of the Black diaspora, see Mathilde Mergeai, 'Lyrical Cartographies: Redrawing the Boundaries of the Black Atlantic in Dionne Brand's *A Map to the Door of No Return* and the *Full Change of the Moon*,' in *Diasporic Women's Writing of the Black Atlantic: (En)Gendering Literature and Performance*, ed. by Emilia María Durán-Almarza and Esther Álvarez-López, pp.64-80 (New York: Routledge, 2014).

For a comparative study between Gyasi and Brand's writings see Christine Okoth, 'The Extractive form of contemporary Black Writing: Dionne Brand and Yaa Gyasi,' in *Textual Practice*, 35.3 (2021), 379-394 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2021.1886705>> [accessed 20 April 2022].

In her interview with Goyal, Gyasi reveals that *The Door of No Return* by William Saint Clair, that she acknowledges at the end of her novel, was hugely influential in the readings for *Homegoing*. See also her interview with Imani Roach for *Guernica* <<https://www.guernicamag.com/taking-a-long-view/>> [accessed 25 April 2022].

¹⁵¹ Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, p.104.

passageway to the ship. Gyasi uses the stone as a metaphor of Esi's roots in Africa which its loss announces the rupture. This stone as I will illustrate finds its way Back to Esi's lineage displaying Gyasi's main project for the novel.¹⁵²

As Gyasi asserts, the purpose of the novel is 'to trace [...] the trail of trauma reinvented' as America constantly 'involved figuring out new ways to subjugate black people.'¹⁵³ With each generation Gyasi addresses the effects of dispersal and slavery and its legacies on Esi's blood line in the diaspora. In Ness's chapter, born into slavery, is the first trans-oceanic narrative in the novel, Gyasi addresses the historical trail of trauma with invoking the Middle Passage and plantations life in the Mississippi. Esi's daughter Ness who is the first generation of African Americans in the novel, represents the rupture and identity loss of those who were brought by "'the big boat'" to America with 'anchors attached to nothing: no land, no people, no worth.'¹⁵⁴ The sense of loss continues with Ness's son kojo who despite being born a free man in Baltimore during the fugitive slave act in the 1850s having a troubled sense of belonging:

Jo used to worry that his family line had been cut off, lost forever. He would never truly know who his people were, and who their people were before them, and if there were stories to be heard about where he had come from, he would never hear them.¹⁵⁵

From Kojo's loss of roots, Gyasi takes the reader to the 1900s to reflect on the legacies of enslavement that Black people were forced to live with. In Willie's chapter, a daughter of a

¹⁵² Gyasi, *Homegoing*, p.49.

¹⁵³ Gyasi in an interview with Kate Killaway, *The Guardian*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jan/08/yaa-gyasi-slavery-is-on-peoples-minds-it-affects-us-still-interview-homegoing-observer-new-review>> [accessed 27 November 2021].

¹⁵⁴ Gyasi, *Homegoing*, p.70.

¹⁵⁵ Gyasi, *Homegoing*, p.130.

coal mine convict H in 1880 the fourth descendant of Esi, set in Harlem during the Great Migration, Gyasi describes a scene from Willie and her son's daily life while walking in a white neighbourhood: 'Now there were so many white people around them that Willie started to feel scared [...] she tried to keep her body small, squaring her shoulders in keeping her head down.'¹⁵⁶ In the chapter of Sonny, Willie's son, Gyasi captures the frustration of Sonny's life as a Black man: 'he knew in his body, even if he hadn't yet put it together in his mind, that in America the worst thing you could be was a black man. Worse than dead, you were a dead man walking.'¹⁵⁷ Gyasi's return to the ancestry is an illustration of her belief in the importance of remembrance as Hartman argues that 'remembrance is entangled with reclaiming the past, propitiating ancestors, and recovering the origins of the descendants of this dispersal.'¹⁵⁸ The project of recovering origins of the diasporic form the forced dispersal is highlighted in Marjorie's chapter who plays a significant role as the Black woman who helps to maintain the connection between the two lines of diaspora in the novel.

Marjorie, the last descendant of Effia and the linking thread of the novel, is born in America to Ghanaian immigrants and this diasporic positioning allows Gyasi to follow Adichie's project of highlighting transnational Blackness in her novel. As Ava Landry maintains both Adichie and Gyasi's novels 'forge new ways to "do" Blackness' as they both 'demonstrate a more nuanced acculturative process in which African immigrants expand on what Blackness means in the cultural imagination and in lived experiences.'¹⁵⁹ In an interview, Gyasi discusses a similar issue to that of Adichie's about discovering the meaning of Blackness in America:

¹⁵⁶ Gyasi, p.220.

¹⁵⁷Gyasi, p.260.

¹⁵⁸ Hartman, 'The Time of slavery,' p.758.

¹⁵⁹ Ava Landry, 'Black is Black is Black is Black?: African Immigrant Acculturation in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*,' in *MELUS*, 43.4 (2018),pp.127-147 (p.145), <<https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/mly044>> [accessed 18 April 2022].

I always say if you come from a country where everybody looks like you and you are [...] used to thinking of yourself as black, it can be a challenge to come to America and have [...] to learn the racial rules.¹⁶⁰

Similar to Adichie, Gyasi also learns that she is 'Black' which she reflects in her character Marjorie. As Monki Motahane et al agree, the uniqueness of Gyasi's novel lies in the way it captures 'how experiences of female descendants across time and space (Africa and America) reflect on complexities of being African and African American in America.'¹⁶¹ In school Marjorie a young girl realises that her Blackness is different from other Black kids in Alabama:

At her new high school, there were more Black children than Marjorie was used to seeing in Alabama, but it took only a few conversations with them for Marjorie to realize that they were not the same kind of black she was. That indeed she was the wrong kind.¹⁶²

Gyasi positions Marjorie within what Landry frames as the 'ever present struggle between pre-migration ethnic identity and post-migration racial identity, in which African immigrants work both in concert with and in position to existing notions of Blackness.'¹⁶³ An African American girl named Tisha mimics Marjorie's way of speaking "“Why you talk like that?” [...] “You sound like a white girl. White girl. White girl.”"¹⁶⁴ Being called 'white girl' brings Marjorie in confrontation with her Black identity which she is not faced with in Ghana:

¹⁶⁰ Gyasi in 'Yaa Gyasi: 'Homegoing: A Novel'' 92018) *Talks at Google*, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BsTMmOVhYWc>> [accessed 01 March 2020].

¹⁶¹ Monki Motahane et al, 'Rooting Routes to Trans-atlantci African Identities: The Metaphor of Female Descendancy in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*,' in *African Identities*, 19. 1 (2021), 17-30 (p.29), <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2020.1788505>> [accessed 15 April 2022].

¹⁶² Gyasi, *Homegoing*, p.268.

¹⁶³ Landry, 'Black is Black is Black is Black?' p.128.

¹⁶⁴ Gyasi, pp.268-269.

[As] Tisha and her friends called her “white girl,” Marjorie was made aware, yet again, that here “white” could be the way a person talked; the music a person listened to. In Ghana you could only be what you were, what your skin announced to the world.¹⁶⁵

While Marjorie is Black, she does not seem to conform to the norms nor perform what institutes Blackness in America. In an interview with Yogita Goyal, Gyasi reveals that moving to Alabama at a young age in a ‘a predominantly white’ school with no other Ghanaians ‘was the first time that I was thinking—unconsciously— about race and ethnicity as two separate things.’¹⁶⁶ Being Black at a white school, Gyasi continues, made her feel that ‘there was always something that I was not quite getting right.’¹⁶⁷ This is translated when Marjorie is positioned as ‘the wrong kind’ of Black, a ‘Black’ that is located between the trajectories of African and African American identities.

In an event for Black History month, Marjorie’s teacher asks her to write a poem ‘[A]ll you have to do is to tell your story [...] Talk about what being African American means to you.’¹⁶⁸ Marjorie becomes hesitant and confused as she does not feel she is African American, she tells her teacher ‘[b]ut I’m not African American.’¹⁶⁹ Because of her Ghanaian roots, Marjorie rejects the identification of ‘Blackness’:

She wanted to tell Mrs.Pinkston that at home, they had a different word for African Americans. *Akata*. That *akata* people were different from Ghanaians, too long gone from the mother continent to continue calling

¹⁶⁵ Gyasi, p.296.

¹⁶⁶ Yogita Goyal, Yaa Gyasi, ‘An Interview with Yaa Gyasi,’ in *Contemporary Literature*, 60.4(2019), 471-490, p.477. < <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/773068>> [accessed 18 April 2022].

¹⁶⁷ Gyasi, ‘An Interview with Yaa Gyasi,’ Yogita Goyal, p.486.

¹⁶⁸ Gyasi, *Homegoing*, p.273.

¹⁶⁹ Gyasi, p.272.

it the mother continent. She wanted to tell Mrs. Pinkston that she could feel herself being pulled away too, almost *akata*, too long gone from Ghana to be Ghanaian.¹⁷⁰

Mrs Pinkston's reply illustrates the way African immigrants find themselves socially forced to adhere to America's systemic racial stratification ignoring their pre-immigrant identities:

"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."¹⁷¹

Gyasi's reference to 'black is black' invokes a similar notion to that of Adichie's blog 'In America, You are Black Baby' where both writers inform African immigrants that in America they all become 'Black.' Similar to Adichie's use of the blog to highlight the cultural connection between Africans and African Americans, Gyasi implements this through Marjorie's poem:

Split the Castle open,
find me, find you
We, two, felt sand,
wind, air.
One felt whip. Whipped
once shipped.

we, two, black.
Me, you.
One grew from
cocoa's soil, birthed from nut,
Skin uncut, still bleeding.
We, two, wade.
The waters seem different
but are same.
Our same. Sister skin.

¹⁷⁰ Gyasi, p.273. (Italics in original).

¹⁷¹ Gyasi, p.273.

Who knew? Not me. Not you.¹⁷²

With the imagery of the 'split castle' Gyasi's poem invokes the historical context of the lineage of Esi and Effia's disconnection from the Cape Coast Castle. As Motahane et al hold, the poem 'evocatively retraces the trans-Atlantic family branch's shooting out of the matriarch Mamee's 'trunk' rooted in Ghana.'¹⁷³ The poem describes Marjorie's awareness of her cultural roots and the shared African heritage between the Africans and the Black diaspora in America despite the historical split.

Gyasi's interest in offering a dialogue across transnational Blackness continues when Marjorie experiences the same legacies and racism that African American women experience in America. When Marjorie is sitting with her love interest, Graham, who is a German international student, 'a brunette girl' whispered to Graham '[y]ou shouldn't sit here' implying he should be with other white students and not with a Black girl.¹⁷⁴ Marjorie wanted Graham 'to say no, to fight harder, to take her hand across the table' instead '[h]e got up, looking almost relieved' which made her realize 'how it was easy for him to slip in unnoticed, as though he had always belonged there.'¹⁷⁵ Later Graham takes the 'brunette' to prom instead of Marjorie:

He had wanted to take Marjorie, but his father didn't think it would be proper. The school didn't think it was appropriate. As a last defence, Marjorie, had heard him tell the principal that she was "not like other black girls." And, somehow, that had been worse.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷² Gyasi, p.282.

¹⁷³ Motahane et al, 'Rooting Routes to Trans-atlantci African Identities,' p.28.

¹⁷⁴ Gyasi, p.279.

¹⁷⁵ Gyasi., p.279-280.

¹⁷⁶ Gyasi, p.280.

Using Crenshaw's intersectional positionality, Motahane et al note that Gyasi's novel 'theorizes objectification in specific context where its methods and what becomes an object are influenced by gender.'¹⁷⁷ However, within this objectification, Gyasi presents as Sackeyfio maintains 'a counter-narrative to images of voiceless and dis-empowered women' who are controlling the narrative in the novel.¹⁷⁸ Marjorie refuses the objectification by Graham 'she had already given him up' and learns to focus on understanding her own diasporic identity as I will illustrate further.¹⁷⁹

Marjorie's identity is constantly re-negotiated between America and Ghana creating ambivalence. In an interview with Goyal, Gyasi argues that the novel thinks about diaspora and the ambivalence of belonging to different locations that she herself feels and translates in the novel:

[W]riting it, made me interested in thinking about how I could connect the dots between the place I had come from but had very little relationship to—Ghana—and the place I had grown up in, Alabama, which has a really rich African American history, that I also felt disconnected from. I wanted to piece these things together.¹⁸⁰

Marjorie is the representation of Gyasi's own experience as she stresses in a conversation with Dolen Perkins 'this book really is just like the physical representation of me straddling those two worlds' because she 'grew up between two cultures [...] not feeling totally

¹⁷⁷ Motahane et al, 'Rooting Routes to Trans-atlantci African Identities,' p.25.

¹⁷⁸ Rose A. Sackeyfio, 'Memory, Identity and Return in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*,' in *African Women Writing Diaspora: Transnational Perspectives in the Twenty-First Century* ed. by Rose A. Sackeyfio (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021). pp.15-28, (p.15).

¹⁷⁹ Gyasi, p.280.

¹⁸⁰ Goyal Interview with Gyasi, p.477.

Ghanaian enough for Ghanaians and also not feeling totally African American enough.¹⁸¹ Gyasi continues that as such 'my sense of myself both ethnically and racially was really complicated and [...] confused.'¹⁸² When Graham asks Marjorie 'would you ever move back to Ghana?' she 'thought for a moment, of her grandmother and the sea, and the castle' only to reply "'I don't think so.'¹⁸³ Marjorie justifies her wish against a final return by stressing that "' I mostly just feel like I don't belong there. As soon as I step the airplane, people can tell that I'm like them but different too. They can smell it on me.'¹⁸⁴ Marjorie interprets this 'smell' as '[I]oneliness, maybe. Or aloneness. The way I don't fit here or there. My grandmother's the only person who really sees me.'¹⁸⁵ Marjorie's position between America and Ghana might be theorised as what Bhabha terms the 'third space.' According to Bhabha the third space 'which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbol of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew.'¹⁸⁶ In introducing hybridity as 'a difference 'within', a subject that inhabits the rim of an 'in-between' reality,' Bhabha expands on the notion of the third space, to argue that 'the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge.'¹⁸⁷ In other words, Bhabha

¹⁸¹ Gyasi, 'Yaa Gyas, "Homegoing"' (2018) Dolen Perkins- Valdez, *Politics and Pose*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVch_Bs0JDg> [accessed 02 March 2020].

¹⁸² Gyasi, 'Yaa Gyas, "Homegoing"'

¹⁸³ Gyasi, *Homegoing*, p.278.

¹⁸⁴ Gyasi, p.278.

¹⁸⁵ Gyasi, p.278.

¹⁸⁶ Gyasi, p.55.

¹⁸⁷ Bhabha, 'Interview with Homi Bhabha,' in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. by Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), p.212. Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, p.19.

suggests that in a colonial positionality two cultures collide, that of the colonized and the colonizer leads to cultural transformations, thus creating a new space.

For Marjorie this 'third space' is productive as the positioning 'in -between' America and Ghana allows her to preserve the cultural connections she has with both locations. Despite feeling different in Ghana and America, Marjorie continues to hold a strong attachment to the country of her ancestry. Marjorie's relation with Ghana and America is a representation that reflects Gyasi's own ideology of home, as she states in an interview with Kate Killaway:

[H]ome, for me, can never really be a place. It is this thing that you can carry inside of you, similar to these characters, particularly the Afro-American ones who have been ripped away from their original homes and yet have this connection to the land.¹⁸⁸

Gyasi's definition of home is what Marangoly George describes of the possibility of home being a location that is 'readily fixed in a mental landscape than in actual geography.'¹⁸⁹ Gyasi thus, challenges the view that the dispersed is homeless. From the title *Homegoing*, Gyasi invokes her characters' connection to their homeland despite their forced displacement as the major concern in the novel. In a book discussion, Gyasi explains that the choice behind the title *Homegoing* comes from her belief that '[y]ou carry home with you everywhere you go [...] even if you are here in America you can still have this connection to your home country.'¹⁹⁰ As Goyal holds the title connotes 'a common euphemism for death in the African American religious tradition where funerals are sometimes called homegoing celebrations'

¹⁸⁸ Gyasi, 'Interview, Yaa Gyasi: 'Slavery is on People's Mindset. It affects as All'' Kate Killaway (2017), *The Guardian*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jan/08/yaa-gyasi-slavery-is-on-peoples-minds-it-affects-us-still-interview-homegoing-observer-new-review>> [accessed 27 November 2021].

¹⁸⁹ Marangoly George, *The Politics of Home*, p.25.

¹⁹⁰ Gyasi in 'Yaa Gyasi: Homegoing' (2018), *WGBH Forum* <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6655o3VW7Kc>> [accessed 26 February 2020].

suggesting not only 'an ending' but also 'a possibility for other openings.'¹⁹¹ Gyasi illustrates the meaning of her title when Marjorie and her grandmother the 'Old Lady,' Akua Collins the fourth descendant of Effia, tells her while swimming in the sea about the ancestors who lost connection to their land:

[In] my dreams I kept seeing the castle, but I did not know why. One day, I came to these waters and I could feel the spirits of our ancestors calling me. Some were free, and they spoke to me from the sand, but some others were trapped deep [...] When they were living, they had not known where they came from, and so dead, they did not know how to get to dry land. I put you in here so that if your spirit ever wandered, you would know where home was.¹⁹²

Gyasi invokes the sea as a link between Black people to their roots and a site of healing for the wandering spirits. Gyasi wants Marjorie to be a subject waded to her roots, thus refusing the discourse that all Black people in the diaspora are uprooted.

To maintain Marjorie's connection to the land of her ancestors, the Old Lady requested that when Marjorie was born in America her parents would 'send something of that child back to Ghana.'¹⁹³ After the birth of Marjorie 'all the way across the Atlantic, her parents had mailed her umbilical cord to Old Lady so that the woman could put it in the ocean.'¹⁹⁴ In commenting on the burial of Marjorie's umbilical cord, Sackeyfio argues that this African practice intends to 'bind the child's spirit to the earth and to ensure that the child returns

¹⁹¹ Goyal, 'An Interview with Yaa Gyasi,' p.474.

¹⁹² Gyasi, *Homegoing*, p.268.

¹⁹³ Gyasi, p.267.

¹⁹⁴ Gyasi, p.267.

home.¹⁹⁵ Marjorie is connected to the sea and enjoys her annual homecomings to Ghana with her family to visit her grandmother where swimming ‘was their summer ritual,’ in which the grandmother reminds Marjorie ‘how to come home.’¹⁹⁶ In the last chapter, Marjorie teaches Marcus how to come home by taking him to the sea to swim and to visit the Cape Coast Castle: ‘[t]his door leads out to the beach, where ships waited to take them away.’¹⁹⁷ The meeting at the door of no return from the same point of departure and rupture symbolises the possibility of return and reconciliation between Africa and its diaspora. The novel ends with Marcus eventually defeating his fear of water after he admits to Marjorie that he is ‘scared’ of the ocean. Marcus’s return to the door of no return and swimming in the ocean with Marjorie is a representation of reconciliation with the violent histories which as Nicholas Birns suggests as ‘a trop that emblemizes how the sea routes of the Black Atlantic can be ones of both alienation and regeneration’ which the novel is built on.¹⁹⁸ Gyasi refuses the idea of the impossibility of return that is present in Dionne and Hartman’s works. Dionne writes that *‘[s]ince leaving was never voluntary, return was, and still may be, an intention, however, deeply buried. There is as it says no way in; no return.’*¹⁹⁹ Similarly, Hartman sees this concept is fraught with issues since ‘return is the fantasy of origins.’²⁰⁰ Gyasi, however, wants the readers to understand that the main message of her novel is that in dealing with reclaiming the histories of the past there is a possibility for return when there is a possibility of reconciliation with this past.

¹⁹⁵ Sackeyfio, *African Women Writing Diaspora*, p.24.

¹⁹⁶ Gyasi, *Homegoing*, p.268.

¹⁹⁷ Gyasi, p.299.

¹⁹⁸ Nicholas Birns, ‘A People Must Define Itself: African American Literary Criticism as a Mode of Critical Race Theory,’ in *Critical Race Theory in the Academy*, ed. by Vernon Lee Farmer and Evelyn Shepherd W. Farmer, (Cherlotte: Information Age Publishing, 2020). pp.384-404, (p.398).

¹⁹⁹ Brand, *Maps*, p.1. (Italics in Original).

²⁰⁰ Hartman, ‘The Time of Slavery,’ p.766.

While swimming together in the beach in Ghana, Marjorie welcomes Marcus home and gives him the 'family heirloom': "[h]ere", Marjorie said. "Have it." She lifted the stone from her neck and placed it around Marcus's. "Welcome home."²⁰¹ Marjorie's 'black stone necklace' that represents Marjorie's connection to her ancestry, which started with the matriarch of the novel Maame who gave stones to both Effia and Esi, but was lost by Esi, found its way Back again to Esi's line:

It had begun with Maame [...] the necklace was a part of their family history and she was to never take it off, never give it away. Now it reflected the ocean water before them, gold waves shimmering in the black stone.²⁰²

Giving the stone to Marcus epitomises the meeting in Africa as a home and the reconciliation between the two histories and the two lines. As DeLinda Marzette argues, the stone becomes a symbolism 'of Maame, of motherhood, of the land, [and] of home' and reconnects 'Maame's lost daughters' to their home and motherland.²⁰³ Gyasi's *Homegoing* and its 'diasporic imaginary' ending, as Dominique Haensell's describes it, works as a project that calls for a meeting between Africa and its Diaspora.²⁰⁴ Chancy's concept of 'autochthony' which she uses to describe 'African and African Diasporics means to highlight the relationship of African descended people of their lands and cultures of origin, even when displaced and reconstituted.'²⁰⁵ Chancy stresses that calling for such project is 'not a romantic notion of a

²⁰¹ Gyasi, p.294, p.300.

²⁰² Gyasi, p.267.

²⁰³ DeLinda Marzette, 'Children of Fire and Water: Motherhood, Migration and Home in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*,' in *South Central Review*, 38. 2-3 (2021), 102-108, (p.107), <<https://doi.org/10.1353/scr.2021.0038>> [accessed 18 April 2022].

²⁰⁴ Dominique Haensell, *Making Black History: Diasporic Fiction in the Moment of Afropolitanism* (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2021), p.202.

²⁰⁵ Chancy, *Autochthonies*, p.5.

“return” to unspoiled origins but an underscoring of the reality that, despite colonial interruptions and excisions, continuities exist.²⁰⁶ Gyasi’s novel emphasises that despite the fissures and ruptures that define the state of the Black diaspora in America, not all diasporans are necessarily lost, and that continuities amongst them exist.

4-The Search for Home in the Haitian bildungsroman:

At the beginning of her journey as an adopted Black child, Iris Odys’s initiation into a new culture in America becomes synonymous with isolation and alienation. As Chancy maintains the cycle of exile ‘progresses through alienation, self-affirmation or self-definition, and recuperation to a return “home.”’²⁰⁷ To survive the first stage of alienation, Iris ensures to maintain connections to her roots through remembering the memories of her ancestral home in Monn Nég:

[W]hen the novelty of it all wore off, I began to think about my family in Monn Nég and missed the aroma of smoke from my great-grandmother’s pipe. I missed the warmth of my mother’s dark, watery eyes, the sounds of my cousins’ laughter, and the taste of mangos that had fallen from the trees. This left me with a yearning for a familiar world. Sobs often rocked me to sleep when there were no tears left.²⁰⁸

Being raised in a white family with no connection to Haitian/Caribbean communities strengthened Iris’s sense of alienation. Chancy maintains that the lack of ‘support of an established community within’ the ‘adoptive countries’ of afro-Caribbean women migrants,

²⁰⁶ Chancy, p.7.

²⁰⁷ Chancy, p.67.

²⁰⁸ Augustave, *The Roving Tree*, p.19.

'often produces a sense of acute alienation.'²⁰⁹ Iris's alienation is complicated by racial oppression which she experiences in her early years in America.

Iris's struggle with America's systemic racism leads her, much like Ifemelu and Marjorie, to discover her 'Blackness.' According to Kaisa Ilmonen in the Caribbean bildungsroman '[t]he young girl is forced to recognize early on in her life, the presence of multiple mechanisms of marginalization, relating to gender, sexuality, skin colour, motherhood and cultural background.'²¹⁰ Augustave explores the violence of the racial discourse with the example of Iris being called the 'n-word' by one of her school mates:

"That n [...] better not sit here," the boy said to a girl who was sitting next to him [...] they're loud, lazy, and stupid."

I raised my eyebrows and set my tray on the table. "Are you talking to me?"

The girl snickered. "There's no other n [...] here is there?"²¹¹

Though Iris is not yet understanding the definition of American 'Blackness,' and is unaware of the meaning of the 'N' word, the negative attitude her schoolmate shows while using what Collins terms 'negative controlling images' of 'loud, lazy, and stupid,' penetrates deep into her thoughts, making her understand the difference between being Black in America and in Haiti:

I didn't know what the word "n [...]" meant but suspected they were talking about my skin color. Back in Monn Nèg, people talked about my

²⁰⁹ Chancy, *Searching for Safe Spaces*, p.xi.

²¹⁰ Kaisa Ilmonen, 'Talking Back to Bildungsroman,' in *The Journal of West Indian Literature*, 25.1 (2017), 60-76, (p.70), <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/90005826>> [accessed 02 November 2022].

²¹¹ Augustave, p.21.

complexion with admiration and envy because its reddish-brown color was different, but I never detected contempt in their voices.²¹²

Augustave wants to show her readers that when Black immigrants come to America, they find themselves compelled to face the existing racial disparities that the legacies of slavery imprinted on the American society. As Awad Ibrahim maintains, in America 'Blackness is so powerful as an invented yet socially real category that Black immigrants' sense of self and peoplehood is tied directly to nonimmigrant Blacks.'²¹³ Similar to Adichie's 'in America you are Black,' Augustave illustrates that Black immigrants immediately are positioned within America's definition of Blackness. In a blog post interview, Augustave reveals the purpose behind implementing such an encounter by arguing that she:

[W]anted to emphasize that even though Iris has adopted to life in the U.S, she still has a lot to learn about American society, and of course if Iris is going to learn about the n-word, it has to be outside of her adopted family home. That fight is indeed a pivotal moment in Iris' life and is the source of her conflicts.'²¹⁴

Like Gyasi, Augustave's choice of using such encounter with school children is to reflect the extent to which systemic racism is entrenched in the American society that a boy of that age can rehearse words that have a complex history.

²¹² Augustave, p.21.

²¹³ Awad Ibrahim, *Black immigrants in North America: Essays on Race, Immigration, Identity, Language, Hip-Hop, Pedagogy, and the Politics of Becoming Black* (Gorham: Myers Education Press, 2020). [E-book] <<https://protect-eu.mimecast.com/s/vAc2CAQDJcE8OG1t9qSU3?domain=vlebooks.com>> [accessed 13 May 2022].

²¹⁴ Kreyolicious, 'Elsie Augustave: An Interview with the Author of The Roving Tree' (2019) <<https://www.badassblackgirl.com/post/elsie-augustave-an-interview-with-the-author-of-the-roving-tree>> [accessed 02 November 2021].

After being called the 'n-word,' Iris becomes wearily familiar of her Blackness, thus she determines to renounce it as she was: '[d]etermined not to be different from my new family, I was willing to do anything not to stand out.'²¹⁵ Reflecting the mind of a child who attempts to do anything to be accepted, Iris directs her efforts to become 'unblack' by wanting to change her Black features into something closer to whiteness:

Whatever it took, I decided, I had to look like the woman in the magazine.

It was hard to tell whether she was white or black, and that was how I wanted to be. If people could not tell that my skin was dark, they would not reject me or single me out. After comparing the woman's features to mine, I decided that I also needed to work on my nose.²¹⁶

What Augustave demonstrates with Iris's confrontation with forms of oppression that made her want to be white is a feature of Black women's Caribbean bildungsroman. As Kaisa Ilmonen argues, in such novels the character of the young girl is 'forced to recognize early on in her life, the presence of multiple mechanisms of marginalization, relating to gender, sexuality, skin colour, motherhood and cultural background.'²¹⁷ From a young age Iris finds herself facing the intersection of gender, race, and her cultural background between Haiti and America, and later Africa. Davies maintains that while addressing the question of 'Black femaleness and Black womanness,' there is 'the additional identity of femaleness' that 'interferes with seamless Black identity.'²¹⁸ For Iris, this additional femaleness while being Black, especially being raised by a white family, burdens her ability to adapt to her new family and new culture. Iris's endeavour to look white does not stop by wanting to make her nose

²¹⁵ Augustave, p.2.

²¹⁶ Augustave, p.27.

²¹⁷ Kaisa Ilmonen, 'Talking Back to the Bildungsroman,' p.70.

²¹⁸ Davies, *Black Women*, p.8.

smaller, 'I took out the clothespin [...] I clipped them on my nose,' but by also asking her mother Margret to buy her whitening cream: 'it will make my skin white. Buy it for me please.'²¹⁹ Similar to Ifemelu who changes her language to assimilate in the American society, Iris also feels the need to focus on the potential of how to be 'fully Americanized' to be accepted in the new culture.²²⁰

The process that Augustave draws for Iris's identity could also be understood within Yoon Sun Lee's rendering of the diasporic identity as presented in the novels of the diaspora. According to Lee, in such novels, identity arises as being dependent on 'performing certain types of acts, gestures, or styles.'²²¹ However, he continues 'to do so is not to earn admission to some predefined collective entity.'²²² Yet, unlike Lee who claims that such performance is not for admission, Iris's performing identity seeks acceptance from the 'predefined collective identity,' in this case, the white dominated American society that is entrenched with systemic racism. By doing so, Augustave situates Iris within the discourse of Black beauty as one of the legacies of slavery in America. Sabrina Strings remind us that 'the burgeoning discourse about Africans' during the boom of slave trade and Black women's position as domestic servants during the sixteenth century 'suggested that their purported distinctive facial features made them facially unattractive.'²²³ Augustave continues with this discourse by focusing on the issue of Black hair in a way that echoes Adichie's novel. Iris describes the daily pain of having a Black hair:

²¹⁹ Augustave, p.27.

²²⁰ Augustave, p.25.

²²¹ Yoon Sun Lee, 'The Postcolonial Novel and Diaspora' in *The Cambridge Companion to The Postcolonial Novel*, ed. by Ato Quayson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p.140.

²²² Sun Lee, p.140.

²²³ Sabrina Strings, *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* (New York: New York Press, 2019), p.17.

The only thing I couldn't get used to was the anguish my hair caused. I hated the daily morning ritual of Margaret combing out my matted hair. All she could manage to do was tie it with a ponytail holder that made it look like a pig's tail. Usually I end up in tears, wishing I had Cynthia's soft hair flowing down my back.²²⁴

Iris's wish to acquire white people's hair is a manifestation of her refusal of America's political definition of Blackness. In an incident with a white woman who 'always wondered what these people's hair felt like,' Iris describes what it means to be faced with America's beauty standards after being 'patted' on her head: [w]hat I disliked the most was the way people found an excuse to touch my hair.'²²⁵ With an irritation, Iris responds to this woman with "stop petting me. I'm not a dog."²²⁶ Similar to Adichie, Augustave uses hair as a political commentary to rebuke the racist cultural attributes that are linked with Black hair which Black women socially inherit.

Like Ifemelu and Marjorie, Augustave's protagonist is not myopic to the differences between her Blackness and the Blackness attributed to her by the American society. In *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology*, Michelle M. Wright argues that in questions of defining Blackness, 'contemporary Black collectives' who perceive themselves through 'Middle passage histories,' 'postcolonial histories,' and 'Afrocentric histories' find themselves 'encountering each other more frequently.'²²⁷ Wright continues that the 'collectives of historical and ancestral Blackness, while certainly intertwined (and at times also

²²⁴ Augustave, *The Roving Tree*, p.20.

²²⁵ Augustave, p.20.

²²⁶ Augustave, p.20.

²²⁷ Michelle M. Wright, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2015), p.8.

facing the same kinds of racist violence) nonetheless understand themselves differently.’²²⁸

In other words, Wright holds that Black immigrants whose histories are identified with colonialism rather than the Middle Passage are aware that they are linked to Atlantic slavery histories. This awareness which Iris demonstrates later when she is in university and meets other Black collectives, is self-definition which is the second phase in Chancy’s cycle of exile. Iris reaches the step of self-definition little by little and becomes more understanding and accepting of herself and her Blackness and learns the richness of her cultural heritage and roots. In her speech for the election for a chairperson of cultural affairs on behalf of the Black Students League, Iris stresses that as a Black Caribbean:

[B]orn in the first black republic of the world [...] my goal would be to share our common African heritage with the college community so everyone can better understand the souls of black folks, as W.E.B. Du Bois would have put it.²²⁹

Similar to Adichie’s focus on transnational Blackness, Augustave also visits the idea of ‘being Black and becoming Black.’ In a conversation with P  p   who came from Haiti to America to study, and later to find out she is her half-sister, Iris suggests that P  p   joins the Black Students League, only to discover that P  p   does not ‘want to get too involved with black Americans.’²³⁰ Iris explains to P  p   that “‘BSL members are not just black Americans. There’s a guy from Ethiopia, one from South Africa, and a sister from Kenya,” [...] “Some of us are West Indians or Latinos. Together we celebrate our common African heritage.”²³¹ Chancy suggests that ‘intellectually, there is a divide between what we consider to be the product of

²²⁸ Wright, p.8.

²²⁹ Augustave, p.61.

²³⁰ Augustave, p.65.

²³¹ Augustave, p.65.

“national” African-descended groups and that which we deem the product of “blackness,” as if there is no connection between the two.’²³² Thus, in the discourse of the diaspora that is inclusive to all Black diasporans, Chancy suggests the need for Black people to work collectively towards what Wright terms as ‘the common goal of racial uplift’ while negotiating their differences.²³³

Like Ifemelu and Marjorie, Iris experiences ambivalence for occupying the space of ‘in-between’ three locations, America, Haiti, and Africa. Prior to her return to Monn Nèg, Iris develops the desire to learn about Haiti through meeting other Haitians like herself: ‘I imagined making Haitian friends who would tell me about Haiti and who would perhaps help bring back memories of a life I once knew.’¹⁵⁵ Davies explains that creating communities is ‘the most comfortable of routes for the immigrant’ because it allows her to create her own ‘type of cultural and social community in the face of the dominating American Ideologies.’²³⁴ To ‘bring back memories’, Iris develops a close relation to her ‘godfather’ Latham, a Haitian friend of her adoptive parents:

I was grateful that he had come to my aid, as he had so often done in many ways since the day I arrived to the united States, when he showed up with his arms filled with clothes and toys [...] I had smiled broadly when I saw him again, happy to have someone who reminded me of the familiar faces I left behind.²³⁵

²³² Chancy, *Autochthonomie, Transnationalism, Testimony, and Transmission in the African Diaspora* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020), p.5.

²³³ Wright, *Physics of Blackness*, p.8.

²³⁴ Augustave, *The Roving Tree*, p.52.

²³⁵ Augustave, p.34.

Later, Latham introduces Iris to a 'Haitian dance class' that helps her 'to learn about the Haitian culture that [she] often heard describes as exotic.'²³⁶ The dance class community helps Iris to enjoy 'hearing about the important role' dance 'played in major historical movements such as the slave revolts,' which as I later argue plays a major role in her final return to 'the magical place' of Africa.²³⁷

In her journey to visit Haiti, Iris becomes cognisant of the complexity of living 'in the between' of America and Haiti, and that returning home does not mean reconnecting with 'home.' Augustave's confronts the role that adoption plays in Iris's disconnection from her collective history, Caribbean/ Haitian cultural identity, and her sense of self. Therefore, in an attempt to re-establish the lost cultural links that she fails to maintain with memory, Iris returns to Haiti. Though her return was for her mother Hagathe's funeral, the journey brought with it a quest for cultural knowledge that has been vague in Iris's life, in the hope it permits an understanding of her complex African/ Caribbean self and eventually be able to achieve cultural recuperation. Upon her arrival, Iris expresses her longing to see her village: '[w]hen Brahimi announced we were approaching our destination, my heart skipped and jumped in anticipation. Monn Nèg seemed vaguely familiar.'²³⁸ Augustave invokes Davies's notion that 'dreamings of a nostalgic home back in the old country is beset with problems' thus, soon after few days of her return to her village, that she hoped it to be a process of reconciliation, Iris is confronted with the difficult reality of re-establishing the cultural links:²³⁹

When I left Monn Nèg at the age of five, I left behind everything and everyone I had known. Now the question followed me like an invisible

²³⁶ Augustave, pp.36-37.

²³⁷ Augustave, p.37.

²³⁸ Augustave, p.86.

²³⁹ Davies, *Black Women*, p.97.

shadow. People, places, and experiences emerged from darkness to become a life beyond conscious memory. The river that knew the mysteries of my ancestors has caused my mind to wonder in its flow. The river remembered the paths it travelled but couldn't return to them, just like I couldn't return to my past.²⁴⁰

Iris's idea of home is built on what Susheila Nasta describes as 'discontinuous fragments of memory' which renders home a mythical construct in Iris's imagination instead of 'a real place.'²⁴¹ The estrangement that Iris experiences upon her return to the 'imagined home' is epitomised when she parallels her return to the experience of a tourist:

Although I took pleasure in bathing in the river, eating local food, and being reacquainted with Haitian life, I felt more like a tourist who willingly blended into a new culture, knowing the experience was only temporary. Sooner or later, my life would resume its course away from the pastoral setting.²⁴²

As Davies holds, once displaced from it, home becomes 'contradictory, contested space, a locus for misrecognition and alienation.'²⁴³ Coming face to face with the culture she is uprooted from re-informs her sense of her ambivalent identity that makes her 'stranger' at home '[i]t would have been different if I had never left. But now, another culture and another life had laid claim to me.'²⁴⁴ Iris's identity that grapples between here and there is located within Davies's argument that 'it is the convergence of multiple places and cultures that re-

²⁴⁰ Augustave, p.116.

²⁴¹ Susheila Nasta, *Home Truths Fictions of the South Asian Diaspora in Britain* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), p.143.

²⁴² Augustave, p.116.

²⁴³ Boyce Davies, *Black Women*, p.113.

²⁴⁴ Augustave, p.116.

negotiates the terms of Black women's experience that in turn negotiates and re-negotiates their identities.'²⁴⁵ As a displaced author herself, Augustave uses her protagonist allegorically to express her views on the nature of migrant's identities as 're-negotiated' and ambivalent. In a conversation for the *WEEKender*, Augustave argues that 'the issue of cultural identity is common among young people growing up in a multicultural society as they are often pulled in opposite directions by different sets of values.'²⁴⁶ Indeed, the novel repeatedly expresses the struggle of inhabiting different cultural spaces simultaneously and the effect of this tension on the diasporan's identity.

When Iris returns to America, she carries a self that is loaded with memories about her roots which plays a significant role in her decision to return to Africa and live in Zaire. When she was back in Haiti, Iris's grandmother Lamerchie reminds Iris of their African origins by telling her what her own enslaved grandmother Nlunda a Kinkulu, who ran away from plantations to Haiti, told her about where they came from: 'my grandmother used to tell me' that '[w]e have been transplanted to this land, but we are Africans.'²⁴⁷ Lamerchie continues to tell Iris about the grandmother's wish for her decedents:

She also told me not to forget that I am African and that she hoped that her children would return to Africa someday. My grandmother's face appeared to me on the ground when I was about to dig a hole to bury your umbilical chord, and a song she had taught me long ago that I

²⁴⁵ Davies, *Black Women*, p.3.

²⁴⁶ 'In Conversation with Elsie Augustave' (2014), *WEEKender*, <<https://memofromlalaland.wordpress.com/2014/06/14/in-conversation-with-elsie-augustave-2/>> [accessed 29 November 2021].

²⁴⁷ Augustave, *The Roving Tree*, p.155.

thought I'd forgotten came back to me. That's how I know her spirit is connected to yours.²⁴⁸

Similar to Gyasi's *Homegoing* where Marjorie's grandmother asks for her umbilical cord to be buried in Ghana for Marjorie to remain rooted to her homeland, Augustave invokes the folk practice known as 'navel string.' In *Gendering the African Diaspora*, Anthea Morrison notes that this term refers to a shared tradition in the Caribbean cultures where the umbilical cord of an infant is buried 'after birth in the soil under a tree.'²⁴⁹ The umbilical cord is usually buried in the infant's homeland which as Dorothy E. Mosby maintains 'represents an indelible bond between the self and place' and to 'root the self to a location.'²⁵⁰ In addition to the cord, to remain connected to her roots, Lamerchie narrates her dream of seeing Nlunda a Kinkulu to Iris to teach her the necessity to connect to Africa 'I saw her in my dream last night. She told me you have an African water spirit dancing in your head and that Africa is where your soul belongs.'²⁵¹ Augustave celebrates the matriarchal heritage of Afro-Caribbean heritage with Lamerchie's connection with the spirit of the dead and invoking folklore and traditional songs. As Ilmonen argues the presences of 'the oral tradition, myths, women's stories and folklore' in Caribbean women's writing 'highlight the continuity and historicity of a racialized, colonized and forgotten women's tradition.'²⁵² With involving orality within a narrative that is told beyond the grave by the spirit of Iris, Augustave presents a different narrative feature to the Caribbean bildungsroman while it remains rooted in Afro-Caribbean folkloric tradition.

²⁴⁸ Augustave, p.155.

²⁴⁹ Anthea Morrison, 'From Africa to "The Islands": New world Voyages in the Fiction of Maryse Condé and Paule Marshall,' in *Gendering the African Diaspora: Women Culture, and Historical Change in the Caribbean and Nigerian Hinterland*, ed. by Judith A. Byfield, Lary Denzer, and Anthea Morrison, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), pp.39-59, (p.51).

²⁵⁰ Dorothy E. Mosby, *Place, Language, and Identity in Afro-Costa Rican Literature* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2003), p. ix.

²⁵¹ Augustave, *The Roving Tree*, p. 155.

²⁵² Ilmonen, 'Talking Back to the Bildungsroman,' p.67.

The cultural alienation that Iris feels in America leads her to develop an interest in dancing to help her in the rediscovery of her Afro-Caribbean roots. As Chancy maintains that Black women characters in early Black women's Caribbean writings of exile 'attempt to end this alienation by first recuperating the history, on both a micro- and macrolevel,' to resist oppression across the African diaspora.²⁵³ Iris's road towards the recuperation of her cultural heritage and history begins to unravel when she is introduced to dancing. Revealing parallels between the protagonist and the author, as both are dance instructors, Augustave embodies in Iris's attachment to dance the potential of reclaiming the Afro-Caribbean cultural heritage. Augustave describes how Haitian cultural music and ancestral dancing that Iris witnesses in Haitian dance classes, become the trigger towards the re-rooting of her identity: 'The sounds of drums played in my mind; adrenaline rushed in my veins. Something beyond the physical occurred, pressing me to reconnect with the culture.'²⁵⁴ Later, through performing Haitian folkloric dance, Iris instantly comes in contact with her African roots:

I began to feel closer to Africa, the place where most Haitian culture originated. When I danced to the rhythms of Africa, my soul found healing in a holistic manner that took me, each time, deeper into a level of consciousness and self-realization. The dance classes triggered an emotional and physical release that uplifted and energized me and allowed me to explore and accept the essence of my being.²⁵⁵

Augustave's use of dance as a key feature of cultural ties for the diasporic Caribbean subject echoes some of the themes introduced in earlier Caribbean women diaspora writers such as

²⁵³ Chancy, *Searching for Safe Spaces*, p.xxi.

²⁵⁴ Augustave, p.36.

²⁵⁵ Augustave, p.37-38.

Paule Marshall's 1983 novel *Praisesong for the Widow*. Marshall's protagonist Avey Johnson reconnects with her African past and diasporic culture through dance rituals. Performing dance rituals for her ancestors as Paulette Brown-Hinds argues, functions for Avey as 'healing rites' and as 'unique ties' that binds her together with the Black diaspora.²⁵⁶ In her essay that addresses dance's relation to subjectivity, Barbara Frey Waxman holds that Marshall is among the writers who uses dance 'as a metaphor to signify their character's self-discoveries, self-expression, and self-endorsement.'²⁵⁷ Similar to Avey who heals and discovers her cultural ancestry, for Iris dance is also a rite of passage towards her self-discovery that helps her cope with the paradoxical condition of diaspora. Iris admits such physical expression 'triggered an emotional and physical release that uplifted and energized me and allowed me to explore and accept the essence of my being.'²⁵⁸ With the experience that she lives through dancing, Iris becomes a choreographer as this 'opened doors and connected me to the culture that suddenly seemed more accessible.'²⁵⁹ Thus, within this new diasporic consciousness, Iris decides to 'return' to Africa and become a dance instructor in Zaire.

The folkloric dance and the spiritual call for her maternal ancestors to return to her motherland bring Iris back to her African roots, thus marks the final phase of her journey, the return. Iris is able to return to Africa only after the recuperation of her culture which

²⁵⁶ Paulette Brown-Hinds, 'Dance as Healing Ritual in Paule Marshall's "Praisesong for the Widow"' in *Religion and Literature*, 27. 1 (1995), 107-117. (p.107) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40058240>> [accessed 19 May 2022].

²⁵⁷ Barbara Frey Waxman, 'Dancing Out of Form: Dancing into Self, Genre and Metaphor in Marshall, Shange and Walker,' in *MELUS*, 9.3 (1994), 91-106, (p.94) < <https://www.jstor.org/stable/467874>> [accessed 10 April 2020].

See also Courtney Thorsson and Paule Marshall 'Dancing Up a Nation: Paule Marshall's "Praisesong for the Widow"' in *Callallo*, 30. 2 (2007), 644-652 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/30129779>> [accessed 19 May 2022].

²⁵⁸ Augustave, p.38.

²⁵⁹ Augustave, p .38.

contributes to her personal growth as a Black woman in the diaspora of Afro-Caribbean Heritage. Iris expresses the major drive of her return to Africa believing that connecting with her home of origin is her salvation: “as children of the African diaspora [...] our salvation is in our African roots and our cultural heritage.”²⁶⁰ However, within this return, Iris is not capable of feeling an immediate magical connection she expected with the land of her ancestry. In a conversation where she is asked about Iris’s experience of return to Africa, Augustave holds that her protagonist exemplifies what the Africans in the diaspora experience when they arrive:

When we get there, we are not quite sure where we fit [...] Hundreds of years that disconnect us to the motherland. Even though, we can find ourselves with the culture, but there is a distinct difference between being Caribbean and being African.²⁶¹

With respect to the historical rift between Africa and its diaspora, Augustave offers a narrative of diaspora that maintains cultural links but does not romanticise the process of this return. At the early phase of her return, Iris experiences what she describes as disillusionment: ‘I fell into the deep sleep of a disillusioned soul,’ when she thinks she failed to secure her dream job of being a dance choreographer which was one of the drives that took her to Africa.²⁶² Iris’s soul becomes ‘wrapped in darkness’ for not being able to admit this failure ‘it was getting hard for me to mask the truth’ from her family in America, which creates a ‘sudden desire to call home’ and return to America.²⁶³ However, the remembrance of her ancestry ‘[m]y great-

²⁶⁰ Augustave, p.59.

²⁶¹ Augustave, ‘Roving Tree Author Elsie Augustave’ *SocaMom Caribbean Book Club*, Eva Wilson (2013), <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s8Ly0JPvJEk>> [accessed 13 February 2020].

²⁶² Augustave, *The Roving Tree*, p.189.

²⁶³ Augustave, pp.192-193.

grandmother told me that this is where my soul belongs' makes Iris determined to stay in Zaire and continue pursuing her dream :²⁶⁴

The whisper of a cool breeze, flirting with the leaves, broke the stillness of dawn. I felt Lamerchie's presence next to me and wished I could communicate with Nlunda a Kinkulu's spirit, the way she could. My restless soul suddenly woke from despair and echoes of ancestral drums vibrated in my mind as a river of determination flowed in my veins.²⁶⁵

Eventually, Iris succeeds in securing a job and engages in a complicated romantic relationship with a married man, the state commissioner Citoyen Bolingo whom she meets during a job interview and then becomes pregnant with his child.

The novel ends with Iris's death during the birth of her daughter Zati with her body being 'buried next to Hagathe,' and her spirit wandering with the ancestors that tells us her request to the spirits of her ancestors to write her story for her daughter:

I still don't know what my fate will be. [...] hopefully, Aïda Wedo will comply and get my story into the hands of my daughter. Then What? Perhaps I will be united with Hagathe and might even meet Nlunda a Kinkulu. I would like to ask her about the Africa she knew.²⁶⁶

Augustave enacts this spiritual homecoming where Iris's body is buried in Haiti and her soul potentially meeting her African ancestors, to argue that as a Caribbean Black woman, Iris belongs to both cultures and is returning to both as a home. The ending also represents

²⁶⁴ Augustave, p.203.

²⁶⁵ Augustave, p.192.

²⁶⁶ Augustave, p.308.

Augustave's celebration of her Caribbean tradition in which she invokes the potential of a Haitian death ceremony which as Chancy maintains is the "rite of passage" called *desounen*.²⁶⁷ This ritual, Chancy writes 'returns the spirits of the departed to their sources: the ancestors and the earth from which they will be reborn.'²⁶⁸ Returning to the spirits for Iris is freeing her from the burdens of the different diasporic formations and oppressions she navigated alive as a diasporic Black woman. Similar to Gyasi's novel, Augustave offers a reconciliation with cultural roots in Iris's journey as her death proposes the possibility to start anew with the potential of gaining new knowledge about her African heritage. As Chancy holds, though 'many exiles lose a sense of who they are (and where they come from) through the condition of exile, still it is possible to transform exile productively to affirm self and origin.'²⁶⁹ Indeed, I suggest that with Iris's diasporic narrative, Augustave argues that the diasporic condition can be transformative for Black women in the diaspora instead of only presenting a narrative that focuses on fragmentation with the African heritage that the historical diasporic condition imposes on the dispersed. However, Iris's journey is not presented as being simple as she ventures through different exile phases to be able to accept and learn her connections to the different locations and histories. Augustave's employment of the coming-of-age narrative allows us as readers to walk the journey along with Iris and allows us to understand that her wholeness of self is the result of her return towards her cultural roots.

Conclusion:

²⁶⁷ Chancy, *Searching for Safe Spaces*, p.26.

²⁶⁸ Chancy, p.26.

²⁶⁹ Chancy, p.217.

This chapter has offered a comparative analysis of the literary representations of the notion of homecoming to Africa in three contemporary texts by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Yaa Gyasi, and Elsie Augustave. I have examined the different trajectories the novels explore in writing relationship to Africa. While I focused on the theme of return as a shared theme in the three novels, I focused on the different diasporic narratives the writers offer. The analysis highlighted the writers' centralisation of Black women's experiences in the diaspora with the oppressions of race and gender while situating their characters' struggles within the legacies of slavery in America. I have suggested that the three writers refuse singularity in defining Blackness by invoking a model of transnational Blackness through the meeting of Black migrants with African Americans under oppressive systems and offer solidarity between Black women by focusing on their specific issues. I have also argued that each text presents a distinct narrative of return while together they present it as productive and transformative formation as opposed to limiting the diasporic experience as being alienating.

Adichie's novel presents a contemporary migratory subjectivity through the story of Ifemelu who leaves from Nigeria to discover Blackness in America, offering a new model of racial formation that is not exclusive to slavery legacies. Adichie uses Ifemelu's blog as a social commentary on the racial hierarchy in America, thus promoting transnational Blackness as an immigrant addressing African American histories. As a Black woman diasporic subject, Ifemelu grapples with the race and gender oppressions in America. With such discourse, Adichie presents Black feminist solidarity that she expresses through discussing Black women's issues. However, after thirteen years in America, Ifemelu decides to return to Nigeria for being unable to belong in America and not feeling her true self. However, Ifemelu's successful return to Nigeria after the experience of migration means an identity located between two

spaces which Ifemelu is able to navigate. Adichie, thus offers a diasporic model that is productive and mobile as opposed to being rootless.

Gyasi's novel is a project of historical reclamation of the violent histories of the past. Through the historical sweep narrative, Gyasi returns to the African involvement in slave trade the African America history with enslavement and its legacies. The storyline of the two sisters separated at the door of no return symbolise the diasporic rupture. However, with the meeting of the descendent of each sister again in Ghana, Gyasi offers in her novel the possibility of return and a reconciliation between Africa and its diaspora, to argue against that narrative that all Africans in the diaspora are rootless. Augustave's bildungsroman highlights Iris's dwelling between Haiti, America and Africa, and her journey to discover her roots through experiencing the different phases of exile. Iris is only able to understand her identity when she is able to recuperate her Afro-Caribbean culture. Augustave enacts spiritual return that allows Iris's soul to continue connecting with her dual heritage. Augustave's model argues that it is possible to transform diasporic experiences productively to affirm self and cultural origin. The genre of the bildungsroman plays a significant role in helping Augustave to represent Iris's journey towards finding the self and the roots.

CHAPTER THREE

CHIMAMNDA NGOZI ADICHIE AND MICHELLE OBAMA AS *THE* POPULAR BLACK FEMINISTS

Introduction:

In the previous chapter I have argued that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Americanah* offers a critique of America's race and gender politics and presents solidarity among Black women in the diaspora by promoting a model of transnational Blackness. In this chapter I analyse the feminism presented in Adichie's popular feminist booklet *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014) and her latest essay *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (2017) along America's former first lady Michelle Obama's 2018 memoir *Becoming*.¹ My study intervenes in the field of Black feminist literary criticism by offering an original reading of both Adichie's texts with Mrs Obama's memoir as a Black feminist text by examining the approaches they follow in addressing some key intersectional Black feminist issues. While I am aware of their different backgrounds, Adichie being a feminist and literary writer while Obama is a former first lady, I argue that as two of the most praised global public figures of Black feminism in the west and expanding the visibility of Black women and Mrs Obama being labelled by many scholars as 'traditional' Black feminists and Adichie as 'prominent figure' of contemporary feminism, it is significant to interrogate the discourses of racism and sexism they offer in their works. In approaching Obama's memoir as a feminist text, I move beyond the scholarship that focuses on it solely as autobiographical writing to read it as a feminist text while acknowledging that the genre of the memoir allows Obama to reflect on her experiences as a Black woman in American and the White House. Though

¹ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014).
Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (London: Fourth Estate, 2017).

conversations are carried on Adichie and Mrs Obama's appearances together, less is done on juxtaposing their models to interrogate the effects of a trend of popular feminism that I argue their texts promote. In an attempt to fill this void, the analysis extends these debates that allow to reflect on the risks of individualistic approaches that dismiss historical complexities and promote overgeneralisations of Black women's experiences with the intersection of race and gender.

Though Adichie's work in feminism cannot be overlooked, I hold that in both of her texts Adichie simplifies and personalises her feminist discussions, a style that she is the advocate for, to popularise feminism and make it accessible which I suggest risks flattening significant intersectional Black feminist issues. In doing so, I offer to continue the recent work scholars have done on Adichie's feminism in this regard, but I push it forward by focusing on her latest feminist essay as an extension to her first popular work, which is often not included in this scholarship, and on examining the language and the style as significant features in her feminist model.² Additionally, Obama's global visibility as America's first lady and the first Black woman to ever hold this position can be seen as contributing to changing views about Black women. Therefore, I will investigate how Mrs Obama contributes to subverting the inherited images and definitions of Black womanhood especially during her role as a first lady. Focusing on her contribution in subverting controlling images is crucial to this study especially since, as Harris maintains, Mrs Obama is seen as 'a role model for young black women.'³ As Brittney cooper argues in her analysis of Mrs Obama's navigation of public sphere, that the

² See Amber Lascelles, 'We Should All Be *Radical* Feminists: A Review of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Contribution to Literature and Feminism,' in *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 57.6 (2021), 893-899, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2021.1900414>> [accessed 26 May 2021].

³ Harris, p.9.

first lady 'used her platform to expand limiting definitions of womanhood and ladyhood.'⁴ However, I argue that Mrs Obama's memoir promotes individualistic approach in discussing issues of gender and race which urges scholars to be more critical in ascribing her model under the label of traditional Black feminist. To carry my intersectional Black feminist reading, I build on the works of key Black women scholars such as Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and Sara Ahmed along other contemporary scholars to address the risks of popularised versions of Black feminism.

Adichie's 2009 TED Talk *The Danger of a Single Story*, where she argues against one-dimensional representations of narratives that create stereotypes, gained her the global popularity as a famous feminist and writer.⁵ Adichie's 2012 popular TEDx Talk *We Should All Be Feminist* that she delivered in 2012 and was adapted in 2014 to a book length-essay, has generated to this day over seven million views on the platform.⁶ Parts of Adichie's TEDx speech were featured in the American singer Beyoncé's 2013 song 'Flawless,' which as Carole

⁴ Brittney Cooper, 'A'n't I a Lady?: Race Women Michelle Obama, and the ever expanding Democratic Imagination,' in *MELUS*, 35, 4 (2010), 39-57 (p.41) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25759557>> [accessed 10 March 2023].

⁵ Adichie, 'The Danger of Single Story' (2009), *TED Global*, <https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en> [accessed 3 April 2023]. This talk to this date has generated over than 30 million views on the platform. See Mika Morikawa-Zhou, 'Effectively Communicating Cultural Complexity to Enact Change' in *Women Community Leaders and Their impact as Global Changemakers*, ed. by Patricia Goodman Hayward, Sarah Rahman, and Zirui Yan (United States: IGI Global, 2022), pp.115-119, (p.117).

⁶ Adichie's non-fiction writing has also been rewarded such as *We Should All Be Feminists* which is *New York Times* Bestseller and *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* a winner of the Grand Prix de L'Héroïne Madam Figaro for non-fiction in 2017, see Adichie, <<https://www.chimamanda.com/about-chimamanda/>> [accessed 12 October 2018].

Adichie, 'We Should All be Feminists' (2009), *TEDx Talks*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hg3umXU_qWc> [accessed 10 Mars 2023]. According to Adichie's official website the book is translated into 8 different languages such as Turkish and Chinese and licenced for publication in 32 languages. See Adichie, <<https://www.chimamanda.com/book/>> [accessed 12 October 2018].

In Sweden, this pocket-sized book was distributed to high school students and the same initiative was started in one high school in Stockholm for the belief that the book will help spark conversations about gender and equality. See Alison Flood, 'Every 16 years old in Sweden to receive a copy of *We Should All Be Feminists*' (2015), *The Guardian*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/dec/04/every-16-year-old-in-sweden-to-receive-copy-of-we-should-all-be-feminists>> [accessed 10 October 2018].

Boyce Davies maintains ‘provide one of the major ways that an African writer’s work was able to circulate via popular media’ and took ‘Chimamanda’s recognition and her version of feminism to another generation and reading demographic.’⁷ In 2017 the phrase *We Should All Be Feminists* was displayed on Christian Dior’s T-shirts for their spring collection.⁸ Adichie’s first feminist text as Bernardine Evaristo argues, ‘probably influenced’ other bestselling Black women writers such as Chidera Eggerue and Otegha Uwagba who subsequently published bestselling feminist works.⁹ Davies maintains that Adichie’s impact created a moment for other Nigerian and African women writers calling it ‘the post-colonial/ diasporic Chimamanda Adichie moment.’¹⁰ After the success of her first essay, Adichie published a similar piece entitled *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* in 2017.

Obama’s 2018 memoir *Becoming* comes after a long line of first lady memoirs by her predecessors who have published about their lives during their position as first ladies including *The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt* (1961), Rosalynn Carter’s *First Lady From Plains* (1984), and Hillary Clinton’s *Living History* (2003). However, Obama’s *Becoming* is the most popular amongst the previous first lady memoirs where in only five months after its publication it succeeded to sell ten million copies globally.¹¹ After this large number of sales, the head of its publishing house, Penguin Random House, Thomas Rabe declared that ‘we

⁷ Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women’s Rights: Leadership and the Circulating of Power* (London & Maryland: Lexington Books, 2022), pp.59-60.

⁸ Steff Totka, ‘Maria Grazia Chiuri a Feminist Statement at Her Dior Debut’ (2016), *Vogue*, <<https://www.vogue.com/article/dior-we-should-all-be-feminists-t-shirt-maria-grazia-chiuri>> [accessed 13 December 2018].

⁹ Bernardine Evaristo, ‘These are Unprecedented times for Black Female Writers’ (2019), *The Guardian*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/oct/19/bernadine-evaristo-what-a-time-to-be-a-black-british-womxn-writer>> [accessed 24 November 2019].

¹⁰ Carole Boyce Davies quoted in Deborat Pucherová, *Feminism and Modernity in Anglophone African Women’s Writing: A 21st-Century Global Context* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2022), p.56.

¹¹ See BBC, ‘Michelle Obama’s Memoir *Becoming* Sells 10 Million Copies’ (2019), *BBC News* <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-47704987>> [accessed 17 April 2019].

believe this could be the most successful memoir in history.’¹² Prior to the memoir, Michelle Obama rose to global fame with her husband Barack Obama’s election in 2008 as the first Black first lady in American history. During Obama’s presidency, Fox News announced in 2015 that Michelle Obama was ‘the most televised first lady’ in which she surpassed Laura Bush and Hillary Clinton in the number of their televised appearances.¹³ Mrs Obama marked her presence in popular American TV shows like the Colbert Report with Steven Colbert in 2012 and appeared dancing with Jimmy Fallon in The Tonight Show in 2013.¹⁴

While Michelle Obama expresses her admiration of Adichie’s works stating ‘I love her stuff,’ unlike the latter who sates she is ‘a Happy Feminist’ in *We Should All Be Feminists*, Mrs Obama never publicly self-proclaimed the label.¹⁵ In 2007 Mrs Obama declared to the *Washington Post* that she does not consider herself a feminist, stating ‘I am not into labels [...] if you laid out a feminist agenda, I would probably agree with a large portion of it. But I wouldn’t identify as a feminist just like I probably wouldn’t identify as a liberal or a progressive.’¹⁶ Despite distancing herself from the feminist label, Mrs Obama has been viewed by many scholars as a figure of Black feminism for subverting negative images of Black womanhood during her

¹² Rabe quoted in Sara Germano, ‘Michelle Obama’s Memoir Near Ten Million Copies Sold’ (2019), *The Wall Street Journal*, <<https://www.wsj.com/articles/michelle-obamas-memoir-on-course-to-be-most-successful-ever-11553601931>> [accessed 21 May 2019].

¹³ See Fox News, ‘Michelle Obama Becoming the Most Televised First Lady’ (2015), *Fox News*, <<https://www.foxnews.com/politics/michelle-obama-becoming-the-most-televised-first-lady>> [accessed 29 April 2019].

¹⁴ Fox News, ‘Michelle Obama Becoming the Most Televised First Lady.’ See Evolution of Mom Dancing with Jimmy Fallon and Michelle Obama’ (2013), *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Falon* <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hq-URl9F17Y>> [accessed 1 April 2023].

¹⁵ Michelle Obama quoted in ‘Books Loved by Michelle Obama,’ *The Reading Agency*, <<https://readinggroups.org/news/books-loved-by-michelle-obama>> [accessed 4th February 2024]. Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists*, p.9.

¹⁶ Obama quoted in *Michelle Obama in Her Own Words*, ed by. Lisa Rogak (New York: Perseus Books Group, 2009), p.54

position as America's first Black first lady.¹⁷ In *Black Women, Agency, and the New Black Feminism* (2017), Maria Del Guadalupe Davidson argues that Mrs Obama:

[I]s a traditional black feminist who understands the structure of white supremacist patriarchy. She acts to resist these forces by excelling in white-dominated spaces and embraces the idea that she is a role model to other black women, not only because of her achievement but also because of her ability to overcome obstacles in her way.¹⁸

In *Black Feminist Politics from Kennedy to Trump* (2018), Duchess Harries maintains that as a first lady, Michelle Obama 'embodies' the Combahee River Collective's form of feminism that called for centralising and uplifting 'those who are most marginalized and disenfranchised' and knew that 'America's destiny is inseparable' from how it treats Black women.¹⁹ Therefore, my attempt to approach Mrs Obama's *Becoming* as a Black feminist memoir stems from such scholarship and public discourse that positions Michelle Obama as a Black feminist.

This chapter is divided into three sections, the first section explores Adichie's stylistic and thematic approach in producing a popular model of feminism that is more accessible to wider audiences in which she tackles complex feminist dialogues using her personal experiences. I examine Adichie's model of feminism and what her approach to feminism presents and risks to obscure by turning to Black women's scholarship on the form of feminism that Adichie's feminist texts promote by discussing the ways she approaches key Black feminist issues. The

¹⁷ According to Meghan Werft, the survey of PerryUndem organization have found that 47% of American consider Obama 'the face of feminism', see Meghan Werft, 'Michelle Obama is the 'Face of Feminism' According to 47% of Americans' (2017), *The Global Citizen* <<https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/michelle-obama-feminism-us-election-poll/>> [accessed 21 May 2019].

¹⁸ Maria Del Guadalupe Davidson, *Black Women, Agency, and the New Black Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 2017), p.95.

¹⁹ Duchess Harries, *Black Feminist Politics from Kennedy to Trump* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p.9.

second section opens with an analysis of the way Mrs Obama addresses her own position as a Black woman between race and gender while telling her experience as a first lady and all the challenges it came with. The last section investigates Michelle Obama's approach to subvert the negative images attached to her during her tenure in the White House as reflected in the memoir. I intend to argue that while Mrs Obama and Adichie's relationship to Black feminism is different, they share in fact similarities in the way they approach the intersection of race and gender in these specific texts.

Adichie's popular essay *We Should All be Feminists* is a fifty-page prose exploration of contemporary feminist issues and what it means to be a woman in the 21st century. Throughout the essay, Adichie addresses questions of gender and feminism with extensive reference to her personal experiences as a woman in Nigeria and America starting with her young adulthood, university years to her travels. Moving away from feminist jargon, Adichie uses simple vocabulary and everyday language and relies on anecdotes that appeal to non-academic audience to tackle social concerns such as marriage, parenting, and success from gender roles perspective. While keeping her discussions brief and concise, Adichie addresses the need to challenge the social stereotypical notions attached to feminism and to those who identify as feminists. Adichie unearths the reasons feminism still matters today and calls for people to participate in feminist conversations for more productive societies. The text critiques society's formation of masculinity and the gender roles that are social and cultural constructs ingrained and inherited through generations. Referencing the story of her feminist grandmother, Adichie ends her essay with calling for the necessity of gender equality on the social, political, and economic level for the world's advancement.

According to Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* was initially sent as an intimate letter to her friend Ijeawele who asked for advice on how to raise her daughter Chizalum as a feminist. The letter was posted on Adichie's official Facebook page in 2016 and later was extended into a pocket-sized book.²⁰ Unlike *We Should All Be Feminists* the manifesto focuses on the context of her Nigerian heritage and Igbo culture but is not addressed to a specific audience. Continuing the short form that became Adichie's trend and maintaining a basic language and a direct style that is similar to her previous essay, she presents accessible reflections on feminism in a form of fifteen practical suggestions outlining her own vision of what constructs a true feminist. The work reads as a step-by-step guide for how to raise feminist girls who are able to challenge traditional expectations attached to their gender. Before presenting her rules, Adichie offers two 'Feminist tools' which serve as a leading thread for the rest of her text which she frames as 'the feminist premise' is that 'I matter equally' and the question 'can you reverse X and get the same result.'²¹ The suggestions tackle points like raising children outside the socially constructed gender roles with reference to social issues readers can understand and relate to including cooking, baby clothes to more complex issues like marriage, likability, biology and gender roles. After her lengthy answer to her friend's request, Adichie ends her essay with a hopeful message suggesting the acceptance of difference in a diverse world and asks her friend jokingly if she had headache from reading her advice.

²⁰ Adichie, < <https://www.facebook.com/chimamandaadichie/posts/a-new-piece-from-chimamandadear-ijeawele-or-a-feminist-manifesto-in-fifteen-sugg/10154412708460944/>> [accessed 16 October 2018].

This booklet is licenced for publication in 19 languages including German, Swedish, Italian and Danish, and has been praised for its feminist rendition by *The Guardian* (UK), *Washington Post* and *Vanity Fair*. See Adichie's official website.

²¹ Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele*, p.8.

Michelle Obama's *Becoming* is a detailed personal account of Mrs Obama's journey to become the celebrated woman of today which she vividly recounts in three large sections. Obama writes her memoir with a simplistic style that moves between formal and informal codes following the different situations she recounts. For example, in telling her childhood stories she uses informal language to connect with her readers, and switches to formal when she speaks as a first lady about her duties. The tone of her writing shifts between seriousness, anger and hope and relies on the reader's sympathy to grasp her emotions. The first section 'Becoming Me' is an exploration of her life in Chicago where Obama writes about her early childhood in the two-bedroom apartment in the South Side of Chicago with her brother Craig and both African American working parents. She speaks about her school years starting from primary school to being student in Whitney Young High school and her hardworking days that ultimately led her to become an Ivy League graduate with degrees from Princeton and Harvard Law School. 'Becoming Us,' visits the life of Obama after meeting her husband whom she mentored while she held the position of an attorney in what she describes as a 'high-end' law firm Sidley & Austin in Chicago.²² In addition, this section delves into the intimate relationship Obama had with her husband starting from their early encounter to their marriage and having a family of two daughters. In the last chapter of 'Becoming Us,' Obama condenses the pages of her memoir with the particulars related to her husband's position as a senator and a member of the Democratic Party and the first African American president in the history of the United States. The third section 'Becoming More' is dedicated mostly to Obama's life in the post-election era of her husband's presidential terms and their life as the first African American family in the White House. Here Obama focuses on her personal

²² Michelle Obama, *Becoming* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2018), p.92.

approach to first ladyhood by describing her life as a first lady inside and outside the walls of the presidential residence and the accomplishments of her first ladyhood under the public scrutiny.

1-Adichie's Model to Popular Feminism:

In an introductory paragraph explaining the steps leading to the publication of her essay, Adichie reveals her hope that her efforts to start a conversation about feminism would make the subject appeal to the public. Presenting herself as a feminist cultural critic, Adichie writes 'I decided to speak about Feminism because it is something I feel strongly about. I suspected that it might not be a very popular subject, but I hoped to start a necessary conversation.'²³ To start this necessary conversation, Adichie narrates short series of personal encounters in Nigeria with the term feminist to address the negative connotations attached to feminism. Adichie opens with a story of her late childhood friend Okoloma, who was the first person to call her a feminist when she was a fourteen-year-old girl. Adichie explains that when Okoloma told her 'You know, you're a feminist' she knew "it was not a compliment. I could tell from his tone – the same tone with which a person would say, 'You're a supporter of terrorism.'²⁴ Adichie recalls that she was warned by a journalist she met after the publication of her novel *Purple Hibiscus* in 2003 that she should 'never' call herself a feminist 'since feminists are unhappy because they cannot find husbands.'²⁵ An academic Nigerian woman told Adichie that feminism 'was un-African,' while another friend said that being a feminist meant she 'hated men.'²⁶ After showing 'how that word *feminist* is heavy' with 'negative baggage,'

²³ Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists*, p.4.

²⁴ Adichie, p.8.

²⁵ Adichie, p.9.

²⁶ Adichie, p.10.

Adichie explains her attempts to challenge all these conceptualisations on feminism by calling herself a:²⁷

Happy African Feminist Who Does Not Hate Men. At some point I was a
Happy African Feminist Who Does Not Hate Men And Who Likes to Wear
Lip Gloss And High Heels for Herself and Not For Men.²⁸

Adichie articulates to the reader a version of feminism as an accessible term that does not require hating men or refusing lipstick, as opposed to being a complex theory. Adichie offers her readers a simple definition of feminism that matches her approach to discussing feminist issues which is 'a man or a woman who says 'Yes. There's a problem with gender as it is today and we must fix it, we must do better.'²⁹ To do better Adichie asks 'we must raise our daughters differently, We must also raise our sons differently.'³⁰ Therefore, she focuses on challenging gender roles as key feminist issues in both manifestos through maintaining the simple language and using examples from everyday life, and her personal experiences that readers can relate to.

Adichie critiques the very positioning of young 'girls and boys' within the social and cultural constructions of gender by questioning the gender roles assigned to them early on 'it is interesting to me how early the world starts to invent gender roles.'³¹ Adichie intentionally moves away from feminist jargon because she explains in *Dear Ijeawele* '[w]e feminists can sometimes be too jargony, and jargon can sometimes feel too abstract.'³² Adichie's texts focus on challenging gender roles which she discusses as a category that is socially

²⁷ Adichie, p.11. (Italics in original).

²⁸ Adichie, p.11.

²⁹ Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists*, p.48.

³⁰ Adichie, p.25.

³¹ Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele*, p.16.

³² Adichie, p.27.

constructed which is a debate that dominated the feminist scholarship of the 1980s and 1990s such as in Judith Butler's 1990 *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. In introducing her theory of gender performativity to explain 'gender as an enactment that performatively constitute the appearance of its own interior fixity,' Butler argues that 'gender is culturally constructed.'³³ For Butler gender is a social construction that is open to contestation 'gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender thus is a construction that conceals its genesis.'³⁴ This means that gender is constructed through a repetitive performance in which individuals perform set of learned acts and behaviours that suggest being a specific gender.

In *We Should All be Feminists*, Adichie narrates one of her 'never forgotten' earliest confrontations with the established gender roles in Nigeria. Adichie refers to her childhood story in primary school when she was not allowed by her teacher to be a 'class monitor' for being a girl despite having had 'the highest score on the test' as the monitor 'had to be a boy' though the boy who became a monitor had 'the second-highest score.'³⁵ Adichie uses her story to warn against the social implications of normalising gender biased designations which could start from schools to affect corporations and systems:

If we see the same thing over and over again, it becomes normal. If only boys are made class monitor, then at some point we will all think, even if unconsciously, that the class monitor has to be a boy. If we keep seeing

³³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, [1990] 1999), p.89, p.9.

³⁴ Butler, p.178.

³⁵ Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists*, p.12.

only men as heads of corporations, it starts to seem 'natural' that only men should be heads of corporations.³⁶

Adichie continues to give an example on this normalisation of early conditioning of gender roles that develop to become a social reality with reference to her friend who believes there is no sexism in Nigeria: 'my dear friend Louis [...] would tell me 'I don't see what you mean by things being different and harder for women. Maybe it was so in the past, but not now. Everything is fine now for women.'³⁷ This friend would only realise later the reality of sexism in Nigeria when Adichie tips a man in a restaurant while being with Louis in Lagos. Adichie describes how the man thought the money belonged to Louis because he is the man: 'this man who was happy and grateful, took the money from me and then looked across at Louis and said, Thank you, sah!' because he believed that 'whatever money I had ultimately came from Louis. Because Louis was a man.'³⁸ Adichie discusses further how women are viewed when unaccompanied by men in hotels in Nigeria when she narrates her experience of renting a room in a hotel only to be mistaken for 'a sex worker.'³⁹ Adichie describes how the entrance guard stopped her and asked her 'annoying questions' on who she is visiting. These questions Adichie asserts come from 'the automatic assumption' that 'a Nigerian female walking into a hotel alone is a sex worker. Because a Nigerian female alone cannot possibly be a guest paying for her own room.'⁴⁰ With these personal experiences, Adichie demonstrates that the gender issues she is asking societies to challenge are everyday necessities for women. As Davies argues, in Adichie's text 'we see an assumption that feminist issues are normal human rights,

³⁶ Adichie, p.13.

³⁷ Adichie, p.14.

³⁸ Adichie, p.16.

³⁹ Adichie, p.19.

⁴⁰ Adichie, p.19.

related to living in the contemporary world.⁴¹ Adichie's approach to the discussions of gender politics through sharing her personal experience recalls the trope of second wave feminism 'the personal is political.'

The trope 'the personal is political' is originally used to focus on the importance of women's everyday events in the struggle to dismantle the hierarchies of power.⁴² The phrase gained popularity with the feminist activist Carole Hanisch's 1969 essay 'The Personal is Political.' It called for the politicisation of women's everyday life as women's personal issues are also political issues and affect one another. Hanisch writes on the political understanding of her own personal experiences 'it is at this point a political action to tell it as it is, to say what I believe about my life instead of what I've always been told to say.'⁴³ As Ruth Rosen argues, what Hanisch 'meant to convey the then-shocking idea that there were political dimensions to private life, that power relations shaped life in marriage, in the kitchen, the bedroom, the nursery, and at work.'⁴⁴ Juliet A. Williams argues that the idea of 'the personal is political' in feminism has always presented a 'forum for women to see how much they had in common with others.'⁴⁵ Consciousness raising groups as a form of activism were the driver of 'the personal is political' campaign. These groups gathered women in a collective, domestic environment to express their everyday experiences with sexism. In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (2000), bell hooks argues that these groups 'provided a space for women to

⁴¹ Davies, *Black Women's Rights*, p. 59.

⁴² Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p.46.

⁴³ Carol Hanisch, 'The Personal is Political,' in *Radical Feminism: A Documentary Reader*, ed. by Barbara A. Crow (New York and London: New York University Press, 2000), pp.113-116 (p.113).

⁴⁴ Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking Books, 2000), p.196.

⁴⁵ Juliet A. Williams, 'The Personal is Political: Thinking Through the Clinton/Lewinsky/Starr Affair' in *Political Science and Politics*, 34.1 (2001), 93-98, (p.93) < <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1350316> > [accessed 11 October 2018].

explore their sexism. This examination of their attitudes towards themselves and other women was often a catalyst for transformation.⁴⁶ In her 1998 *Fighting Words*, Patricia Hill Collins maintains that ‘the personal is political’ slogan ‘operated as a metaphor in organizing feminist ideas and actions’ that ‘pointed out how politics permeated everyday life’ and ‘prescribed how actions in everyday life were important in challenging structural power relations.’⁴⁷ Collins further argues that despite the fact that ‘the personal is political’ slogan ‘valorised individual experience’ it ‘linked such experiences to larger systems of structural power.’⁴⁸ Collins maintains that consciousness-raising ‘emerged as central’ to the feminist slogan ‘the personal is political’ as ‘women learned to see their individual lives in political terms.’⁴⁹ As Collins writes, ‘[i]n 1970s Black women encountered the feminist slogan “the personal is political.”’⁵⁰ Among the Black feminists who were in support of this trope is Audre Lorde who argues in her 1984 *Sister Outsider*, that approaching this trope the right way could be productive for Black women’s struggles and activism:

I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears. Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices.⁵¹

Adichie, thus, formulate her views on gender politics with the use of her individual experience to help readers who want to be feminists to better understand sexism and gender oppression.

⁴⁶ hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 2nd edn. (London: Pluto Press 2000), p.48.

⁴⁷ hooks, p.48.

⁴⁸ Patricia Hill Collins referring to Kathie Sarachild 1987 *Feminist Revolution in Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p.46.

⁴⁹ Collins, p.46.

⁵⁰ Collins, p.46.

⁵¹ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (California: Crossing Press, 1984), p.113.

Continuing the personal narratives, in *Dear Ijeawele*, Adichie extends on a similar discussion in *We Should All Be Feminists* by asking her friend to teach her daughter to refuse society's acceptance of gender inequality with reference to her own stories. In the third suggestion, Adichie reiterates her argument on gender roles arguing that they 'are so deeply conditioned in us that we will often follow them even when they chafe against our true desires, our needs, our happiness. They are difficult to unlearn,' therefore, she stresses 'it is important to try to make sure that Chizalum rejects them from the beginning.'⁵² Adichie argues that girls should be raised to 'question our culture's selective use of biology as reasons for social norms' and 'should never accept it as justification for any social norm.'⁵³ In addressing sex and biology Butler argues that it 'is a discursive formation that acts as a naturalised foundation for the nature/ culture distinction and strategies of domination that the distinction supports.'⁵⁴ As a female child Adichie narrates how social and cultural expectations were attached to her gender as her and her brother were asked to do things differently:

I remember being told as a child to 'bend down properly while sweeping, like a girl [...] I wish I had been told simply, 'bend down and sweep properly because you will clean the floor better.' And I wish my brothers had been told the same thing.⁵⁵

Thus, she demands that the society should not assign certain roles only on the bases of a girl's biological formation 'because you are a girl is never a reason for anything.'⁵⁶ When Adichie asks Ijeawele to be 'deliberate' about how she engages with her daughter 'and her

⁵² Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele*, p. 20.

⁵³ Adichie, pp.48-49.

⁵⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp.47-48.

⁵⁵ Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele*, p.15.

⁵⁶ Adichie, p.15

appearance,' Adichie returns to her own experience of stopping sports because of the changes of her body as a female 'I stopped playing football when my breasts first appeared because all I wanted to do was hide the existence of my breasts, and running and tackling didn't help. Please try not to let that get in her way.'⁵⁷ Another point that Adichie problematises through the personal is the 'retrograde marital expectations on women' in a world that she argues 'still largely values a woman's marital and maternal roles more than anything else.'⁵⁸ Adichie references the time she challenged this view by refusing being called after her husband's name. When she asked a journalist to use her name instead 'I asked him to stop because that was not my name' Adichie reveals that she received 'smouldering hostility from some Nigerian women in response to this.'⁵⁹ With her experience Adichie illustrates the difficulty of challenging the social norms in Nigeria.

When Adichie further refers to other feminist issues she uses the pronoun 'we' significantly for critiquing or demanding feminist change as it is noticed from the title of her essay which she believes everyone should be feminists. In an interview where she is asked about the 'we' of her slogan, Adichie stresses that it means to address 'everyone in the world.'⁶⁰ In both feminist texts Adichie uses 'we' in the way that could risk homogenising different experiences and cultural backgrounds. In *We Should All be Feminists*, Adichie maintains that '[t]he problem with gender is that it prescribes how we *should* be rather than recognize how we are.'⁶¹ Similarly, in *Dear Ijeawele*, she contends that 'standards or experiences' should never be universalized as they are particular to individuals and 'are not for other people.'⁶² Throughout

⁵⁷ Adichie, p.42.

⁵⁸ Adichie, p.31.

⁵⁹ Adichie, p.32.

⁶⁰ Adichie, 'Chimamanda Adichie on the Dior Autumn-Winter 2019-2020 Haute Couture' (2019), *Christian Dior*, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sVCZzh93jXk>> [accessed 9 October 2019].

⁶¹ Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists*, p.34.

⁶² Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele*, p.60.

the work there are phrases with repetitive 'we' such as 'we teach girls' and 'we raise girls.'⁶³ Though she is addressing a Nigerian friend on the specific Nigerian experience, she uses the 'we' to address global audience. For example, in addressing marriage, she states '[...] we teach girls to aspire to marriage, yet we don't teach boys to do the same.'⁶⁴ In the second suggestion, Adichie argues that co-parenting is not common among people, writing 'when we say fathers are 'helping,' we are suggesting that childcare is a mother's territory, into which fathers valiantly venture.'⁶⁵ Furthermore, she talks about marriage, a point previously argued in *We Should All Be Feminists*; however, this time in relation to cooking, which she holds that 'we are still talking about [...] as some kind of a marriageability test for women.'⁶⁶ She further stresses that 'if we stop conditioning women to see marriage as a prize, then we would have fewer debates about a wife needing to cook in order to earn that prize.'⁶⁷ She continues 'we have been so conditioned to think of power as male that a powerful woman is an aberration;' therefore, 'we are quicker to assume girls can't do many things.'⁶⁸ Adichie's extensive focus on the 'I' and the 'we' that does not refer to the different intersectional parameters could risk homogenising Black women's experiences and not cater to the different vectors of oppression Black women face, and could risk being related to the concept of 'common oppression' that hooks critiques in her 1984 *Feminist Theory From Margin to Center*.⁶⁹ The notion of 'common oppression,' hooks argues, was created by white radical and liberal women to create a false sense of sisterhood. However, she contends that such platform is corrupt, and it mystifies 'the true nature of women's varied and complex social reality.'⁷⁰ hooks maintains that this idea

⁶³ Adichie, p.33, p.32.

⁶⁴ Adichie, p.29.

⁶⁵ Adichie, p.13-14.

⁶⁶ Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele*, p.16.

⁶⁷ Adichie, p.16.

⁶⁸ Adichie, p.20, p.24.

⁶⁹ hooks, *Feminist Theory*, p.44.

⁷⁰ hooks, p.44.

was a 'false' platform 'disguising and mystifying the true nature of woman's varied and complex social reality' since women are 'divided by sexist attitudes, racism, class privilege, and a host of other prejudices.'⁷¹ Therefore, hooks argues that despite the importance of highlighting women's experiences, women's problems will not be solved by employing the narrative of common oppression 'divisions will not be eliminated by wishful thinking or romantic reverie about common oppression despite the value of highlighting experiences all women share.'⁷² Adichie's feminist discussion tends to focus less on the impact of race on women, which she clarifies in her texts as I will illustrate further, in comparison to her feminist dialogue in her novel *Americanah*, which I have argued in the second chapter.

Adichie's feminist texts pay a significant attention to the aspect of Black femininity, specifically beauty, a discussion which is more present in *Dear Ijeawele*, in which it constructs the longest part of the *Manifesto* in comparison to *We Should All Be Feminists* which tackles it briefly in relation to Adichie's experiences. In her first essay, Adichie narrates how she became determined not to be apologetic about being feminine and loving to wear make-up: 'I have chosen to no longer be apologetic for my femininity' after the mistake of believing that 'the less feminine a woman appears, the more likely she is to be taken seriously.'⁷³ Adichie refuses the labelling that feminists are not feminine by describing herself as being a 'happily girly' who likes 'high heels and trying on lipsticks.'⁷⁴ Similarly, in *Dear Ijeawele* Adichie stresses that 'feminism and femininity are not mutually exclusive. It is misogynistic to suggest that they are.'⁷⁵ This perception argues Adichie results from women being taught to be 'apologetic

⁷¹ hooks, p.44.

⁷² hooks, p.44.

⁷³ Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists*, p.39.

⁷⁴ Adichie, pp.39-40.

⁷⁵ Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele*, p.42.

about pursuits that are seen as traditionally female such as fashion and make-up.⁷⁶ In her broader discussion on femininity, Adichie shifts her focus to Black hair and the necessity of promoting positive images of Black hair on mainstream media. In both texts, Adichie addresses the complex issues related to Black beauty that Black feminism has been concerned with for decades in their writings and activism. Many of Adichie's arguments as I illustrate below are Black feminist discussions which she repeats using her simplistic style and accessible language while also referring to her personal experiences. As Davies argues *We Should All Be Feminists* 'carries many of the themes and assertions that run through the work of African feminist literary and theoretical writers.'⁷⁷ Yet, Adichie argues that she is indifferent about Black feminist academic texts stating, 'I don't care much for feminist academic texts, I care for the textured lives of feminist characters' when in fact as Thabi Myeni argues, Adichie 'gets her talking points from theoretical feminists that came before her' in *We Should All Be Feminist* but repeating it in a manner that is 'accessible to the masses.'⁷⁸ In the tenth suggestion in *Dear Ijeawele*, Adichie urges for the necessity of redefining the meaning of 'neat hair' by asking her friend to allow her daughter to wear her 'hair loose' with 'big plaits and big cornrows' and to not use 'tiny-toothed comb that wasn't made with our hair texture in mind' to support her previous claim that 'hair is political,' which she publicly stated.⁷⁹ For Adichie, Black women's hair is associated with different assumptions if it fails to adapt to the white encoded mainstream definitions of hair which is straight hair.

⁷⁶ Adichie, p.42.

⁷⁷ Davies, *Black Women's Rights*, p.60

⁷⁸ Thabi Myeni, 'Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Isn't Quite the Champion of Feminism you Think: Here's Why' (2018), *Independent*, <<https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-feminism-trans-exclusionary-black-women-hillary-clinton-a8696931.html>> [accessed 2 October 2019]. Adichie quoted in Myeni.

⁷⁹ Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele*, p.44.

Adichie, 'Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: 'Hair is Political' (2013), Channel 4 News <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ck2o34DS64>> [accessed 04 October 2018].

The meaning of hair for Black women and Black culture is discussed by many Black feminists and scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins, Ingrid Banks, Shirley Anne Tate, and Kobena Mercer who have addressed in depth the cultural meanings attached to Black hair. In *Hair Matters* (2000), Banks asserts that Black women's hair has 'political constructions [...] that intersect with race and gender in relationship to mainstream notions of beauty.'⁸⁰ This makes Black women's hair undesirable if 'measured against white standards of beauty, which include long and straight hair.'⁸¹ Similarly, in *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), Collins argues that 'within the binary thinking that underpins intersecting oppressions, blue-eyed, blond, thin white women could not be considered beautiful without the Other—Black woman with African features of Dark skin, broad nose, full lips, and kinky hair.'⁸² In her (2009) *Black Beauty: Aesthetics, Stylization, Politics*, Tate argues that hair 'continues to be political' as beauty is affected by political activism because the way it is perceived changes from one community to another.⁸³ Tate maintains that Black beauty continues to be subject 'to the vicissitudes of identity politics, representations and the ongoing racializations of bodies and practices.'⁸⁴ Adichie asks women to refute the mainstream-promoted image of beauty by arguing against 'the narrow mainstream definition of beauty.'⁸⁵ The British writer Kobena Mercer argues that Black hair is among the 'politically intelligible [...] creative responses' to the ideologies promoted by racism.⁸⁶

⁸⁰ Ingrid Banks, *Hair Matters: Beauty, Power, and Black Women's Consciousness* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), p.38

⁸¹ Banks, *Hair Matters*, p.2.

⁸² Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p.89.

⁸³ Shirley Anne Tate, *Black beauty: Aesthetics, Stylization, Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p.43, p.105.

⁸⁴ Tate, p.10.

⁸⁵ Tate, p.45.

⁸⁶ Kobena Mercer, 'Black Hair/Style Politics,' in *New Formations*, 3 (1987), p.34.

<http://banmarchive.org.uk/collections/newformations/03_33.pdf> [accessed 15 November 2018].

In *Dear Ijeawele*, Adichie stresses that different platforms of media such as ‘magazines and films and television’ promote the idea that ‘whiteness is valued’ over Black beauty which children start to notice from an early age.⁸⁷

Chizalum will notice very early on [...] what kind of beauty the mainstream world values. She will see it in magazines and films and television. She will see that whiteness is valued. She will notice that the hair texture that is valued is straight or swingy, and hair that is valued falls down rather than stands up.⁸⁸

Though it is a significant issue for Black women in the diaspora, Adichie does not delve into the history and the roots of why Black beauty is not the standard in the mainstream media, unlike Black feminists who centralise the historical background in their discussions on beauty. In *Governmentality of Black Beauty Shame*, Tate insists that ‘through [...] enslavement and colonialism’s flesh continues to be Black women’s burden.’⁸⁹ Consequently, she argues, the nature of Black woman’s skin defines white as beauty and Black as ‘ugliness;’ therefore, to correct the ‘colonial myth’ that established the claim that ‘all women wish to be white,’ necessitates a project of decolonization.⁹⁰ Instead, in *Dear Ijeawele* Adichie tells her friend that she should ‘know best how to affirm her [daughter’s] own kind of beauty, how to protect

⁸⁷ Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele*, p.45.

⁸⁸ Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele*, p.45

These recent years witnessed the rise of publication of Black hair positivity writings across different genres like children’s books memoirs and academic texts. For example, in 2019 short film from director Matthew A. Cherry entitled *Hair Love* that in 2020 won the Oscar for best animated short film. The seven minutes film features a story of a Black father who struggles to style his young daughter’s Black hair and eventually succeeds. This film was turned into a bestselling children’s book in 2019. Other books about Black hair positivity include *Twisted: The Tangled History of Black Hair Culture* which is a 2022 memoir/academic exploration of Emma Dabiri’s journey with her hair as a Black woman.

⁸⁹ Tate, *The Governmentality of Black Beauty Shame: Discourse, Iconicity and Resistance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p.7.

⁹⁰ Tate, p.7.

her from looking at her own reflection with dissatisfaction.⁹¹ To do so, Adichie urges her friend to teach her daughter ‘that there are many individuals and many cultures that do not find the narrow mainstream definition of beauty attractive,’ therefore, she advises ‘make sure that you create alternatives for her to see’⁹² In her belief in ‘the power of alternatives,’ Adichie asks Ijeawale to surround her daughter ‘with a village of aunties, women who have qualities you’d like her to admire.’⁹³ Adichie lists different African American and African feminists ‘who are a source of feminist inspiration’ that she personally admires ‘I for example, particularly admire the African American feminist Florynce Kennedy [...] Ama Ata Aidoo, Dora Akunyili, Muthoni Likimani, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Taiwo Ajai-Lycett.’⁹⁴ Kennedy is one of the strongest voices in America who stood against racial and gender injustice and Aidoo, whose writing and activism is a feminist exploration of conflicts between men and women, focuses on African women’s struggles in relation to European colonialism. Adichie’s reference to such radical feminists for the first time in her feminist works showcases her deep awareness as a feminist of their work and its importance for Black women, yet as I argue further Adichie follows a different approach.

In support of her call to expand the beauty narratives on mainstream media that she talks about in her feminist texts, and her statement as a feminist who loves lipstick, in 2016 Adichie took part in an advertisement for the British pharmacy chain *Boots* and become the official face of their No7 cosmetics.⁹⁵ In the video of the advertisement, Adichie is featured repeating a similar statement about the perception that make-up contradicts women’s aim for

⁹¹ Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele*, p.46.

⁹² Adichie, p.45.

⁹³ Adichie, p.46.

⁹⁴ Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele*, p.46.

⁹⁵ Adichie, ‘No7 Made Ad with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’ (2016), *Boots UK*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1hMx_dx1nE> [accessed 01 November 2018].

seriousness.⁹⁶ In the advert, she states ‘our culture teaches us that if a woman wants to be taken seriously then she is not supposed to care too much about her appearance.’⁹⁷ What Adichie is referring to is the concept of ‘likability’ which she warns against in both her feminist works. In *We Should All Be Feminists* she argues against the belief that ‘being likable is very important and that this ‘likable’ trait is a specific thing.’⁹⁸ In *Dear Ijeawele* she alerts her friend to ‘teach her [daughter] to reject likability. Her job is not to make herself likable.’⁹⁹ The concept of rejecting likability is not new, what Adichie is claiming suggests a return to the idea of the ‘male gaze’ a term coined by Laura Mulvey in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* back in 1975.¹⁰⁰ In the context of cinema, Mulvey speaks about the objectification of women by male filmmakers as well as male spectators who position women as sexualised objects to cater to their desires.¹⁰¹ To debunk the ‘male gaze,’ Adichie declares in the No7 advert that for her wearing make-up ‘is about how I feel when I get it right. What makes me happy when I look at the mirror.’¹⁰² Adichie’s appearance in this advertisement is celebrated by many critics such as Chedria Labouvier who commented on the advert stating ‘it is political, radical even, that one of the biggest British brands has tapped a dark-skinned Black woman writer to represent them.’¹⁰³ Kelly Dougher also views Adichie’s make-up campaign as

⁹⁶ Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists*, p.38.

⁹⁷ Adichie, Boots Advert.

⁹⁸ Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists*, p.24.

⁹⁹ Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele*. p.36.

¹⁰⁰ Laura Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ in Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. by Patricia Erens, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp.28-40, (p.33).

¹⁰¹ Mulvey, p.33.

¹⁰² Adichie, Boots Advert.

¹⁰³ Chedria Labouvier, ‘Why Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Beauty Campaign Matters’ (2016), *ELLE*, <<https://www.elle.com/beauty/news/a40177/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-boots-beauty-campaign-why-it-matters/>> [accessed 18 October 2018].

important for countering the 'narrow perception of femininity' specifically with the long history of the underrepresentation of Black women within the beauty industry.¹⁰⁴

Though Adichie's campaign is widely celebrated, critics like Vicky Spratt view that with this advert Adichie is promoting a 'branded feminism' and employing the concept of feminism as a marketing tool to sell products.¹⁰⁵ Patel and Myeni argue that Adichie is standing for a brand of feminism as a tool to become popular and this popularity that Adichie is gaining is through emphasising to present 'Eurocentric' feminism.¹⁰⁶ Myeni sees that Adichie is building 'a multimillion brand' through the type of feminism she represents which is 'liberal.'¹⁰⁷ Liberal feminist thought which is based on the classic liberal theory according to Lisa Schwartzman focuses on individualism and the freedom of individuals to define what is valuable for their lives and live accordingly.¹⁰⁸ Michael Dawson argues that liberalism's focus on individual autonomy has been 'constantly rejected, particularly in Black feminist writings from the 1970s and 1980s, as being inadequate for the liberation of black women or the black community.'¹⁰⁹ Having a liberal brand is not the only idea that risks Adichie's feminist model, her failure to identify the overlapping paradigms in her public engagements and feminist non-fiction and that garnered her more criticism.

¹⁰⁴ Kelly Dougher, 'Why Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Boots No7 Campaign Is Hugely Important' (2016), *Fashion Magazine* <<https://fashionmagazine.com/beauty/chimamanda-ngozi-adichies-boots-no7/>> [accessed 20 October 2019].

¹⁰⁵ Vicky Spratt, 'Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is Fronting Boots No7 Make-up Range' (2016), *Grazia* <<https://graziadaily.co.uk/beauty-hair/hair/chiamanda-ngozi-adichie-fronting-boots-no7-make-range/>> [accessed 19 November 2018].

¹⁰⁶ Myeni, 'Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Isn't Quite the Champion of Feminism you Think: Here's Why' (2018), *Independent*, <<https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-feminism-trans-exclusionary-black-women-hillary-clinton-a8696931.html>> [accessed 2 October 2019].

¹⁰⁷ Myeni, 'Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Isn't Quite the Champion of Feminism you Think.'

¹⁰⁸ Lisa H. Schwartzman, *Challenging Liberalism: Feminism as Political Critique*, (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University, 2006), p.4.

¹⁰⁹ Michael C. Dawson, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African- American Political Ideologies*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p.139.

Within her return to some Black feminist concerns, Adichie's arguments in these texts show that her feminist discussions here are different from the approach presented in her fiction such as in her celebrated novel *Americanah* where she demonstrates Black feminist solidarity by referring to gender, race, and class as intersectional issues common to Black women in the diaspora. In *We Should All Be Feminist* Adichie emphasises that 'this conversation is about gender,' and similarly states in *Dear Ijeawele* 'I am angry about racism. I am angry about sexism;' however, she further argues 'I am angrier about sexism than I am about racism.'¹¹⁰ She justifies her position, affirming '[b]ecause in my anger about sexism, I often feel lonely. Because I love, and live among, many people who easily acknowledge race injustice but not gender injustice.'¹¹¹ Adichie's stance echoes Audre Lorde's '[m]y response to racism is anger,' however, Audre stresses that dialogues about racism 'require recognizing the needs and the living contexts' of other women of colour which is not present in Adichie's generalised discussion.¹¹² Parallel to her first feminist text, Adichie also does not address colonialism nor returns to the legacies of slavery in this work. Marianne T. Aguilar justifies Adichie's tone in discussing such complex subjects by claiming that Adichie addresses her targeted audience as 'a friend;' therefore, she constantly uses 'light-hearted and friendly' tone.¹¹³ However, as Lascelles argues 'we must seriously consider the implications of Black feminism if one of its most prominent spokespeople (at least in the mainstream pop-culture sphere) champions liberal feminism as if it were feminism tout court.'¹¹⁴ Though Adichie's model popularises feminism, it comes with the risks of promoting a form of feminism that can

¹¹⁰Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists*, p.44.man
Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele*, p.23.

¹¹¹ Adichie, p.23.

¹¹² Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, p.124, p.126.

¹¹³ Marianne T. Aguilar, 'Dear Ijeawele' Sets a Standards for Feminism' (2017), *The Crimson* <<https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2017/3/29/feminist-manifesto-review/>> [accessed 2 October 2019].

¹¹⁴ Lascelles, 'We Should All Be *Radical* Feminists' p. 2.

endanger the decentralisation of the intersectional paradigm and Black women's specific experiences with such oppressions.

The simplistic style of feminism that Adichie follows to popularise feminism risks the flattening of Black feminist concepts and marginalising Black women's specific experiences with gender/ racial injustice. In both feminist texts *We Should Be Feminists* and *Dear Ijeawele*, Adichie dismisses race from her gender and feminist dialogue which is an exclusion of intersectional understanding of Blackness. In an interview with the British race writer Reni Eddo-Lodge, Adichie addresses her positioning within the intersection of being a woman and Black: 'I am both and both interact,' yet her statement on the term itself is controversial.¹¹⁵ On different occasions, Adichie publicly expresses her rejection of attributing herself to different feminist labels of intersectional feminism and African feminisms such as womanism:

[M]any of my friends who are not white will say, 'I'm an intersectional feminist', or 'I'm a womanist.' And I have trouble with that word, because it has undertones of femininity as this mystical goddess-mother thing, which makes me uncomfortable. So, we need a word. And my hope is we use 'feminism' often enough that it starts to lose all the stigma and becomes this inclusive, diverse thing.¹¹⁶

Adichie's refusal of labels is described in what she terms as 'feminist Lite' in *Dear Ijeawele* which she warns her friend not to teach her daughter 'beware of the danger of what I call feminism Lite; the idea of conditional female equality. Being a feminist is like being pregnant.

¹¹⁵ Adichie in a conversation with Reni Eddo-Lodge <<https://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/blog/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-conversation-reni-eddo-lodge-wow-2018>> [accessed 27 October 2019].

¹¹⁶ Emma Brockes, 'Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: 'Can People Please Stop Telling Me Feminism Is Hot?' (2017), *The Guardian* <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/04/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-stop-telling-me-feminism-hot>> [accessed 1 October 2019].

You either are or you are not. You either believe in the full equality of men and women, or you do not.¹¹⁷ In *We Should All Be Feminists*, Adichie expresses her refusal of the use of inclusive labelling when she is asked about using human rights instead of the term feminism:

Because that would be dishonest. Feminism is, of course, part of human rights in general— but to choose to use the vague expression Human Rights is to deny the specific and particular problem of gender. It would be a way of pretending that it was not women who have, for centuries, been excluded. It would be a way of denying that the problem of gender targets women.¹¹⁸

Though Adichie argues that she refuses general terms to address gender inequality, she uses the term feminism with no specific attributions to support her argument that everyone can be a feminist, which makes feminism appear as a relevant concept to all women equally and this can disregard the different oppressions that distinguish Black women's lives.

In 2017, Adichie sparked a major controversy followed by a wide backlash received after the statement she made on transgender identities, specifically transgender women, in an interview with the UK's television network Channel 4 News (which is part of promoting the then new release of *Dear Ijeawele*) when asked about whether 'a trans woman [...] is a real woman.'¹¹⁹ Adichie's response to the question was:

It is difficult for me to accept that we can equate your experience with the experience of a woman who has lived as a woman from the beginning

¹¹⁷ Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele*, p.21.

¹¹⁸ Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists*, p.41.

¹¹⁹ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Interview, *Channel 4 News* (2017), YouTube, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KP1C7VXUfZQ>> [accessed 25 February 2024].

in the world as a woman, and who has not been accorded those privileges that man are [...] I don't think it's a good thing to talk about women's issues being exactly the same as the issues of trans women, because I don't think that's true.¹²⁰

The following response to Adichie's comments appeared instantly through hashtags criticising Adichie on different social media platforms like #ChimamandaKilledMe that was launched by a trans women community in the African continent.¹²¹ The African American transgender activist Raquel Willis criticised Adichie's response through series of posts on Twitter (now X) such as a post that read: 'We know exactly what you mean when you say "Trans women are Trans women, but can't simply say, "trans women are women."' ¹²² Later, in a *Teen Vogue* interview, Raquel justified Adichie's comment by clarifying that 'as Nigerian black woman, and intersectional feminist' Adichie is 'expected to speak for or know about any experience where someone can be marginalized and it's impossible.'¹²³ The self-acclaimed intersectional Black feminist writer Morgan Jerkins, calls Adichie's 'trans exclusionary' statement as being 'beyond disappointing' but should not negate the work she does for feminism.¹²⁴ following the controversy in a Facebook post Adichie clarified that the reason for this backlash is 'language orthodoxy' as she was misunderstood when not using the language she was expected to use arguing that had she used 'a cis woman is a cis woman and a trans woman is

¹²⁰ Adichie, Channel 4 News.

¹²¹ See B. Camminga, 'Disregard and Danger: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and the Voices of Trans (and cis) African Feminists,' in *The Sociological Review*, 6.8, (2020), 817-833, <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0038026120934695>> [accessed 10 February 2024].

¹²² Raquel Willis, Twitter (X), (2017), <https://twitter.com/RaquelWillis_/status/840370359396311040> [accessed 6 March 2024].

¹²³ Morgan Jerkins, 'Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is Getting Criticised for Her Comments About Transgender Women.' (2017), *TeenVogue*, <<https://www.teenvogue.com/story/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-comments-transgender-women-criticized>> [accessed 29 April 2024].

¹²⁴ Jerkins, 'Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is Getting Criticised for Her Comments About Transgender Women.'

a trans women' she would not have received this major criticism.¹²⁵ Adichie further highlights the importance of acknowledging differences in feminist discourses arguing that 'in talking about feminism and gender [...], it's important for us to acknowledge the differences in experience of gender.'¹²⁶ In this post Adichie reiterates her disassociation with the intersectional term stating 'even the word 'intersectionality' comes from a certain kind of academic discourse that sometimes I don't know what it means.'¹²⁷ Black feminist scholars like Lascelles argues that Adichie's feminist persona which showcases 'dedication to both women empowerment and lipstick' promotes 'a version of feminism that is dangerously liberal' which is in 'danger of obscuring the anti-capitalist, anti-racist, LGBTQIA+ inclusive stance and commitment' that Black feminism advocates for.¹²⁸ Lorde who criticises liberal feminism's disregard of race, gender, class, sexuality, and age as categories that contribute to inequalities faced by Black women stresses that failure to see differences based on these oppressions fosters a false sense of 'sisterhood.'¹²⁹ To promote popular feminism that is non-academic, Adichie distances herself from the image of what Sara Ahmed, who is significantly influenced by Lorde's work, calls the 'feminist killjoy.' In *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook* (2023), Ahmed argues that the feminist killjoy is a feminist who interrupts white feminism's 'happiness' by asserting gendered, racial, and sexual oppressions as intersections that cannot be separated in addressing Black women, and women of colour's experiences.¹³⁰ Ahmed argues that there are feminists who 'might try to maximize the distance between themselves

¹²⁵ David Smith, 'Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie on Transgender Row: I Have Nothing to Apologise For' (2017), *The Guardian* <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/21/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-nothing-to-apologise-for-transgender-women>> [accessed 17th April 2024].

¹²⁶ Smith, 'Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie on Transgender Row: I Have Nothing to Apologise For.'

¹²⁷ Smith, 'Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie on Transgender Row: I Have Nothing to Apologise For.'

¹²⁸ Lascelles, 'We Should All Be Radical Feminists,' p.1, p.6.

¹²⁹ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, p. 118.

¹³⁰ Ahmed, *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook: The Radical Potential of Getting in the Way* (New York: Seal, 2023), pp.1-4.

and the very figure of the feminist killjoy,' these feminists are then '*liberal or neoliberal*.'¹³¹ Adichie's accessible feminist exploration reads as flat in regard to the representations of the multi layered intersectional categories which is a core value of intersectional feminism that Black feminists have been historically calling for.

In a public statement which shows her rejection of academic terms, Adichie reduces postcolonial theory to a mere 'something that professors made up because they needed to get jobs.'¹³² Adichie's comment can be read as an elimination of the intellectual effort of many male and female scholars that have presented a contribution to this field by making a space for African voices in the postcolonial scholarship and drawing attention to the histories of colonialism in the continent. The Kenyan poet Shailja Patel criticised Adichie through a question directed to her on Twitter 'you erase whole bodies of African knowledge and African feminism outside your field, what Africa are you defending, A market? A brand?'¹³³ As Grace Musila suggests with such statement Adichie 'overlooks the feminists and postcolonial theorists who made her possible.'¹³⁴ Adichie is indebted to the long tradition of African feminists and postcolonial theorists which she confesses, but not directly referring to postcolonialism, 'I think of myself as coming from a tradition.'¹³⁵ For example, Adichie's famous slogan that calls for everyone to be a feminist is inspired by Ata Aidoo who in 1992 declared as an African feminist '[w]hen people ask me rather bluntly every now and then whether I am a feminist, I not only answer yes, but I should go on to insist that every woman

¹³¹ Ahmed, *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook*, p.218. (Italics in original).

¹³² Adichie quoted in Grace A Musila, 'Chimamanda Adichie: The Daughter of Postcolonial Theory'(2018), *Aljazeera* < <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/chimamanda-adichie-burden-representation-180204094739657.html>> [accessed 30 October 2019].

¹³³ Shailja Patel, Twitter < <https://twitter.com/shailjapatel/status/957142910260170752>> [accessed 30 October 2019].

¹³⁴ Musila, 'Chimamanda Adichie: The Daughter of Postcolonial Theory.'

¹³⁵ Adichie quoted in Musila. 'Chimamanda Adichie: The Daughter of Postcolonial Theory.'

and every man should be a feminist,' stressing that 'it is not possible to advocate independence for our continent without also believing that African women must have the best that the environment can offer [...] this is the crucial element of our feminism.¹³⁶ Aidoo's feminist call acts in respect of women's conditions in Africa, whereas Adichie's simplistic and generalised approach to feminism and her refusal of labels as an African woman appears antithetical to African feminism and Black feminism.

In both feminist texts, I argue excluding her fiction, Adiche does not take into consideration Black women's varied conditions in Africa as many women are living in extreme situations though she writes as a Nigerian woman. Black women are influenced by their race, ethnicity, and their cultural histories as the Nigerian gender theorist Morala Ogundipe-Leslie argues are suffering from 'structures and attitudes inherited from indigenous history and sociological realities' and above all they are influenced 'by superstructural forms deriving from the postcolonial past.'¹³⁷ Adeola Babatunde argues that in Nigeria 'women are discriminated against in all sectors of society' and are suffering from health and poverty problems.¹³⁸ Adichie's works are careful in discussing her country and many Black African countries' long histories under the colonial powers. As Kouamé Adou argues that 'Adichie spent so many years outside Nigeria (in the United States) so that she sometimes seems to be disconnected from Nigerian culture. *We Should All Be Feminists* does not appear as a text

¹³⁶ Ama Ata Aidoo quoted in Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, *Africa Wo/Man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), p.115.

¹³⁷ Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, 'African Women, Culture and Another Development' in *Theorising Black Feminism: The Visionary Pragmatism of Black women*, ed. by Stanlie M James and Abena P.A. Busia, (London: Routledge, 1993), p.112.

¹³⁸ Adeola Babatunde, *Women's Rights in Nigeria: Advancing Human Rights* (South Africa: David Daniel Consultancy Ltd, 2014), p.5.

written for an African audience.’¹³⁹ The reason for this, Adou continues, is that Adiche ‘endeavours to translate Nigerian gender relationships’ in a way that is ‘understood to non-Nigerians,’ and within ‘this process of translation, she seems sometimes to be lost. As a consequence, we notice a kind of mixed discourse that is characteristic of the migrant belonging to two cultures thus translating between cultures.’¹⁴⁰ Myeni Argues that with such writing Adichie is ‘striving for feminism that simply serves to garner white acceptance’ and ‘disregards the specificity of the colonial oppression Africans face for being Black.’¹⁴¹ With such model of feminism that does not return to the specific historical experiences of African women with colonialism, Adichie promotes a view that women globally experience the world similarly, and that feminism is standard and relevant to all women regardless of their age, religion, culture, history, race, and class differences among others.

The issue of class is not centralised in both of Adichie’s texts and when referred to marginally they are addressed as a single category separated from the other intersections of race and gender. In comparison to the more complex rendition of these social realities that she presents in her novel *Americanah*, where I argued focuses in the blog on the complex relation between race and class for Black people, in *We Should All Be Feminists*, Adichie argues that ‘gender and class are different’ and not as intersecting oppressions.¹⁴² Similarly, when Adichie addresses class in Nigeria in *Dear Ijeawele* when advising her friend to ‘teach her [daughter] about privilege and inequality’ Adichie does not return to colonial legacies though she writes from the position of being a woman, Black and from an African developing country.

¹³⁹ Kouamé Adou, ‘Storying the Self in Nigerian Gender Discourse: A Critical Evaluation of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014),’ in *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention*, 5.9 (2016), 88-95, (p.92-93), <[https://www.ijhssi.org/papers/v5\(9\)/version-3/N0593088095.pdf](https://www.ijhssi.org/papers/v5(9)/version-3/N0593088095.pdf)> [accessed 9 April 2023].

¹⁴⁰ Adou, p.93.

¹⁴¹ Myeni, ‘Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Isn’t Quite the Champion of Feminism you Think.’

¹⁴² Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists*, p.41.

The same continues when Adichie speaks about class and her Igbo culture which she writes it 'focuses a little too much on materialism.'¹⁴³ What her simplistic booklets are lacking is acknowledging the fact that she is writing from her advantaged position as a middle-class Black woman, a position that is not shared by all African women who struggle with economic disadvantage. Unacknowledged class differences in Adichie's accessible feminist model further promote the liberal view that fails to recognise the way differences influence how women experience social and cultural categories. As Collins suggests within the impossibility of 'uniformity of experience' among Black women, it is crucial for Black feminists to analyse how the different and new forms of oppression influence Black women 'differently' otherwise 'Black women may in fact be instrumental in fostering other Black women's oppression.'¹⁴⁴ In both works, Adichie eschews away from intersectional Black feminism that forges a political thought that ensures the recognition of class, race, and other social injustices together as overlapping with gender. The danger of such simplistic model that does not recognise differences and fails to challenge institutionalised social oppressions related to the intersectional categories should be more addressed by Black feminist scholarships. With the wide readership Adichie's writing receives and her visibility as a celebrated feminist, the trend of popular feminism that she promotes can be a disservice to the Black feminist activism.

4- A Black Woman in The White House:

With Michelle Obama's rise to public popularity along her husband Barak Obama's win of the election, and despite the celebration of her historical accomplishment as the first Black First lady, as a Black woman she was often viewed from the intersecting positions of race and

¹⁴³ Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele*, pp.39-40.

¹⁴⁴ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p.67.

gender which she refers to in her memoir. When speaking about the campaign trail for elections in the memoir, Mrs Obama refers to the bigotry she faced and speaks about being stereotyped as an '[a]ngry Black woman' and being 'painted not simply as an outsider but as fully "other," so foreign that even my language couldn't be recognized' for being Black.¹⁴⁵ Such scrutiny reflects the complex history of Black womanhood in America as Brittney Cooper argues on the criticism Obama received '[t]he intense public discourse surrounding Michelle Obama's fitness for First Lady-hood further magnifies and illuminates the continuing connections between race, gender, and national identity that govern black women's roles in the public sphere.'¹⁴⁶ Afua Hirsch sees Obama's memoir as a response to the criticism she received as a first lady, arguing that 'most of Obama's narrative on race, however, comes courtesy not of her own perspective but that of many commentators who weaponised her Blackness against her.'¹⁴⁷ Therefore, while more of such public positioning and her approach to reverse it will be focused on in the coming section, I will first discuss how Mrs Obama speaks in the memoir from these intersections and how she addresses the correlation between the legacies of slavery and the role such history plays in her positioning.

Obama's admiration of Adichie is present in the use of the simple anecdotal language that Adichie is famous for to talk about her childhood experiences. In the first section 'Becoming me,' Obama narrates different childhood stories from riding the bus 'to Lake Michigan every day to go to a rec camp' with her brother Craig, 'cruising in her father's car 'BUICK [...] on Sundays and summer evenings,' to her breakfast 'debate' with her mother on

¹⁴⁵ Adichie, p.265, p.263.

¹⁴⁶ Cooper, *A'n't I a Lady*, p.41.

¹⁴⁷ Afua Hirsch, *'Becoming' By Michelle Obama Review Race, Marriage and the Ugly Side of Politics* (2018), *The Guardian* < <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/nov/14/michelle-obama-becoming-review-undoubtedly-political-book> > [accessed 10 November 2019].

eggs.¹⁴⁸ Though in this childhood account Obama briefly mentions the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr, who ‘had been killed standing on a balcony in Memphis,’ did lead to ‘setting off riots across the country, including Chicago,’ she focuses less on the particularity of growing up as a Black girl in America during the 1960s and 1970s and the impact it had on her. This era was characterised by a heated political landscape and Civil Rights Movement activism, the assassination of Civil Rights Movement leaders and the subsequent civil action and riots, and the rise of Black Power Movement.¹⁴⁹ This lack of historical contextualisation that Obama uses to narrate her childhood is controversial as much could have been addressed about how these moments in American history affected Obama as Black woman. The American race writer Ta-Nehisi Coates criticises Mrs Obama stating that he ‘almost mistook her for white’ for focusing on what he called her ‘idyllic youth.’¹⁵⁰ To speak about herself and her brother being raised in an African American family she writes ‘[a]s we grew we spoke more about drugs and sex and life choices, about race and inequality and politics. My parents didn’t expect us to be saints [...] They also never sugarcoated what they took to be the harder truths about life.’¹⁵¹ To give an example of such hard truths, Obama gives the story of her brother Craig who was accused of stealing a bicycle by a police officer only because he is a ‘black boy.’¹⁵² In her comment on this incident Obama reveals her parents explanation to her and her brother ‘what had happened my parents told us, was unjust but also unfortunately common. The color of our skin made us vulnerable. It was a thing we’d always have to navigate.’¹⁵³ Obama narrates this incident with no relation to the nature of the political debates which she could

¹⁴⁸ Obama, *Becoming*, pp.23-25.

¹⁴⁹ See *The Civil Rights Movement: A Documentary Reader*, ed. by John A. Kirk (New Jersey: Wiley Blackwell, 2020).

¹⁵⁰ Ta-Nehisi Coates quoted in Afua Hirsch, ‘*Becoming* by Michelle Obama Review Race, Marriage and the Ugly Side of Politics.’

¹⁵¹ Obama, p.25.

¹⁵² Obama, p.25.

¹⁵³ Obama, p.25.

have used as an opportunity to highlight more the difficulty of being raised as a Black woman in such political climate.

Unlike Adichie who excludes race in her feminist texts to focus on gender, Mrs Obama's approach to addressing race promotes an individualistic vision where racial issues are presented as an individual problem that can be overcome through success and not as a rooted systematic paradigm of injustice in America. Such discourse, I argue, calls into question the argument that positions Obama as a traditional Black feminist specifically that Black feminism views race and gender as interweaved institutionalised oppressions. In describing the 'jarring and uncomfortable' university life at the then white dominated Ivy League university of Princeton, Obama narrates how she overcame racism by working hard. Obama writes that when she went to register in university, the responsible college counsellor whom Obama does not remember 'her age or race or how she happened to look at me,' believed Obama is not suited for Princeton: 'I'm not sure, [...] that you are a Princeton material' suggesting a racial prejudice.¹⁵⁴ In response to this counselor, Obama writes 'I settled down and got back to work [...] I was learning to focus and have faith in my own story.'¹⁵⁵ Obama maintains after being accepted in Princeton 'had I decided to believe her, her pronouncement would have toppled my confidence.'¹⁵⁶ The issue of systemic racism as Taylor argues that instead of treating it as an 'Institutional Phenomenon,' Obama's perception of racism is reduced to being an unfortunate 'residue from the past.'¹⁵⁷ Taylor further continues claiming that Obama chronicles inequality as 'a matter of psychological impairment that can be overcome through

¹⁵⁴ Obama, p.56.p.66.

¹⁵⁵ Obama, p.67.

¹⁵⁶ Obama, p.67.

¹⁵⁷ Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, 'Succeeding while Black'(2019), *Boston Review* <<http://bostonreview.net/race/keeanga-yamahtta-taylor-succeeding-while-black>> [accessed 11 April 2019].

grit and grin.’¹⁵⁸ Ralina L. Joseph who expresses her fascination by Obama’s ‘frank disclosures on race,’ in the memoir, describes her race talk about post-White House period as ‘shocking’ due to the silencing of race discourse that marked Obama’s presidency.¹⁵⁹

Obama’s regard of racial burdens as an obstacle that can be overcome through being ‘smarter’ showcases Obama’s perception that the disadvantaged position Black women face due to the inextricability of the interweaved inequities of racism and gender can be surpassed. Like Adichie’s fostered neoliberal take on key intersectional issues, Obama’s rendition of such dynamics of power as individualistic is what Sara Ahmed calls ‘neoliberal agenda’ which is ‘a way of making feminism about the resilience of individuals.’¹⁶⁰ As Taylor argues, Obama ‘normalizes power and the status quo while sending the message that the rest of us only need to find our place in the existing social hierarchy to be happy.’¹⁶¹ In *Re-Imagining Black Women* (2011) Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd sees that Mrs Obama ‘situates racism as something that is largely of the past, with vestiges that can be dismissed with the proper attitude.’¹⁶² Obama’s individualistic view results from her privileged position as a highly educated and influential woman. As Patricia Hill Collins argues in *Black Feminist Thought*, different experiences among individual Black women influence the way they deal with intersecting oppressions and Black women’s political issues ‘the existence of core themes does not mean that African-American women respond to these themes. Differences among individual Black women produce different patterns of experiential knowledge and in turn shape individual reactions to the core

¹⁵⁸ Taylor, ‘Succeeding while Black.’

¹⁵⁹ Ralina L. Joseph, ‘Thank you Michelle Obama for your Book’s Hard Truths about the Post-racial Myth’ (2019), *The Seattle Times* <<https://www.seattletimes.com/opinion/thank-you-michelle-obama-for-your-books-hard-truths-about-the-post-racial-myth/>> [accessed 10 November 2019].

¹⁶⁰ Ahmed, *Living A Feminist Life*, p. 236.

¹⁶¹ Taylor, < <http://bostonreview.net/race/keeanga-yamahtta-taylor-succeeding-while-black> > [accessed 11 April 2019].

¹⁶² Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd, *Re-Imagining Black Women: A Critique of Post-Feminist and Post-racial Melodrama in Culture and Politics* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), p.236.

themes.¹⁶³ These core themes as Collins stresses are advanced by ‘Black feminist intellectuals’ as Collins argues and are not present in her work. However, Shawntay et al argue that Obama ‘is a role model to black women because she can call upon the ways in which we are connected to our ancestors through the legacies of triumph amid perpetual and systemic racism and sexism that often places black women at a great disadvantage.’¹⁶⁴ Shawntay et al’s argument comes in response to Obama’s reference that she is a descendant of a slave ‘I’d lived invisibility. I came from a history of invisibility. I liked to mention that I was the great-great-granddaughter of a slave.’¹⁶⁵ Instead of focusing on relating her narrative to being a descendant of a slave and America’s legacies of slavery, Obama chooses not to make her memoir revolve around being the first Black first lady and stresses that ‘[i]t was time to stop thinking about something as arbitrary as skin colour.’¹⁶⁶ Much focus on the histories of the structural disadvantages of race and gender risks ascribing Mrs Obama among the radical Black feminists which risks the resurfacing of her less admired pre-White House perceived image, and to maintain a narrative that presents her as an apolitical loved public figure which I discuss in the second section of this analysis.

Michelle Obama’s focus on narrating her presidential initiatives in the White House are decontextualised from the race political debates that marked her husband’s presidential era. The political period within which the events of Obama’s memoir *Becoming* take place involve the discussion on the truth of the dream of post-racial America with the election of a Black

¹⁶³ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p.27.

¹⁶⁴ Shawntay Stocks, Sherella Cupid, and Tahira Mahdi, ‘Reflection, Race, and Representation: Analyzing the Magic of the Michelle Obama Effect with and for our Black Daughters,’ in *Michelle Obama and the FLOTUS Effect: Platform, Presence, and Agency*, ed. by Heather E. Harris and Kimberly R. Moffitt (Lanham and London: Lexington Books, 2020), pp. 125- 142, (p.131).

¹⁶⁵ Obama, p.405.

¹⁶⁶ Obama, *Becoming*, p.276

president. In addressing the political scene of the period within which her husband was elected, Mrs. Obama writes that:

When Barack was first elected, various commentators had naively declared that our country was entering a “postracial” era, in which skin color would no longer matter. Here was a proof of how wrong they’d been [...] many were overlooking the racism and tribalism that were tearing our nation apart.¹⁶⁷

With the election of Barack Obama many have presumed that America supposedly have surpassed racism and entered a post-racial era. Michael C. Dawson and Lawrence D. Bobo simply explain the concept of post-racial America as the belief ‘that Africans Americans have achieved, or will soon achieve, racial equality in the United States.’¹⁶⁸ Christopher Sebastian Parker also defines this notion as ‘the perception that race relations have improved and an interracial comity has emerged.’¹⁶⁹ This term is generally associated with the presidency of Barack Obama in which by a Black man taking the highest governmental office in the country it was claimed that it signified post-racialism. Coates argues in his work *We Were Eight Years in Power*, which analyses race during Obama’s period of presidency, that Barack Obama’s election ‘was alleged to demonstrate a triumph of integration.’¹⁷⁰ In their article Dawson and Lawrence also maintain that both conservatives and liberals in America have celebrated Barack Obama’s victory, which these two groups claimed indicated the rise of post-racial

¹⁶⁷ Obama, p.396.

¹⁶⁸ Michael C. Dawson and Lawrence, D. Bobo ‘One Year Later and the Myth of a Post-Racial society; in *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, 6. 2 (2009), 247-249, (p.247), <<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:10347165>> [accessed 10 November 2019].

¹⁶⁹ Christopher Sebastian Parker, ‘Race and Politics in the Age of Obama,’ in *The Annual Review of Sociology*, 42 (2016), pp.217-230, (p. 218), <<https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/10.1146/annurev-soc-081715-074246>> [accessed 18 November 2019].

¹⁷⁰ Ta-Nehisi Coates, *We Were Eight Years in Power* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2017), p.124.

society.¹⁷¹ Kevern Verney also writes in the same line with the aforementioned critics through focusing on the commentators who considered that Obama's presence in the White House meant it was the time for witnessing 'the final chapter in the nation's long civil rights struggle.'¹⁷² Coates stresses that Barack Obama 'virtually ignored race' while in office, despite the fact that in his first electoral campaign he rallied against the silence over racial issues, declaring that 'race is an issue that I believe this nation cannot afford to ignore right now.'¹⁷³ Coates further argues that 'part of that conservatism about race has been reflected in his reticence' in which he has 'declined to talk about the ways [...] race complicates the American present.'¹⁷⁴ Mark Ledwidge's argues that much focus on the issue of racism would leave Barack Obama 'vulnerable to erroneous charges of reverse racism' and that's what contributed to his failure to endorse policies directed to address racial inequality that is embedded in America.¹⁷⁵

In 'Becoming More,' Mrs Obama is careful to infer the significance of racial politics in her recount of both presidential terms. When addressing her husband's run for the presidency, Mrs Obama writes on her then concern about the ongoing racial anxieties Black people face, declaring 'Barak was a black man in America, after all. I didn't think he could win.'¹⁷⁶ In one of the few occasions in the memoir where she addresses being the first Black family in the White House, stating as 'the first African American family in the White House, we were viewed as representatives of our race. Any error or lapse of judgment [...] would be magnified.'¹⁷⁷ The

¹⁷¹ Coates, p.247.

¹⁷² Kevern Verney, *Barack Obama and the Myth of a Post-Racial America*, ed. by Mark Ledwidge et al (New York: Routledge, 2014), p.vii-ix.

¹⁷³ Coates, *We Were Eight Years in Power*, p.139.

¹⁷⁴ Coates, *We Were Eight Years in Power*, p.119.

¹⁷⁵ Mark Ledwidge, *Barack Obama and the Myth of a Post-Racial America*, ed. by Mark Ledwidge, Kevern Verney and Inderjeet Parmar (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp.10-11, p.15

¹⁷⁶ Obama, p.226.

¹⁷⁷ Obama, p.295.

narration then moves forward to talking about her meeting with the Queen of England, initiating gardening in the White House and visiting military hospitals.¹⁷⁸ Mrs Obama's account of her husband's presidential terms also moves away from addressing the significant political events during his era specifically the rise of Black Lives Matter in 2013. Black Lives Matter movement was initiated in 2013, enraged by the homicide of Trayvon Martin, to respond to 'the state-sanctioned violence and anti-Black racism.'¹⁷⁹ This social movement, which surfaced as a reaction to the mass murders of Black people by white Americans, proved the magnitude of racism and police violence in the Obama era. Brittney Cooper argues in *Eloquent Rage* that during the age of Obama Black women and men across different age categories were killed by the police whereas the majority of the accused officers still maintained their jobs.¹⁸⁰ Cooper maintains that despite being in a position that allows him to act the contrary, Barack Obama 'struggled' to declare 'that Black lives Matter and more specifically, the lives of Black women and girls matter [...] only coming around to cite the myriad contributions of Black women in a speech.'¹⁸¹ Mrs Obama presents this image of post-racialism in the memoir through focusing on narrating the choices of initiatives she undertook while first lady. This shows Mrs Obama's effort to distance herself from being perceived as traditional Black feminist by being apolitical and adhering to her traditional role as a first lady set by her predecessors. Within the turmoil of events of these injustices towards the Black communities, the former first lady chose to lengthily write on the launch of White House gardening and the Let's Move initiative. Obama talks about planting the southwest corner of

¹⁷⁸ Obama, p.316, p.343, p.328.

¹⁷⁹ Black Lives Matter, Official website <<https://blacklivesmatter.com/what-we-believe/>> [accessed 13 November 2019].

¹⁸⁰ Brittney Cooper, *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers her Superpower* (New York: Picador, 2018), p.158.

¹⁸¹ Cooper, p.85.

the White House lawn with vegetables as an accomplishment in which she calls it ‘miniature Eden’ that produced ninety pounds of harvest.¹⁸² The other programme was Let’s Move, directed to school children for eliminating child obesity and to encourage physical activities starting from changing food preparations.¹⁸³

The focus on such programmes allows Mrs Obama to be identified as a first lady rather than a Black first lady to maintain her public popularity. Obama argues that she was aware that her choice of first lady programs would bring her criticism ‘I also knew that for some people it wouldn’t feel like enough. I understood that I was being watched with a certain kind of anticipation.’¹⁸⁴ As Farah Jasmine Griffin maintains Obama’s choice of programs is a form of a safety measure that takes to avoid ‘anything that might portray her as a “black” first lady.’¹⁸⁵ Black feminists like Cooper argues that Mrs Obama’s encouragement of children to refuse laziness through the Let’s Move is something Barack Obama frequently practices which is ‘language of respectability.’¹⁸⁶ Respectability politics, to use Cooper’s definition, are ‘the belief that Black people can overcome many of the everyday, acute impacts of racism by dressing properly and having an education and social comportment.’¹⁸⁷ Respectability politics are another form of manifesting post racial myth that the memoir invokes by producing the image that racism is individualistic issue. Like Adichie, Obama’s discourse as a first lady in the memoir is neoliberal ‘in essence’ as Marian Meyers and Carmen Goman hold.¹⁸⁸ The ideology

¹⁸² Obama, *Becoming*, p.328.

¹⁸³ Obama, p.347, p.371.

¹⁸⁴ Obama, p.328.

¹⁸⁵ Farah Jasmine Griffin, ‘At Last... ?’: Michelle Obama, Beyonce, Race and History’ in *Deadalus*, 140.1(2011), 131-141, (p.137), <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25790448>> [accessed 13 May 2019].

¹⁸⁶ Cooper, *Eloquent Rage*, p.154.

¹⁸⁷ Cooper, p.147.

¹⁸⁸ Marian Meyers and Carmen Goman, ‘Michelle Obama Exploring the Narrative’ in *Howard Journal of Communication*, 28. 1 (2017), 20-35, (p.32) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10646175.2016.1235520>> [accessed 5 November 2019].

of neoliberalism as Rosalinda Gill and Christina Scharff put it is ‘understood as a mode of political and economic rationality characterized by privatization, deregulation and a rolling back and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision.’¹⁸⁹ This system, Gill and Scharff continue, is directed ‘for governing subjects who are constituted as self-managing, [and] autonomous.’¹⁹⁰ Neoliberalism thus locates success as a personal choice obtained by hard work regardless of governmental boundaries. As Meyers and Goman stress, the issue with neoliberalism is that it neglects rather than recognises ‘systemic discrimination based on race, class, gender, sexuality, ability or other aspects of socially constructed identity.’¹⁹¹ Alexander-Floyd also writes that the Obama’s ‘represent “Brand Obama,” a dynamic duo that self-commodifies their personalities in line with the dictates of neoliberal post-politics fantasies.’¹⁹² To promote this brand, Michelle Obama’s narrative is constructed in a manner that serves the interest of the public and to promote an image against the stereotypes attached to her as a Black woman. While some critics believe that Obama’s memoir is a feminist take on sexism and racism, I argue that her neoliberal narrative fails to acknowledge the challenges of the historical complexities and institutionalised oppressions is further proof to her disassociation from the term feminist. While Adichie refuses academic definitions of feminism including intersectionality, Obama’s memoir attests to her refusal of being labelled a feminist despite some scholar’s insistence on aligning her along radical Black feminists that worked on challenging hierarchies of power a view which I suggest needs challenging.

¹⁸⁹ Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, eds., *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p.5.

¹⁹⁰ Gill and Scharff, p.5.

¹⁹¹ Marian Meyers and Carmen Goman, ‘Michelle Obama Exploring the Narrative,’ p.32.

¹⁹² Alexander-Floyd, *Re-Imagining Black Women*, p.236.

5- Michelle Obama Disrupts Controlling Images:

While I argued that Obama's take on sexism and racism is individualistic thus neoliberal, in this section I want to acknowledge her role as a global figure in challenging established controlling images associated with Black women inherited from enslavement that robbed them their agency which her memoir further documents. While occupying the first lady role, Obama was pictured as the typecast of the historically stereotyped Black woman. In *Becoming*, Obama addresses the many occasions where she was publicly criticised for her identity positioning within her race and gender dynamics. In their study that solely focuses on how these intersections affected the public's perception towards Obama, Alex Badas and Katelyn E. Stauffer also confirm that the double bind of race and gender affected her experience as a first lady.¹⁹³ As an example of the negative public perception of Obama is a comment on an internet forum that wrote 'There is nothing uglier than manly, muscular arms on a woman. Obama should be hiding them instead of showing them off.'¹⁹⁴ The *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd writes 'it is Michelle who looks as though she could easily wind up and punch out [...] all the corporate creeps who ripped off America,' implying the stereotype of the angry masculine Black woman.¹⁹⁵ Obama's physical appearance was under scrutiny and received negative public stir as she writes 'suddenly my arms were making headline' only relating it to her tall figure and feeling disheartened that the public focused on her appearance instead of

¹⁹³ Alex Badas and Katelyn E. Stauffer, 'Michelle Obama as a Political Symbol: Race, Gender, and the Public Opinion Toward the First Lady' in *Politics & Gender*, 15.3 (2019), 431-459 (p.443), <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X18000922>> [accessed 6 November 2019].

¹⁹⁴ Quoted in Jeannine Stein, *Michelle Obama's Toned Arms are Debated* <<https://www.latimes.com/fashion/alltherage/la-ig-arms29-2009mar29-story.html>> [accessed 20 November 2019].

¹⁹⁵ Maureen Dowd quoted in Vanessa Jones and Boston Globe, *Michelle Obama's Bare Arms Stir Controversy* <<https://www.sfgate.com/living/article/Michelle-Obama-s-bare-arms-stir-controversy-3247209.php>> [accessed 10 November 2019].

the content of her rhetoric.¹⁹⁶ Obama was also accused of emasculating her husband which she described as 'harsh critique' specifically that it came 'from another professional woman.'¹⁹⁷ The criticism received by Obama as a Black women is what Patricia Hill Collins argues as the 'matriarch', a form of gendered racial oppression historically attached to enslaved Black women which refers to an excessive strong Black woman who consequently becomes undesirable comparing to white woman for being 'too assertive.'¹⁹⁸ As Collins argues there are many controlling images that are meant for the objectification of Black womanhood that aims for discrediting Black women's rights to citizenship in America.¹⁹⁹ In addition to anger, such images include the 'Jezebel' to refer to the sexually aggressive Black woman, the 'Mammy' to refer to Black women and domestic servitude and their Blackness refers to the contrary of beauty, among others.²⁰⁰

Michelle Obama's apolitical decision to be identified as a mother in chief brought attention to debates on Black motherhood and garnered her more criticism. As Melissa Harris-Lacewell argues 'Michelle Obama is an important corrective to this distorted view of Black motherhood. She and her own mother, Grandma Robinson, are kind, devoted, loving, and firm black mothers who challenge the negative images that dominate the public discourse on Black motherhood.'²⁰¹ Obama has publicly declared that her mission during the presidential terms was to be a 'mom in chief' something she constantly reiterates in the memoir.²⁰² This position of prioritising family has sparked criticism; a view which Obama saw as forthcoming

¹⁹⁶ Obama, p.332.

¹⁹⁷ Obama, p.332.

¹⁹⁸ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed., (New York: Routledge, 2000), p.77.

¹⁹⁹ Collins, p.72., p.81.

²⁰⁰ Collins, p.81.

²⁰¹ Melissa Harris-Lacewell Quoted in *Race in the Age of Obama*, p.83.

²⁰² Obama, p.301.

Obama, p.329.

writing that ‘regardless of what I chose to do, I knew I was bound to disappoint someone’ insinuating the feminist criticism that followed her statement.²⁰³ Obama’s focus on the concept of “family comes first” and the race neutral initiatives are the result of maintaining the subverted image that was attributed to her before she became a first lady. Feminists also disagreed with Obama’s approach of ‘mom in chief’ as well as her handling of the prevalent gender issues in America. In the memoir Obama replies to this feminist criticism writing ‘with my garden and messages about healthy eating, I was a disappointment to feminists, lacking a certain stridency.’²⁰⁴ Despite Obama’s claim of mom in chief, Hirsch sees that ‘her role has never been defined’ for the purpose of benefiting and serving the image of her husband as a president.²⁰⁵ Others, such as hooks, argue that Obama favoured to ‘represent herself first and foremost as always and only obsessed with caring for her family’ only to ‘separate herself from the image of feminist ball breaker associated with Hillary Clinton.’²⁰⁶ Unlike Obama, hooks declares, Clinton has actually called herself “the family feminist,” and she is known for publicly addressing feminist politics.²⁰⁷ However, Clinton’s feminist politics have put her under public censure that might have impacted her popularity among Americans. Laura Ingraham accuses Clinton’s feminism as ‘the False Sisterhood Trap’ for Clinton’s inability to stand up ‘for women’s dignity.’²⁰⁸ Liza Featherstone argues that Clinton is ‘an empty symbol as a woman and feminist’ and argues that her status as feminist ‘can be used to pursue oppressive policies.’²⁰⁹ As hooks argues, with the turmoil that Clinton generated by propagating her feminist policies, Obama felt the need to distinguish herself from Clinton

²⁰³ Obama, 328.

²⁰⁴ Obama, p.328.

²⁰⁵ Hirsch, *Becoming by Michelle Obama Revie Race*.

²⁰⁶ bell hooks, *Writing Beyond Race: living Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p.60.

²⁰⁷ hooks, p.60.

²⁰⁸ Laura Ingraham quoted in hooks, *Writing Beyond Race*, p.60.

²⁰⁹ Liza Featherstone in *Current Affairs*, <<https://www.currentaffairs.org/2016/10/the-faux-feminism-of-hillary-clinton>> [accessed 25 May 2019].

when it comes to feminism.²¹⁰ However, by separating herself from the politics of feminism, further contends hooks, Obama's stance has had a negative influence on both the advocates of feminism and the people who question the value of the feminist movement.²¹¹

Harris states that Obama's feminism is mainly looked at through the vision of white feminists who felt entitled to judge Obama's choices.²¹² Leslie Morgan Steiner contends that Obama should have said more on women's position than just talking about fashion and planting vegetables.²¹³ On the other hand, many Black feminists such as Rebecca Walker criticise this questioning of Obama's choices by white feminists. In her defence of Obama, Walker calls such questioning as 'tedious' and relates it to white feminists' failure to understand the particularity of the concerns that characterise Black women's lives.²¹⁴ However, as in the memoir the former first lady does not focalise the consequences of gender inequality in America. Myers and Goman, argue that 'motherhood is the lens through which gendered inequities are viewed in this narrative: unequal pay, sexual harassment, gendered violence, and the myriad other forms of gendered discrimination and abuse in the workplace, home, and society are not included.'²¹⁵ This view is present in the memoir to maintain the softened tone that her approach to historical complexities follows to avoid public chastisement towards Obama.

In the memoir Obama addresses the criticism triggered by a statement she made during a campaign speech in Milwaukee. This speech featured Obama stating 'What we've learned

²¹⁰ hooks, *Writing Beyond Race*, p.60.

²¹¹ hooks, p.60.

²¹² Harris, *Black Feminist Politics from Kennedy to Trump*, p.9.

²¹³ Leslie Morgan Steiner, 'Michelle Obama: Powerful or Just Popular,' *Modern Mom*, <<https://www.modernmom.com/47ebe4d2-3b36-11e3-be8a-bc764e04a41e.html>> [accessed 23 May 2019].

²¹⁴ Rebecca walker quoted in Harris *Black Feminist Politics*, p. 9.

²¹⁵ Meyers and Goamn, p.32.

over this year is that hope is making a comeback! And let me tell you something, for the first time in my adult lifetime, I'm really proud of my country.'²¹⁶ Though not explicitly stated, this statement refers to the fact that Barack Obama who is a Black man is accepted to be part of America's presidential race. However, she focuses in the memoir on how her speech was manipulated and mentions how she was called unpatriotic and who '*always hated America*.'²¹⁷ She speaks about how she was negatively portrayed along with her husband on media including the CNN who considered them a 'patriotism flap' and even among blog users.²¹⁸ After her speech, the Obama's were caricatured in a photograph of terrorists under a title of 'Politics of Fear' in an article by the *New Yorker*.²¹⁹ This amplified negative opinions towards Michelle Obama; thus, a plan to change how the public viewed her was needed. Hortense Spillers maintains that 'the Obama campaign's PR machine' made sure that 'the future first lady had to be re-choreographed into a more palatable routine.'²²⁰ Even while first lady this involved the White House's effort of using the internet such as YouTube to create an accepted image of Obama.²²¹

Such effort included Obama's engagement in different aspects of popular culture such as the many occasions where she appeared on television shows dancing and engaging with kids. eventually after promoting a 'softened' image of FLOTUS, popularity ratings in 2014 indicated that Michelle Obama's approval ratings reached 66% comparing to the 48% her husband

²¹⁶ Obama, p.260.

²¹⁷ Obama, p.260.

²¹⁸ Obama, p.262.

²¹⁹ Geraud Blanks, *Michelle Obama and the FLOTUS Effect: Platform, Presence and Agency*, ed. by Heather E. Harris and Kimberly R. Moffit (London: Lexington Books, 2019), p.7.

²²⁰ Hortense Spillers 'Views of the East Wing: On Michelle Obama' in *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 6.3 (2009), 307-310, (p.308) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420903063703>> [accessed 5 November 2019].

²²¹ Meyers and Goman, p.21.

had.²²² At the same time, Obama being promoted as only caring mother is part of this ‘softened’ image. Critics like Meyers and Goman called her choice a ‘safely-gendered arena of family and motherhood,’ while others like Blanks disagree with their point and views it from the perspective that ‘the Obamas represented a non-patriarchal model of the modern Black family.’²²³ Maintaining a non-threatening image also included her personal appearance through style and fashion. In the memoir, Obama justifies her style choices by claiming ‘I tried to be somewhat unpredictable, to prevent anyone from ascribing any sort of message to what I wore [...] I was supposed to stand out without overshadowing others, to blend in but not to fade away. As a black woman, too, I knew I’d be criticized if I was perceived as being showy and high end, and I’d be criticized also if I was too casual. So I mixed it up [...] to boost a diverse set of up-and-comers.’²²⁴ Therefore, Obama is admitting that she is obliged to adhere to a certain appearance which pleases the public and departs from the stylisation that accentuates her race. In this prospect, Shirley Tate maintains about Obama’s overall make-up looks, which she considers as ‘minimal,’ that ‘it is about upper/middle-class beautification that cuts the race divide.’²²⁵ Obama’s ‘glamorous,’ yet respectable appearance which is required to be race neutral led her to be attributed to the former first lady Jackie O Kennedy.²²⁶ This means that Obama’s style and even demeanour maintained that of a white woman’s style which made the media, as Tate mentions, turn her into a ‘style icon.’²²⁷ Therefore, Tate asserts Obama felt compelled to succumb to this acceptable femininity, which is ‘transracial,’ to

²²² Meyers and Goman, p.33.

²²³ Blanks, *Michelle Obama and the FLOTUS Effect*, p.7.

²²⁴ Obama, p.333.

²²⁵ Shirley Tate, ‘Michelle Obama’s Arms: Race, Respectability, and Class Privilege’ in *Comparative Studies an International Journal*, 10. 2-3, (2012), 226-238, (p.234), <<https://doi.org/10.1179/1477570012Z.00000000017>> [accessed 5 November 2019].

²²⁶ Tate, p.234.

²²⁷ Tate, p.235.

avoid the public's severe criticism.²²⁸ On the other hand, Nadia E. Brown sees that part of the legacy of Obama is that she revolutionised the concept of first ladyhood with 'style and elegance.'²²⁹ Brown further argues that the approach demonstrated by Obama in dealing with the criticism of her identity is 'graceful and tactful.'²³⁰ Cooper believes that the former first lady's 'ascent to ladyhood [...] conquered that offensive history, proving that Black women could be the arbiters of American femininity and style, too.'²³¹ Though I agree that Obama's highly visible position allowed her to change some of the deeply inherited perceptions about Black women, labelling her a traditional Black feminist is still problematic.

Obama's narrative choice to address her political involvement in her husband's presidential campaign trail can be read as an effort to correct the image of the emasculating Black woman that was attached to her, writing 'If I was going to continue to campaign like a candidate, I needed to be supported like a candidate[...] I needed to do the job well.'²³² The form autobiographical form I argue allows Obama to reconstruct the public record about her image and reimagine her own identity as a Black woman. She employs of the personal genre as a chance for her to redefine how the public should see her as she affirms in the last chapter *Becoming More* that 'if you don't get out there and define yourself, you'll be quickly and inaccurately defined by others.'²³³ To recreate a counter narration to her distance away from addressing Black women's issues as a first lady, Obama claims in the memoir that she attempted to be involved in such discourses 'the deeper I got into the experience of being First Lady, the more emboldened I felt to speak honestly and directly about what it means to

²²⁸ Tate, p.235.

²²⁹ Nadia E. Brown, 'Michelle Obama's Legacy' in *Politics & Gender*, 15.3(2019), 361-364 (p.363) <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X19000424>> [accessed 6 November 2019].

²³⁰ Brown, p.363.

²³¹ Cooper, *Eloquent Rage*, p.156.

²³² Obama, pp.286-287.

²³³ Obama, p.285.

be marginalized by race and gender.²³⁴ In talking about the early stages of her role as a first lady, Obama recollects 'I understood already that I'd be measured by a different yardstick. As the only African American First Lady to set foot in the White House.'²³⁵ Obama also writes about how her actions are compared to the previous white women who held her position She writes 'If there was a presumed grace assigned to my white predecessors, I knew it wasn't likely to be the same for me[...] I had to be better, faster, smarter, and stronger than ever.'²³⁶ In *Becoming Us*, Obama describes how the social conditioning of her Black identity that is assigned to historically established controlling images as a 'mind-set' when writing 'I was female, Black and strong, which to certain people maintaining a certain mind-set, translated only to angry.'²³⁷ The memoir, I argue, presents the racial and gendered discourse, to use the writer Afua Hirsch's phrase, in a 'dignified tone' as it 'leaves out far more of this sordid history than it chooses to recall.'²³⁸ Indeed, despite some attempts in writing about being a Black woman to rectify claims about her identity, the memoir still uses a tone that does not acknowledge that sexism and racism in America are institutionalised which further supports my argument that she has neoliberal attitudes in addressing such oppressions. While acknowledging Obama's status that contributes to subverting the stereotypes that are historically attached to Black women despite the criticism, dubbing her a traditional Black feminist with the neoliberal attitude that she has towards sexism and racism comes with risking the intellectual labour of intersectional feminism.

Conclusion:

²³⁴ Obama, p.405.

²³⁵ Obama, p.284.

²³⁶ Obama, p.284.

²³⁷ Obama, p.265.

²³⁸ Afua Hirsch, '*Becoming* by Michelle Obama Revie Race.'

This chapter has examined the texts of two popular figures of Black feminism, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and the former first lady Michelle Obama. Despite popularising Black feminism and globalising discussion over Black women's contributions that Obama and Adichie are known for, their texts promote for mainstream versions of Black feminism as they present in their work a feminist language that is individualistic and disconnects from the political and historical discourses of intersectional struggle that Black feminism stands for. Reading these texts together concluded that while both figures are hailed as the representatives of contemporary Black feminism, their works present similar neoliberal attitudes marked by individualistic and non-intersectional renderings of Black women's issues. In examining Adichie's feminist texts *We Should All Be Feminists* and *Dear Ijeawele*, the analysis has argued that within her effort to make feminism popular and accessible to non-academic readers, the texts risk the flattening of significant Black feminist issues related to the intersections of race and gender. Adichie uses her personal experience and everyday language to appeal to different audiences and to promote an image of feminism as relevant and non-threatening term. To do so, Adichie distances herself from the core intersectional values of academic Black feminism and radical Black feminists which I argued risks homogenising Black women's experiences with these oppressions and dismissing historical particularities. I have suggested to look critically at her feminist work with acknowledging the role of her fiction and her popularity in globalising Black women's literature.

In my reading of Obama's memoir *Becoming* as a feminist text that holds similar simplistic language that is present in Adichie's work, I problematised the scholarship's labelling of Obama as a traditional Black feminist for her approach that she takes to discussing racism and significant Black feminist staples as an individualistic effort as opposed to being a historically institutionalised systems of injustice. I have argued that while Obama used the genre of the

memoir to reshape the negative narratives attributed to her while first lady to reclaim her identity and her story, to maintain her refusal of being labelled as a feminist, she embraces a dignified tone in addressing her experiences as a Black woman in America during one of its significant eras of having the first Black president. I have also argued that Obama uses the memoir to give readers insight into how she helped in reversing controlling and stereotypical images about Black women.

CHAPTER FOUR:
THE PRACTICE OF LIFE WRITING AS A REPRESENTATION OF AN INTERSECTIONAL SELF IN
BLACK WOMEN'S HYBRID GENRES

Introduction:

In the previous chapter I have read Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's feminist texts and Michelle Obama's memoir to examine the type of feminism these works proliferate with regards to Obama and Adichie being positioned as popular figures of contemporary Black feminism. I have also discussed the risks that can be associated with their brand of Black feminism when not focusing on the intersecting oppressions of race and gender. Maintaining the intersectional lens, this chapter aims to study the presence of the race/ gender dialogue in contemporary Black American and Black British non-fiction hybrid genre texts. In this chapter I analyse four contemporary texts from America and Britain that have not been studied together before to argue that despite the transgression of formal boundaries, they share the practice of life writing to express their personal experiences with the intersections of race and gender. The examined texts are *Bad Feminist: Essays* (2014) by Roxane Gay, *This Will Be My Undoing: Living at the Intersection of Black, Female, and Feminist in (White) America* (2018) by Morgan Jerkins, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White people about Race* (2017) by Reni Eddo-Lodge, and *Slay in Your Lane: The Black Girl Bible* (2018) by Yomi Adegoke and Elizabeth Uviebinené.¹ The significance of selecting these works to be studied together is that they range between a feminist essay, a memoir, a journalistic essay, and a self-help book,

¹ Roxane Gay, *Bad Feminist: Essays* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2014).

Morgan Jerkins, *This Will Be My Undoing: Living at The Intersection of Black Female and Feminist in (White) America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2018).

Reni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* (London: Bloomsbury Circus, 2017).

Yomi Adegoke and Elizabeth Uviebinené, *Slay in Your Lane: Black Girl Bible* (London: Fourth Estate, 2018).

respectively, yet together I argue their writers transgress beyond the single genre to include autobiographical features to allow them to voice their experiences with race and gender. While most of the studies on some of these texts focus on their thematic concerns, my analysis investigates the works' employment of autobiographical aspects by focusing on reading the elements of life writing. This study examines the ways the Black women writers reflect and construct their intersectional identities as Black women in their writing by merging their forms with life writing practice. This chapter then is a contribution to the scholarship on the longstanding tradition of Black women's autobiographical writing by challenging the autobiographical framework that claims that autobiography is an act of performance through applying a selection of autobiographical theories by Black women that testify to the form's importance for Black women's self-assertion. To achieve this, I will build on a selection of autobiographical methods and return to earlier Black women's writings and theorisations on life writing to maintain that these contemporary Black women writers adopt the characteristics of early Black women models that serve as an archive that records Black women's historical struggle to freedom and agency, to reflect their own experiences with race and gender at this very moment.

To examine the texts' form, that I argue helps convey the writers' intersectional concerns, I offer a new way of reading these Black women's writings through problematising Sidonie Smith's concept of autobiographical performativity. To build her argument on autobiography as a performative act Smith, a scholar of autobiographical studies, employs Judith Butler's notion of the performance of gender to reframe the performativity of autobiographical writing. In her 1998 essay 'Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance,' Smith argues that 'the autobiographical speaker' is a mere 'performative subject' suggesting that

'autobiographical telling is not a "self-expressive" act.'² In other words, Smith differs from the autobiographical theory that argues that the self emerges to the surface when writing, instead she maintains it is always performed making autobiography a 'performative occasion.'³ Though Smith's model is original and still important in which it allows different ways to look at autobiographical forms, my analysis follows the autobiographical theorisation that Smith rejects to argue that these writers use life writing to reflect on their experiences of being Black women. To depart away from Smith's performativity, I follow a model that I present from a collage of different models and definitions of autobiography by Black women and different scholars like Nellie Y. McKay who argue that for Black women in specific this form is vital for asserting their selfhood. I am re-rooting this model that argues that historically Black women did not have the luxury to use autobiography as a performance but as a way to express their struggles with forms of oppression. I want to argue that the selected writers are following the model of earlier Black women writers of the diaspora and adopt this form to write about their intersectional selfhood. To do so, I revisit the historical significance of the autobiographical practice in Black women's diasporic tradition whom I concur used the form to assert the self as I discuss in the coming section. This will also allow me to examine what these writers are borrowing from the older generations of Black women writers as well as from each other in adopting this mode of writing. Thematically, I argue that these writers follow the works of Black feminism, which as Jennifer C. Nash reminds us, demands an 'account of gendered racism and racialized sexism' by 'advocating a feminism that transcends a preoccupation exclusively with gender.'⁴ Finally, I will study how these works sit within the

² Sidonie Smith, 'Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance' in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* (Wisconsin, The university of Wisconsin Press, 1998). pp.108-115. (p.108).

³ Smith, p.109.

⁴ Jennifer C. Nash, 'Intersectionality and Its Discontents' in *American Quarterly*, 69.1 (2017), 117-129, (p.118). <<https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/1/article/652577> N1> [accessed 29 April 2019].

contemporary debate on Black feminism and intersectionality. Unlike Adichie's feminist texts, I argue that these writers build their texts on an intersectional dialogue based on their experiences as Black women with race and gender. Focusing on the autobiographical form in these hybrid genres on race and gender as a way to voice Black women's experiences through problematising Smith's concept, the chapter presents a novel approach that contributes to the reading of these contemporary texts beyond the single genre. It encourages the study of the textual hybridity across the different forms in contemporary Black women's writing as a significant tradition in continuation, and to explore the rich new forms rising from such practice.

1-Black Women's Life Writing and Autobiographical Performativity:

I suggest that the mood of multi forms within the selected works represents the symbolism of quilt work in Black women's tradition in the diaspora. Quilt like narratives are based on the act of quilt making among African American enslaved women that many American Black feminists such as hooks consider to be an artistic creation.⁵ Quilting was more than an artform, it was used by enslaved women to share their stories of enslavement as well as stories of hope and survival.⁶ This patchwork quilt trope has been adopted in African-American literature, such as Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, as a political tool against the doubled oppression Black women in America face by being female and Black.⁷ bell hooks remind us that within this space of the 'artistic production' of quilt making, Black women found a space 'where they could transcend self.'⁸ Johnnie M. Stover argues that

⁵ bell hooks, *Belonging a Culture of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 163.

⁶ Alana Butler, 'Quilting Among African-American Women as a Pedagogy of Care, Empowerment and Sisterhood,' in *Gender and Education*, 31.5 (2019), 590-603, (p.590).
<<https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2019.1594708>> [accessed 15 March 2023].

⁷ Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (California: Harcourt, 1982).

⁸ hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, p.163.

autobiographical writing has been a common trend among Black women since its emergence as a 'patchwork –quilt like narrative' resulted from their unique experiences to 'represent the diverse cultural patterns from which their voices speak.'⁹ To acknowledge the quilt making as a significant artform within Black women's tradition to transcend the self, I consider the writers' transgression of form and the use of life writing as a contemporary continuation of the practice of quilt making.

To argue against Smith's concept, my chapter builds from the previous scholarship by Black women scholars who have studied Black women's autobiographical writing as a significant genre in the development of Black literary tradition, and a form that Black women relied on for writing their selfhood, such as Nellie Y. McKay. In her article 'The Narrative Self' McKay argues that 'from their earliest writings in the West, autobiography was sufficiently central to African Americans that they made it the genre of preference in the development of Black literary culture.'¹⁰ McKay continues that 'in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, displaced Africans found it critical in gaining the language they needed to enter white debates on the humanity of Africans,' therefore, from this time 'the life story (or portion of it) has been the most effective forum for defining black selfhood in a racially oppressive world.'¹¹ Zora Neale Hurston is one of the acclaimed Black women writers who presented an example of an autobiography on Black female self-narrative in her 1942 *Dust Tracks on the Road*. As McKay suggests 'the richness of the autobiographical tradition includes its multiplicity and complexity of narrative strategies and its various forms of self-representation that delineate

⁹ Johnnie M. Stover, *Rhetoric and Resistance in Black women's Autobiography* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2003), p.26.

¹⁰ Nellie Y. McKay, 'The Narrative Self: Race, Politics, and Culture in Black American Women's Autobiography,' in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998). pp.96-107, (p.96).

¹¹ McKay, p.96.

differences among and between black women and men.¹² Marlene Kadar describes life writing 'as genre of documents or fragments of documents written out of life or unabashedly out of personal experiences of the writer.'¹³ According to Kadar, life writing encompasses fictional and non-fictional texts with the subgenre autobiography being identified as non-fiction life writing. Kadar argues that life writing which writes about the individual 'favours autobiography.'¹⁴ Following Kadar's classification of autobiography as the non-fictional subgenre of life writing, the term autobiography then shall be used throughout this section to refer to the practice of non-fiction life writing.

Autobiography, which is simply defined by Smith and Watson in *A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, as 'self life writing,' will be continuously referenced to refer to the term life writing as no other subgenres of life writing will be referred to in this section. The main aspect of autobiography that is emphasised, is autobiographical 'I,' which is the main feature that distinguishes this type of writing from other forms. According to Smith and Watson's study the 'I' is 'the producer of the story' and it plays a central role in the narrating process of autobiographies.¹⁵ Dennis Altman argues that the inclusion of the writer's personal historical background is 'a necessary piece of information against which the reader weighs his or her reading,' as the focus on the writer's background is central to the reader who plays a critical role in the reception of the work.¹⁶ Invoking personal histories in non-fictional texts signifies autobiographical writing as argued by Kadar.¹⁷ According to Harris, 'self-reflecivity' is a

¹² McKay, p. 97.

¹³ Marlene Kadar, *Essays on Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice*, ed. by Marlene Kadar (Toronto: University of Toronto press, 1992), p.29.

¹⁴ Kadar, p.5.

¹⁵ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 2nd ed (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p.71.

¹⁶ Denis Altman, 'Writing the Self,' in *Anthropological Quarterly*, 75.2 (2002), 317-321, (p.320), <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3318262>> [accessed 13 March 2019].

¹⁷ Kadar, *Essays on Life Writing*, p.5.

process of 'self-reference' in which the writer deeply reflects with herself to answer questions about her personal experience while writing.¹⁸ This process of documenting lives and experiences among Black women is a vital tool used to increase the understanding of their own selves.¹⁹ Therefore, the focus on autobiography will serve the objective of this study which will primarily explore the practice of life writing through examining the presence of autobiographical aspects in their works to argue that these contemporary Black women writers continue to use this form within the different genre they use to represent their life with the intersecting oppressions of race and gender.

Analysing life writing through autobiographical aspects in these Black women's texts is for this form's connection to expressing the writer's experiences with the intersection of race and gender. As Smith and Watson argue 'to speak autobiographically as a black woman is not to speak as a "woman" and as a "black." It is to speak as a black woman.'²⁰ Kadar maintains that life writing presents 'reconstruction of women's lives.'²¹ For that reason, in the beginning of the twentieth century, the white western canonisation of what constitutes the genre of life writing excluded slave narratives and women's domestic lives' narrative.²² Moreover, the practice of crossing the single form boundary is a significant mode in the early tradition of Black women's writing that Gay, Jerkins, Eddo-Lodge, and Adegoke Uviebinené borrow in their works. As Stover argues within earlier African American works there was a 'tendency of African American writers to blur the lines between genres;' however, due to 'western society's need to establish clear genre [...] the works of African Americans were summarily

¹⁸ Harris, Harris, *Narrative and Experience in Multi-Cultural Education*, p.39.

¹⁹ Carole Boyce Davies quoted in Harris, p.39.

²⁰ Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, p.41.

²¹ Davies, p.29.

²² Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, p.3.

dismissed.²³ As Bart Moore-Gilbert concurs this exclusion came from the claim that women's writing rejected the model of life writing that was created by western men.²⁴ This exclusion, however, did not hinder Black women writers in the diaspora to continue with this practice which allowed later generations Black women writers to adopt the tradition. With the rise of Black feminism, feminists across generations also developed a tendency towards life writing to voice their marginalised perspectives. This interest in this genre as Susan Green maintains is due to the fact that it 'is seen as ideologically appropriate to feminism' for its ability to redefine women's stories that have been 'silenced by institutionalised monologic discourse.'²⁵ However, Green argues that Black women and feminists' life writing could be considered as 'reclamation of agency particularly to those who have been marginalised through gender, class and race.'²⁶ Thus, life writing including its many subgenres are used as an approach for the rendering of Black feminism and for negotiating the double binds of race and gender.

Referring to Butler, Smith believes that 'autobiographical storytelling is always a performative occasion,' where the self exists 'prior to the autobiographical expression;' thus, the self then is only the consequence of this autobiographical storytelling.²⁷ Watson and Smith argue that writers adopting life narratives 'address readers whom they want to persuade of their version of experience.'²⁸ Smith further adds that such writing is 'always a gesture toward publicity, displaying before an impersonal public an individual's interpretation

²³ Stover, p.2.

²⁴ Bart Moor-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Life Writing: Culture, Politics and Self-representation* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. xviii.

²⁵ Susan Green, 'Genre: Life Writing', in *English Teachers' Association of NSW, 2* (2008), (p.52).

<https://www.englishteacher.com.au/resources/command/download_file/id/138/filename/82LifeWriting.pdf> [accessed 05 April 2019].

²⁶ Green, p.52.

²⁷ Smith, *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, p.109.

²⁸ Smith and Watson, (2010), p.7.

of experience.²⁹ While Smith argues that ‘the history of an autobiographical subject is the history of the recitations of the self,’ it is crucial to argue that historically Black women’s autobiography was a tool used to dignify the self. In his study of 19th century Black women’s autobiographical writing, Johnnie M. Stover maintains that Black women used autobiography for both establishing the self as well as for fighting against the systems, significantly slavery, which threatened the very presence of that self.³⁰ However, argues Stover, their self in their writing is ‘rarely separated from the community.’³¹ Therefore, the presence of the ‘I’ as a signifier of the self in Black women’s autobiographies is a representative of many voices rather than one voice.³² According to Valerie Smith, the ‘I’ in Black women’s life writing symbolises ‘we’, which refers to Black women like themselves or the Black community.³³

The practice of the ‘I’ in Black women’s autobiography has not ceased with the end of slave narratives as it continues to encompass an important part in contemporary Black women’s life writing as I argue in this analysis. Historically, the intersection led to the disregard of Black women’s hybrid texts which Stephen Butterfield’s relates to the fact that Black writers present a version of self that is different from the white ideal of self.³⁴ Therefore, any practice of writing that is based on life writing, such as autobiography, was mainly identified as European and androcentric.³⁵ Therefore, the continuing interest among contemporary Black American and British feminists in life narratives within genre hybridisation could be also read as an effort to decolonise this practice from the white male and western domination on the

²⁹ Smith, *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, p.436.

³⁰ Johnnie M. Stover, ‘Nineteenth-Century African American Women’ Autobiography as social discourse: The Example of Harriet Anne Jacobs,’ in *College English*, 66.02 (2003), 133-154 (p.134). <<https://doi.org/10.2307/3594263>> [accessed 20 April 2019].

³¹ Stover, p. 173.

³² Stover, p.173.

³³ Valerie Smith quoted in Bosničová, p. 32.

³⁴ Stephen Butterfield quoted in *Black Women’s Writing*, p.129.

³⁵ Stover, p.21.

genre. As Braxton maintains, Autobiographical writings among these Black women not only mark a shift from slave narratives, where their writing has been located for long time, but also an adopted process for self-performance.³⁶

2 -The 'I' in *Bad Feminist* Manifesto:

Roxane Gay's *Bad Feminist: Essays* (2014) is a collection of essays that reveals her personal journey as she evolves as a woman and as a feminist through addressing the things that she loves that are against the definitions of mainstream feminism. I offer a new approach to reading her manifesto as a life writing text, that I sustain Gay practices through the autobiographical 'I' which permits her to write herself as a Black woman and a Black feminist. The mood of transgression of from between the critical essays and the life writing genre allows Gay to explore herself as a feminist and her relation to feminism as well as a cultural critic demanding for more spaces for Black women's issues with reference to her personal life. The text is written in a way that shows Gay as a cultural critic where she criticises popular culture in the U.S and mainstream feminism, and writers in references to both academic Black feminism and popular rendering of Black feminism. within her talk about scrabble tournaments, referencing popular culture and Hollywood movies, Gay refers to significant radical Black feminists that influence her such as Audre Lorde to build her critique. As Naomi Wolf argues that 'while Gay is based on campus, she writes in the way that you discuss feminist theory with your best friend' which Carla Kaplan relates to Gay's 'accessible writing' a similar approach that I argued is present in Adichie's feminist texts.³⁷ Patricia J Williams

³⁶ Joanne M. Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography, A Tradition Within a Tradition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), p.10.

³⁷ Naomi Wolf, 'Bad Feminist Great Rhetorician,' (2016), *Signs*, < <http://signsjournal.org/bad-feminist/>> [accessed 04 May 2019].

Clara Kaplan, 'Feminism for Those Who Don't Like Feminists' (2016), *Signs*, < <http://signsjournal.org/bad-feminist/>> [accessed 04 May 2019].

contends that what makes Gay's feminism appealing is her 'colloquial yet highly intellectual' discussions that depart from her stories with scrabble to her criticism of the American TV show *Girls*.³⁸ However, Unlike Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's simplified feminism that eschews away from intersectionality discussed in previous chapter, I want to argue that Gay's self-referential feminist discussions build on an intersectional take in analysing racism and sexism issues.

To argue for the performativity of the autobiographical practice, Sidonie Smith argues that 'the "self" so often invoked in self-expressive theories of autobiography is not a noun, a thing-in-itself, waiting to be materialised through the text' as she believes 'there is no essential, original, coherent autobiographical self before the moment of self-narrating. Nor is the autobiographical self-expressive in the sense that it is the manifestation of an interiority that is somehow ontologically whole, seamless, and "true".'³⁹ I want to argue that for Gay the inclusion of the autobiographical narration is to present her authentic gendered and racialised self as a Black women writer. As Nellie McKay argues about early Black women's autobiographies 'Black autobiographers almost always focus on the racial authentication of the self' as their writing begins from a position that 'establishes and asserts the reality of the self through experience.'⁴⁰ Gay's narrative presents raw insight into her own struggles of coming to terms with her approach to feminism and being able to navigate life as a Black woman and an academic. In the first chapter 'Me' essay entitled 'Feel Me. See Me. Hear Me. Reach Me' Gay expresses her believe in the importance of her writing as a therapeutic medium for the expression of herself 'I tell some of the same stories over and over because

³⁸ Patricia J. Williams, 'On Imperfection and Its Comforts' (2016), *Signs* < <http://signsjournal.org/bad-feminist/>> [accessed 04 May 2019].

³⁹ Smith, p.108.

⁴⁰ Nellie McKay, 'The Narrative Self,'p.96.

certain experiences have affected me profoundly. Sometimes, I hope by telling these stories, again and again, I will have better understanding of how the world works.’⁴¹ Gay writes that her text is an attempt to assert her identity away from suggesting perfection as her essays ‘are political, and they are personal’ however, affirms that like feminism they are ‘flawed, but they come from a genuine place. I am just one woman trying to make sense of this world we live in. I am rising my voice to show all the ways we have room to want more, to do better.’⁴² As McKay holds Black women writers always refused to ‘participate in an ideology that separated the self from the Black community.’⁴³ By transmitting her Black experiential self, Gay’s narrative becomes a tool she employs to call for the urgency of not taking other Black selves for granted.

Gay also uses the form to reveal her own self as a ‘bad feminist’ when she explains the reason behind choosing the term bad feminist ‘I embrace the label of bad feminist because I am human. I am messy.’⁴⁴ In a TED talk entitled ‘Confessions of a Bad Feminist’ Gay humorously acknowledges that calling herself a bad feminist ‘started as an inside joke with myself and a wilful provocation.’⁴⁵ Being a bad feminist, she argues is related to the rejection of mainstream feminism which focuses on white women’s needs ‘I decided feminism wasn’t for me as a black women’ as feminism has ‘historically, been far more invested in improving the lives of heterosexual white women to the determiners of others.’⁴⁶ Later Gay expresses the relief she felt in the beginning of her feminist journey when she was introduced to

⁴¹ Gay, *Bad Feminist*, p.3.

⁴² Gay, p.xiv.

⁴³ McKay, p.96.

⁴⁴ Gay, p.xi.

⁴⁵ Gay, ‘*Confessions of a Bad Feminist*’ (2015), *TEDWomen*, <https://www.ted.com/talks/roxane_gay_confessions_of_a_bad_feminist?language=en#t-37149>[accessed 17 September 2019].

⁴⁶ Gay, p.xiii.

intersectional feminism, writing that 'it was easy to embrace feminism when I realized it was advocating for gender equality in all realms, while also making the effort to be intersectional, to consider all the factors that influence who we are and how we move through the world.'⁴⁷ While Smith rejects the 'synonymity' of the I of the narrator and the I of the narrated, I argue that Gay establishes both as synonymous as herself cannot be separated from her entity as a Black woman writer who is 'happy to be both of these things.'⁴⁸

Gay expresses her support of popular feminism in addition to the academic intersectional feminism which is part of why she believes that she is a bad feminist. In talking about the American singer Beyoncé represents by stating 'it was a glorious spectacle to see this pop star openly embracing feminism.'⁴⁹ While Gay openly admires Beyoncé's feminism, other Black feminists have an opposing view such as Adichie who when asked about Beyoncé's representation of feminism, she argued that it is not her type of feminism for focusing on men and not on women's true issues.⁵⁰ bell hooks criticises Beyoncé's feminism by considering Beyoncé to be anti-feminist and non-revolutionary because she presents Black women as victims and objectifies their bodies, a critique Gay herself considers as provocative and 'without a space for debate.'⁵¹ Identifying as a bad feminist is not only related to admiring Beyoncé, both in her book and the TED talk, Gay gives a list of what she believes are the reasons she is not a good feminist. Gay links being a bad feminist to loving the shades of the

⁴⁷ Gay, p.xiii.

⁴⁸ Smith, p.108, Gay, p.17.

⁴⁹ Gay, 'Confessions of a Bad Feminist.'

⁵⁰ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, <<https://www.thefader.com/2016/10/07/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-beyoncs-feminism-comment>> [accessed 17 September 2019].

⁵¹ bell hooks, <<http://www.bellhooksinstitute.com/blog/2016/5/9/moving-beyond-pain>> [accessed 19 September 2019].

Gay, 'Beyoncé's Control of Her Own Image Belies the bell hooks 'Slave' Critique' (2014), *The Guardian*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/may/12/beyonce-bell-hooks-slave-terrorist>> [accessed 19 September 2019].

colour pink, reading Vogue magazine, listening to women degrading Rap music and admiring dresses.⁵² Julie Burchill criticises Gay's narrow vision of what defines a bad feminist suggesting that such attributes 'hardly qualify one as a Bad Feminist.'⁵³ Gay's approach to feminism, is found appealing by other critics such as Brittney Cooper who contends that 'Roxane Gay's Bad Feminist takes away the trepidation that so many young people feel about identifying with the term feminist.'⁵⁴ Gay's divergent approach towards feminism could be related to hooks' argument, which emphasises on the non- existence of 'one path to feminism.'⁵⁵ In *Feminism is for Everybody*, hooks argues that 'our strategies for feminist change must be varied.'⁵⁶ Gay's 'bad feminism' thus can be located within hooks' context of bringing radical Black feminism to a wider audience by referring to popular culture but remaining true to Black women's intersectional issues.

When it comes to popular culture, Gay contests against the representations of race in popular culture to approach both Blackness and the legacies of slavery in the United States. Addressing the non-diverse television shows, Gay reveals the difficulty she finds in identifying with such representation 'I enjoy difference, but once in a while, I do want to catch a glimpse of myself in others.'⁵⁷ In the 2011 film *The Help* directed by Tate Taylor, which tackles the stories of Black women and domestic servitude in the 1960s Mississippi, Gay argues that race is 'handled ineffectually' and goes even to accuses its writer Kathryn Stockett of caricaturing

⁵² Gay, *Bad Feminist*, p.315.

Gay, 'Confessions of a Bad Feminist.'

⁵³ Julie Burchill, 'Is Roxane Gay's Relentless Self-analysis Compounding her Problems' (2017), *The Spectator* <<https://www.spectator.co.uk/2017/07/is-roxane-gays-relentless-self-analysis-compounding-her-problems/>> [accessed 05 May 2019].

⁵⁴ Brittney Cooper, '*Feminism for Badasse*' (2016), *Signs*, < <http://signsjournal.org/bad-feminist/>> [accessed 04 May 2019].

⁵⁵ bell hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 116.

⁵⁶ hooks, p.116.

⁵⁷ Gay, p.6.

Black women. hooks maintains that this movie ‘has angered and disturbed black females’ like no other contemporary movie.⁵⁸ For hooks, *The Help* has ‘triggered psychological distress’ for its ‘historical inaccuracy’ and ‘dehumanizing depictions of black womanhood.’⁵⁹ Gay questions the ability of American movies about slavery to bring novelty such as the 2011 *Django Unchained* directed by Quentin Tarantino, which depicts the story of a male slave during the 1800s.⁶⁰ Gay argues that such Hollywood narratives which attempt to capture Black people’s struggles with slavery, are insufficient for repeating the same single story.⁶¹ In her TED talk ‘The Danger of a Single Story’ Adichie warns against the repetition of archetypal images related to Black people that have been rehearsed for centuries.⁶² Creating the notion of single story as Adichie simply phrases it, is through showing ‘[...] people as one thing, as only one thing over and over again, and that is what they became.’⁶³ The consequence of repeating the same story as Adichie emphasises ‘robs people of dignity.’⁶⁴ Gay contends that Hollywood insists on portraying Black women within the same image of domestic slaves which she considers dehumanising.

Gay writes that there is ‘an ongoing and critical conversation about race in America.’⁶⁵ She holds that because racism is omnipresent, overcoming it is a major endeavour whether in America or any other place in the world.⁶⁶ Gay relates this failure to respectability politics; thus, shifting the focus towards Black communities. Respectability politics describe a set of

⁵⁸ hooks, *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p.175.

⁵⁹ hooks, p.175.

⁶⁰ Gay, p.222.

⁶¹ Gay, p.230.

Gay, p.232.

⁶² Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, ‘The Danger of a Single Story’ (2009), *TEDGlobal*, [y<https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?utm_campaign=tedsprea&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=tedcomshare>](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?utm_campaign=tedsprea&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=tedcomshare) [accessed 14 September 2019].

⁶³ Adichie, *The Danger of a Single Story*.

⁶⁴ Adichie, *The Danger of a Single Story*.

⁶⁵ Gay, p.259.

⁶⁶ Gay, p.260.

norms minority leaders ask their groups to adhere to as counter- strategies to fight the negative stereotypes.⁶⁷ Gay criticises this concept for its emphasis on locating Black people within the frame of model citizens that normally means white citizens.⁶⁸ She argues that ‘respectability politics are not the answer to ending racism’ and change is not as simple as following ‘a prescribed set of rules and make the world a better place for all.’⁶⁹ Instead, she agrees with the former American president Barack Obama’s view whom she argues locates ‘the responsibility of change on all of us’ as ‘one nation indivisible.’⁷⁰ Yet, this focus on collective responsibility of change without singling out white Americans could be interpreted as Gay’s aim to refuse to hold her white American readers accountable for sustaining racism.

Smith claims that the ‘autobiographical recitation is a recitation of a recitation,’ however, I suggest that the autobiography allows Gay’s intersectional self to surface as opposed to being a reiterated performance of the self that is created for the narration.⁷¹ Gay’s practice of life writing is not limited to self-narration, but also to improve the knowledge of her own self. In his study of Black women’s autobiographies, Stover argues that within the autobiographical writing of Black women slaves, ‘exploring [the] self was the first step toward empowering [the] self.’⁷² In the last chapter ‘Politics, gender, and Race’ Gay reveals the nature of the conclusion about her relationship with feminism, confessing ‘I am falling as a woman. I am falling as a feminist.’⁷³ Using the ‘I’ Gay admits that she is writing to perform her selfhood to her readers asserting:

⁶⁷ Mikaela Pitcan, Alice E Marwick, Danah Boyed, ‘Performing a Vanilla Self: Respectability Politics, Social Class, and the Digital World’, in *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 22. 3 (2018), 163-179 (p.164), <<https://doi.org/10.1093/jcmc/zmy008>>[accessed 14 May 2019].

⁶⁸ Gay, p.259.

⁶⁹ Gay, p.259.

⁷⁰ Gay, p.260.

⁷¹ Smith, p.111.

⁷² Stover, *Rhetoric and Resistance*, p.34.

⁷³ Gay, p.314.

The more I write, the more I put myself out into the world as bad feminist, but I hope, a good woman- I am being open about who I am and who I was and where I have faltered and who I would like to become.⁷⁴

Therefore, Gay's last statement exemplifies her attempt to explore herself to come to terms with her relation to feminism.⁷⁵ Gay's self-empowerment is through the exploration of her intersectional identity as she stresses by quoting Audre Lorde's who states that as a Black feminist I recognize that my power as well as my primary oppressions come as a result of my blackness as well as my womanness, and therefore my struggles on both of these fronts are inseparable.⁷⁶ Gay refers to Lorde to criticise the feminist movements that fail to recognise 'the effects of racism and postcolonialism' that are unique issues to women of colour, thus amplifying her intersectional self.⁷⁷

3 -Living at the Intersection of Race and Gender in Morgan Jerkin's Autobiography:

Like Gay's text, Morgan Jerkins' *This Will Be My Undoing* is also autobiographical account in which she uses life writing to present a journey towards her selfhood. This pastiche inspired by the earliest mode of quilt narrative is weaving into Jerkin's work as a result of being positioned between the vectors of race and gender. like Gay, Jerkin's autobiographical essays include the repeated first-person pronoun 'I.' In the opening of the book, Jerkins reveals the first moment she discovered her Black identity: '[w]hen I was ten, I realized that I was black.'⁷⁸ Writing from the position of an intersectional self, Black and a woman, is constantly

⁷⁴ Gay, p.318.

⁷⁵ Gay, p.318.

⁷⁶ Lorde quoted in Gay, p.307.

⁷⁷ Gay, p.307.

⁷⁸ Jerkins, *This Will Be My Undoing*, p.1.

emphasised in Jerkins' writing. In the first essay entitled 'Monkeys Like You' she observes that 'there is equal value in race, gender and class for each trait refracts a different light onto another, which is why I write.'⁷⁹ Jerkins' autobiographical essays come with an act of revealing selfhood and writing her self's assertion. She stresses that her selfhood, being Black, is honourable by saying 'my blackness is an honour, and as long as I continue to live, I will always esteem it as such.'⁸⁰ This quote is an example of Jerkin's celebration of herself and her identity, which she argues is the reason for her writing.

In writing herself, Jerkins shares with her readers the complications of female Black identity in America. This practice of focusing on personal details and discussing the particularity of women's experiences is not new. For 'the personal is political' as Smith argues, feminists adopted 'life writing as a discursive mode and a[s] self-reflexive genre' to support women become active 'agents and actors' for change.⁸¹ Through sharing intimate parts of her life, Jerkins's aim of using her own experience is an act of continuing a tradition, which previous feminists initiated, to appeal to the race -gender debate. To emphasise this point, Jerkins argues 'The particular experience of the black woman in modern America needs to be addressed. But there isn't just one; there are many. Millions, to be exact. I can only add one.'⁸² Thus, Jerkins stresses that she is voicing her experience to start a much-needed debate in America.

The title *Living at the Intersection of Black, Female and Feminist in (White) America* suggests that Jerkins's account focuses on writing her experience as a subject interlocked between being Black and a female. I argue that her memoir presents an authentic Black self

⁷⁹ Jerkins, p.23.

⁸⁰ Jerkins, p.199.

⁸¹ Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, p.85.

⁸² Jerkins, p.228.

as opposed to the performed subject separating the I of the narrator and the I of the narrated subject as Smith suggests. Jerkins presents herself as a Black feminist who is aware that intersectionality is against the monolithic interpretation of Black women's experiences and views the vexed dynamics of race and gender as overlapping. In a comment on the importance of locating Black women's lives outside the single axis thinking, Jerkins argues 'we as black women are doubly disenfranchised in the throes of two spaces, race and gender, and there is no solace.'⁸³ Black feminists' focus on intersectionality is conflicting the white mainstream feminism that includes Black women's experiences along with those of white women. This critique is persistent in Jerkins' work, who argues that:

When black women speak about themselves to those who are not black, somehow our interlocutors get offended that we dare speak about how both race and gender affect us.⁸⁴

Jerkins is directing this statement to the white feminists who she argues have failed to highlight the particularity of Black women's experiences with social inequities and the legacy of slavery.⁸⁵ She further insists that to understand Black women's lives white mainstream feminism is attaching Black women next to their white counterparts, which for her 'erases black women.'⁸⁶ Her argument has been the core of the Black feminist debate against white feminism for decades. In one of her earliest texts *Ain't I a Woman?: Black Women and Feminism*, hooks maintains that in the middle of Black women's oppression resulting from both institutionalised racism and sexism, there always has been a tendency among white

⁸³ Jerkins, p.49.

⁸⁴ Jerkins, p.23.

⁸⁵ Jerkins, p.23

⁸⁶ Jerkins, p.23.

feminists 'to romanticize the black female experience rather than discuss the negative impact of that oppression' to stress the need for Black women to control the narrative⁸⁷

Becoming aware that being a Black woman 'is different,' Jerkins maintains that Blackness does not separate Black women from other women 'however, it does distinguish us.'⁸⁸ According to Jerkins, white people are part of this complexity since their perception is built upon the idea that Black people represent different 'societal ills.'⁸⁹ This perception is dehumanising especially for Black women; thus, declares Jerkins 'my black womanhood cancels out my humanity because black womanhood is unhuman.'⁹⁰ She further associates this condescending view towards Black women to the legacies of slavery by arguing that 'Since slavery, black womanhood has represented the perverse, the grotesque.'⁹¹ Jerkins invokes 'Hottentot Venus' to argue that such images that are still associated with Black women as Jerkins argues are the result of what Patricia Hill Collins calls 'generalized ideology of domination.'⁹² For Collins, the dominating powers control the stereotyped images of Black women either by using existing images or by constructing new stereotypes.⁹³ Part of such manipulation of the images that define Black womanhood is privileging white standards of beauty over other women of different ethnicities.

Jerkins expresses her personal experience with of living with Black hair in America 'I grew up learning about "good" and "bad" hair' in reference to white women's hair being good comparing to Black women's hair that is considered bad.⁹⁴ Jerkins follows and borrows her

⁸⁷ hooks, *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (Boston, South End Press, 1981), p.6.

⁸⁸ Jerkins, p. 21, p.24.

⁸⁹ Jerkins, p. 183.

⁹⁰ Jerkins, p.183.

⁹¹ Jerkins, p.44.

⁹² Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd edn, (New York: Routledge, 2000), p.69.

⁹³ Collins, p.69.

⁹⁴ Jerkins, p.34.

ideas on Black beauty from Black feminist scholarship that addresses what is, historically, institutionally, and socially constituted as 'good' and 'bad' hair. Collins, Ingrid Banks and Shirley Anne Tate have presented thorough studies about the issue of Black hair and the white domination over beauty ideals. In *Black Beauty*, the Jamaican scholar Tate agrees with Banks argument that people who feel privileged for having 'good hair' can only feel as such due to the existence of what is constituted as 'bad hair'.⁹⁵ To have Black hair automatically means bad hair and to have a white people's hair means good hair. For this reason, Jerkins states that her hair is considered a 'good hair' due to her light skin that makes people attribute her among white women.⁹⁶ Jerkins also, associates hair with pain, arguing 'the painstaking effort directed towards one's hair is taught incredibly early, and it never lets up.'⁹⁷ She was forced to start perming her hair from a young age, which made her 'obsessed' with straightening it.⁹⁸ Jerkins argues that this obsession was to attain beauty ideals, which meant white beauty, for her it was a way, she states, 'to elude the restraints of my blackness.'⁹⁹ Jerkins' point about pain and hair perming among Black women follows what Tate terms as 'stylization practices'.¹⁰⁰ Tate argues that 'beauty and becoming beautiful through stylization practises are about hegemony.'¹⁰¹ This is related to Collins argument about images of beauty being dominated by the powers that control societies, referring to the white hegemonic powers.

The approach that Jerkins takes to tackle Black women's hair is not only tied to white hegemonic control of beauty images, but also critiques respectability politics. In her interview with Gay, Jerkins states that, respectability politics are 'about assimilating to whiteness and

⁹⁵ Shirley Anne Tate, *Black Beauty: Aesthetics, Stylization, Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p.41.

⁹⁶ Jerkins, p.35.

⁹⁷ Jerkins, p.35.

⁹⁸ Jerkins, p.35.

⁹⁹ Jerkins, p.37.

¹⁰⁰ Tate, *Black Beauty*, p. 157.

¹⁰¹ Tate, p.157.

making white people feel comfortable.¹⁰² This is related to her argument that Black women feel themselves obliged to adhere to the 'respectable' look, which usually means looking like white women.¹⁰³ When talking about Black women's need to straighten their hair, she says 'we do this to get jobs, move in and out of social circles.'¹⁰⁴ Jerkins clarifies that since different Black women 'have different experiences,' there are Black women who do not feel the need to adhere to the social pressure, instead many Black women straighten their hair out of 'aesthetic choice.'¹⁰⁵ To illustrate, Jerkins writes:

We as black women are not afforded ownership over our own identities, our own bodies, the colour of our skin and the texture of our hair, and yet white women can appropriate our bodies in order to suit their own selfish desires.¹⁰⁶

Jerkins uses 'we' as a retrospective tool through which she revisits the past to insist on the past/present relation in regard to slavery legacies. She states, 'I use the term "we" because there is very little psychological disassociation between the past and the present when we talk about slavery.'¹⁰⁷ She further refers to Black women saying, 'it is we who were captured and transported by the millions to the New World' to both justify the use of 'we' and to highlight the uniqueness of Black women's experiences which have been shaped by slavery.¹⁰⁸

Jerkins reveals the different encounters with racism that she faces in her everyday life. Writing on what it means to be Black, Jerkins argues that 'I am not simply treated as a human

¹⁰² Jerkins in an interview with Roxane Gay, <<https://www.elle.com/culture/books/a14464215/morgan-jerkins-this-will-be-my-undoing-interview/>> [accessed 25 April 2019].

¹⁰³ Jerkins, p.46.

¹⁰⁴ Jerkins, p.43.

¹⁰⁵ Jerkins, p.43.p.45., Jerkins in an interview with Roxane Gay.

¹⁰⁶ Jerkins, p.45.

¹⁰⁷ Jerkins, p.216.

¹⁰⁸ Jerkins, p.216

being. I am treated as a black woman.’¹⁰⁹ Jerkins insists ‘[a]s white people they can never fully understand’ and since they are not Black and do not possess Black bodies their ‘understanding is an abstraction.’¹¹⁰ Jerkin’s argument could be understood and located within the context of the politics of accountability which is a political term directed towards the demands for a certain group to be ‘held to account,’ as Tony Wright’s argues in his study of the politics of accountability.¹¹¹ hooks states that the politics of accountability emphasize that white people ‘are accountable for changing and transforming white supremacy and racism.’¹¹² hooks relates such accountability to the white supremacist capitalist patriarchal dominating powers within societies. Thus, to transform the dominant racist white supremacy, hooks stresses ‘I am compelled to locate where my responsibility lies’ to argue that such responsibility lies with every individual.¹¹³

Within the discourse of racism, Jerkins insists that the issue of race is overlapping with gender; thus, reinforcing intersectionality. Jerkins addresses her personal stories with race, writing ‘I am [...] aware of how others’ biases kick in when they see me, and how their subsequent treatment of me differs from the way they might treat someone else who is not black and female.’¹¹⁴ In her intersectional dialogue Jerkins references the earlier generation of Black feminists such as Audre Lorde’s argument in *Sister Outsider* on dismantling the hierarchy of power ‘I do believe in the Audre Lorde’s saying that you cannot dismantle the master’s house with the master’s tools.’¹¹⁵ Returning to Black hair straightening, Jerkins

¹⁰⁹ Jerkins, p.166.

¹¹⁰ Jerkins, p.166.

¹¹¹ Tony Wright, “The Politics of Accountability,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Public Law*, ed. by Mark Elliott and David Feldman, Cambridge Companion to Law (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp.96-115. p. 96.

¹¹² hooks, *Writing Beyond Race*, p.30.

¹¹³ hooks, p.30.

¹¹⁴ Jerkins, p.194.

¹¹⁵ Jerkins, p.49, 52.

writes 'we do this to appear more docile' and 'we eschew swimming in the pool because chlorine damages our hair.'¹¹⁶ Though she uses, 'we' Jerkins criticises feminists who 'speak without listening and use feminism as a way to unify without analysing black women's differences and their complications.'¹¹⁷ Jerkins states the fact that she is privileged by declaring in an interview that 'I'm black women, but I do have privilege and I need to acknowledge it over and over.'¹¹⁸ Both in her book and in this interview, Jerkins insists that her story in this text is not 'a one size-fits all' narrative to maintain that her story is singular.

Jerkins uses her text as an opportunity to voice her fear about the situation of Black women in America. Jerkins then argues that not all women could be grouped 'together under the patriarchy without considering race, which further stigmatizes us as black women but provides a buffer for white women.'¹¹⁹ Therefore, for Jerkins white women should not be included in the process of changing what hooks calls 'imperialist supremacist capitalist patriarchy.'¹²⁰ White women should not be part of this discussion argues Jerkins, they should 'remain silent' and let Black women raise this discourse because they will 'reinforce supremacy.'¹²¹ Jerkins holds a similar view with other Black feminist like Feminista Jones who maintains that despite the fact that white women are also oppressed by the male hegemony, their fight to 'smash the patriarchy' remains white and racist.¹²² hooks on the other hand includes all women in the participation in the discourse against white supremacy. hooks views that linking white supremacy to the establishment of racism 'allows us to see beyond skin

¹¹⁶ Jerkins, p.43.

¹¹⁷ Jerkins, p.53.

¹¹⁸ Jerkins, p.53.

¹¹⁹ Jerkins, p.53.

¹²⁰ hooks, *Writing Beyond Race*, p.36.

¹²¹ Jerkins, p.211.

¹²² Feminista Jones, *Reclaiming Our Space: How Black Feminists Are Changing the World from the Tweets to the Streets* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019), p.14.

color' because it permits to reflect on the influence of white supremacy on everyone regardless their race.¹²³

4-Intersectional Self in Reni Eddo-Lodge's Journalistic Genre:

Reni Eddo-Lodge's *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* is more of a journalistic text, but it shares the nuances of autobiographical writing through the writer's use of the 'I.' Autobiography is 'self-referential' writing which simply means the writing of one's personal story and Eddo-Lodge adopts such writing.¹²⁴ To consider writing autobiographical demands the presence of the narrating 'I,' the first-person pronoun, a feature constantly present in her work. Eddo-Lodge is using *Why I'm No Longer* as a platform to write about her experiences with race and gender, which can be noticed in the section where she speaks about the benefits of publicly vocalising the issue of gender. Eddo-Lodge argues feminism 'was helping me come to term with my blackness as part of myself that I'd always known was shrouded in stigma.'¹²⁵ Thus, revealing this part about herself is deemed necessary, as maintains that the purpose of writing is to 'deconstruct the structural power of a system' that locates her as other.¹²⁶ Eddo-Lodge further asserts 'I write[...] to assure myself that other people have felt what I'm feeling too, that it isn't just me.'¹²⁷ This statement can be related to the argument of Susan Green's argument that considers the use of what she labels the 'assertive I' as a method of establishing intimacy with the reader as readers are expecting to be admitted to the writer's own consciousness.¹²⁸ Furthermore, Eddo-Lodge argues that this book is written 'to articulate that feeling of having your voice and confidence

¹²³ hooks, p. 6.

¹²⁴ Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, p.4.

¹²⁵ Eddo-Lodge, *Why I no Longer*, p.152.

¹²⁶ Eddo-Lodge, 184.

¹²⁷ Eddo-Lodge, p. xvi.

¹²⁸ Green, p. 51.

snatched away from you in the cocky face of the status quo.’¹²⁹ The change of the pronoun from ‘I’ to ‘you’, which is interpreted as her aim to signify a collective ‘we.’ Writing for the collective is not a new theme within Black women’s life narratives. Eddo-Lodge further says, ‘I have come to realize that I am not alone in my despair’ after publishing part of this book as a blog.¹³⁰

Eddo-Lodge refers to different American Black feminists to present scholarly-like debate about the conflict between white and Black feminists. Simultaneously, she refers to popular culture as noted previously on the TV show *Girls* and discusses issues related to Black women on different media platforms. For example, she published an article on the famous fashion Magazine *Vogue* about stereotyping Black women’s bodies on Instagram.¹³¹ She also appeared on an interview with the Hollywood actress Emma Watson to discuss *Why I’m No Longer* which was widely viewed on YouTube.¹³² The crisscross between academic and popular feminism that Eddo-Lodge tends to infuse within her text could be seen as an approach she uses to appeal a wider audience to her book. On Twitter, she has over than sixty thousand followers and Watson’s post about Eddo-Lodge’s work reached over five million likes on Instagram.¹³³ This popularity has given her more accessibility in which she is seen as the representative of the young generation of Black feminism. For example, she has been on interviews with many news anchors such as Sky News to discuss Black Lives Matter in UK.¹³⁴

¹²⁹ Eddo-Lodge, p.xvii.

¹³⁰ Eddo-Lodge, p. 220.

¹³¹ Reni Eddo-Lodge, < <https://www.vogue.co.uk/article/blackfishing-phenomenon> > [accessed 3 June 2019].

¹³² Eddo-Lodge in an interview with Emma Stone, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AwWCZI_OUsY > [accessed 02 June 2019].

¹³³ Eddo-Lodge on Twitter <<https://twitter.com/renireni>> [accessed 01 June 2019].

Emma Watson on Instagram <<https://www.instagram.com/p/Bdk3GQuBSL-/?hl=en>> [accessed 30 May 2019].

¹³⁴ Eddo-Lodge on Sky News <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lk0s_c6y9Ak> [accessed 03 June 2019].

The 'I' in Eddo-Lodge's text represents more than her selfhood as an individual subject. As Stover argues that in Black women's life narratives 'the self is secondary to the primary needs of [...] community.'¹³⁵ Stover's argument can be related to Eddo-Lodge's statement after the public reception of her post; here she writes 'I was glad that it had served them. I knew that if I was feeling less alone, they were feeling less alone too.'¹³⁶ Giving readers access to her experience. On the other hand, theorising selfhood is used to perceive the experience of the writer from the public eye and is a pursuit for Black women activists to employ as a political apparatus to serve their causes. Indeed, in Eddo-Lodge's case inserting life writing within her journalistic text, is to make prominence out of the rhetoric of race and gender in Britain.

Eddo-Lodge argues that white British people are maintaining colour-blind racism 'I can't have a conversation with them about the details of a problem if they don't even recognize the problem exists.'¹³⁷ For Meghan Burke colour-blind racism is the ideology of denying the persistence of racism within societies.¹³⁸ Eddo-Lodge criticises the politics of colour-blindness, which she calls 'a childish, stunned analysis of racism' because for her it fails to see how structural power is manifested and focuses only on colour.¹³⁹ Colour blindness, to use the critical race theorist Patricia J. Williams' word in her work *Seeing a Colour-Blind Future* (1997), is the 'dismissiveness' of the existing colour differences.¹⁴⁰ Eddo-Lodge writes that this ideology is problematising as it 'does not get to the root of racism' for failing to address racism

¹³⁵ Stover, p.28.

¹³⁶ Eddo-Lodge, p.xiii.

¹³⁷ Eddo-Lodge, p.xi.

¹³⁸ Meghan Burke, *Colorblind Racism*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), p. ix.

¹³⁹ Eddo-Lodge, p.82.

¹⁴⁰ Patricia J. Williams, *Seeing a Colour-Blind Future: The Paradox of Race the 1997 Reith Lectures* (London, Virago Book,1997), p. 2.

as systemic resulting from white domination.¹⁴¹ Williams, contends 'Blindness about colour constitutes an ideological confusion at best, and a denial at its very worst.'¹⁴² Eddo-Lodge attributes the denial of racial inequality to all people using 'we,' a pronoun most of the writers discussed in this chapter prefer to use. As an example, Eddo-Lodge claims 'we placate ourselves with the fallacy of meritocracy by insisting that we don't see race.'¹⁴³ With such approach of using 'we' Eddo-Lodge allows her conversation on race to be opened to white and Black people as an invitation for productive dialogue as she explains about the use of the term white '[w]hen I write about white people in this book, I don't mean every individual white person. I mean whiteness as a political ideology.'¹⁴⁴ White privilege Eddo-Lodge explains is the fact that if you're white, your race will almost certainly positively impact your life's trajectory in some way.'¹⁴⁵ In her more scholarly definition, the British professor Kalwant Bhopal argues:

White privilege [...] is the expression of whiteness through the maintenance of power, resources and systems of support through formal and informal structures and procedures, is maintained, and often obscured, through white people's rationalizations in using broad (often racist) categorizations of people of colour.¹⁴⁶

this ideology is the result of racism in which priority is given to white identities while other groups are regarded marginal.¹⁴⁷ However, Bhopal continues, this privilege is manifested

¹⁴¹ Eddo-Lodge, p.83.

¹⁴² Williams, p.2.

¹⁴³ Eddo-Lodge, p.81.

¹⁴⁴ Eddo-Lodge, p.115.

¹⁴⁵ Eddo Lodge, p.87.

¹⁴⁶ Kalwant Bhopal, *White Privilege: The Myth of a Post- Racial Society* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2018), p.19.

¹⁴⁷ Bhopal, p.1.

‘through people’s actions and structural procedures’ which means that this ideology is reinforced by people.¹⁴⁸ Bhopal contends that whiteness as a privileging status is granted to white people ‘through institutional structures and (un) conscious actors.’¹⁴⁹ Therefore, based on Bhopal’s argument performing the ideology of whiteness requires active agents. She is insisting on referring to all white people whom in this case, according to her claim, are ‘all’ the active agents maintaining white privilege. At the same time, this does not mean that Black people are not influenced by white dominance of social structures.

Eddo-Lodge stresses that racism is indeed systemic by saying racism ‘is embedded in British society. It’s in the very core of how the state is set up. It’s not external. It’s in the system.’¹⁵⁰ Thus, she argues that racial inequality in Britain is an established system. Eddo-Lodge dates its existence back to the British Empire and British involvement in the slave trade. *Why I’m No Longer* opens with the result of Eddo-Lodge’s experience with reading about Black British history and the legacies of slavery that she argues were not taught enough in Britain.¹⁵¹ She refers to many historical facts that support ‘Britain’s complicity in the slave trade’ to argue that the legacy of the British Empire’s effect in Britain is still present.¹⁵² Eddo-Lodge writes that ‘The past has never felt so distant’ because ‘slavery as a British institution existed for much longer than it has currently been abolished- over 270 years.’¹⁵³ The reference to historical facts, which the text is loaded with, can be looked at as Eddo-Lodge’s attempt to impose authority. She wants her readers to trust her arguments and at the same time, she is taking the mission of presenting a history lesson about slavery.¹⁵⁴ She continues taking this

¹⁴⁸ Bhopal, p.19.

¹⁴⁹ Bhopal, p.19.

¹⁵⁰ Eddo-Lodge, p.56.

¹⁵¹ Eddo-Lodge, p.9.

¹⁵² Eddo-Lodge, p.3.

¹⁵³ Eddo-Lodge, p.3.

¹⁵⁴ Eddo-Lodge, p.9.

role of an educator of when she further compares the legacies of racism in America and Britain. Revisiting the historical past of Black Britain declares Eddo-Lodge came with an epiphany, a realization that 'I had been kept ignorant.'¹⁵⁵ However, with a voice of anger, she argues that this ignorance is also prevalent among white people whose ignorance of Britain's racial history affect the urgency of racial inequality: '[t]here are many people who have no idea –and I'm talking about white people-[...] about the history of racism.'¹⁵⁶ Such ignorance maintains Eddo-lodge is reinforced by the centralisation of the American racial history, which she argues has for long overshadowed the Black British experience.¹⁵⁷ Therefore, she stresses '[w]hile the black British story is starved of oxygen, the US struggle against racism is globalized into the story of the struggle against racism that we should look to for inspiration.'¹⁵⁸ Eddo-Lodge then is calling for the reclamation of the past as well as the centralisation of race dialogues in Britain which her book is contributing to.

Eddo-Lodge's discussion of racism includes Black women's particular experience with raced sexism; thus, reinforcing intersectional understanding of their shaped experiences by the overlapping intersections of race and gender. As Beverly Bryan et al. argue in the 1985 *The Heart of The Race* that 'because our participation as women in the struggles against slavery is poorly documented, the extant of our contribution can never be fully established.'¹⁵⁹ Their argument reveals the long-standing tradition of writing frustration among Black British women with the question of underrepresentation. In 'The Feminism Question,' Eddo-Lodge starts her debate by criticising white feminist representations of gender in popular culture.

¹⁵⁵ Eddo-Lodge, p.54.

¹⁵⁶ Eddo-Lodge, p.7.

¹⁵⁷ Eddo-Lodge, p.55.

¹⁵⁸ Eddo-Lodge, p.54-55.

¹⁵⁹ Beverly Bryan, Stella Dadzei, Suzanne Scafe, *The Heart of Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain* (London: Virago Press, 1985), p.125.

Similar to Gay, Eddo-Lodge criticises HBO's 2012 TV programme *Girls* for having an 'all white cast,' which for her encourages overlooking the inclusion of Black women.¹⁶⁰ Such feminism that this show is representing, argues Eddo-lodge, promotes a form of feminism in which 'gender equality must be addressed, but race could languish in the corner.'¹⁶¹ Thus, she uses such example from popular culture to open her debate against what makes mainstream white feminism problematic.

In a similar approach to Gay, to criticise mainstream feminism, Eddo-Lodge writes about her personal experience with feminism '[m]y feminist thinking gave rise to my anti-racist thinking.'¹⁶² Focusing on the fact that her anti-racist thinking is the result of being a feminist, is the way in which Eddo-Lodge illustrates the urgency of the interlocked social injustices of race and gender. She sustains 'feminism was helping me become a more critical, confident woman [...] it was helping me come to terms with my blackness.'¹⁶³ For her Blackness and womanhood are inseparable entities; thus, within the feminist dialogue racism must be included; a fact white feminism fails to realize.¹⁶⁴ Following the path of African American feminists like hooks, Eddo-Lodge uses her text to propagate her non-belief in the white feminist project that excludes race, which Black feminists regard as the determining factor in their experiences. Eddo-Lodge refers to a point that resonates with the importance of consciousness raising groups. She argues that white feminists fail to understand 'why women of colour needed or wanted a different place to meet.'¹⁶⁵ It has always been the case for Black British women to seek isolated places to share their struggle with racism and sexism. As Bryan

¹⁶⁰ Eddo-Lodge, p.144.

¹⁶¹ Eddo-Lodge, p.145.

¹⁶² Eddo-Lodge, p.151.

¹⁶³ Eddo-Lodge, p.152.

¹⁶⁴ Eddo-Lodge, p.154.

¹⁶⁵ Eddo-Lodge, p.154.

stresses these groups were used among Black British women as ‘collective means’ to cope with the ‘miserics’ resulted from the discrimination against them.¹⁶⁶ Eddo-Lodge writes ‘In black feminists, we would talk about whatever was happening with our lives’ to talks about her experience with the Black feminists meetings that she considers similar to consciousness raising groups. Therefore, she says ‘[t]ogether we asked why. We took what we thought was isolated incidents and linked them into a broader context of race and gender.’¹⁶⁷ Therefore, like Jerkins’s *This Will Be My Undoing, Why I’m No Longer* reinforces the intersectional school of thought in which Eddo-Lodge argues for intersectionality as the only road to grasp Black women’s complex situation. Eddo-Lodge’s intersectional discussion shows the transnational borrowing from African American feminists as she refers to different Black feminists, who are supporters of the intersectional analysis of race and gender including hooks, Michele Wallace, Angela Davis, and Kimberlé Crenshaw.¹⁶⁸

Eddo-Lodge’s examining of the crossroad of race and gender is a strategy Black women adopt to be ‘remembered.’¹⁶⁹ She continues to stress her disapproval of the white feminist agenda by discussing the reception of the intersectional approach among white feminists. In Britain, Eddo-Lodge points out, white feminists refuse intersectionality ‘because to recognize structural racism would have to mean recognizing their own whiteness.’¹⁷⁰ Race for white feminism, contends Byrne, is considered equivalent to gender and sexuality; it means gender would remain in the center of the discussion and race is only joined assuming that it will function the same way as gender.¹⁷¹ However, such view diminishes how hierarchies of power

¹⁶⁶ Bryan, *The Heart of The Race*, p.130.

¹⁶⁷ Eddo-Lodge, p.145-155.

¹⁶⁸ Eddo-Lodge, p.158-159.

¹⁶⁹ Eddo-Lodge, p.160.

¹⁷⁰ Eddo-Lodge, p.162.

¹⁷¹ Byrne, p.6.

are structured and neglects the particularity of race that needs to be addressed with the same importance as gender. Therefore, Eddo-Lodge sees 'the backlash against intersectionality' as 'white feminism in action.'¹⁷² This struggle, argues Heidi Safia Mirza in *Black British Feminism*, 'to engender critical racial reflexivity among white feminists consumed the black feminist project for more than a decade.'¹⁷³ However, this conflict is still a prevalent subject among Black feminist scholars and writers as they continue to argue against mainstream white feminism.

5-Life Writing in the Self-help Genre:

Adegoke and Uviebinené's self-help guide is autobiographical and biographical text for its focus on the experiences of its writers and presents a cacophony of personal stories of successful Black British women. The self-referential style makes the text a celebration of selfhood as presented by both writers, which made the work appear as a self-help book directed to themselves and their readers. Both writers emphasise this point as Uviebinené states that '*Slay in Your Lane* is the personal-development course I never knew I needed.'¹⁷⁴ Adegoke also asserts 'Elizabeth and I are writing this as much for ourselves as we are for other black women.'¹⁷⁵ The race/gender debate is also maintained in *Slay in Your Lane: Black Girl Bible*. Adegoke and Uviebinené attempt to present a self-help book for empowering Black women. Therefore, they construct their narrative on both their own life experiences and on other Black women's experiences whom they perceive as role models. Such achieving Black British women include the recording artist Jamelia, the author Malorie Blackman and the

¹⁷² Eddo-Lodge, p.167.

¹⁷³ Heidi Safia Mirza, *Black British Feminism: A Reader*, ed. by Heidi Safia Mirza (London: Routledge, 1997), p.10.

¹⁷⁴ Adegoke and Uviebinené, p. 3.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.6.

Olympic gold medallist Denise Lewis. According to Adegoke the purpose of having such Black women is to help both the writers and readers to realize their potential.¹⁷⁶

In an interview, Uviebinené declares that ‘this book is a guide for black women’ Even before the publication, they wanted it to be specifically addressed to Black women; therefore, they refused the book to be addressed for women of colour instead.¹⁷⁷ Yet, readership is offered for non-Black people argues Adegoke to grasp Black women’s experiences.¹⁷⁸ This insistence on presenting a work about Black women in specific is due to their awareness that such works are ‘in fashion’ as claims Adegoke.¹⁷⁹ This explains why nine publishers have raced to win the publication of this book and then the Fourth Estate, the same house that publishes for Adichie, won the deal.¹⁸⁰ Arifa Akbar explains the attention that such works receive in the world of publication claiming ‘there is an immense appetite for a conversation around race and inequality in Britain.’¹⁸¹ *Black Girl Bible* thus is a response to this thrive for Intersectional discussion in Britain.

Smith suggests that for the autobiographical subject the ‘heterogeneous recitations of identity’ can ‘never align perfectly.’¹⁸² However, I want to suggest that for these Black women writers there is a continuation of the past tradition where this genre is embraced for ‘self-assuredness’ as McKay maintains and ‘recognition of different levels of power in the self’ even under racism and sexism.¹⁸³ For Uviebinené, the self surfaces to address her heterogenous

¹⁷⁶ Adegoke and Uviebinené, p.340.

¹⁷⁷ Adegoke, p. 207.

¹⁷⁸ Adegoke quoted in Arifa Akbar ‘How to be a Black Woman and Succeed: Two Friends who have Written the Manual’ (2018), *The Guardian*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jun/24/black-girl-woman-bible-elizabeth-uviebinene-yomi-adeoke-slay-your-lane>> [accessed 30May 2019].

¹⁷⁹ Adegoke quoted in Arifa Akbar.

¹⁸⁰ Adegoke, p.340.

¹⁸¹ Akbar ‘How to be a Black Woman and Succeed.’

¹⁸² Smith, p.110.

¹⁸³ McKay, p. 100.

self as a Nigeria woman growing up in the UK with Nigerian parents using the first person pronoun: 'I was constantly warned that I would be sent to Nigeria if my grades didn't pick up in maths and science.'¹⁸⁴ In addition, Adegoke revisits her first instances of her worries when applying for university as a Black woman. Here, she writes 'I was absolutely petrified I would end up being the only black girl within 4000-mile radius.'¹⁸⁵ The return to their detailed personal backgrounds shows that their upbringing and their experiences are different, which for them demonstrates the justification behind the necessity of such text. The selfhood that these writers delve into through writing is again related to Bosničová's 'concept of selfhood in relation' which I propose in contrast to Smith's recitation of recitation of a performed self.

¹⁸⁶ Joanne M. Braxton maintains that 'the black woman autobiographer looks back to look forward [...] to provide encouragement, direction and guidance.'¹⁸⁷ The acts of guidance and encouragement can be sensed in *Slay in Your Lane* in which Uviebinené tells her readers 'as you read through this book I hope it gives you the tools and support to be in the driving seat of your life.'¹⁸⁸ Uviebinené further argues that this book is meant to 'encourage those who are just about to take flight' toward their achievements. ¹⁸⁹ Adegoke continues by confirming:

What we *are* saying is that there is much empowerment and inspiration to be gained from the many women who jumped over the very hurdles that you too will find yourself up against.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁴ Adegoke and Uviebinené, p. 14.

¹⁸⁵ Heidi Safia Mirza, p.24.

¹⁸⁶ Bosničová, p.32.

¹⁸⁷ Joanne M. Braxton, 'Autobiography and African American Women's Literature', in *The Cambridge Companion to African American Women's Literature*, ed. by Angelyn Mitchell and Danille K. Taylor, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 128-149 (p.146).

¹⁸⁸ Uviebinené, p.3.

¹⁸⁹ Uviebinené, p.3.

¹⁹⁰ Adegoke, p.6.

Thus, writing selfhood is not only a therapeutic process where writers reflect on the self to develop and identify it, but can also be used by Black women as an initiation to promote reassurance among their communities.

The Black Girl Bible is not only about self-empowerment as it opens a debate about the systemic racism and the discrimination against Black women in different aspects in Britain. This view is also held by Anealla Safdar who argues that *Slay in Your Lane* 'not only empower, but also dissect structural racism in the UK.'¹⁹¹ Similar to Eddo-Lodge, both the writers of *The Black Girl Bible* maintain that racism in Britain is systemic. When addressing the point of education Adegoke gives examples about racial inequality in UK universities. She contends that these institutions are 'predominantly white and middle class in terms of students and staff in which more 'than 92 percent of the British professors are white; 0.49 per cent are black; and a mere 17 of those are women.'¹⁹² Her withhold from acknowledging this fact could be understood in relation to Bhopal's argument. Bhopal argues that the existence of inclusive policies in universities per se is inadequate; action must be taken to solve racial inequality otherwise such policies are irrelevant.¹⁹³ Adegoke's statements do not only prove the persistence of racial inequality in UK academy but also prove that this work is based on well-researched arguments. Each source the writers use in their work is referenced at the end of the book, which suggests that they want their readers to trust their work to be a source of authority. It seems they want to propose that their text is not only about their personal experiences but also is almost a scholarly discussion of racism; thus, it is trustworthy of

¹⁹¹Anealla Sefdar, <<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/slay-systemic-institutional-racism-180831234556151.html>> [accessed 29 May 2019].

¹⁹²Adegoke and Uviebinené, p.45.

¹⁹³ Adegoke and Uviebinené, p.45.

reading. Statistics and numbers are not only utilised to support their argument that post-racial era in Britain is a myth but also to speak about gender inequality.

Slay in Your Lane's discourse stresses the interconnectedness of racism to gender; thus, implying the need for intersectional dialogue in Britain. In the section about work, Uviebinené focuses on the inequality that Black women deal with in the workplace. She argues that 'structural racism leaves black women feeling they have to work twice as hard.'¹⁹⁴ In addition, she points out that 'being Black and female, we can feel more pressure to overwork ourselves compared to our white peers, because we are blighted with the double disadvantage of race and gender.'¹⁹⁵ In both statements, she is stressing the obligation Black women feel to put double effort in comparison to their white counterparts as the result of the amalgamation of gender and racial inequalities. The consequences of the interlocking intersections of race and gender are also the foci of Adegoke's narrative. Based on her own experience as a journalist on the British public broadcasting channel, Channel 4, she reveals that 'because I'm female, and also because I'm black' she receives abuse unlike her white and male colleagues.¹⁹⁶ Such institutional gendered racism in the workplace could be considered as part of the maintenance of white privilege. Therefore, I agree with Bhopal that, such actions 'reinforce the status quo' and are 'an example of the protection of white privilege' and maintains the domination of power in the hands of white people.¹⁹⁷ Adegoke declares 'Black women are not being attacked solely because we are black or because we are women: it is the fact that we occupy both identities that put us at risk of more vitriol. This is why intersectional feminism [...] matters so much.'¹⁹⁸ Both Adegoke and Uviebinené agree with other young

¹⁹⁴Adegoke and Uviebinené, p.90.

¹⁹⁵ Adegoke and Uviebinené, p.333.

¹⁹⁶ Adegoke and Uviebinené, p.256.

¹⁹⁷ Bhopal, *White Privilege*, p.55.

¹⁹⁸ Adegoke and Uviebinené, p.257-258.

Black feminists in Britain like the editor of *Can We All Be Feminists?* June Eric-Udorie. In this work, Eric-Udorie holds the view that intersectionality is the only space for women who are marginalized to express their experiences with the multi-faceted oppressions.¹⁹⁹ With promoting such discourse, these contemporary Black women writers are thus following the work of the earliest generations of radical Black feminists who insisted on the importance of an intersectional paradigm.

Like Jerkin's text, *Slay in Your Lane* repeatedly focuses on the issues of Black hair and beauty to argue for the gendered racism against Black women. Adegoke refers to Jamelia's experience with her natural hair declaring that 'despite her fame, singer-turned-presenter Jamelia wasn't immune from criticism about her hair during her time on a popular weekly television show.'²⁰⁰ By using Jamelia as an example, Adegoke is stressing the discrimination Black women face in their workplace due to their natural hair. A point that has been already stressed in Ingrid Banks' sociological study *Hair Matters* that uses Black women experiences to generate knowledge about the politics of Black hair and its relation to Black women's status.²⁰¹ Using her own experience, Uviebinené states that as Black women 'always trying to be excellent can put unnecessary level of pressure on us. I see it in myself, and I can see it in my friend's experiences, too.'²⁰² Uviebinené maintains that 'as you walk into your department you begin to mentally prepare yourself for the onslaught of comments about your new hairdo.'²⁰³ What must be noted is that she is implying the relation of such demeaning view toward Black women's hair to microaggressions. In her discussion about microaggressions,

¹⁹⁹ June Eric-Udorie, *Can We All Be Feminists?* ed. by June Eric-Udorie (London: Virago Press, 2018), p.xiv.

²⁰⁰ Adegoke, p. 117.

²⁰¹ Ingrid Banks, *Hair Matters, Beauty, Power, and Black Women's Consciousness* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

²⁰² Adegoke and Uviebinené, p.87.

²⁰³ Uviebinené, p.89.

Uviebinené refers to the psychology professor Derald Wing Sue's work to argue that all forms of racial acts have a negative effect on Black women. In *Microaggressions in Everyday Life*, Sue argues that 'microaggressions are brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership.'²⁰⁴ Therefore, Uviebinené confirms that 'their impact on us can be substantial and occur more often than we might like to think.'²⁰⁵ Other scholars like the American sociologist Charisse C. Levchak in her work *Microaggressions and Modern Racism* (2018) emphasise the result of such behaviours on the targeted groups. C. Levchak warns that microaggressions have a lasting consequence on the psychological well-being of these groups and reinforce racial inequality in the society.²⁰⁶ Adegoke stresses that 'it can be assumed that sexism, racism and the combination of the two affect us in ways we may not be actively aware of' argue that not only microaggressions but also the interlocked racism and sexism which Black women encounter specifically in Britain, have an impact on their mental health.²⁰⁷

Like Jerkin's, Adegoke and Uviebinené argue that hair and beauty are racialised in which Black beauty is always underrated comparing to white beauty. In the section of 'Representation,' Adegoke writes that 'whiteness requires something to be opposed to it, and so blackness must become what is ugly.'²⁰⁸ Black hair is compared to white straight hair and 'having an afro wasn't simply 'off trend', it was ugly. It was 'undone.'²⁰⁹ Adegoke blames the media for promoting such images for imposing the white beauty standards on Black women

²⁰⁴ Derald Wing Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life, Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation* (New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, 2010), p. xvi.

²⁰⁵ Uviebinené, p.92.

²⁰⁶ Charisse C. Levchak, *Microaggressions and Modern Racism: Endurance and Evolution* (New Britain: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p.6.

²⁰⁷ Adegoke, p.305.

²⁰⁸ Adegoke, p.264.

²⁰⁹ Adegoke, p.240.

and obliging them to conform.²¹⁰ Yet, the media is not the only sector to blame, cosmetics industry is also responsible, contends Adegoke, which she considers to be disrespectful toward Black women for not adequately investing in the products directed to Black women.²¹¹ At the same time, she returns to the roots of such perception in which the Black hair 'has been historically described as a 'problem' in need of 'fixing.'²¹² Here Adegoke is implying a return to the legacy of slavery during the time where Black women's hair and beauty was dehumanized. Even if Black women are considered beautiful nowadays, it is due to their proximity to white European futures, which means being light and having a model-like figure.²¹³

Historically, Black women's natural hair is always compared to straight blond hair; therefore, needs straightening. As Noliwe M. Rooks maintains in *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture and African American Women* (2000), that during the 1980s 'the construction of African American Female Beauty became very similar in both white and African American companies' advertisements for hair-care products' after this there were less calls for natural Black hair, thus Black women's hair 'must be straightened.'²¹⁴ Tate also refers to the complicity of advertisements in forcing Black women to adhere to white beauty standards through promoting skin lighting and hair straightening products.²¹⁵ Furthermore, almost twenty years ago Collins have argued that white beauty cannot be considered the ideal if there was no Other, the Other here contends Collins are Black women's features of 'dark skin, Broad noses,

²¹⁰ Adegoke, p.200.

²¹¹ Adegoke, p.232.

²¹² Adegoke, p.242.

²¹³ Adegoke, p.203.

²¹⁴ Noliwe M. Rooks, *Hair Raising Beauty, Culture, and African American Women* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000), p.130.

²¹⁵ Tate, *Black Beauty*, p.36.

full lips, and kinky hair.’²¹⁶ Adegoke maintains that ‘marketing has recently and rapidly changed in terms of representation’ and refers to Adichie’s Boots advertisement after having said that media and cosmetics are failing Black women.²¹⁷ However, recently it could be argued that many cosmetics companies are attempting to improve their production policies to include the maximum of colour shades. For example, a quick visit to the French cosmetics company Lancôme’s official page celebrates an attempt to create more inclusive industry by offering forty shades in their foundation range.²¹⁸

Adegoke and Uviebinené reference the popular feminist figure Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s work *We Should All Be Feminists*. Adegoke agrees with Adichie’s argument on the societal established gender roles. Referencing Adichie’s quote, Adegoke writes ‘a man who is afraid of ambition or drive or emotion isn’t a man you want’ to argue that women should not be interested in men who are intimidated from ambitious women.²¹⁹ For her, women of different ethnicities should be loved for who they are as a whole and should not sacrifice their ambition for men. However, she follows this comment arguing, ‘It cannot be assumed that this is something black men understand by virtue of being black.’²²⁰ In addition, Uviebinené declares Adichie’s ‘iconic quote is something that has always struck a chord with me.’²²¹ Here Uviebinené is referring to Adichie’s argument about marriage in which she says ‘because I am a female, I am expected to aspire to marriage.’²²² Like Adegoke, Uviebinené also agrees with Adichie and similarly uses her personal experience to reveal that becoming a wife was

²¹⁶ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p.89.

²¹⁷ Adegoke, p.224.

²¹⁸ Lancôme, < <https://www.lancome.co.uk/find-your-shade-find-your-power/>> [accessed 04 June 2019].

²¹⁹ Adegoke, p.276.

²²⁰ Adegoke p.277.

²²¹ Adegoke, p.286.

²²² Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists*, p.29.

something she grow up to believe is ‘the ultimate goal.’²²³ Uviebinené later on states ‘being single is seen as some sort of problem and something that increasingly concern your parent as you get older.’²²⁴ The choice of discussing popular issues such as marriage which is present in Adichie’s feminist texts help appeal to general audience, however, unlike Adichie, Uviebinené and Adegoke discuss it from an intersection lens.

Conclusion:

The analysis located four various texts that belong to different genres within the practice of life writing through highlighting the aspects of selfhood celebrated in their writings. The study has argued that despite the mixed genre within the one text, contemporary Black feminist writers tend to manifest the autobiographical ‘I’ for different purposes. In analysing the different genres, I problematised Sidonie Smith’s performativity by arguing that these writers return to the autobiographical ‘I’ to express their experiences with the intersections which is a practice that Black feminists and diasporic Black women have been using to document their struggle with these issues. The focus on autobiography as the dominant subgenre of non-fiction life writing resulted from the non-fiction nature of all the works. The section concluded that despite the hybrid merger and the writers’ different backgrounds, the use of life writing as a space for writing themselves and celebrating the ‘I’ proves prevalent as a unifying point among their different texts. With problematising the argument that autobiography is a performance, I suggested that these writes write the self as a unique and homogenous self that writes as a Black woman which the self-referential style allowed to surface. I suggest that using the autobiographical form within these essays, journalistic works

²²³ Uviebinené, p.287.

²²⁴ Uviebinené, p.287.

reflects the richness of the different narrative strategies that these Black women adopt to represent the complexities of Black women's identities and experiences with race and gender.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has explored contemporary Black diasporic women's writing published between 2010 and 2018 that respond to a decade characterised by significant and urgent global concerns related to race, gender, and diaspora which contributed to the renewed mainstream visibility and scholarly interest in such writings. Throughout the four chapters I have engaged with the creative terrains contemporary Black women's writing has brought to our attention about the issues of race, racism, gender, Black feminism, legacies of slavery, the Black diaspora, Black diasporic identities, concepts of migration and home. Through a close reading of Black women's texts across multiple genres of poetry, novels, feminist essays, memoirs, and life writing, and engaging with current debates on these texts, I have uncovered the different ways the selected writers represent and address Black women's experiences with race and gender and mobilise Black diaspora concepts from a contemporary diasporic context. The texts portray intersectional discussions of race and gender within the historical legacies of slavery in the diaspora through depicting their own personal experiences, creating Black women characters, and locating them within these paradigms, while others reclaim historical narratives using their own voices as Black women writers. Within our globalised world that is still affected by movement, the transnational selection of texts offers us cross-border diasporic dialogues written by writers affected by historical and contemporary movements.

This thesis presented a contribution to transnational studies by working on a body of literary works that reflects the geographical diversity of the Black Atlantic from and circulating across Africa, America, the Caribbean, and Britain. Focusing on transnational Black women's writing allowed for a comprehensive examination of Black women's experiences and writings

on race and gender and diaspora from cross-cultural perspective. The thesis presented a significant contribution in terms of crossing the geographical borders and the borders of the genres. I have presented innovative readings of these forms to argue that the writers cross the form boundaries using hybrid genres, oral traditions, and language, to reclaim the silenced voices in history and represent diasporic Black women's issues. The genre plays a significant role in Black women's literary tradition that these contemporary Black women continue to use in the way that serves the issues they discuss, and I argued that they follow the tradition of many Black women writers who have adopted and employed these genres to write on Black women's marginalised experiences. Applying intersectional and diasporic analysis, I have found that on different levels, most of these writers address the complex intersections of race/ gender oppression during a moment where Black women in the diaspora continue to navigate their lives with these injustices. While they return to legacies in different approaches, all the texts studied offer us an insight into Black feminist dialogues that have been occupying and continue to occupy Black women's diasporic writing throughout the many generations, in a contemporary context.

This thesis opened with a discussion of three poetry works, Grace Nichols' *I Have Crossed an Ocean* (2010), Aracelis Girmay *the black maria* (2016), and Tracy K. Smith's *Wade in the Water* (2018) to consider the poets' representations of the legacies of slavery focusing on the historical sites of the Middle Passage, the Atlantic Ocean, and the ship. Following Christina Sharpe's 'wake work' I have argued that the three poets situate contemporary Black life and racial oppression as 'afterlives' of slavery and as an extension of the legacies and histories of enslavement by invoking the different elements of the Middle passage. To return to these legacies, I argued that the three poets invoke memory and rememory as tools that help them reimagine silenced narratives in the histories of chattel slavery. Nichols, Girmay, and Smith

use their poetry to reimagine history to talk to the present moment as Black women. The analysis has found that to a different extent, the imagery of water is invoked by the three poets as a significant site in Black history and collective memory of Black people in the diaspora. Water appears in the three collections in all its meanings and paradoxes as the poets return to this site as a symbol of historical violence for the enslaved as well as a symbol of healing, new birth in the diaspora, and resistance.

Grace Nichols creates a voice of enslaved Black women to remember and give readers access to the undocumented voices of Black women and their experiences during the Middle Passage and slavery. Nichols presents different accounts of the experiences of Black women who despite the trauma of enslavement are able to reclaim themselves by celebrating their heritage and connecting spiritually with the ancestors. The Atlantic Ocean emerges in Nichols's poetry as a paradoxical site of both Black erasure, trauma and as a site of diasporic birth of new histories and cultures. However, Nichols's poems focus more on water as a site of diasporic Black birth through celebrating the Black diaspora and the rich cultural legacies that slave ships transported via the oceanic crossings to the Caribbean. This celebration I argued is illustrated via Nichols's centralisation of employing Afro-Caribbean folklores and oral traditions like the carnival and the calypso along with the use of the creole. My reading of Nichols's poems concluded that while it is crucial to remember the violent histories enacted by the Middle Passage, it is also significant that the rich diasporic cultures that this site generated, be celebrated.

Aracelis Girmay's *the black maria* aesthetically and thematically attends to Black immanent and imminent death. Among the three poets, Girmay's work is mostly structured by the thematic, language and the form of water imagery as it both grieves and celebrates Black death

through linking what she terms as Black misidentification to the moon's water basins. Like Nichols, Girmay gives voice to Black women using the characters 'Luams' to represent Black women's struggle with the intersections of race and gender in the past and present to highlight the historical continuity of these paradigms. With memory, Girmay invokes the past and present death of Black people where slave ships morph into contemporary immigrants' boats to stress the continuity of the ocean as a site violence against Blackness. Thus, unlike Nichols, Girmay invokes the Middle Passage, the Atlantic Ocean, and the sea as sites of trauma and Black death. Using the wake analytic, I have concluded that Girmay's poem returns to the slave ship to invoke the histories of slavery and its connection to the systemic violence enacted on Black people not only in America but in the diaspora.

I have argued that Smith uses erasure poetry of real-life testimonies of marginalised enslaved men and women within Sharpe's Black redaction and annotation as examples of the wake and techniques that allow the reader to hear the silenced voices in Black history. Smith redacts the document without adding annotation to allow the invisible to come forward and not be interrupted to ask readers to reflect on what is absent and what is present. The analysis has found that unlike Nichols, Smith invokes the memory of the Middle Passage through the ocean as a site of injustice and cultural trauma as well as resistance. The recollection of the past presented in the performance of the ring dance and song is to celebrate Black people's attachment to their cultural heritage in the diaspora. Smith invokes the image of the ship to characterise history as a 'forever' sailing slave ship to address the continuous cycle of trauma and subjugation that Black people are experiencing in the wake of slavery. Smith urges those in the wake of this history to look back and embrace this wake with consciousness to create a new story.

In the second chapter I examined diasporic questions in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's critically acclaimed novel *Americanah*, Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*, and Elsie Augustave's *The Roving Tree*. These novels deal with America's legacies of racism and gender issues that trouble the process of home and homemaking for the Black female protagonists. The texts write Blackness, migration, home, race, womanhood, and return by creating a narrative that is controlled by the voice of Black women. In the analysis I have explored the representations of diasporic concerns in their texts revolving around African roots, troubled homes, belonging and identity in Black women migratory experiences in America. I presented new readings of these texts by investigating the ways Adichie, Gyasi, and Augustave centralise Black women's experiences with issues of race and gender and portray their characters' struggle in dealing with the legacies of slavery and racism they face in the diaspora. I have maintained that while their novels share the theme of a return to Africa, each text explores a distinct trajectory in writing their protagonists' relationship with connecting to their African roots. I have suggested that the three writers refuse singularity in defining Blackness by invoking a model of transnational Blackness through the meeting of Black migrants with African Americans under systems of oppression and offer solidarity between Black women by focusing on addressing these specific issues. I have also argued that each text presents a distinct narrative of return while together they present it as productive and transformative formation as opposed to limiting the diasporic experience as being alienating.

I have found that Adichie's novel presents a contemporary migratory subjectivity through the story of Ifemelu that offers a new model of racial formation that is not exclusive to that which resulted from the legacies of slavery. Adichie uses Ifemelu's blog as a social commentary on the racial hierarchy in America to promote for a model of transnational Blackness through an immigrant addressing African American histories. With Ifemelu's

grappling with the intersections of race and gender, Adichie presents Black feminist solidarity with Black women in the diaspora which she expresses through discussing diasporic Black women's issues. Such experiences that made Ifemelu unable to feel her true self lead to her return to Nigeria. Ifemelu's return to Nigeria is not perfect as she carries with her the effects of migratory subjectivity, of being located between two spaces, which Adichie shows her protagonist is able to navigate. Thus, I concluded that Adichie offers a diasporic model that is productive and mobile as opposed to being rootless and homeless.

I have argued that Gyasi's novel is a project of historical reclamation of the violent histories of the past through the return to the African involvement in slave trade and the African America history with enslavement and its legacies. I have suggested that Gyasi's structure and narration that focuses on the two sisters who were separated at the door of no return symbolise the violent rupture between Africa and its diaspora. The analysis has maintained that while the novel follows much of the scholarship on the reclamation of the past, with the meeting of the descendent of each sister again in Ghana, Gyasi offers the possibility of return and a reconciliation between Africa and its diaspora, to argue against the narrative that all Africans in the diaspora are rootless. The engagement with Augustave's Caribbean bildungsroman brought a unique migratory experience to the thesis which is that of a Haitian adoptee who dwells between three diasporic spaces of Haiti, America, and Africa. I have argued that the genre of the bildungsroman plays a significant role in helping Augustave to represent Iris's journey towards finding herself and her roots. Iris's upbringing in America that positions her between her Blackness and gender and creates within her a state of isolation which leads to the start of her journey. I have argued that Iris is only able to understand her identity when she is able to recuperate her Afro-Caribbean culture. However, I have suggested that her journey to reconnect with her roots is not depicted as perfect. With Iris's

death in the motherland, Augustave enacts a spiritual return that allows Iris's soul to continue connecting with her Afro-Caribbean heritage. To conclude, I asserted that Augustave's model argues that it is possible to transform diasporic experiences productively to affirm self and cultural origin. I regard Adichie, Gyasi, and Augustave's as productive models of migration as they offer new ways of reading diasporic journeys and propose different relation to diaspora as being a productive experience as opposed to creating a state of homelessness.

The third chapter addressed Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Michelle Obama's labelling as the popular figures of contemporary Black feminism. I studied the feminism Adichie's popular feminist booklet *We Should All Be Feminists* and her latest essay *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* and Obama's popular memoir *Becoming* present. I have argued that in both texts, Adichie popularises feminism to simplify its meaning to the new readers and to create a mainstream feminism that is understood and relevant to diverse types of audiences as opposed to academic texts. To achieve this model, Adichie relies heavily on personal experiences and simple language. I also maintained that while she addresses issues related to Black women that have been discussed by Black feminist scholarship, Adichie moves away from intersectional examining of race and gender and chooses to address each category as single and disconnected to present a feminism that as she stresses does not ascribe to labels. However, I suggested that this approach holds the risk of flattening significant Black feminist issues related to the intersection of race and gender.

I approached Michelle Obama's *Becoming* as a Black feminist memoir as a response to the scholarship and public discourse that insist on positioning Michelle Obama as a traditional Black feminist despite her public disapproval of her association with the term. In my reading of Obama's memoir as a feminist text, I problematised such labelling by arguing that the

memoir is careful in addressing issues related to race and gender and that she renders race as an issue that is an individualistic effort as opposed to being a historically institutionalised systems of injustice. I argued that this approach is to maintain a non-threatening image and to disassociate herself from the angry feminist that critics have attached to her name. The chapter has concluded that despite Adichie and Obama's approaches, their visibility and status is a contribution to the globalisation of discourses on diasporic Black women.

In the final chapter I focused on reading the intersections of race and gender in Roxane Gay's *Bad Feminist: Essays*, Morgan Jerkins's *This Will Be My Undoing: Living at the Intersection of Black, Female, and Feminist in (White America)*, Reni Eddo-Lodge's *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White people about Race*, and Yomi Adegoke and Elizabeth Uviebinené's *Slay in Your Lane: The Black Girl Bible*. The Four texts belong to four different genres, however I have maintained that they share the practice of life writing through emphasising the writers' use of autobiographical 'I.' I have problematised Sidonie Smith's view of autobiographical performativity which argues that autobiographical writing is the performance of the self, to argue that these writers adopt this form to represent their own personal experiences with the intersections of race and gender. I maintained that historically Black women writers adopted the life writing narrative form for self-assertion and self-reclamation as a response to the historical othering and subjugation of enslaved women that the consequent generations inherited. The contemporary generation of Black women writers adopt this form to reflect on their life experiences to contribute to the discourses on Black women's struggle with these oppressions. The analysis has found that the four writers focus on an intersectional rendering of race and genre using their experiences to bring attention to readers that contemporary Black women still struggle with the legacies of the past. together these texts return to academic discussions of Black feminism while referencing popular culture to appeal

to wider audiences. However, I suggested that while adopting such approach, the writers maintained an intersectional view of discussing their experiences which I argued is absent in Adichie's feminist texts.

The importance of the study that I have undertaken, as I have argued in the introduction, has emerged within a decade marked by renewed interest in engaging with the creative terrains offered by contemporary diasporic Black women's writing. Therefore, this thesis encourages the production of scholarship that engages with such rising critical interest in approaching the creative works of the new generation of Black women writers in the diaspora. Some of the emerging scholarship on intersectionality belongs to scholars I have engaged with such as Shirly Anne Tate's *From Post-Intersectionality to Black Decolonial Feminism: Black Skin Affections* (2022), develops Black decolonial feminist analysis to the readings of Blackness and the Black body. *Reading Contemporary Black British and African American Women Writers: Race, Ethics, Narrative Form* (2020), edited by Jean Wyatt and Sheldon George explores race and form in Black women's diasporic fiction within the emerging interest of approaching race as a category in narrative theory. Recent works such as *Black Women's Literature of the Americas: Griots and Goddesses* (2023) by Tonia Leigh Wind and Constance González Gorba *Pathologizing Black Bodies: The Legacy of Plantation Slavery* (2023), examine complex aspects of the histories of slavery such as roots, identity, trauma, and spirituality by drawing from diasporic Black women's texts. Forthcoming texts in 2023 include *Global Black Feminism: Cross Border Collaboration Through an Ethics of Care* edited by Andrea N. Baldwin and Tonya Hyne that offers a global approach to Black feminist studies and builds on Black women's texts from America and the Caribbean. *African Women Narrating Identity: Local and Global Journeys to the Self* (2023) by Rose A. Sackeyfio could be

of interest to scholars looking into African women's cultural experiences in western settings from a postcolonial framework.

The surge of diasporic Black women's writing that is receiving wide mainstream visibility, recognition, popularity, wide readership, and scholarly interest, could be argued is the result of a multitude of conditions that are contributing to such shifts of attitudes towards Black women's writing. As I suggested in the introduction to this thesis that the political climate marked by key global events significantly Black Lives Matter uprisings that sparked conversations about race on wider scales and the MeToo movement that highlighted gender debates, affected the readership with feminist and writings about racism hitting major sales and bestseller lists. Many Black women writers are receiving prestigious prizes like Bernardine Evaristo's win of the Booker prize which she testifies was a change to her career is an indicator that more publishers now are finally starting to respond to the calls of Black women writers to create more opportunities in the industry for their creativity. In addition to the subject matter in reflecting key racial and gender issues, Black women's writing is also receiving recognition for their formal innovativeness and literary experimentations as many of the celebrated prize-winning texts present this mood of literary mixing which is demonstrated in this thesis's selected texts.

Researcher's Publication Output:

Book Review:

Raffaoui, Nahla, review of *Reading Contemporary Black British and African American*

Women Writers: Race, Ethics, Narrative Form, ed. by Jean Wyatt and Sheldon

George, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 58. 3 (2022),429-430

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