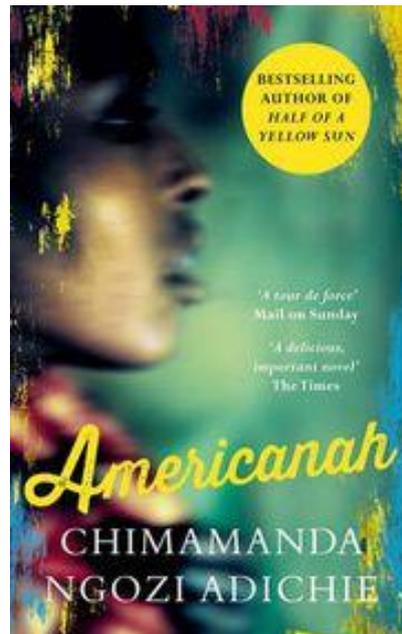
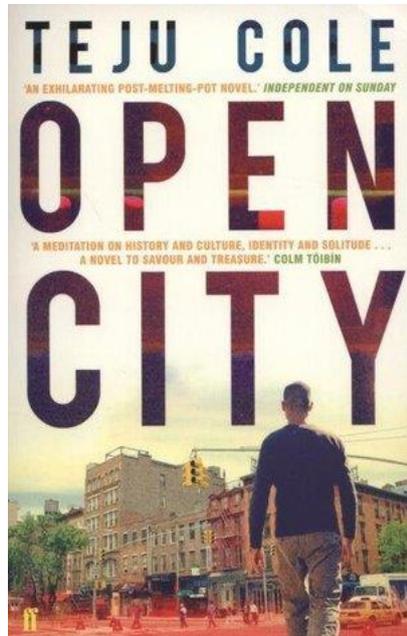


Exploring the Transnational American novel: Identity and Race in
Open City and *Americanah*



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Abstract

This Master's thesis explores the construction of identity and race in transnational American novels. It subsequently aims to answer the question: How are the construction of identity and race portrayed in Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013)? Both novels have been written by Nigerian-American authors with ties to Nigeria, the US, and other places around the globe. As a result, their novels are transnational in nature, and they primarily cover themes including migration, transnational border crossings, global citizenship, identity formation, race, and racism. The novels have often been analyzed in relation to postcolonial or diasporic themes. This thesis, however, takes this a step further and analyzes the construction of identity and race in both novels through the lens of postcolonial theory as extended by transnationalism. Postcolonial theory and theorizations of a black diasporic identity and Afropolitanism are used for the analysis of identity construction in the novels, while racial formation theory and Cole and Adichie's personal essays on race in America are used to examine the construction of race in both novels. The findings demonstrate that the protagonists' identities are portrayed as complex, multilayered identities that are shaped through transnational border-crossings and ties to multiple countries and cultures. This suggests that postcolonial theory alone is insufficient to gain a full understanding of the complex and multifaceted identities of the novels' protagonists that are, or at least, move towards transnational identities rather than post-colonial identities. The findings also illustrate that race is a hegemonic, normative, American social construction that is engrained in American society and, therefore, most Americans are unaware of this. It, consequently, implies that the outsider's perspective on America's race politics as provided by these transnational American novels are of pivotal importance to gain a thorough understanding of the extent to which race and racial hierarchies structure American society and culture.

Key words

Teju Cole, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Post-colonialism, Transnational American novel, Hybridity, Identity, Race, Racial Formation Theory, Afropolitanism

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Introduction

“I came from a country where race was not an issue,” Ifemelu notes, “I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America” (Adichie 290). The Nigerian Ifemelu – protagonist of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* – remarks this at a dinner party in response to the Haitian-American woman who said she had once dated a white man and claimed that race was not ‘an issue’ in their relationship. Ifemelu, however, knows from first-hand experience that the woman’s claim is only partially true, because as a former citizen of a predominantly ‘black’ country, Ifemelu knows that in some countries, such as her native Nigeria, race is truly not an issue, but this is not the case in America. The Nigerian-German Julius, protagonist of Teju Cole’s *Open City*, has a similar racial experience. Julius describes an encounter with an African cabdriver in New York City who calls him “brother” and notes: “[H]ey, I’m African just like you” (Cole 40). This suggests that the cabdriver deems Julius to be part of an African immigrant community in New York City, or an African ‘brotherhood,’ with whom Julius supposedly shares an African cultural identity. This illustrates that race profoundly shapes a person’s identity in the US. The fact that Ifemelu and Julius are both originally from Nigeria, provides them with an outsider’s perspective on American culture and society. It enables them to understand that race and identity are inextricably linked and, more importantly, socially constructed in America. Both examples, consequently, demonstrate the topic of this thesis: the construction of identity and race in transnational American novels.

Teju Cole’s *Open City* (2011) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013) are perfect for comparative analysis. Both novels are written by authors with Nigerian roots who migrated from post-colonial Nigeria to the US; they were published only two years apart; and, more importantly, they are transnational novels that both deal with similar themes, such as migration, transnational border crossings, global citizenship, identity formation, race, and racism. Even though the novels were written only a few years ago, they have received significant scholarly attention. Most of the existing research concerning *Open City* is focused on cosmopolitanism and, to a lesser extent, on memory and trauma, post-coloniality, and African migration. Previous research regarding *Americanah* has often focused on borders, African migration, identity formation, race, and gender. The two novels have primarily been researched independently, but this thesis will not analyze these novels in isolation, nor will it focus on themes, such as cosmopolitanism, memory and trauma, or gender. The purpose, here, is to analyze the constructions of identity and race in both novels through the lens of

postcolonial theory as extended by transnationalism. It, subsequently, leads to the research question: How is the construction of identity and race portrayed in Teju Cole's *Open City* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*?

Scholarly debates regarding transnational American literary Studies often intersect with debates about postcolonialism, and this thesis will contribute to existing scholarly literature that also recognizes this intersection. In her 2004 Presidential Address "Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies: Presidential Address to the American Studies Association," Shelley Fisher Fishkin urges fellow Americanists to adopt a transnational approach, rather than a national approach, to American Studies. Fishkin claims that a transnational approach is particularly useful for American literary studies to gain a better understanding of the "cultural crossroads" that shape the works of border-crossing authors, artists, and cultural forms that celebrate multiple regional and national traditions (Fishkin 32). Several scholars have, subsequently, 'answered' Fishkin's call and compiled companions about the challenges and opportunities concerning the transnational turn in American literary studies. Paul Jay and Jogita Goyal, for example, both recognize that transnational American literary studies greatly benefits from postcolonial studies, because it provides a framework for studying culture and literature in a transnational context that moves beyond and, explicitly questions, older Eurocentric notions of comparative analysis (Jay 2). Since the protagonists of *Open City* and *Americanah* migrated to the US from the former-British colony of Nigeria, their identities are profoundly influenced by post-colonialism. It must be noted, however, that migration is taken a step further in these novels, as the protagonists cross multiple transnational borders and, therefore, their identities have been affected by transnational border-crossings as well. It is, therefore, useful to draw from postcolonial theory and use a transnational perspective for the analysis of transnational American novels.

This thesis consists of four chapters. The first chapter is devoted to the contextual background of the thesis. It includes the theories, methodology, and concepts that are used for the comparative analysis of *Open City* and *Americanah*. This thesis, as noted, extensively uses postcolonial theory to examine the constructions of identity and race relations in both novels. Key theorists in the field of postcolonial studies include Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha. Although this thesis predominantly draws from Bhabha's work, it should be noted that Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) are among the foundational texts of postcolonialism. Said criticizes the Eurocentric notion of 'orientalism' in his controversial eponymous book. *Orientalism*, according to Said, reduces all

countries of the eastern hemisphere to the homogenous 'East,' and it is, subsequently, deemed inferior to the 'West' (Said 10). This not only reinforces romanticized stereotypical images of the East, it also justifies colonialization and Western superiority (9). Spivak popularizes the term 'subaltern,' which refers to the people that live outside the political, cultural, and social center of a nation; they solely occupy the margins. Spivak believes that white males who dominate the field of postcolonialism do not accurately portray the subaltern experience, because they tend to speak for the subaltern instead of letting them speak for themselves (Spivak 102). To truly understand the subaltern, Spivak believes, they should get their voices back (102). Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994) is packed with new concepts, such as ambivalence, hybridity, mimicry, and Third Space. It describes the ways in which postcolonial identity is constructed. Postcolonial identities are often constructed in relation to the culture of the colonizer, and Bhabha, subsequently, explains how this facilitates resistance against the colonizer. Particularly Bhabha's theory is very useful for the exploration of the novels, for the protagonists are 'post-colonial' subjects whose identities are indelibly shaped by post-colonialism. Even though the novels have been examined independently with a postcolonial framework before, not much scholarly attention has been devoted to a comparative analysis of both novels with a framework that combines transnational American literary studies and postcolonial studies. This thesis, therefore, aims to fill this lacuna.

Before I turn to the method and concepts that will be used in this thesis, it is of great importance to clarify the difference between postcolonial or diasporic literatures and transnational literatures. Postcolonial literatures emerge from a history of colonization and diasporic literatures emerge from a fundamental absence of the homeland (Ashcroft et al. 214). Transnational literatures, however, emphasize cross-cultural literary writing, and, in general, it refers to writings from people who have immigrated or travelled from a homeland, to writings written in a second language, or to writings with a cross-cultural theme (214). These literatures might touch upon topics related to postcolonial or diasporic literatures, but they do not have to be the direct result of colonialism or diaspora. Teju Cole and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie both emphasize the transnational travels of their protagonists to illustrate that they cannot be tied to a single culture or nation. *Open City* and *Americanah* also tap into themes related to postcolonialism and diaspora, such as displacement and migration, but the novels' focus on transnational migration, global populations, and the fluidity of the notion of 'home' makes these works examples of transnational literatures rather than postcolonial or diasporic literatures.

The method of close reading is the most appropriate method to analyze narration,

themes, and symbolism in *Open City* and *Americanah*. In order to gain a thorough understanding of the manner in which postcolonial, or even transnational, identities are constructed, it is important to discuss several concepts related to identity formation. As noted, Bhabha studied the relation between identity formation and postcolonialism. Mimicry and hybridity are related concepts that describe the process in which the colonized subject forges a new cultural identity during and, in the wake of, colonization. Third Space refers to the place, location, or space in which these new identities are formed. Cultural Studies scholar Stuart Hall has also coined useful concepts for the analysis of identity formation. In "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Hall studies the relation between identity and Caribbean diaspora. He explains that cultural identity can be conceptualized in two different ways. Firstly, it can be conceptualized as one shared, fixed cultural identity that all Africans share with each other. Secondly, it can be conceptualized as a unstable, fluid cultural identity that is marked by differences rather than commonalities, and Hall prefers the latter conceptualization in the case of a black diasporic identity. The African diasporic experience shapes the protagonists of both novels and, therefore, it is useful to use Hall's concepts here. While Bhabha and Hall have researched identity formation in relation to postcolonialism and diaspora respectively, Taiye Selasi conceptualizes the identity formation of the newest generation of Africans emigres. In her essay "Bye-Bye, Babar," Selasi defines the Afropolitan identity and experience. Afropolitans redefine what it means to be African in the global world of today. They are the twenty-first century Africans of the world who are often higher educated, work and live in metropolises all over the world, speak several languages, and they tie themselves to multiple cultures. Afropolitan identities are, consequently, shaped by African roots, transnational journeys, and cosmopolitan lifestyles. Afropolitanism is a very useful concept for the analysis of the identities of the novels' protagonists, for they have African roots, but are also shaped by their transnational journeys and cosmopolitan lifestyles in America.

In order to gain a full understanding of the manner in which race is constructed and perceived in the US, it is important to discuss Michael Omi and Howard Winant's racial formation theory. They coined the concept of racial formation in their book *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (first edition 1984). Racial formation refers to race as a social construction determined by political, social, and economic forces. The authors argue that, based on the construction and transformation of racial meaning, concepts of race structure both state and civil society, and it continues to significantly shape identities and institutions (Omi and Winant vii). Former traditional race theories often disregarded the centrality and complexity of race in American society and Homi and Winant's racial

formation theory, therefore, is essentially a new approach for the theorization of race and racism. Homi and Winant provide definitions of race, racial formation, and racism in chapter four “Racial Formation.” The authors also explain the process of racial formation on both a social-macro and a social-micro level. Homi and Winant’s theory is useful for the analysis of racial formation in the US, because the protagonists struggle with ‘becoming black’ in America as well as America’s race politics.

It is, furthermore, important to discuss various texts about race relations and perspectives on race in the US. Teju Cole wrote “The White-Savior Industrial Complex” for *The Atlantic* in 2012. Cole coined the concept the ‘White-Savior Industrial Complex’ in response to the Kony 2012 video to demonstrate that the notion of ‘the white savior’ is still prevalent in America. He explains that the ‘White-Savior Industrial Complex’ refers to the notion that Africa is a poverty-stricken, war-torn continent in need of help, and the sentimentalist Americans who then provide ‘help’ are the white saviors exempted from thinking about American foreign policies that have perpetuated systems of oppression in Africa. Cole explicitly states in the article that he wrote it from a dual perspective: as an African and as a black man living in America. Cole, in other words, provides an interesting, double perspective on race in America. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie also wrote several articles about race and race relations in America. In ““Our” Africa Lenses” Adichie claims that, because she is from Nigeria, she can look at America and the rest of the West with ‘African’ lenses and, therefore, she views race related issues from an outsider’s perspective. In this article, Adichie criticizes the fact that Western media tend to portray Africa as a homogenous, monolithic country, and the notion that Western adoption of African children will diminish Africa’s problems. This is very problematic, because it reduces Africans to pity-objects without any agency, and it reinforces the idea that they are poor and helpless people. Adoption, moreover, will not solve Africa’s structural problems; it is only another example of what Cole calls the white Savior Industrial Complex. Thus, Cole and Adichie both challenge American conceptions of Africa and race. In “The Color of an Awkward Conversation,” Adichie describes how mainstream Americans think about race and blackness. Adichie defines two dominant American views on race and blackness. The ‘Diminishers’ believe that blacks might still encounter mild forms of racism, but only from crazy, unhappy, or ‘ignorant’ people. ‘Diminishers’ often have black friends, which to them means they cannot possibly be racist. The ‘Deniers’, however, do not believe racism still exists, because Martin Luther King Jr.’s dead ended racism and, therefore it is a phenomenon of the past. They often consider themselves to be ‘colorblind,’ as they claim to believe that all people are the same, which

implies that race is a biological given, rather than a social construction. Adichie concludes that, although the ways in which blackness and race have manifested itself today differ from that of the 1950s, the way in which Americans view and talk about race and blackness have remained the same.

Chapter two and three are devoted to analyses of the novels. The second chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the construction of identity in *Open City* and *Americanah*. The focus of this chapter lies on the identity formation of Julius and Ifemelu after they have migrated to the US. I argue that, in *Open City*, Julius forges his identity through his superior historical and cultural awareness of instances of suffering and trauma in New York City, his interactions with both African immigrants and African-Americans in the city, and his transnational border-crossings and ties to multiple nations and cultures. I, moreover, argue that, in *Americanah*, Ifemelu predominately forges her identity through her immigration and assimilation in America as well as her subsequent return to Nigeria, her interaction with African-Americans, and her redefinition of what it means to be African and her celebration of the complexity of Africa. The third chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the construction of race in America in *Open City* and *Americanah*. The focus of this third chapter lies on the construction of race, racial hierarchy, and racism in America as well as their effects on Julius and Ifemelu's racial identities. I claim that Teju Cole represents the construction of race in the US through the racial project of stereotyping; through highlighting the importance of racial categories in America; and through revealing attitudes towards race and racism in New York City. I, furthermore, claim that Adichie represents the construction of race through the racial project of exposing American 'common sense' assumptions about race; through her shrewd observations of particularly white, liberal, middle-class American attitudes concerning race; and through revealing the fact that Americans tend to 'not deal' with race in an attempt to handle the sensitive subject. The following chapter, as noted, will provide the contextual background and the theoretical framework of this thesis.

1. Contextual Background: Theory, Methodology, and Concepts

1.1 The Transnational Turn in American (Literary) Studies

American Studies became an academic field of study in the 1950s – a period in which its scholarship was predominantly influenced by the ‘myth and symbol’ school. Studying America, according to the myth and symbol school methodology, equaled studying the culture of a homogenous and exceptional nation-state. Put differently, American Studies scholarship was largely focused on cultural production that originated within America’s national boundaries. During the following decades, however, the myth and symbol school received widespread criticism for promoting an ethnocentric worldview of America as an exceptional country that disregarded international and transnational issues. From the 1980s onwards, moreover, the process of globalization accelerated because of technological innovations, improved infrastructure, and new means of communication. Consequently, the notion that America and its culture are exceptional and homogenous became obsolete. American Studies, subsequently, turned away from the myth and symbol school towards a more interdisciplinary and transnational approach. Shelley Fisher Fishkin is one of the first scholars to signal this turn in American Studies. In her 2004 presidential address to the American Studies Association, Fishkin explains the importance of a transnational approach to the field of American Studies, for “The United States is and has always been a transnational crossroads of cultures. And that crossroads of cultures that we refer to as “American culture” has itself generated a host of other crossroads of cultures as it has crossed borders” (Fishkin 43). A transnational approach, in other words, is vital to understand America and its culture, as both were formed by transnational encounters that, in turn, also shaped other countries’ cultures. Fishkin, furthermore, claims that American Studies has, indeed, been transformed over the last four decades – it now includes the voices of minorities and women, and it has replaced exceptionalist visions of America – but “the national paradigm of the United States as a clearly bordered geographical and political space remained intact” (20). Put differently, American Studies scholars still approach the study of America from within the nation’s borders, rather than from a transnational perspective that exceeds the country’s borders. Fishkin, therefore, urges fellow Americanists to place the transnational, rather than the national, at the center of American Studies – so Fishkin, quoting Paul Lauter, argues – America is part of a world system in which “the exchange of commodities, the flow of capital, and the iterations of cultures know no border” (21). In other words, people, goods, and ideas

move freely from and to the US, which illustrates that borders are mere artificial constructs that are by no means stable and fixed. Thus, adopting a transnational approach to American Studies is the only way to do justice to America's crossroad of cultures.

Fishkin pleads that adopting a transnational approach to American Studies will particularly benefit transnational American literary studies, because "[A]s the transnational grows more central to American studies we will welcome investigations of the broad array of cultural crossroads shaping the work of border-crossing authors, artists, and cultural forms that straddle multiple regional and national traditions" (Fishkin 32). Several literary scholars have answered Fishkin's 'call' to centralize the transnational in American (literary) Studies, which resulted in, for example, the publication of Paul Jay's *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies* (2010). Jay's book provides an extensive overview of theoretical and critical issues that drove the transnational turn in literary studies as well as how these issues have come to dominate contemporary global fiction. Jay situates literary studies within the process of the transnational turn, and he proposes the following three arguments. Firstly, the transnational turn in literary and cultural studies has its roots in theoretical developments and social and political movements of the 1960s, rather than in the development of globalization (3). Secondly, globalization should be viewed from a historical perspective dating back to the sixteenth century, because it is not solely a contemporary phenomenon, it includes the long histories of imperialism, colonization, decolonization, and postcolonialism (3). Thirdly, the center-periphery model – one that sees power, commodities, and influence flowing from the urban West to developing countries in the South – should be complicated for the study of globalization, as locations are not static, fixed, and unchanging; rather, locations are continuously produced and reproduced and, therefore, it is important to continue the remapping of the geographies of literary and cultural forms (3-4). Jay, subsequently, analyses a plethora of English texts from several continents to illustrate the intersection between globalization, colonialization, and decolonization. He concludes by stating that his book is designed to present an overview of the transnational turn in English literary studies – a turn driven by decolonization and globalization that transformed cultural production both inside and outside of the academy (4).

The most recent publication to respond to Fishkin's 'call' is *The Cambridge Companion to Transnational American Literature* (2017). Yogita Goyal edited this companion that provides an extensive account of the impact, scope, and opportunities of the transnational turn in American literary studies. The companion positions the study of American literature in relation to, for example, postcolonial studies. Goyal agrees with Jay in

the introduction, “Transnational Turn,” that, since the emergence of critical theory in the 1970s, nothing has reshaped literary studies more than transnationalism, but confusion persists about what transnationalism entails for the study of literature (Goyal 2). In this companion, Goyal provides a history of the field and key debates of transnationalism to clarify some of the confusion surrounding transnationalism. She argues that most debates focus on political dimensions and, consequently, a literary dimension is lacking (4). Goyal advocates to look beyond America as an empire, colony, or exception, because the transnational turn offers new opportunities for analysis and critique regarding American literature (5). The companion, subsequently, offers new interpretations of literary texts and histories through the lens of transnationalism, because – dissimilar to the recent development of globalization – transnationalism is timeless; it is not a recent phenomenon, as nineteenth century literature already dealt with transnationalism, immigration, and citizenship. In sum, transnationalism is a useful method to analyze a broad array of American literature, from early American writings to contemporary American writings, because it could offer new insights that are currently lacking.

This thesis is also an answer to Fishkin’s call to centralize the transnational in American Studies. It examines the works of two border-crossing authors, Teju Cole and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, whose works have been profoundly shaped by their transnational border-crossings. This research also recognizes that transnationalism and post-colonialism are inextricably linked and, consequently, it fits within existing scholarship that combines a transnational and post-colonial approach to literature. One of the goals of this thesis is, therefore, to contribute to existing literature in the field of transnational American literary studies.

1.2 Postcolonial Theory

From the 1970s onwards, globalization was on the rise, transnationalism gained traction in academia, and postcolonial studies emerged as a field of study. As noted, Paul Jay and Yogita Goyal both explain the relations between American literature and globalization, the transnational turn, and postcolonial studies. Jay, for instance, explains that postcolonial studies predominantly challenges and criticizes national, ethnocentric literatures and, more importantly, it provides a framework for studying culture and literature in a transnational context that moves beyond and, explicitly questions, older Eurocentric notions of comparative analysis (Jay 2). Edward Said is often credited as one of the founding fathers of postcolonial

studies because of his contributions to the field. Said's controversial book *Orientalism* (1978), for instance, criticizes Western misconceptions of the Eastern world, and it became a foundational text in the field. In his book, Said particularly criticizes and challenges the concept of orientalism – the Eurocentric, prejudiced notion that people from the East, the Orientals, are racially inferior to people from the West, the Occidentals (Said 12). Said explains that Western scholars did not distinguish among the nations in the East and, therefore, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East were all reduced to 'the East'. This actually leads to a biased and romanticized image of the East, which impedes a true understanding of all the individual countries (10). Said argues that this lack of distinction between individual countries allowed the West to suppress all peoples from the East, for they were all different, exotic, and inferior. Orientalism, in short, is a mere social construct in which the West defines itself in opposition to the East to justify Western domination over the 'other,' which reaffirmed Western racial superiority. This reinforced the binary opposition between a normative 'us' (i.e. the West) and 'them' (i.e. the East) – two categories that are mutually exclusive, but that depend on each other for their existence (15). In sum, Said criticizes Western scholars for reinforcing an Eurocentric, constructed ideal image of the East that serves their own imperial interests and justifies colonization.

Gayatri Spivak is also a well-known theorist of postcolonial studies who introduced – and popularized – Antonio Gramsci's concept of the subaltern to the field of postcolonial studies. The subaltern refers to the people who solely occupy the margins, rather than the center, of the hegemonic power structure of a nation (Spivak 74). Spivak wonders how successful postcolonialism has been in understanding the colonized, especially the subaltern, and providing them with a voice. She, subsequently, criticizes the works of white males that dominate the field, because they, as outsiders, cannot fully comprehend the experiences of the subaltern, which entails that those scholars can only write about what they assume about the subaltern experience (77). Spivak, moreover, is wary of scholars speaking for the subaltern rather than having the subaltern speak for themselves, leading her to ask the question: Can the Subaltern speak? (78). Put differently, Spivak wonders if the subaltern have a voice at all in Western postcolonial Studies. Spivak argues that Western scholars believe their work gives voice to the subaltern, but, instead, it only reinforces their status as the subaltern 'other' (85). Spivak concludes that the voices of the subaltern can be fully recovered, but not by Western scholars (90). In short, Spivak challenges existing, white male dominated postcolonial works about the experiences of the subaltern, for they do not give a thorough understanding of such experiences and, as a result, the subaltern remain voiceless.

Homi Bhabha is another renowned theorist of postcolonial studies, for he developed important key concepts in the field, such as hybridity, third space, mimicry, and ambivalence. He coined these terms in *The Location of Culture* (1994) to describe the ways in which the colonized have put up resistance against their colonizers (Bhabha 9). The central question of Bhabha's book is: how to understand postcolonial culture? Bhabha analyses identity in relation to theories of postcolonial culture to answer this question. He first challenges the notion that a person's identity is composed of fixed factors, such as race, gender, or class. Bhabha, instead, argues that everyone is cultural hybrid, for a mixture of cultural influences shape and affect a person's identity (5). Bhabha also argues that especially postcolonial cultures are very complex, because those cultures consist of a mixture of imitations of the language and culture of the colonizer and the preexisting traditional customs (127). Postcolonial theories should, therefore, focus on this hybridity and cosmopolitanism to gain a full understanding of postcolonial cultures. Bhabha, moreover, warns against theories of postcolonialism that misinterpret or misunderstand postcolonial cultures, as they could exacerbate discrimination against such cultures (218). Thus, Bhabha has developed new concepts that contributed to new understandings of postcolonial cultures to illustrate that culture can only be located in 'liminal' or hybrid spaces.

Even though the landmark works of these three pioneers of postcolonial studies have been criticized extensively, they are considered to be the foundation of the field, and they are still of great importance today. *Orientalism*, for example, has become a discourse from which to study Western attitudes towards the East. In addition, orientalism, as well as subaltern and all the concepts Bhabha has introduced to the field are all included in *Postcolonial Studies: The Key Concepts Second Edition* (2007), which illustrates the enduring influence of the works of Said, Spivak, and Bhabha. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helena Griffin explain in the "Introduction" that the concepts in this book are key to understanding the issues that influenced and characterized postcolonialism. They also note that with the spreading of neo-liberalism, the subject of postcolonialism has been of great significance to the field of transnationalism, as debates about postcolonial studies now increasingly intersect with debates about transnationalism and transnational literatures (Ashcroft et al. vii). The authors, subsequently, pay special attention to the term transnational – a term that has gained traction among postcolonial studies scholars in the last two decades. They explain that the term transnational as an adjective is growing in use, because – dissimilar to 'postcolonial' and 'diasporic' – it includes migrant, diasporic, and refugee communities not directly emerging from the colonial experience (ix). Thus, postcolonialism scholars increasingly use the term

‘transnational,’ to make the field of postcolonialism more inclusive.

Postcolonial theory comprises a large part of the theoretical framework of this thesis, because it serves as a powerful lens through which the transnational American novels *Open City* and *Americanah* will be read and analyzed. Postcolonial theory vis-à-vis America, however, needs clarification, for America is an ambiguous country when it comes to colonialism and post-colonialism. The country started out as a British colony in 1607 and remained under British rule until 1783. After gaining independence in 1783, America celebrated its newly found independence, and it entered a post-colonial period in the late eighteenth century. It must be noted, however, that America, subsequently, gradually developed into an empire that, in turn, expanded into territorial imperialism during the late nineteenth century. Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and Haiti, for instance, were subjected to American political or cultural imperialism. America, in other words, as a former colony, did not go through the classical stages of pre-colony, colony, independence, and decolonization that their colonial counterparts went through, because after its independence, the country rapidly engaged in imperialism along with European nations (Madsen 2). Deborah L. Madsen, editor of *Beyond the Borders American Literature and Post-colonial Theory* (2003), however, claims that America’s specific ambiguous situation allows for a particular conceptualization of post-colonialism in which “the critic, rather than the text or its author, adopts a post-colonial perspective (...) to analyze the ways in which their own post-colonial status, as members of colonized cultural groups is inscribed in their practice as readers and writers, teachers and scholars of American literature” (2). Both *Open City* and *Americanah* are transnational American novels written by authors that are “members of colonized cultural groups,” who are very much critical of the US, which is reflected in their writings. Postcolonialism, in this sense, is thus a useful tool for the analysis of these novels. Madsen also explains that “post-colonial theory is the tool that enables the cultural study of a reformulated identity” (2). The forging of new, hybrid identities runs as a red thread through both novels, which, again, illustrates the significance of post-colonial theory for the study of identity construction in America in both novels. In sum, applying postcolonial theory to transnational American novels is very useful here, as both Cole and Adichie are post-colonial subjects able to critically observe America from an outsider’s perspective, which could offer new insights into American culture and society.

1.3 Transnational (American) Literatures

Postcolonial studies scholars, as noted, have grown unsatisfied with the terms ‘post-colonial’ and ‘diasporic,’ and they have often replaced these terms with the word ‘transnational.’

Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Griffin explain that this is especially true regarding literature.

Postcolonial literatures usually emerge as a result of a history of colonization and diasporic literatures emerge from a fundamental absence of the homeland (Ashcroft et al. 214).

Transnational literatures, in contrast, emphasize cross-cultural literary writing, and, in general, the term ‘transnational’ refers to writings from people who have migrated or travelled from a homeland, to writings written in a second language, or to writings with a cross-cultural theme (214). These literatures, in other words, do not necessarily have to be a direct result of colonialism or diaspora and, therefore, these terms do not do justice to such literatures. The authors do emphasize that transnational literatures might tap into similar themes as postcolonial and diasporic literatures, such as dislocation, ambivalence, cultural clash, and loss (214). It must be noted, moreover, that writers of transnational literatures focus on the increasing fluidity of global populations. They themselves are often more affluent and more mobile than diasporic populations; they often feel ‘at home’ in multiple places, rather than exiled from home; and they often spend time or live in multiple locations (215). Put differently, transnational literatures differ from postcolonial and diasporic literatures, for they focus on the increasing flow and mobility of individuals and populations, transnational, back-and-forth border crossings, and the fluidity of the notion of home. Thus, transnational literatures is a relatively new concept that has extended the field of postcolonial studies.

Both Teju Cole’s *Open City* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* are examples of transnational literatures. Both authors have migrated back and forth between Nigeria and the US and, consequently, they have lived in both the US and Nigeria for extensive periods of time. This illustrates their mobility: the ability to move between multiple places that are ‘home’. Adichie, actually, still divides her time between the US and Nigeria. Both authors also write about their transnational border crossings as well as related themes, such as dislocation, cultural clashes, identity formation, and race relations. Thus, these two transnational novels are perfect for comparative analysis, and they will be analyzed from a postcolonial perspective as extended by transnationalism.

1.4 Postcolonial Cultural Identity

Postcolonial Studies examines, explains, and challenges the cultural legacy of colonialism. Many postcolonial studies scholars research the forging of new cultural identities as a result of colonialism and imperialism. Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, and Taiye Selasi have all written about this subject. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha introduced new concepts, such as *hybridity*, *mimicry*, and *Third Space* to the field of postcolonial studies. The concepts describe the development of new cultural identities as well as signify ways in which the colonized resisted their colonizers. Stuart Hall, although not a postcolonial studies scholar, has also written extensively about – among other things – cultural identity, race, and ethnicity. Hall is a cultural studies scholar who draws on postcolonialism to illustrate the relation between cultural identity and race. In his 1997 essay, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” Hall addresses questions about identity, cultural practices, and cultural production. Hall explains that the concept of a *black diasporic identity* can be understood in two ways: as a collective identity that all Africans share, or as an individual identity that centralizes the differences between those Africans. Taiye Selasi is a writer and photographer of Nigerian-Ghanian origin. She was born in the United Kingdom, but she grew up in the US. Selasi, consequently, considers herself part of a new African diaspora called *Afropolitanism*, which she defines and elaborates on in her 2009 essay “Bye-Bye, Babar (Or: What is an Afropolitan?).” In this essay, Selasi explains what an Afropolitan identity, sensibility, and experience exactly entail. These concepts are very useful for the analysis of *Open City* and *Americanah*, because the novels’ protagonists go through processes of identity formation on a national, racial, and cultural level. Both Julius and Ifemelu migrated from the former British colony of Nigeria America, which sparked the formation of their new identities.

1.4.1: Hybridity, Mimicry, and Third space

In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha analyses the relation between the colonized subject and the colonizer to stress their mutual dependence. Bhabha introduced the term *mimicry* to describe the ambivalent relation between colonizer and colonized subject. Mimicry refers to the process in which colonizers encourage the colonized to adopt their culture, beliefs, values, and habits, and behavior, because the colonizers deemed their culture to be superior to that of the colonized (Bhabha 121). This process will ultimately ensure that the identity of the colonized subject will be replaced by a new, Western identity. In their attempt to mimic their

colonizers, the colonized become “almost the same, but not quite” (122). Mimicking, after all, for it to be effective, “must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” (122). The line between imitation and mockery is a fine one and, therefore, the colonized subject simultaneously imitates and mocks the colonizer, which is not the desired effect that the colonizer envisioned when he encouraged the colonized subject to mimic him. Put differently, the colonizers could have never anticipated that a person’s identity and behavior could be something that was beyond their control. Mimicry, therefore, exposes this flaw in colonial thought and, consequently, it poses a great threat to the authority of the colonizers (88). In sum, the fact that mimicry could also be mockery, illustrates that the colonized subject cannot fully adopt the colonizer’s culture and behavior, which disrupts colonial authority and, more importantly, it serves as a means to resist colonial dominance.

Bhabha, moreover, explains that *hybridity* is a related concept that also unintentionally subverts the power-balance between the colonizers and the colonized. Hybridity commonly refers to the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization (Ashcroft 108). Bhabha states that hybridity, in relation to culture, refers to a conception of culture that is centered around ‘cultural difference’ rather than ‘cultural diversity’ (Bhabha 50). Cultural diversity, Bhabha believes, implies that a culture is static, for it has clear boundaries and it is composed of specific – often old – characteristics that are authentic to that particular culture (50). This notion, subsequently, reinforces a romanticized perception of other cultures, which is detrimental to those ‘other’ cultures that have become trapped in an externally enforced culture. Culture, instead, should be perceived as a mix of traditions and systems of exchange and interrelations that is continually changing. In short, the concept of hybridity implies a critique on western concepts, such as cultural diversity and multiculturalism that perpetuate the subordinate position of the colonized and, therefore, hybridity serves as a subversion of Western, colonial domination.

The space that facilitates processes of mimicry and hybridity are conceptualized as *Third Space*. Bhabha claims that language cannot accurately represent the world and, therefore, all cultural forms, especially cultural identity, emerge from or are constructed in a contradictory and ambivalent space that he refers to as “Third Space of enunciation” (Bhabha 53-55). This space is located in between cultures that are perceived to be each other’s opposites, such as the culture of the colonized and the culture of the colonizer. Bhabha explains that “this interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (4). Put differently, in the Third Space, the colonized can review cultural differences to ultimately

form a new, mixed culture and identity outside of the imposed, dominant culture of the colonizer. The Third Space, consequently, also functions as a disruption of the colonizer's authority, for the colonizer cannot control the postcolonial culture and identities that emerge from a Third Space. Bhabha, moreover, believes that if people recognize the ambivalence of a Third Space, it might help them to see that every culture is hybrid; no culture can be superior to another (38). Bhabha, in other words, challenges the idea that cultures and identities are fixed and stable; rather, they are always subject to change (38). Thus, the Third Space is an 'in-between' space in which two cultures meet and a new, hybrid culture or identity is forged, which threatens the dominant colonial hegemony.

1.4.2 Black Diasporic Identity

In "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Hall, similar to Bhabha, proposes to perceive cultural identity not as an "already accomplished fact," but as a "production" that is always in process, never complete, and always constituted within representation (Hall 222). Put differently, cultural identity is never a finished product, it is always in motion – changing and evolving – and, therefore, it is not a transparent concept. Hall, subsequently, outlines two ways of thinking about cultural identity. Firstly, cultural identity can be defined as one shared, fixed, and stable culture, which people with the same history and ancestry have in common and it, consequently, reflects the peoples' shared history and cultural codes (223). Secondly, cultural identity can also be defined as unstable, fluid, and sometimes even contradictory, because it is marked by many similarities as well as differences (225). Regarding the latter definition, Hall explains that cultural identity is "a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being,' it is not fixed in time; it can transcend place, time, history, and culture" (225). It, moreover, undergoes constant transformation, for identity is subject to the "continuous 'play' of history, culture and power" (225). In other words, *the black diasporic identity* is characterized by both commonality – a shared, collective identity – and difference, for people with the same roots often have lived through different experiences that have shaped their identities accordingly. The second definition of cultural identity, Hall believes, is necessary to thoroughly understand the traumatic experiences of colonialism – the way in which blacks and black experiences were subjected to categories, such as 'different' and 'other,' which ultimately made blacks perceive themselves as 'other' too (225). Thus, different experiences produce differences in cultural identity across different black diasporic communities and, therefore, Hall, in a similar

vein as Bhabha, illustrates that cultural identity emerges from several factors, such as history and culture that are always subject to change.

1.4.3 Afropolitan Identity

In “Bye-Bye Babar,” Selasi defines the Afropolitan identity and experience. Afropolitans, according to Selasi, constitute the newest generation of African emigrants working at law firms, chemistry labs, or jazz lounges. These men and women are a blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes. Some of them are ethnic mixes, for example, Ghanaian and Canadian, Nigerian and Swiss, while others are merely “cultural mutts”: American accent, European affect, African ethos (Selasi par. 3). Most Afropolitans are multilingual: in addition to English and a Romance or two, they understand some indigenous languages and speak a few urban vernaculars. There is at least one place on the African Continent to which Afropolitans tie their sense of self: a nation-state, a city, or a relative’s kitchen (par. 3). Finally, there is the G8 city or two (or three) that Afropolitans know like the backs of their hands, and the various institutions that know them for their famed focus. Selasi concludes that “[W]e are Afropolitans: not citizens, but Africans of the world” (par. 3). Put differently, the Afropolitan identity is shaped by transnational border crossings, fluid global citizenship, and the ability to make a home wherever they go.

This new generation of African emigrants are also unique in the fact that they redefine what it means to be ‘African.’ Afropolitans do not look for traditional jobs as their parents did, such as doctoring and engineering, they, instead, look for jobs in the media, politics, music, and design (par. 5). Afropolitan artists, moreover, celebrate their African roots in their works. More importantly, Afropolitans are willing to complicate Africa; to engage with, critique, and celebrate the continent (par. 6). They refuse to oversimplify Africa as solely a geographical entity; rather, Afropolitans want to comprehend its cultural complexity; honor its intellectual and spiritual legacy; and sustain their parents’ cultures (par. 6). Selasi stresses that the ultimate task for every Afropolitan is to forge an identity from widely disparate sources, for they are “Brown-skinned without a bedrock sense of ‘blackness’ (...) and often teased by African family members for ‘acting white’” (par. 7). The Afropolitan identity and experience are, therefore, marked with an ‘in betweenness’ of which they are often fully conscious.

The Afropolitan identity is forged along at least three dimensions: national, racial, and cultural. Afropolitans, dissimilar to their parents, do not claim one nation as home; rather,

home can be the place where they currently live or have lived – the possibilities are endless. Over time, they choose bits and pieces of a national identity that fits with their personality (par. 8). Race, similarly, is not a question of skin-tone, but of politics, as not all Afropolitans identify as ‘black’. For Afropolitans, race will be determined by their relationship towards other colored people and where they locate themselves in the history that produced ‘blackness’ as well as the political processes that continue to shape it (par. 8). Forging a cultural identity, according to Selasi, is the most difficult for Afropolitans, but it is also a privilege. Afropolitan cultural identity is not black and white, because identifying with Nigeria, Yoruba, America, or Great Britain all mean different things and this multidimensional thinking is necessary for Afropolitans to make sense of themselves (par. 8). In sum, Afropolitans do not belong to a single geography; they do not fit in the neatly demarcated racial categories; nor do they consider themselves to be part of one culture, and it is exactly this complexity that makes them uniquely Afropolitan.

1.5 Racial Formation and Perspectives on Race in America

Racial formation, perspectives on race, and race relations in America all feature as red threads in the novels of Cole and Adichie. It is, therefore, useful to discuss Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s racial formation theory, because it explores race as a social construction determined by political, social, and economic forces. In *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (second edition 1994), Omi and Winant examine how concepts of race are created and altered, how race becomes politicized, and how they have come to pervade American society (Omi and Winant vii). Particularly chapter four, “Racial Formation,” in which the concepts and workings of race, racism, and racial formation are defined are of great importance for the analysis of *Open City* and *Americanah*, as all three concepts play an important role in the novels. It is also useful to analyze a few non-theoretical texts from both Cole and Adichie, for both have written several personal essays about race in the US. Both authors write from different perspectives about their experiences with race and racism in America. Cole wrote the article “The White-Savior Industrial Complex” for *The Atlantic* in 2012. The article criticizes the ‘white savior complex’ – the notion that whites continue to be and act as the saviors of the less-fortunate races – a widespread belief that is still very popular among white Americans. Cole specifically states in this article that he wrote it from multiple positions: as an African *and* as a black man living in America. This entails that he combines both an outsider’s and an insider’s perspective on race relations in America. Adichie has

written several articles about race and racism in America of which “Our ‘Africa’ Lenses” and “The Color of an Awkward Conversation” will be discussed in this thesis. Both articles were written for *The Washington Post* in 2006 and 2008 respectively, and both describe and reflect on Adichie’s personal experiences and observations regarding race in America. Adichie wrote the articles from a Nigerian perspective and, therefore, she has an outsider’s perspective on race relations in the US.

1.5.1 Racial Formation Theory

Omi and Winant pioneered the concept of racial formation in response to traditional race theories that failed to acknowledge the centrality of race in American politics and daily life. Traditional race theories, moreover, either romanticized race or disregarded its complexity. The authors believed that a new approach to race was necessary and, subsequently, they developed the racial formation theory based on the notion that concepts of race are always politically contested (Omi and Winant viii). Omi and Winant argue in *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* that, based on the construction and transformation of racial meaning, concepts of race structure both state and civil society and it continues to significantly shape identities and institutions (vii).

The chapter “Racial Formation” offers the outlines of a theory of race and racism. The authors first define race as “a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies” (Omi and Winant 55). Put differently, race refers to a complex construction of social and political meanings subject to continuous transformation. Race, therefore, plays an important role in understanding and structuring related concepts such as identity and our social world. The notions of race as a social structure and a dimension of human representation underlie Omi and Winant’s racial formation theory. They define racial formation as the social-historical process that “creates, inhabits, transforms, and destroys racial categories” (55). Omi and Winant, subsequently, claim that racial formation theory consists of two steps. Firstly, racial formation is a process of historically situated projects in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized (56). Secondly, it is related to the evolution of hegemony; the way in which society is ruled and organized (56). In other words, racial formation exposes the idea that society is divided, organized, and structured along the lines of race.

Racial formation operates on a macro-social and micro-social level. As a macro-level process, racial formation has led to two different projects: the neoconservative racial project – or ‘color-blind’ politics – in which the significance of race is disregarded; and the liberal

racial project in which the significance of race is affirmed, which leads to egalitarian, activist politics (Omi and Winant 58). Racial formation on a micro-social level, or in every-day life, refers to racial projects that shape people's racial 'common sense.' Casual stereotypes, such as all black men are rappers or gangsters, demonstrate racial formation and racial 'common sense' in everyday life. Race, indeed, plays a large role in every-day life; it is often the first thing people notice about other people and interpreting racial meaning depends on preconceived notions of a racialized social structure (59). Noting that a light-skinned black person, for example, does not look 'black' illustrates that preconceived notions of what a black person should look like exists and, more importantly, this seems to be 'normal.' Put differently, there is always a connection between people's conception of race and the manner in which they perceive a social structure with its own laws, customs, and threats.

Consequently, people's identity, hobbies, customs, and preferences become racially coded, for racial awareness in every-day life is all pervasive (60). Since everyone is subjected to racial subjection, everyone naturally knows the 'rules' of racial qualification and racial identity and, as a result, comprehending, explaining, and acting out race becomes 'common sense'.

The final concept that Omi and Winant define is: racism. They state that a clear understanding of what racism entails is lacking today, because people tend to perceive race, and by extension, racism differently. Whites tend to perceive race as a marginalized, unimportant reality, while racial minorities, particularly blacks, perceive race as an everyday experience (Omi and Winant 70) The absence of a clear understanding of racism, consequently, makes it difficult to challenge it. Definitions of racism, similar to race, have changed over time and, therefore, a modern definition of racism is needed to adequately explain racial issues today. The authors propose that racial projects are only racist when they "create or reproduce structures of domination based on essentialist categories of race" (71). Put differently, racism constitutes a clear link between essentialist representations of race and social structures of domination. Thus, as times and society change, the definition of racism changes too and, therefore, there can be no 'timeless' and absolute standard of what constitutes racism (71). In sum, racial formation theory demonstrates that the concepts of race and racism, depending on the particular political, historical, or social context from which it arises, give arbitrary characteristics, such as a person's skin color, symbolic significance.

1.5.2 Race: A Dual Perspective

In “The White-Savior Industrial Complex,” Cole coined the concept ‘White-Savior Industrial Complex’ in response to the Kony 2012 video: a documentary film that promoted *Invisible Children Inc.*’s ‘Stop Kony movement’ – a movement dedicated to get Ugandan warlord Joseph Kody arrested. The White-Savior Industrial Complex entails a “big emotional experience that validates privilege” (@tejucole tweet #5). Put differently, Cole criticizes Americans traveling to Africa to ‘make a difference’ and supposedly ‘save’ the Africans by, for example, building houses without consulting the very people they claim to help (Cole par. 10). Cole, moreover, explains that Africa has often been the backdrop for white fantasies of conquest and heroism; it is a space onto which whites can project their egos (par. 13). This allows Americans to feel good about themselves for helping the Africans, which also enables them to disregard their support for American foreign policies that have often perpetuated systems of oppression in Africa. Put differently, Americans who truly care about Africa should consider evaluating American foreign policy that has often done more harm than good in countries such as Nigeria (par. 20). The Kody 2012 film and the White-Savior Industrial Complex illustrate that the notion of America as ‘the white savior’ is still prevalent in America.

Cole stresses that arresting Kody will not make Uganda’s problems disappear, because there are more complex and widespread problems, such as problems of governance, of infrastructure, of democracy, and of law and order (par. 15). Kody, therefore, is merely a convenient villain – he harms and kills children – to Americans who seek a convenient villain, for Kody embodies their view of Africa as a war-torn continent in need of foreign help. Americans tend to forget or disregard that Africa’s structural problems are the result of colonialism and white oppression and arresting Kody will not solve such problems. To truly help Ugandans, Americans should realize that Uganda does not need more people who disregard the Ugandan’s own agency in bettering their lives. After all, a great deal of work had been done, and continues to be done, by Ugandans themselves to improve their own country (par. 16). The Ugandans, in other words, do not need another sentimentalist white-savior.

1.5.3 Race: The Perspective of a Non-American Black

In “Our ‘Africa’ Lenses,” Adichie, similar to Cole, criticizes the approach of white Westerners seeking to ‘help Africa.’ Adichie first problematizes the fact that American media tends to compress a varied continent into one homogenous and monolithic country called ‘Africa’ (Adichie par. 3). As a result, Americans tend to identify people from African countries solely as African, rather than, for example, Nigerian or Somalian. Adichie knows this from her own experience: “I realized that I was African when I came to the United States” (par. 2). People in Africa, in other words, do not necessarily define themselves as African, but the American media have reinforced the idea that people from Africa are simply ‘African.’ Consequently, Americans expected Adichie – and her fellow ‘Africans’ – to be an expert on Africa regardless if the subject was Egypt or Namibia – two completely different countries.

Adichie claims that, because she is from Nigeria, she can look at America and the rest of the West with ‘African’ lenses; she views race related issues from an outsider’s perspective. She, subsequently, problematizes Western adoption of African children that has attracted a lot of media-attention. The western notion that Western couples – as white saviors – are ‘helping’ to better the lives of poor African children through adoption is very popular. Celebrities including Madonna and Angelina Jolie reinforced this notion, as they have encouraged people to adopt African children. This, Adichie argues, is very problematic, for it implies that adopting children will relieve Africa’s problems and, more importantly, it romanticizes poverty, reduces Africans to pity-objects, and it takes away the will and agency of Africans (Adichie par. 6-7). Adichie also points out that adoption only relieves surface problems in Africa, while structural problems, such as corrupt governments, remain intact. Thus, Adichie criticizes the role of the Western media in perpetuating existing stereotypes about Africa that profoundly color the way in which America perceives peoples from African countries.

In “The Color of an Awkward Conversation,” Adichie describes how mainstream Americans think about race and blackness. Adichie outlines the behavior of two types of people whom she refers to as “Diminishers” and “Deniers,” for they represent America’s views on blackness (Adichie par. 5). The Diminishers have a subtle intellectual superiority and depend on the term ‘ignorant.’ They believe that blacks, at times, still encounter mild forms of racism, but only from crazy, unhappy, or ‘ignorant’ people who mean well, but do not know better. Diminishers often have black friends, or they supported the Civil Right Movement and, therefore, they might be ignorant, but they cannot be ‘racist’ (par. 6). The

Deniers, in contrast, do not believe that blacks still encounter any form of racism, because Martin Luther King Jr.'s death ended racism. Racism, in other words, is a phenomenon of the past that no longer exists. Deniers often consider themselves to be 'colorblind,' as they claim to believe that all people are the same, which implies that race is a biological given, rather than a social construction. When blacks claim to have experienced racism, the Deniers quickly find other reasons for their ill-treatment, and if racism has, indeed, been proven that they are quick to tell stories about, for example, Native American oppression, which merely generalizes all instances of oppression (par. 7).

Adichie argues that even though the way blackness manifests itself has changed since 1965, the way Americans talk about it has not changed. She believes that the notion that "[O]nce upon a time, black towns were destroyed, black Americans were massacred and barred from voting, etc. All this happened because of racists. Today, these things no longer happen, and therefore racists no longer exist" is still a very persistent myth in America (par. 8). Put differently, some Americans believe that racism only manifests itself in lynching or slavery, both of which have been outlawed and, consequently, they fail to see that racism does still exist in many subtle forms. Thus, Adichie criticizes the fact that some Americans refuse to acknowledge that racism still exist, because it is not as obvious as it was in the 1950s.

In conclusion, this chapter has provided the theoretical framework for the analysis of *Open City* and *Americanah*. The conceptions of Bhabha, Hall, and Selasi are very helpful for the examination of the protagonists' identity formations. Bhabha's conceptualizations of hybridity and Third Space are particularly useful for the analysis of Julius' identity formation in New York City. Julius' identity is ultimately composed of Nigerian, European, and American influences, which become evident from Julius' extensive cultural and historical awareness that essentially crosses many transnational boundaries. New York City, then, functions as a Third Space that facilitates the formation of Julius' hybrid identity. Hybridity and Third Space, as well as mimicry, are also useful concepts for the analysis of Ifemelu's identity formation in both America and, later, in Nigeria. Ifemelu's hybrid identity is a result of Nigerian and American influences, but when she returns to Nigeria Ifemelu's identity becomes transnational, rather than hybrid. America and Nigeria, here, function as Third Spaces that allow for Ifemelu's identity formation. Halls conceptualization of a black diasporic identity that emphasizes the differences between Africans rather than the similarities, moreover, also aligns with Julius and Ifemelu's identity formation, because they develop their respective identities in opposition to other Africans and African-Americans and, therefore, their identities differ from other black diasporic communities. Telasi, furthermore,

has identified the characteristics specific to an Afropolitan identity, and these correlate to Julius and Ifemelu's identities. Julius' biracial background, his transnational border-crossings, and his ties to multiple cultures and nations characterize his identity, whereas Ifemelu redefines what it means to be African in the twenty-first century, and she complicates notions of Africa and Africans, which characterize her identity.

Omi and Winant, Cole, and Adichie's works about racial formation, race, and racism are of great significance for the exploration of the construction of race and, by extension, racism in *Open City* and *Americanah*. Omi and Winant's conceptualization of racial projects is very useful for the analysis of racial formation, racial categories, and racism. Julius faces stereotyping and racial coding – two racial projects that demonstrate the all-pervasiveness and importance of race and racial categories in the US as well as the extent to which racism is ingrained in American society. Ifemelu reveals American 'common sense' ideas regarding race – a racial project that illustrates that the construction of race and the racial hierarchy in America are ingrained in American society and culture. Cole's conceptualization of the 'White Savior' and the 'White Savior Industrial Complex,' are also useful for the analysis of the construction of race in the novels. The 'White Savior' and the 'White Savior Industrial Complex' feature once in *Open City* and more prominently in *Americanah* to illustrate that they reinforce and justify a socially constructed racial order that keeps whites at the top and blacks at the bottom of the American racial ladder. Adichie's conceptualizations of 'Diminishers' and 'Deniers' are of great importance for the analysis of American attitudes towards race and racism in both novels. Cole is less explicit about racism compared to Adichie, but New York City's palimpsestic structure, implicitly, functions as a denier of racism in the city, and Julius's underlying assumptions about black men make him a diminisher as well as a contributor of racism in America. The 'Diminishers' and 'Deniers' in Adichie's novel serve as a vehicle for Adichie's merciless criticism of white, liberal, middle-class Americans who, unintentionally, exacerbate racism and the societal position of blacks in the US.

The following two chapters explore the constructions of identity and race in *Open City* and *Americanah*. Chapter two is devoted to a comparative analysis of the construction of identity in both novels in the light of the academic works discussed in this chapter.

2. Rethinking African Identity: The Construction of Identity in *Open City* and *Americanah*

The complexity inherent in identity construction is omnipresent in both *Open City* and *Americanah*. Both novels' protagonists struggle with their identities as 'outsiders' in American society. Julius particularly struggles with his identity as a Nigerian-German immigrant living in the US, whereas Ifemelu struggles with her identity as an African immigrant in the US and, later, as an Americanized returnee in Nigeria. This chapter explores how Julius and Ifemelu construct and come to terms with their respective identities in the novels. Even though this chapter primarily addresses the construction of identity, and the following chapter will address the construction of race, it is important to note that race plays a significant role in Julius and Ifemelu's identity formation and, therefore, identity and race cannot be fully separated. This chapter, consequently, does touch upon the subject of race. The chapter shall demonstrate that Julius' identity is primarily constructed through his superior historical and cultural awareness of instances of suffering and trauma in New York City, his interactions with both African immigrants and African-Americans in the city, and his transnational border-crossings and ties to multiple nations and cultures. Ifemelu's identity construction, in contrast, is predominately constructed through her immigration and assimilation in America as well as her subsequent return to Nigeria, her interaction with African-Americans, and her redefinition of what it means to be African and her celebration of the complexity of Africa.

The chapter is subdivided in three subchapters. The first subchapter examines Homi Bhabha's conceptions of hybridity and Third Space in *Open City*. Mimicry does not play a significant role in Julius' identity formation and, therefore, it will not be examined here. Mimicry, hybridity, and Third Space are all explored in *Americanah*, for they all play an important role in Ifemelu's identity construction. As a result, the focus in the first subchapter lies on postcolonialism rather than transnationalism. The second subchapter examines Stuart Hall's conceptions of a black diasporic identity in relation to identity construction in the novels. The third subchapter analyses Taiye Selasi's conception of Afropolitanism with regards to identity formation in both novels. These concepts and approaches are all useful for the exploration of Julius and Ifemelu's transnational identity formation. All subchapters focus on the analysis of *Open City* first, after which *Americanah* will be discussed.

2.1 Hybridity, Third Space, and Mimicry in *Open City* and *Americanah*

Homi Bhabha's conceptions of hybridity, Third Space, and mimicry – the latter only in the case of *Americanah* – are used to explore the identity formations of Julius and Ifemelu. Bhabha claims that a person's identity is never the result of fixed factors; rather, it is composed of various cultural and historical traditions and systems of exchange that are continuously subject to change. Identity should, therefore, be understood as culturally hybrid. This is particularly the case for post-colonial subjects, such as Julius and Ifemelu, as a mixture of Nigerian and Western cultures have shaped their identities. Such identities, then, emerge from a liminal, 'in-between' space – the Third Space – that is ambivalent and often contradictory. Julius and Ifemelu's identities become hybrid in different spaces that function as a Third Space and, in turn, their hybrid identities strengthen Julius and Ifemelu's ability to interpret and navigate the Third Space.

Julius registers all of New York City's multi-layered history in an attempt to suppress his own past, reinvent himself, and, as such, construct an 'ideal' identity. This becomes evident from, for example, Julius' focus on the city's historical involvement with colonial oppression. On one of his walks, Julius watches children play in Battery Park. Julius reflects upon the fact that this place has not always been such a pleasant 'playground' for children, as it used to be a busy site where slaves and paupers were hanged in the seventeenth century and where slaver's ships were built and launched during the nineteenth century (Cole 163-164). Battery Park, in other words, used to be the center of the lucrative slave trade that operated out of the city's ports. Thus, Julius exposes New York city's largely invisible and shameful history – a history that has disrupted the lives of his African ancestors – because the city played a significant role in and profited enormously from the slave-trade. On another walk, Julius accidentally stumbles upon the memorial for the site of an African burial ground. The monument is located on a small patch of grass that is surrounded by office buildings, shops, and restaurants (220). Julius imagines this exact place in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the burial ground actually comprised six acres of ground in which thousands of slaves lay buried (220). Julius believes that, although this vast burial ground has been reduced to a tiny spot of grass, it still represents "the echo across centuries from slavery in New York" (221). This, again, illustrates the notion that remnants of slavery are still inscribed in the ground and, therefore, in the history of New York City. Julius merely reregisters his ancestor's sufferings; he does not fully connect with it as might be expected from an African immigrant; rather, Julius remains a distant observer of the city's history. It reinforces the

notion that Julius' focus on colonial oppression, here, serves a different purpose: it serves to suppress his own personal perpetrators-trauma of having raped Moji back in Nigeria. Julius, after all, also fails to connect with his own memories; he cannot come to terms with the fact that he raped Moji and, therefore, his aloofness towards New York's painful past is a reflection of his inability to connect with his own painful past. New York City's history, in other words, enables Julius to hide behind a mask of compassion for others. Julius notes that he presents himself as "the listener, the compassionate African who paid attention to the details of someone else's life and struggle. I had fallen in love with that idea of myself" (70). Put differently, Julius rather consumes himself in the struggles and traumas of others, such as the slaves that lived in the city centuries ago, to convince himself that he is actually a good person at heart. Thus, New York City has been indelibly shaped by its painful past that has left an open wound that slides across the city. Julius, similarly, has an open wound; a perpetrator's trauma, that he tries to conceal by focusing on the city's traumas. New York City, thus, functions as a Third Space that enables Julius to forge an identity from the bits and pieces that he allows to be part of himself. This is congruent with Bhabha's argument that liminal, 'in-between' spaces enable people to attain selfhood and initiate new signs of identity (Bhabha 2). Thus, the examples illustrate that Julius' focus of New York City's history allow him to reregister his ancestors experiences with colonial oppression and, more importantly, it enables him to suppress his own painful memories.

Julius' identity is composed of Nigerian, German, and American influences, which entails that he is 'in-between' – and embraces – multiple cultures, which strengthen Julius' ability to interpret and navigate through New York City and its history. Julius is an immigrant-outsider in the perfect position to note the multi-layered nature and history of the city, which becomes evident from his extensive cultural and historical awareness. Julius, for instance, notes during a walk that the terrorist attacks of 9/11 "were not the first erasure on the site" (Cole 58). The site that is now referred to as Ground Zero, after all, used to have other purposes. Before the building of the Twin Towers in the 1960s, the site was home to bustling little streets that had to make way for the aforementioned towers. Even before this, in the nineteenth century, Washington Market and the Syrian enclave were located here and, before that, the Lenape had inhabited the site (59). Julius reflects on this, because he "wanted to find the line that connected [him] to [his] own part in these stories" (59). Put differently, the common denominator here is that all these people and their histories have been forgotten; they have been replaced or displaced. Julius is aware of those displaced groups, because displacement and oppression are part of his own history and identity and, therefore, he can

relate to those that have been rendered invisible in contemporary New York City. This notion is reinforced by Julius' memory of his only deep conversation with his mother who explained that WWII had brought indelible sufferings upon her and Julius' grandmother. Julius' grandmother lived in Berlin when the Russians took over the city in May 1945, and it was likely that she was one of the countless victims of rape by the men of the Red Army (80). His mother, born in the wake of WWII, grew up fatherless in a country recovering from war and, therefore, her childhood was marked by poverty, bitterness, and war-trauma. Trauma and suffering are, consequently, part of Julius' identity too. Julius' realization that he is the "unaware continuation" (80) of a world that has been largely destroyed by a war decades ago underscores this as well, for the consequences of this war live on in Julius. Thus, because of his German ancestry, Julius is particularly sensitive to narratives of trauma and suffering, and, therefore, he is able to interpret and navigate through a city built on layers of suffering and displacement. In sum, Julius' hybrid identity allows him to roam his, what Bhabha refers to as, "interstitial space"; it allows him to shift back and forth between cultures and communities, which enable him to understand and navigate through a Third Space, such as New York City.

Ifemelu's identity formation, dissimilar to Julius' identity formation, develops through three distinct stages. Stage one comprises Ifemelu's childhood and adolescence in which her identity is rooted in and tied to her homeland, Nigeria. Stage two comprises Ifemelu's early adulthood in America, where her identity is primarily shaped through immigration and assimilation into her new homeland, which makes it a hybrid of Nigerian and American influences. The last stage involves a return to Nigeria where Ifemelu gradually reconnects with Nigerian culture and, consequently, her identity has become transnational and, therefore, it cannot be tied to a single geography any longer. Stage two is particularly interesting in light of Bhabha's conceptualization of mimicry, because Ifemelu initially conducts the strategy of mimicry in an attempt to fit into American society. This comes to the fore in Ifemelu's mannerism and looks that she adapts to American, or Western, standards. Ifemelu begins practicing an American accent after a humiliating incident during registration-day at university. Ifemelu's foreign accent had propelled Christina Thomas, responsible for registering international students, to treat her condescendingly by speaking extremely slow (Adichie 133). It demonstrates that, to be taken seriously in the US, Ifemelu needs to speak with an American accent, because this is considered to be the norm. Ifemelu, subsequently, perfects "the blurring of the t, the creamy roll of the r, the sentences starting with "So," and the sliding response of "Oh, really"" from carefully watching her friends and newscasters on

tv (173). Ifemelu, here, purposely mimics an American accent in order to be included into American society. She, however, is well aware that it is “an act of will,” (173) for it is not her own, real accent with which she grew up in Nigeria. Later, Ifemelu also relaxes her naturally kinky hair – a painful and oppressive treatment – that makes her hair smooth and sleek, similar to the hair-style of her white counterparts. This should increase Ifemelu’s chances of obtaining a job, for kinky hair is deemed to be “unprofessional” in America (119). This all suggests the oppressive power of white America that eventually forces Ifemelu to subdue her Africanness in order to fully assimilate into American society. It must be noted, however, that Ifemelu – even though she is increasingly adhering to white norms – does not desire to become white; it is merely a way to get accepted by her white, American counterparts. Thus, Ifemelu consciously imitates and adopts Western ideals of beauty and behavior, stripping herself of her Africanness, to become, in Bhabha’s words, almost the same as white Americans, but not quite.

Ifemelu, however, grows increasingly unhappy with the American façade that has oppressed her true self and, consequently, she gradually reclaims her African identity, which makes her identity culturally hybrid. The reclaiming of Ifemelu’s African identity includes using her Nigerian English accent again and growing back her natural, kinky hair. Ifemelu makes the deliberate choice to quit her unnatural American accent – an act that has “taken on, for too long, a pitch of voice and a way of being that was not hers” (Adichie 175) – as a means to reclaim her African identity. She also regrets relaxing her hair, because “she did not recognize herself [and] the smell of burning [hair], of something organic dying which should not have died, had made her feel a sense of loss” (203). It illustrates that Ifemelu’s hair is a large part of her identity that is now gone and, therefore, cutting her relaxed-hair and letting it grow back naturally helps her to reclaim her African identity. Ifemelu, in other words, purposely adopts a hybrid identity that comprises both American *and* Nigerian culture to resist white oppressive norms of beauty and behavior. This coincides with Bhabha’s notion that a hybrid identity serves to subvert political, economic, and ideological power structures. America, then, functions as a Third Space from which Ifemelu’s new identity emerges. Even though these changes have brought Ifemelu closer to her true self, she still feels incomplete; unable to become her true self. Ifemelu, subsequently, decides to end her blog, as it makes her feel “naked and false” (6). Ifemelu also decides to return to Nigeria – where she believes she can actually be her true self. Upon arrival in Nigeria, however, it becomes evident that Ifemelu has changed: “Had buildings in Lagos always had this patina of decay? (...) Had it always been like this or had it changed so much in her absence?” (385). Ifemelu, in other

words, has to adjust to Lagos, because the city has changed, but, more importantly, her immigrant experience and subsequent life in the US have transformed her identity and, as such, it is not tied to one nation or culture anymore. This notion is reinforced by Ranyinundo's teasing remarks: "Americanah! (...) You [Ifemelu] are looking at things with American eyes" (385). Ifemelu, indeed, as the term denotes, is an Americanized returnee who, initially, seems to have lost touch with Nigerian culture. This does not entail that Ifemelu is devoid of a national identity; rather, it entails that her identity is in the process of becoming transnational. Ifemelu, soon reconnects with Nigerian culture, the city of Lagos and, more importantly, with her high school sweetheart, Obinze, which underscores her ability to construct an identity from various nationalist and cultural discourses. Ifemelu's transnational identity, in other words, goes beyond a postcolonial identity of resistance, for post-colonialism is insufficient to fully understand the complexity of the multi-faceted integration of ideologies and cultures that have form Ifemelu's fluid identity in Lagos. Thus, Ifemelu's return to her once colonial homeland should be viewed from a transnational perspective rather than a post-colonial one, for it reveals and highlights the clashes between national cultures that are inherent in Ifemelu's transnational identity. In sum, in Nigeria, Ifemelu exclusively tied herself to Nigerian culture, but after her migration to the US, Ifemelu enters a Third Space, that allows her to incorporate American and, later, Nigerian culture into a hybrid identity. When Ifemelu returns to Nigeria, however, she adopts a multicultural perspective that makes her identity transnational.

2.2 Black Diasporic Identity in Open City and Americanah

Stuart Hall centralizes the diaspora in his theoretical approach of cultural identity. Hall has identified key features that characterize a black diasporic identity. The traditional notion that people with the same roots, all Africans for example, share a collective identity is one of the key features of such an identity. Another, more important and complex, key feature focusses on the differences between those people that share a collective identity, for individual identity formations have been subject to the play of history, culture, and power and, therefore, cultural identity is not a static process. Interestingly, Hall's conception of a black diasporic identity, then, is similar to Bhabha's conception of a hybrid identity, for both concepts imply a critique on Western concepts, such as, multiculturalism. This Western concept, according to Bhabha, suggest that cultures are fixed, bordered and, therefore, impermeable. Multiculturalism, moreover, according to Sharmani Patricia Gabriel, disregards "the exchanges, crossings and

complex identity ‘routes’ set into play by diaspora, when different groups of people come to live and interact together, sharing one nation” (Gabriel par. 30). Put differently, an ambivalent relationship exists between multiculturalism and black diaspora, and this subchapter specifically focusses on the differences between black diasporic communities in the US. Different experiences, after all, produce differences in cultural identity across different black diasporic communities and, consequently, Julius and Ifemelu’s identities emerge from difference rather than commonality.

Hall’s claim that a black diasporic identity is composed of experiences that are similar, yet at the same time different, is applicable to Julius, because he forms his identity in opposition to the other African immigrants he encounters, which underscores their differences rather than their similarities. Julius’ encounter with an African cab driver and, later, with the African clerk in the post office exemplify this. During the first encounter, Julius fails to greet his cab driver who reprimands Julius for this and notes: “Hey, I’m African just like you, why you do this?” (Cole 40). The cab driver, here, expects Julius to greet him warmly, for their shared African ancestry should foster a bond between the two. This angers Julius, as he is not in the mood for people who try to “lay claims” on him (40). Julius, in other words, distances himself from the attempt of the cab driver to establish a connection with him based on the fact that they both have African roots. Julius, in fact, resents this presupposed and involuntary belonging to a group that supposedly shares a collective identity characterized by oppression and racism. Julius’ subsequent encounter with the African clerk at the post office who, to Julius’ dismay, repeatedly calls him ‘brother’ underscores this too. The man explains that he is African and could tell that Julius was also from the “Motherland” – Africa (186). Julius is agitated by the man’s comment, and his contempt for classification propels him to avoid this post office in the future. Julius, again, distances himself from a well-intentioned African ‘brother’ who seeks a connection with Julius based on them both being from the same continent. Put differently, Julius constantly resists and denies his ties to the ‘African brotherhood’ in New York City, for ancestry and gender are not factors that automatically foster brotherly kinship in Julius’ eyes. Julius, after all, is a biracial, educated immigrant in the US and, consequently, his experiences differs from the lower-educated ‘brothers’ he encounters. Class, in other words, is an important factor for Julius in the formation of his identity. Thus, Julius persistently denies his ‘natural’ connection to other African men, which forces him to forge an identity in opposition to those men that do actually acknowledge and embrace their shared cultural identity.

Julius also forms his identity in opposition to the African-Americans he encounters,

which underscores the notion that blackness does not necessarily foster a bond among all black men. A person's black skin color, indeed, automatically makes him a member of the 'black brotherhood' in the US, which illustrates that race and identity are inextricably linked. *Open City*, however, demonstrates that the 'black brotherhood' alliance is precarious, because Julius' black skin did not protect him from a violent robbery executed by fellow black men. Prior to the robbery, Julius had made eye-contact with two of his assailants, and, subsequently, he had given them the brotherly 'nod' – "a gesture of mutual respect based on our being young, black, male; based (...) on our being "brothers"" (Cole 212). Based on this 'nod,' Julius could have never anticipated that these men would violently rob him, for these men were supposedly Julius' 'brothers'. The robbers, therefore, did not only violate Julius' body and sense of safety, more importantly, they violated their brotherly bond and all it stands for, which shows that this supposedly tight-knit community is, in fact, very dangerous and self-destructive. This traumatic incident, consequently, distances Julius even further from his black counterparts, as this savage attack does not correspond with the civilized image he has of himself. Thus, after the attack, Julius is unable to identify himself with people with whom he shares the same skin color and, therefore, in order to abate a full identity-crisis, he forges a cultural identity in opposition to the black men he has encountered. This correlates with Hall's observation that cultural identity is always changing, because people will always change. Julius is profoundly affected by the robbery and, as a result, the formation of his cultural identity is influenced accordingly. In sum, Julius' identity does not emerge from commonality, but from differences in experience, because the more African or black 'brothers' Julius meets, the more differences between him and 'them' prevail.

Hall's theory of cultural identity essentially means that a universal African identity, solely based on a collective experience, does not exist, for identity is always subject to external forces, such as the place a person grew up in. Ifemelu and her African-American boyfriend Blaine exemplify this, because, despite their shared African ancestry and similar skin-tone, their different experiences of growing up in Nigeria and the US respectively have produced different cultural identities. Their experiences with race and racism, for example, differ, and, therefore, both react differently to race-related incidents. The fragment in which a white woman asks if she can touch Ifemelu's hair exemplifies how sensitivity regarding the subject of race differs for African-Americans and American-Africans in the US. Ifemelu allows the woman standing in line behind her and Blaine in the grocery store to touch her hair. Ifemelu sees no harm in this, because the woman might not know any black people, and this may be her only opportunity to touch Afro hair (Adichie 313). Blaine, in contrast, has a

very strong reaction to this, because Ifemelu is not a “guinea pig” for white people to ‘experiment’ on (313). Put differently, Blaine, drawing from his life-experiences as an African-American living in the US, considers the woman’s act to be racially insensitive, as actions of well-intentioned Americans can perpetuate racism without them realizing it, and Blaine is very much aware of this. It, moreover, shows the extent to which race is part of Blaine’s identity. Ifemelu’s reaction reinforces the idea that outside of the US, such acts are not necessarily frowned upon, and Ifemelu’s inability to understand Blaine’s reaction underscores this: “[H]e expected her [Ifemelu] to feel what she did not know how to feel. There were things that existed for him that she could not penetrate” (313). Ifemelu, after all, grew up in Nigeria and only recently moved to the US and, therefore, she has completely different life-experiences than Blaine. This also comes to the fore in another race-related incident. Blaine angrily tells Ifemelu about an occurrence of systemic racism at Yale University. Mr. White, a black security guard at the university’s library, and his black friend exchanged car-keys and money in front of the library. A white library-employee had seen this and mistaken the exchange for a drug deal. The white man, subsequently, called the police who then escorted Mr. White to the police station. The university brushed off the incident as “a simple mistake that wasn’t racial at all” (343). In a response to this, Blaine decides to organize a protest in front of the library and, again, Ifemelu has difficulty understanding Blaine’s strong reaction. Ifemelu fails to fully understand how problematic and prevalent racial prejudices are in the US. These instances of racism are, after all, particularly prevalent in the US and rather uncommon in Nigeria and, consequently, they have intrinsically shaped Blaine’s identity.

Blaine, in turn, does not understand how Ifemelu is not as affected as he is when confronted with instances of racism. Blaine, for instance, did not even ask Ifemelu if she wanted to join him in the aforementioned protest, because he simply assumed she would come. Ifemelu, however, does not want to protest and, in an act of rebellion, decides to choose a lunch event over Blaine’s protest. From Blaine’s angry response concerning Ifemelu’s absence at the protest, Ifemelu deduces “a subtle accusation (...) about her Africanness; she was not sufficiently furious because she was African, not African-American” (Adichie 345). It suggests that Ifemelu realizes that Blaine believes her to be an outsider to the sufferings of racism that African-Americans still have to endure. Ifemelu, in other words, is unfamiliar with the experience of hundreds of years of African-American oppression in the US and, therefore, she cannot fully understand Blaine’s anger about racism. Blaine, furthermore, does not understand Ifemelu’s friendship with the Senegalese professor Boubacar. Ifemelu feels

connected to Boubacar, because he “spoke the same silent language she did” (338). They are, indeed, both from former African colonies and, consequently, they share similar experiences that are foreign to African-Americans. Ifemelu and Boubacar, for example, joke about “how thin-skinned they [Africans] had become, too aware of European slights, and yet too enamored of Europeanness” (340). Put differently, Ifemelu and Boubacar bond over the recognition that colonization has irrevocably put its stamp on Africa, and they laugh about how it has changed Africans. It demonstrates that Ifemelu connects with Boubacar in a way that she cannot connect with Blaine, for the latter has not lived in post-colonial Africa and, therefore, he does not have this particular experience that has profoundly shaped Ifemelu’s cultural identity. Thus, one universal or black culture does not exist; as Bhabha pleads, all cultures should be perceived as hybrid. Similarly, one universal African or black identity does not exist, because all black diasporic communities – African-American or American-African – have different historical and cultural experiences that produce different cultural identities across these communities.

2.3 Afropolitan identity in *Open City* and *Americanah*

Afropolitanism is another concept that can be used to examine the identity formation of the protagonists in *Open City* and *Americanah*. Taiye Selasi defines the newest generation of African emigrants that have sprawled over the world as Afropolitans. These people are, amongst other things, characterized by their back-and-forth crossings of transnational borders, their fluid global citizenship, and their ability to feel at home in different places. Both Julius and Ifemelu can be considered Afropolitan for Julius’ identity is largely shaped by his cross-cultural border-crossings and his ties to multiple cultures and countries, whereas Ifemelu’s identity is primarily shaped through her redefinition of what it means to be African and her willingness to complicate Africa as well as her celebration of her African roots.

Julius literally travels across three continents within a year: from Africa to America to Europe and back to America, but, more importantly, he crosses borders across space and time that tie him to three different continents: Africa, Europe, and America, which has profoundly influenced his identity. *Open City* is permeated with geographical, spatial, and historical border crossings both outside and within New York City. This becomes evident from Julius’ reflections that are triggered during his walks in New York City. Julius walks the streets of, as the title suggests, an ‘open city,’ which implies that New York City particularly allows for spatial mobility, as it is a ‘borderless’ city. Julius’ conversations with Liberian refugee Saidu

in a detention facility in Queens and the Haitian shoe-shiner Pierre at Penn Station exemplify this, for they take Julius to Africa, Europe, the Caribbean and back to America. Saidu explains to Julius that he fled Liberia to escape the Liberian Civil Wars (1989-1996 and 1999-2003) and wanted to go to America (Cole 65-66). He, subsequently, recounts his escape route that took several years and brought him to Guinea, Spain, Portugal, and – finally – America. This conversation allows Julius to cross American ‘borders’ in space and time and follow Saidu’s transnational escape-route from Africa to Europe to America. Pierre, similarly, tells Julius his story of escape from the Caribbean to America. The shoe-shiner explains with “the faint trace of a Caribbean French accent” in his voice that his country has suffered under the hands of Bonaparte and Boukman (77). Pierre, here, refers to the Haitian Revolution from 1791-1804 (Shen). This story enables Julius to mentally cross borders into the Caribbean of two centuries ago. Both instances demonstrate that Julius’ border crossings across space and time often have to do with the African diaspora and migration of which he himself is part as well. It illustrates that, even though America is Julius’ new homeland, he remains an outsider; a detached observer of New York City, and the people he meets and converses with constantly pull him back to Africa and the African diaspora. Julius, again, presents himself as a registrar: not for New York City’s multi-layered history, but for African immigrant experiences, and all these experiences somehow relate to his own immigrant-experience, which, consequently, contribute to the formation of Julius’ own identity. This correlates with Selasi’s claim that the Afropolitan identity is characterized by a blend of African roots and European or American influences. Thus, besides Julius’ physical border-crossings, these examples illustrate that Julius – via his conversations with fellow, less fortunate immigrants – mentally crosses even more transnational borders that reinforce his sense of self and, subsequently, make him an ‘African of the world.’

Julius’ ties to multiple cultures and nations enable him to maneuver within and beyond European, African, and American cultures and, subsequently, it expands his perspective on nation, selfhood, and the contemporary global transnational world. Julius is very knowledgeable about European, African, and American culture, which becomes evident from his observations about music, films, and history. Julius’ coincidental visit to American music store *Tower Records*, for instance, always reminds him of European classical music. The store plays European music on the second floor, and Julius immediately recognizes the songs: from a birthday ode to Queen Mary played by the British Henry Purcell to, his favorite, the late symphony *Das Lied von der Erde* played by the Austrian Gustav Mahler (Cole 17). The sounds and sights of New York City often remind Julius of classical European music, which

illustrates Julius' ability to hear and see European cultural artifacts in America. Julius' visit to the cinema, where he watches *The Last King of Scotland* about Idi Amin's rule in Uganda, also exemplifies this. Before the film begins, Julius recollects an earlier visit to this theater where he watched an American film about Africa and, although the film's music was from the right time period, it was not from the right part of Africa: "[W]hat had Mali to do with Kenya?" (29). Julius, as an African, is aware of the cultural differences between African countries and, therefore, he immediately heard that the music originated from Mali, not Kenya – a cultural difference the filmmaker, who is probably not African, might not have been aware of. As *The Last King of Scotland* begins, it immediately triggers memories of Julius' childhood when he and his cousins watched the film *The Rise and Fall of Idi Amin*, a film that portrayed decapitated bodies and gruesome killings in great detail – “images that were genuinely shocking” dissimilar to the “blood-spattered American war movies” (29). Julius' knowledge of both African and American films allows him to draw comparisons and perceive subtle differences that others might not notice. Thus, as a Nigerian-German man living in America, Julius is ‘in-between’ multiple cultures, which enables him to easily move within and beyond the boundaries of European, African, and American culture. As a result, Julius' identity is not grounded in either Africa, Europe, or America, but in all of these cultures. This notion fits with Selasi's claim that Afropolitans face the difficult, yet privileged, task to forge an identity from a variety of sources. It must be noted, however, that Julius' ‘in-betweenness,’ here, differs from Bhabha's liminal, in-between Third Space, for Bhabha's Third Space relates to the disruption of colonial power: it is a space in which two opposing cultures – the culture of the colonizer and the culture of the colonized – grapple with differences to ultimately form a new hybrid culture or identity that disrupts colonial power. Julius' identity, here, is merely marked by an ‘in-betweenness,’ for he draws from widely disparate sources, such as different cultures, nations, and histories to forge his own identity. Thus, Julius' in-betweenness illustrates that he cannot be tied to one nation only, and it helps him maneuver within and beyond European, African, and American cultures, which enable him to thoroughly comprehend the contemporary global transnational world.

Ifemelu, similar to Julius, can also be regarded as Afropolitan, not because she travels across three continents – she only travels between Nigeria and the US – but because Afropolitans redefine what it means to be African in the twenty-first century, and, in the process, they subvert Western notions of national identity. Ifemelu's immigrant experience, her life in the US, and her subsequent return to Nigeria make Ifemelu an Afropolitan forging an identity from widely disparate sources that ultimately make her a transnational citizen,

rather than a American or a Nigerian. Ifemelu's controversial blogpost addressing the Nigeropolitan Club, a group of Nigerian returnees in Lagos, exemplifies this. In this blogpost, Ifemelu criticizes the Nigerian returnees who constantly compare Lagos with New York. "Lagos," Ifemelu explains, "has never been, will never be, and has never aspired to be like New York," and while most returnees came back with the best intentions of starting businesses or changing the country, they spend "all [their] time complaining about Nigeria" (Adichie 421). By pointing out that "Lagos will never be like New York," Ifemelu underscores the fact that the Nigerian city will never be, nor does it desire to become, another epitome of Western culture, because Lagos is, and will always be, a non-Western city. Lagos, therefore, does not have to resemble New York and comparing it to a Western city is futile. The returnees, similarly, do not have to assimilate into one single culture, or tie themselves to one country, and they do not have to mimic Americans either; rather, they should celebrate their hybridity and the ability to feel at home in multiple cultures and countries. With this blogpost, Ifemelu tries to subvert the Western ideals and notions regarding national identity that prevail the lives of the returnees. It, consequently, also demonstrates that Ifemelu, dissimilar to other returnees, understands that the fusing of her national and cultural identities into a transnational identity allow her to find pride in her country. Selasi argues that this multidimensional thinking and redefining of Africanness is necessary for Afropolitans to make sense of themselves and, as such, it is exactly what makes Ifemelu Afropolitan. Thus, the twenty-first century Afropolitans debunk the Western notions that national identity has to be tied to one geographic location, which is in line with Bhabha's argumentation concerning identity formation. Ifemelu, instead, centralizes the importance of migration vis-a-vis returning to the homeland for the development of transnational hybrid identities.

Afropolitans, moreover, refuse to oversimplify Africa; rather, they celebrate their roots and the continent's cultural complexity. Ifemelu's observations serve as a vehicle to critique American one-dimensional notions of 'Africa' and 'Africans'. This becomes particularly evident from Ifemelu's interaction with Kimberly, Ifemelu's employer, and her sister Laura. Kimberly, for example, points out a dark-skinned, plain-looking model in a magazine and exclaims: "Oh, look at this beautiful woman" (Adichie 146) – a remark, Ifemelu later realizes, Kimberly uses for all black women. Ifemelu responds that Kimberly can "just say black" and that not "every black person is beautiful" (147). Ifemelu, here, exposes Kimberly's inability to talk about race, for she rather enunciates a 'color-blind' remark. Kimberly, after all, would point everything out, except for the woman's only distinguishing feature – her skin color. Such 'color-blind' remarks, moreover, actually perpetuate racism, because it reduces black

women to just “beautiful” stripping them from all their other distinguishing qualities. In another instance, Laura, Kimberly’s sister, tells Ifemelu and Kimberly about a Nigerian doctor who was “wonderful, so well-groomed and well-spoken”; Laura, subsequently, remarks that he and Ifemelu belong to the privileged Nigerians, dissimilar to the “millions who live on less than a dollar” back in Nigeria (168). This is a very stereotypical and problematic remark, because, firstly, it illustrates Laura’s underlying assumption that she did not expect African doctors to be well-groomed and well-spoken, and, secondly, she assumes that Nigeria, and Africa by extension, is predominantly inhabited by the poverty-stricken proletariat of the world unable to take care of themselves. Laura later adds that she once knew a Ugandan woman in graduate school who, to her surprise, could not get along with the only African-American woman in class (168). Laura, here, implies that all black people are somehow related to Africa and, naturally, they should get along. It is a problematic statement, because it suggests that Africa is one, large homogenous country, rather than a continent that consists of many different countries and cultures. Ifemelu responds that Laura’s generalizing comments are too simplistic to make, which correlates to Selasi’s claim that Afropolitans complicate Africa because “the media’s portrayals (war, hunger) won’t do. Neither will the New World trope of bumbling, blue-black doctor” (Selasi par. 8). Thus, Ifemelu exposes Kimberly’s discomfort with talking about race and Laura’s stereotypical ideas about Africa and Africans that perpetuate racist assumptions about Africa. In sum, Ifemelu refuses to essentialize Africa; rather, she seeks to centralize its cultural complexity to debunk Kimberly and Laura’s misconceptions about Africa and Africans.

In conclusion, this chapter has explored the conceptions of Bhabha, Hall, and Selasi regarding identity and identity construction in *Open City* and *Americanah*. Bhabha’s conceptualization of hybridity and Third Space have been very useful to gain a better understanding of Julius’ identity formation. Julius’ hybrid identity is the product of his German-Nigerian ancestry and his immigration to New York City. The latter, moreover, functions as a Third Space that facilitates Julius’ identity formation. The concepts of hybridity, Third Space, and mimicry have primarily been useful for the analysis of Ifemelu’s hybrid identity, yet they are insufficient to gain a better understanding of Ifemelu’s transnational identity that is characterized by her fluid global citizenship. Ifemelu’s immigration and assimilation into the US have shaped her hybrid American-Nigerian identity. America, then, similar to New York City in Julius’ case, functions as a Third Space that facilitated Ifemelu’s identity formation. This correlates with Hall’s claim that America can be

conceptualized as the site of the 'New World' – a place where cultures meet; where Africa meets the West – where cultural confrontations are rife and new cultures begin (224-225). The site in itself is, therefore, a site of hybridity and diaspora. Put differently, the fact that America was the 'New World' in which all of the 'Old World' came together and grappled with each other makes America a contact zone that particularly allows for the development of hybrid identities. Julius's inability to reconnect with his own past entails that he is stuck roaming the streets of New York City, which affects his identity formation. It, in fact, might actually impede Julius from adopting a fully transnational identity. Ifemelu, dissimilar to Julius, does not stay in the US, as she returns to Nigeria where her identity actually does transition into a transnational identity. As a result, post-colonial theory, here, is very useful to gain a thorough understanding of Julius' identity formation, but it proves to be insufficient in gaining a deeper understanding of the complexities and forces at work in a transnational identity, such as that of Ifemelu.

Hall's conceptions concerning cultural identity have also been useful for the analysis of Julius and Ifemelu's identity formation. Julius forges his identity in opposition to other Africans and African-Americans, because having a shared ancestry or the same skin color do not make up for the individual differences between Julius and his African and black counterparts. Ifemelu, similarly, forges her identity in opposition to the African-Americans she encounters, for her experiences with race and racism differ greatly from that of African-Americans. This illustrates that Julius and Ifemelu's cultural identities emerge from cultural and historical differences rather than commonalities. In sum, Hall's argument that a universal African or black identity, solely based on a collective experience, does not exist corresponds with Julius and Ifemelu's identity formation.

Telasi's conceptualization of an Afropolitan identity has also been very useful for Julius and Ifemelu's identity formation. Both protagonists' identity formations align with the characteristics of an Afropolitan identity. Julius' identity is predominantly influenced by his biracial background, his transnational border-crossings across space and time, and his ties to multiple cultures and nations. Ifemelu's identity, in contrast, is primarily shaped through her redefinition of what it means to be African in this day and age and her willingness to complicate and celebrate Africa. Both Julius and Ifemelu, in other words, subvert western notions of national identity and belonging, for a national identity involves an emotional and cultural experience of where one feels at home. It, therefore, has nothing to do with geography. It must be noted, however, that even though both protagonist can be considered twenty-first century Afropolitans, Julius' inability of reconnecting with his trauma actually

inhibits him of enjoying all the benefits and reaching the full potential of an Afropolitan. Julius, as noted, aimlessly wanders the streets of New York unable to connect to the city or his past, which makes him seem rootless, while, at the same time having some ties to different nations and cultures. Selasi calls this being “lost in transnation;” it refers to the rootlessness of people who move from one culture to another and, therefore, they could have roots everywhere, but they end up with roots nowhere. This contrasts sharply with Ifemelu’s identity formation, who has roots in both the US and Nigeria. Ifemelu, in fact, re-roots herself in Nigeria and, consequently, she finds pride in her native homeland. An Afropolitan identity, therefore, aligns much more with a transnational identity compared to a hybrid identity. In sum, postcolonial theory, alone and in itself, proves to be insufficient for a thorough analysis of the complexities inherent in the protagonists’ multi-layered identity formations.

3. **Becoming Black in America: The Construction of Race in the US in *Open City* and *Americanah***

The construction of race as well as the protagonists' racial identities are at the center of *Open City* and *Americanah*. As noted in chapter two, Julius and Ifemelu are outsiders in American society and, more specifically, they are outsiders of American race politics. Julius and Ifemelu are unfamiliar with the American concept of race and, therefore, a large part of their individual identity struggles involve grappling with what it means to be black in America. This chapter examines the construction of race, the racial hierarchy, and racism in America as well as their effects on the protagonists' respective racial identities. The chapter will illustrate that Cole represents the construction of race in the US through the racial project of stereotyping; through highlighting the importance of racial categories in America; and through revealing attitudes towards race and racism in New York City. Adichie, partly similar to Cole, represents the construction of race through the racial project of exposing American 'common sense' assumptions about race; through her shrewd observations of particularly white, liberal, middle-class American attitudes concerning race; and through revealing the fact that Americans tend to 'not deal' with race in an attempt to handle the sensitive subject.

This chapter is also divided in three subchapters. Subchapter one analyses Omi and Winant's conceptualization of racial projects and racial formation in *Open City* and *Americanah*. Racial 'common sense' is a concept that Omi and Winant use extensively, and it, therefore, deserves clarification. Racial 'common sense' refers to the notion that race has become a way for people to comprehend, explain, and act in the world around them (Omi and Winant 106). Put differently, people associate certain characteristics, behavior, and attitudes with people with a particular physical appearance. Subchapter two explores two related concepts – 'The White Savior Industrial Complex' and the 'White Savior' – in both novels. The final subchapter examines two American perspectives on race and racism: one diminishes the seriousness of racism and the other denies its existence altogether. All subchapters, similar to the previous chapter, focus on the analysis of *Open City* first after which *Americanah* will be discussed.

3.1 Racial formation in *Open City* and *Americanah*

Michael Omi and Howard Winant developed the racial formation theory to explore race as a socially constructed concept. The scholars explain that racial projects are key to understanding the dominant and mainstream formations of race in society. They define racial projects as “an [simultaneous] interpretation, representation, and explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines” (Omi and Winant 56). Racial projects, in other words, are representations of race in popular culture, language, ideas, and social interaction that attribute meaning to race and define its role within society. These racial projects, therefore, underlie the racial formation theory, and they are present on both a micro and macro-level in society. Racial projects, although in different forms, also play a pivotal role in *Open City* and *Americanah*. In the former, the construction of race becomes evident through the racial project of racial stereotypes, whereas, in the latter, racial formation is made apparent through the racial project of exposing ‘common-sense’ assumptions about race.

Stereotyping is a racial project that operates on a micro-level, for it shapes people’s ‘common sense’ assumptions regarding race in every-day life. Stereotyping reinforces Julius’ status as the racialized immigrant, which illustrates that racism is all pervasive in American society. Julius’ encounter with two racist “out-of-town” teenagers illustrates this. The teenagers first ask Julius: “Hey mister (...) Wassup?” (Cole 31). The pair then proceed to ask Julius if he is a gangster – “[A]re you a gangster mister?” – while they both flash, what they believe to be, gang signs (31). The girl, subsequently, notes that Julius is black, yet to her surprise he is not “dressed like a gangster” to which her brother replies that he bets Julius is a gangster anyway (32). First, this example demonstrates the teenagers’ ignorance, because they think it is funny to stereotype Julius as a “gangster” solely based on his skin color. This is a common stereotype of black men that is often perpetuated through media representations and music and, therefore, all black men are probably gangsters in the teenagers’ eyes. Julius, however, is anything but a gangster, as he is a highly-educated biracial German-Nigerian, but to those teenagers he is only one thing: black, which equals ‘gangster.’ Secondly, the fact that the pair assume that Julius only speaks slang – “Wassup” – and would be familiar with gang signs, underscores the teens’ deep-rooted prejudices against black men. Thirdly, noting that Julius is “black” but does not dress “like a gangster” illustrates that the girl has a preconceived notion of how black people are supposed to dress, and Julius is not dressed in accordance with his skin-color, hereby disrupting the teen’s ‘common sense’ assumptions

concerning blackness. This aligns with Omi and Winant's notion that people's interpretation of racial meaning depends on preconceived notions of a racialized social structure (Omi and Winant 59). The brother and sister's behavior, moreover, is racist, because their demeaning remarks show that they do not perceive Julius as a fellow human-being, but rather as a stereotype, or, in other words, as 'other.' This coincides with Omi and Winant's claim that racism creates or reproduces structures of domination based on essentialist categories of race (Omi and Winant 71). Thus, Julius' racialization as a 'black gangers' illustrates the extent to which American society is structured along the lines of race.

Julius did not feel at home in predominantly 'black' Nigeria, because of his 'light' skin-color, yet he is immediately racialized as 'black' in the US, which reinforces the notion that race is a social construct particularly prevalent in the US. Julius' recollections of his life in Nigeria exemplify that he always felt different from his 'fully' Nigerian counterparts. Julius explains that "[T]he name Julius linked me to another place and was, with my passport and my skin color, one of the intensifiers of my sense of being different (...) not being fully Nigerian" (Cole 78). Put differently, Julius' German first name, his 'brown' skin-color, and his passport are all evidence of the biracialism that sets Julius apart from full-blooded Nigerians. Julius, moreover, explains that he never uses his Yoruba middle name, which demonstrates that Julius does not identify with either a German or a Nigerian cultural identity. Julius' lack of a sense of belonging is also underscored by the fact that Nigerians perceive his light-colored skin to be a marker of wealth and, therefore, they see him as different. Julius' music teacher at the Nigerian Military School, for example, perceives Julius as a "half-Nigerian, a foreigner" which the man equates with "swimming lessons, summer trips to London, domestic staff" (83). The music teacher, here, makes a clear connection between Julius' skin-color and wealth. In a similar experience, Julius and his aunt go to a tailor's shop in a "sprawling slum," clearly a poor part of the city, where children stared at Julius and his aunt, because "from their point of view, [they] would have represented unimaginable wealth and privilege, an impression strengthened by [Julius'] "whiteness""(223). It shows that Julius feels, and is perceived to be, different in Nigeria, because he is not dark enough to be considered Nigerian. It must be noted, however, that Julius' has never been racialized as white in Nigeria. In the US, in contrast, Julius also feels, and is perceived to be, different, for he is considered black – a concept he is unfamiliar with. This correlates to Omi and Winant's notion that there is always a connection between people's conception of race and the manner in which they perceive a social structure with its own laws, customs, and threats (Omi and Winant 59). Julius, however, does not define himself by his race, for his skin-color merely

indicates that his roots lie in two different countries. Thus, Julius, similar to Ifemelu, does not think of himself as white nor does he think of himself as black; these racial categories are not prevalent in Nigeria and, therefore, Julius only became black when he came to America.

Exposing the construction of race and the racial hierarchy in America lie at the heart of *Americanah*. Ifemelu, similar to Julius, is an outsider to America's race politics: "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" (Adichie 290). Ifemelu, indeed, gradually learns what it means to be black in America – an experience that she foregrounds and critically reflects upon in her anonymous blog *Raceteenth: Or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*. In the blogpost "To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: In America You are Black Baby," Ifemelu illustrates that Americans automatically racialize people into racial categories – most notably 'black' and 'white' – irrespective of people's origin. These racial categories are not irrelevant, because whiteness and blackness have very different connotations, and they determine a person's place on America's race ladder. This is also highlighted in another blogpost, "Understanding America for the Non-American Black: American Tribalism," in which Ifemelu explains that class (rich vs. poor), ideology (liberal vs. conservative), region (North vs. South), and race constitute America's tribalism, or, the main groups in which American society is divided (184). Americans assume that everyone will understand this, and, similarly, everyone is expected to understand the American ladder of racial hierarchy that is implicitly interwoven in and determines one's place in American society. Ifemelu, furthermore, rightfully notes in "Understanding America for the Non-American Black: What Do WASPs Aspire To?" that the differentiating between white and black people in America matters, because of white 'privilege.' Being white, after all, is associated with opportunities, while being black is associated with disadvantage and, therefore, many blacks aspire to the privileges of whiteness (205). This notion is reinforced in the blogpost "Why Dark-Skinned Black Women – Both American and Non-American – Love Barack Obama". Ifemelu states that having light-colored skin is still very much valued among American blacks (214). This is partly due to the media, Ifemelu explains, as today's successful American black entertainers or public speakers are all light-skinned. In popular culture, similarly, light-skinned black women are the norm and "beautiful dark women are invisible," as they only feature in supporting roles; as the sidekick of the white woman; and they never play the lead role (214). It demonstrates that American media and popular culture perpetuate white notions of beauty and, therefore, American blacks still value a lighter skin color. Thus, Ifemelu understands the workings of

America's racial system that keeps whites on top and blacks at the bottom. This aligns with Ta-neshi Coates' statement that whiteness and blackness are modern white inventions to justify white oppression (Coates 8).

Adichie, similar to Cole, also reveals 'common sense' assumptions concerning race that pervade American society, for Americans consider it to be normal to divide people along the lines of race – a practice that perpetuates racism. This becomes evident from the blogpost "Is Obama Anything but Black?". In this blogpost, Ifemelu exposes this type of American liberal hypocrisy regarding race. "In America," Ifemelu states, "you don't get to decide what race you are, it is decided for you" (Adichie 337). Put differently, it suggests that racialization, for Ifemelu, is particularly an American practice that she was unfamiliar with growing up in Nigeria. Ifemelu uses Obama's biracialism to illustrate that, depending on the situation, Obama is identified through either his bloodline or his skin color. Ifemelu explains that predominantly white people will say that Obama is biracial or multiracial – basically anything but black – because of his white mother (337). This suggests that race is a biological given that someone inherits from their parents. Ifemelu, subsequently, quickly illustrates that race is actually a social construct, because if a random black person commits a crime, even Obama could be stopped and questioned for fitting the profile of 'black man.' Race, then, is not about biology anymore; rather, it is solely about the color of one's skin. This demonstrates that "race matters because of racism" (337). Race and racism, after all, still structure American society even though many Americans are unaware of this. Racism also comes to the fore in "To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: In America You are Black Baby." Ifemelu describes that Americans expect a black person to behave in a certain manner that complies with their racial category. This, for example, includes exchanging the 'black nod' with other black people, referring to black women as "strong," and acting offended when faced with racism (220). Put differently, blacks are to adhere to the constructed standards of blackness set by whites to not disrupt the racial hierarchy in America. This is in line with Omi and Winant's argument that people's identity, hobbies, customs, and preferences become racially coded as a result of racial formation (Omi and Winant 60). Ifemelu, moreover, points out that black men should always act "hyper-mellow," otherwise people will think that they might pull out a gun, and if a crime has been committed by a black person, black men are advised to stay away from that area, for they might be stopped for "fitting the profile" (220-221). Ifemelu, here, refers to the racial projects of racial profiling and stereotyping that are reinforced by policies that target black people. Thus, Ifemelu illustrates that racialization and racism have become 'common sense,' for it is engrained in American culture and society. In sum, Ifemelu

familiarized herself with the concept of race to reveal its construction, America's racial hierarchy, and 'common sense' assumptions of race that all serve to separate blacks and whites, diminish black people's societal status, and justify white domination.

3.2 *The 'White Savior Industrial Complex' in Open City and Americanah*

Teju Cole coined the term the 'White Savior Industrial Complex' in his eponymous article for *The Atlantic*. In this article, the term refers to – and criticizes – a specific type of activism where predominantly white people enter foreign countries or communities to help and 'make a difference' often based on their misunderstandings, false assumptions, or faulty generalizations of such countries and communities. Adichie also addresses and criticizes this type of activism – particularly the adoption of African children – in her article "Our Africa Lenses." Both authors claim that the 'White Savior Industrial Complex' has become increasingly popular in the US and other Western countries. The concept is also represented in *Open City*, albeit briefly, and more explicitly in *Americanah*. Julius refers to the 'White Savior Complex,' once, yet he refrains from ideologically commenting on it; he is more pronounced in his critique of Ellis Island to illustrate that racial inequality and systemic racism perpetuate the inferior position of blacks in American society. Ifemelu, in contrast, refers multiple times to the 'White Savior Industrial Complex' to demonstrate that liberal, white, middle-class attitudes towards race are the epitome of ignorance and self-satisfaction.

Julius' reflection on the 'White Savior' as a cinematic trope shows that he is aware of this notion and, naturally, it annoys him, but he does not necessarily criticize or condemn it. Julius' visit to the movie theater to watch *The Last King of Scotland* exemplifies this. While waiting for the film to begin, Julius recounts an earlier visit to the movie theater where he watched another African film, and he recalls his frustration regarding the film's narrative in which "the good white man" saved East-Africa from fraudulent pharmaceutical companies (Cole 29). So, it is, as Julius implicitly appears to confirm, an age-old, Eurocentric narrative that is still prevalent in films. "Africa," Julius explains, "was always waiting, a substrate for the white man's will, a backdrop for his activities" (29). Put differently, Africa functions as a blank canvas for the white man onto which he can project his will and desires. Cole makes a similar claim in his article for *The Atlantic*: Africa has, indeed, often been the backdrop for white fantasies of conquest and heroism; it is a space onto which whites can project their egos (Cole par. 13). The 'White Savior,' in other words, reduces Africans to poor, helpless people without any agency – a fantasy that allows the white man to be their hero – and, consequently,

it is not about helping Africa anymore; rather, it is about the white man and his ego. This is problematic, because it reinforces notions of white or Western superiority, while exacerbating racial inequality and racism. Julius, subsequently, expects a similar narrative in *The Last King of Scotland*: “I was primed to see a white man, a nobody in his own country, who thought, as usual, that the salvation of Africa was up to him” (29). Put differently, Julius expects to see another messiah-figure who feels the urge to save Africa from its plight. Remarkably, Julius’ subsequent reflection revolves around Idi Amin and his childhood memories regarding the dictator; he does not come back to the issue of the ‘White Savior Industrial Complex’ anymore. This illustrates that Julius reflects on a plethora of different issues, of which the problematic narrative of the ‘White Savior’ is only one, that do not seem to personally affect him all that much, as all his reflections are merely distant observations. Julius, after all, only mentions that such a narrative annoys and frustrates him, but he refrains from taking an ideological or critical stance regarding the issue. Julius’ aloofness concerning the ‘White Savior Industrial Complex’ might stem from Cole’s conviction that direct speech is pivotal in public discourse and in the political sphere, but this is not the case with fiction (Cole par. 5). Cole notes: “I am a novelist. I traffic in subtleties, and my goal in writing a novel is to leave the reader not knowing what to think” (par. 4). Cole is, therefore, much more vocal and critical of the ‘White Savior Industrial Complex’ in his article compared to *Open City*, for this novel is not the right place for direct speech. It is also important to note that Julius’ aloofness regarding the city and the people he encounters – as noted in the previous chapter – is also largely a reflection of Julius’ inability to connect with his personal trauma of having raped Moji in Nigeria. Thus, because of Julius’ struggle with his own past, he distances himself from partisan beliefs concerning the ‘White Savior Industrial Complex’ and its effects.

Julius is more vocal about racial inequality and racism that pervades the US. This becomes evident from Julius’ observations of Ellis Island. Julius explains that Ellis Island is “the focus of so many myths” (Cole 54) – it, indeed, is widely known and marketed as the most important gateway for immigrants into the US, and it is perceived to be the embodiment of American freedom and democracy. It is because of the many immigrants who entered the US here that America, whether true or false, is often hailed as ‘a nation of immigrants.’ Julius, however, rightfully notes that “Ellis Island was a symbol mostly for European refugees,” for “it had been built too late for those early Africans – who weren’t immigrants in any case – and it had been closed too soon to mean anything to later Africans” (55). Ellis Island, after all, was built in 1892, decades after the abolition of slavery in 1865, and it closed in 1924 and, therefore, it does not symbolize anything to the Africans – such as Julius himself – who

entered the US after this date. Julius, here, exposes the irony of Ellis Island as the symbol of American freedom, because America was solely a beacon of freedom and democracy for European refugees, not for those “early Africans,” who were forced to leave their countries to work as free labor in America. This notion is underscored by Julius’ subsequent observation that “[B]lacks, ‘we blacks,’ had known rougher points of entry” (55). Julius, here, refers to the ill-treatment of his African ancestors who came to America on over-crowded slave-ships and, dissimilar to their European counterparts, were not warmly welcomed at Ellis Island. Julius, subsequently, bonds over the realization that Africans and African-Americans in the US still face racism and ill-treatment today. This enables Julius to identify with fellow black men for the first time, and it propels him to say “we blacks.” Julius, therefore, criticizes the dominant narrative of Ellis Island that completely disregards the sufferings of Africans. Thus, through his exposure of the ‘invisible’ narrative of Africans in the US, Julius demonstrates that Africans and African-Americans have always been and are still relegated to the margins of American society as well as to the margins of the narrative of America as a country of immigrants. In short, even though Cole is not as pronounced about the ‘White Savior Industrial Complex’ in *Open City*, he is very much critical of racism and racial inequality that have pervaded American society and America’s national narrative, for systemic racism perpetuates the inferior position of blacks in the US.

Ifemelu’s sharp analyses are both the subject and the method of *Americanah* that allow her to criticize the ‘White Savior Industrial Complex’ and – by extension – American society and culture. Ifemelu is particularly critical of Kimberly and Laura’s liberal, white, middle-class attitudes towards race. This immediately comes to the fore in Ifemelu’s first meeting with the two women in which Kimberly shows Ifemelu her house. Ifemelu notices that Kimberly has proudly exhibited many pictures of her and her family at far-away destinations posing with poor locals who had “absolutely nothing,” but, in Kimberly’s eyes, “were so happy” (Adichie 149). Kimberly, here, makes a remark that merely glorifies poverty. This notion is reinforced by the fact that Kimberly perceives the poor as “blameless” and that “[P]overty was a gleaming thing; she [Kimberly] could not conceive of poor people being vicious or nasty, because their poverty had canonized them, and the greatest saints were the foreign poor” (149). Kimberly’s perception and glorification of poor foreigners is very problematic, because it is a form of systemic racism that reduces these people to agentless people that cannot be blamed for their plight, nor can they themselves change this situation. It, consequently, perpetuates the Africans’ inferior position as charity-needing subjects. This aligns with Adichie’s criticism that such an attitude romanticizes poverty, reduces Africans to

pity-objects, and it takes away their will and agency (Adichie par. 6-7). This well-intentioned, yet detrimental attitude towards the world's less fortunate have propelled Kimberly and her husband, Don, to get involved in various charity projects in Africa to help the locals, while knowing that, in Don's words, they are not "messiahs" (150). Kimberly, subsequently, mentions their involvement with a charity in Malawi and how she hopes to visit Africa one day and do charitable work there. Kimberly, here, refers to Africa as if it is one homogenous, monolithic nation, which, according to Adichie, is a false assumption, often perpetuated by the media, that generalizes all African countries and peoples as solely African (Adichie par. 3). Kimberly, after all, appears to be ignorant of the differences between African countries. Both Don and Kimberly's attitudes toward charity, furthermore, suggests that racial and national hierarchies of charity exist, and they feel a sense of superiority from being charitable. This is in line with Cole and Adichie's criticism of such attitudes, for the 'White Saviors' well-intentioned actions often do not help those in question, because they do not target long-term structural problems; these actions merely provide them with a "big emotional experience" that validates their privilege and makes them feel good about themselves (@tejucole tweet #5). Thus, Adichie illustrates that the 'White Savior Industrial Complex' is prevalent among liberal, white, middle-class Americans who have grown so accustomed to thinking that charity will 'change' Africa, that their ignorance and self-satisfaction prevents them from seeing that charity is merely a short-term solution; their efforts do not target the root or causes of Western oppression in Africa.

Kimberly extends her charitable activities to Ifemelu as well, which implies that she also perceives Ifemelu as a poor, inferior 'other' in dire need of her help and, consequently, Kimberly's patronizing attitude perpetuates systemic racism in America as well. Kimberly, for example, gives Ifemelu extra money, by way of a 'signing bonus,' upon hiring Ifemelu and, a few months later, she offers Ifemelu to come live with her family in their basement as well as to use their spare car (Adichie 163). Ifemelu notices that Kimberly was pleading with her to move in or, at least, take the spare car, rather than simply asking or offering it, which makes her feel guilty and sad for Kimberly. Kimberly's mask of 'kindness', in other words, conceals her underlying assumptions that all African people, even if they study at an American university, are always in need of help. Kimberly, after all, never asked Ifemelu if she needed her 'charity;' rather, she just assumes Ifemelu would need these things. This example demonstrates that Kimberly's help reduces Ifemelu to a pity-object similar to the poor Africans Kimberly helps in Malawi. The notion that Kimberly treats Ifemelu as her personal charitable object, strips Ifemelu from her own agency, and it relegates her to an

inferior position as ‘other’ below Kimberly herself. In addition, after hearing about Kimberly’s drive to help poor Africans, Ifemelu feels “sorry to have come from Africa, to be the reason that [Kimberly] (...) would have to dig deep to feel such pity, such hopelessness” (150). This also underscores the notion that Kimberly’s attitude puts Ifemelu in a patronizing position, believing that she personally requires charity from people, such as Don and Kimberly. Ifemelu, moreover, realizes that Kimberly suffers from an unacknowledged, inward unhappiness that is shielded by the belief in other people’s happiness, because if they can be happy then she might also become happy one day (164). It suggests that Kimberly, indeed, sees Ifemelu as a poor foreigner rather than a fellow-human being, because it serves to fill the void and unhappiness that have characterized her life. Thus, Kimberly’s attitude towards Ifemelu is self-serving, for it allows her to feel good about herself; alleviating her feelings of unhappiness, but it exacerbates Ifemelu’s position as an outsider. In sum, Adichie is mercilessly critical of the ‘White Savior Industrial Complex’ – popular among liberal, white, middle-class Americans – because it validates Western superiority while, simultaneously, keeping Africans in their inferior positions, and when this attitude is adopted ‘at home’ and directed to blacks in the US, it also perpetuates systemic racism and racial inequality in America.

3.3 ‘Diminishers’ and ‘Deniers’ in *Open City* and *Americanah*

In “The Color of an Awkward Conversation,” Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has outlined two common views on race and racism in America. She describes the Americans that hold such views as either ‘Diminishers’ or ‘Deniers.’ The former tend to hide behind a mask of ignorance and diminish the seriousness of racism in American society. The latter, in contrast, hide behind a mask of ‘color-blindness’ and completely deny the fact that racism still exists in contemporary America. These views also feature in *Open City* and *Americanah*, yet in very different ways. The American ‘Diminishers’ and ‘Deniers,’ as such, do not feature prominently in Cole’s novel, but it can be argued that New York City’s palimpsestic structure functions as a denier of racism in the city, and Julius’s biased reflections, arguably, make him a diminisher of as well as a contributor to racism in America. The ‘Diminishers’ and ‘Deniers,’ however, are present in human-form in Adichie’s novel, as these people serve as a vehicle for Adichie’s criticism of American perceptions regarding race-related issues.

In a 2011 interview with NPR News, Teju Cole explains his view on writing about traumatic events, such as 9/11: “you can best write about it [9/11] by writing about other

things (...) to comprehend the trauma of Sept. 11” (NPR.com). Cole, arguably, also writes about race and racism with this view in mind, as he juxtaposes different histories in the city to illustrate that African history is often denied a place in contemporary New York City. Julius, for example, juxtaposes the large graveyard of Trinity Church with the African burial ground that used to be of a similar size. On one of his walks, Julius passes Trinity Church and notes that the large graveyard encompasses both sides of the Church with white and black headstones as well as a few monuments of which Alexander Hamilton’s is the most prominent (Cole 49). As one of the Founding Fathers of the nation, it is not surprising that Hamilton’s statue graces the graves of other prominent white New Yorkers. The Church and its vast graveyard, therefore, embody white, patriotic American history. This contrast sharply with the African Burial Ground National Monument on a tiny plot of grass – the only visible representation left of a vast African burial ground that used to comprise six acres of ground. As noted from the previous chapter, some fifteen to twenty thousand blacks, primarily slaves, were buried here, but the graveyard had to make way for the coffee-shops, stores, restaurants, and bars that are currently located here (220). Put differently, the site of the African burial ground and, by extension, the entire city has become a palimpsest: “written, erased, rewritten” (59). Remarkably, both graveyards date back to the seventeenth century, yet the one that is still fully visible today is the graveyard that commemorates white American heroes who laid the foundation of both America and New York City specifically. Forgotten and erased, however, are the Africans who also contributed to the foundation of the country. The African burial ground is completely rendered invisible today, and the monument is the only visible representation of the graveyard. It, after all, does not represent patriotic American history; rather, it represents a painful and shameful node in American history – a history marked by racial violence and oppression, and by literally burying this part of history, the city refuses to acknowledge its role in this traumatic history. The erasure and rewriting of this historical layer, therefore, allows New York City to mask its involvement in slavery and racism. Thus, by writing about the ‘white’ graveyard in juxtaposition to the ‘black’ graveyard, Cole illustrates that New York City’s denial of the presence of black history shows that the city has not fully come to terms yet with the deep wounds that slavery and racism have inflicted on the city.

Julius, as noted, is largely unaffected by the people he encounters throughout the novel, even if they make racist comments, but his biased reflections reveal his contempt and ignorance of other black men, and, therefore, he diminishes the seriousness of racism in America. Julius starts a conversation with Dr. Mailotte sitting next to him on the plane to

Brussels, and upon finding out that Julius is Nigerian she notes: “I know a great many Nigerians, and I really should tell you this, many of them are arrogant” (Cole 88). This is quite a generalizing and racist comment, for the woman implies that most Nigerians are arrogant solely based on the fact that she has encountered many arrogant Nigerians. Julius, however, is not at all affected by this statement, on the contrary, he is impressed by her seniority and directness. The fact that she practices a profession similar to that of Julius’, might have fostered a connection between Julius and the woman based on their shared social-economic class. It suggests that Julius identifies with her rather than with fellow Nigerians, because they are both higher-educated and, consequently, he disregards her comment about Nigerians. This also comes to the fore in another instance where Julius’ bias against fellow-black men is highlighted. Julius explains that, during one of his walks, he noticed five pairs of middle-aged, sluggish black men playing a game of backgammon in the subway station on Wall Street and, opposite of these men, Julius noticed a pair of white men playing chess (46-47). Julius consciously points out the physical division between the pairs of men, which reinforces the racial divide between these men too. More importantly, Julius’ description of the black men as “sluggish” is rather negative, implying that they are too old to do anything but play this luck-based game (TheGammonPress). The white men, in contrast, are plain white men to Julius, but they play chess – a skill-based game that requires the ability to think logically and act accordingly. Julius, in other words, also makes a divide in social-economic class between black and white people, for he subtly assumes that the white men are better educated and from a higher class compared to the black men purely based on the games they play. This aligns with Adichie’s claim that racism still exist in the subtlest forms, which ‘Diminishers’ and ‘Deniers’ refuse to believe. Thus, Julius’ biased reflections, reveal that he favors class solidarity over racial solidarity, which illustrates that, even though he exposes many instances of racism in the city, he himself is has implicit biases and is racist towards fellow black men too. In sum, Julius’ own biases prevent him from seeing that such racist underlying assumptions not only diminish the seriousness of racism; they contribute to racism and racial inequality in America.

The ‘Deniers’ and ‘Diminishers’ feature prominently in *Americanah*, for the ‘Deniers’ views on race and racism illustrate the manner in which Americans deal, or rather not deal, with such sensitive subjects. Ginnika, Ifemelu’s Nigerian friend who familiarizes the freshly arrived Ifemelu with life in America, rightfully notes: “this is America, you’re supposed to pretend that you don’t notice things [such as race]” (Adichie 127). Ifemelu, however, chooses to do the exact opposite and refuses to adopt this American mannerism, which becomes

evident from her encounters with ‘Deniers’ that eventually lead her to start her blog *Raceteenth*. She, for example, recalls a conversation with two different male ‘Deniers’ about race. One of them claimed that “race is totally overhyped these days, black people need to get over themselves, it’s all about class now,” while the other asserted that “the only race that matters is the human race” (4). These men embody Adichie’s definition of a ‘Denier.’ The former, after all, suggests that racism does not exist and, therefore, “black people need to get over themselves” and stop playing the ‘race-card,’ as class is the reason for the ill-treatment of black people (Adichie par. 7). The latter, in contrast, implies he is color-blind, because he believes all people are part of the human race, and, consequently, skin-color is not important. Both, in other words, clearly deny the existence and importance of race and racism in America, because their white privilege allows them to do so. Race is not a barrier for white Americans; it does not impede them in their lives, but black Americans do not have this ‘luxury.’ In addition to these white male ‘Deniers,’ Ifemelu also met a Haitian woman with a similar view on race. The woman explains that she once dated a white man and “race was never an issue for them” (290). Ifemelu knows from her relationship with Curt, a white American, that this is untrue, for “the only reason you say that race was not an issue is because you wish it was not (...) we say that race doesn’t matter because that’s what we’re supposed to say to keep our nice liberal friends comfortable” (290-291). Ifemelu, indeed, knows that outside of the confines of one’s home race does matter, but one should pretend it does not matter, because this is how Americans tend to deal with race: pretend that it does not exist. Thus, Ifemelu has that outsider acuity with which she notices every little detail about American culture and society, and she is particularly aware of the construction of race and racism in the US, which liberal, white, middle-class Americans pretend to not notice.

Ifemelu, moreover, also reveals how white, middle-class ‘Diminishers’ tend to be patronizing towards colored people under disguise of liberalism and open-mindedness. Kelsy, the white woman requesting to get her hair braided in cornrows at the Afro-hair salon, is the embodiment of such a ‘Diminisher,’ which becomes evident from her demeanor towards the hairdresser, Mariama, and Ifemelu. Kelsy, for example, bombards Mariama with all kinds of ignorant questions about the salon, her kids, and women’s voting rights in Mariama’s homeland to ultimately note: “[I]sn’t it wonderful that you get to come to the US and now your kids get to have a better life?” (Adichie 189). This condescending rhetorical question is immersed with nationalist overtones, because it suggests that Mariama should be eternally grateful for being allowed into America – the country that enabled Mariama to be successful and own a hair salon. Kelsy, in other words, assumes that America is a greater country than

any other country. Ifemelu underscores this notion, for she believes Kelsey to be the type of liberal American who expects foreigners to be grateful for their new lives in the US and they are also to refrain from any criticism pertaining to the US (189). Kelsey, moreover, boasts about “truly understand[ing] how modern Africa works” solely based on one book she has read. This is a truly patronizing claim, for Kelsey has never been to Africa before, yet she believes that one book has provided her with all the knowledge of modern Africa. The fact that Kelsey came to the salon to get cornrows in order to prepare for her first trip to Africa reinforces her ignorance of African culture, for she appropriates this African hairstyle – a significant part of African culture – because she thinks it is fun, while constantly making patronizing claims about Africa. This aligns with Adichie’s notion of a ‘Diminisher,’ as such a person believes that good intentions entail that they could never be racist. Thus, Adichie criticizes Western society appropriating black culture for themselves, while unintentionally perpetuating the oppression of and racism against black people. In short, Adichie shows that both ‘Deniers’ and ‘Diminishers’ hide behind their supposedly liberal views of race and racism, which might seem innocent, but it actually causes a lot of harm, as white people can afford to simply ‘not deal’ with race and pretend it is not an ‘issue,’ but black people do not have this privilege; they are forced to deal with the consequences of being black on a daily basis.

In conclusion, this chapter has examined the conceptions of Omi and Winant, Cole, and Adichie in relation to the construction of race, racial hierarchy, and racism in America in *Open City* and *Americanah*. Omi and Winant’s racial formation theory has been very useful to gain a deeper understanding of the construction of race through racial projects in both novels. Cole’s representation of racial stereotyping aligns with Omi and Winant’s conception of racial projects, because, through stereotyping and racial coding, Julius is racialized as a ‘black gangster,’ which underscores both the importance of racial categories and the extent to which racism is ingrained in American society. Julius, after all, has never identified himself as ‘black,’ nor as a ‘gangster’ in Nigeria, and he still does not identify himself as such – it is purely an imposed racial identity, which shows that race is a social construction. Adichie’s exposure of American ‘common-sense’ thoughts and ideas about race and racial categories similarly correlates to Omi and Winant’s conception of racial projects, for it illustrates that the construction of race and, subsequently, the racial hierarchy in America are ingrained in American society and culture, which perpetuate racial inequality.

Cole and Adichie’s portrayals of the ‘White Savior Industrial Complex,’ and the

'White Savior' in general, have also been of great significance for the analysis of the construction of race in the novels. Both authors, although Cole implicitly and Adichie more explicitly, demonstrate that the 'White Saviors' might mean well, yet they disregard the complexity of African countries and their structural problems. They, moreover, reinforce and justify a socially constructed racial order in which white people are superior to black people. This, again, reinforces systemic racism, and it perpetuates the inferior position of blacks in general as well as in American society specifically. Thus, both authors highlight this contradiction inherent in the 'White Savior Industrial Complex' and Cole, quoting John Berger, perfectly captures this contradiction, because "[A] singer may be innocent, never the song" (Cole par. 22).

The Authors' depictions of American attitudes towards race and racism, moreover, align with Adichie's notions of 'Diminishers' and 'Deniers.' Cole, again, is not as explicit as Adichie regarding racism, but New York City's palimpsestic structure functions as a denier of racism in the city, and Julius's underlying assumptions about black men make him a diminisher as well as a contributor of racism in America. The 'Diminishers' and 'Deniers' in Adichie's novel serve as a vehicle for Adichie's merciless criticism of white, liberal, middle-class Americans who might be well-intentioned, yet they exacerbate racism and the societal position of blacks in the US. In sum, both Adichie and Cole, again, emphasize the hypocrisies inherent in common attitudes that either diminish or deny the role of race and racism in American society.

In short, Omi and Winant, Cole, and Adichie all write about the construction of race from either an insiders', dual, or outsider's perspective. Julius and Ifemelu are both outsiders to America's race politics; it is not until they move to the US that they 'become black.' They, subsequently, have to grapple with what it means to be black in the US. As a result, both Cole and Adichie draw upon the powers of observation to illustrate that migration and race are inextricably linked, as migration has shaped the protagonists' racial and, more importantly, transnational identities. Adichie writes on the penultimate page that "[R]ace doesn't really work here [in Lagos]. I [Ifemelu] feel like I got off the plane in Lagos and stopped being black" (Adichie 476). This illustrates that Ifemelu, as an American returnee, now understands that race is a socially constructed concept that solely structures American society – not Nigerian society. It is, therefore, very much a normative and hegemonic American concept permeated with contradictions and hypocrisies. Both *Open City* and *Americanah*, however, are transnational novels that demonstrate that it is not enough to view race and racial identity in 'American terms;' rather, they should be considered in the context of transnationalism.

Conclusion

“Dear Non-American Black,” Ifemelu writes in her blogpost “To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: In America, You Are Black, Baby,” “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” (Adichie 220). This demonstrates that the two concepts of identity and race are not necessarily interconnected in non-US countries, but they are inextricably linked and, above all, socially constructed in America. This notion also runs as a red thread through *Open City* and *Americanah*. The construction of identity and race in transnational American novels is also the topic of this thesis and, accordingly, it has aimed to explore the ways in which Teju Cole and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie portray the construction of and the relation between identity formation and race in their novels. Cole and Adichie both write about identity and race in America from an African, or an outsider’s, perspective – not from an insider’s perspective. This outsider’s acuity has enabled them to write and publish ‘honest’ novels about race in America that underscore, rather than avoid, the sensitive topic of race in America. Previous research on this topic is sparse, because most research is focused on either *Open City* or *Americanah*. The former has often been analyzed in relation to cosmopolitanism, memory and trauma, post-coloniality, and African migration. The latter, in contrast, has often been examined in relation to border studies, African migration, identity formation, race, and gender. Both novels have been analyzed in light of postcolonial theory before, but not in the light of transnationalism. Existing literature on these novels, consequently, remains inconclusive on significant matters, such as the construction of identity and race in both *Open City* and *Americanah*. This thesis has, consequently, aimed to answer the following question to fill this lacuna: How are the construction of identity and race portrayed in Teju Cole’s *Open City* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*?

Before I answer this question, I will first give an overview of the methodology, theories, and concepts I have used in this thesis. I have used the method of close reading to explore *Open City* and *Americanah*. Both novels have been analyzed from a postcolonial perspective as extended by transnationalism. I have used Homi Bhabha’s theory on post-colonial identity; Stuart Hall’s theory on African diaspora and cultural identity; and Taiye Selasi’s ideas regarding Afropolitanism to examine the identity formation of the novels’ protagonists. Particularly Bhabha’s conceptualizations of mimicry, hybridity and Third Space; Hall’s conception of the black diasporic identity; and Selasi’s conception of Afropolitanism have been used as tools to gain a better understanding of Julius and Ifemelu’s identities. I

have also used Michael Omi and Howard Winant's racial formation theory and Teju Cole and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's personal essays to examine the construction of race in America. Omi and Winant's conceptualization of racial projects, Cole's conceptualization of the White Savior Industrial Complex, and Adichie's ideas about American hypocrisies concerning race and racism have been used to analyze the construction of race, racial hierarchy, and racism in America as well as its effects on both protagonists.

This section briefly summarizes the findings of chapter two and three, which will be followed by an interpretation of these findings to answer the research question. Chapter two has examined the construction of identity in *Open City* and *America*. Julius constructs his identity in three different ways. Firstly, Julius presents himself as a registrar of New York City's historical and cultural sights that primarily represent colonial suffering, which enables him to suppress his traumatic memories and, subsequently, construct an ideal sense of self. Secondly, Julius purposely distances himself from other African immigrants and African-Americans in the city to create a contrast between 'them' and Julius' own constructed ideal identity. Lastly, Julius's transnational border-crossings connect him to multiple nations and cultures, which allow him to pick and choose the parts from Nigerian, German, and American culture that fit his ideal self. Julius's ideal identity contrasts sharply with his Nigerian identity that has been tarnished by his perpetrator's trauma. This trauma, however, is an indelible part of his past and, even though he does not recognize this yet, it is also part of his current identity. Julius' inability to truly connect with other people and New York City is, therefore, a reflection of his inability to connect with his past.

Ifemelu also constructs her identity in three different ways that contrast starkly with Julius' identity formation. Ifemelu's identity develops through distinct stages, of which stage two – immigration and assimilation in America – and stage three – returning to Nigeria – have shaped Ifemelu's identity the most. Firstly, through Ifemelu's immigration and subsequent assimilation in America, she reaches a stage of independence that allows her to forge a culturally hybrid identity comprised of Nigerian and American influences. Through her return to Nigeria, moreover, Ifemelu moves toward a stage of interdependence that enables her to construct a transnational identity. Secondly, during stage two, Ifemelu also constructs her identity in opposition to African-Americans, for she gradually learns that Africans and African-Americans have different racial experiences, which shape their identities accordingly. This illustrates the interconnectedness between identity and race. Lastly, in stage three, Ifemelu reconnects with her Nigerian roots, as she now understands and celebrates what Africa means to her and, above all, what it means to be 'an African of the world.' This

realization, consequently, comprises a large part of her transnational identity.

Chapter three has explored the construction of race, and by extension, racial hierarchy and racism in America in *Open City* and *Americanah*. Julius reveals the construction of race in *Open City* in three different ways. Firstly, Julius shows that the racial project of stereotyping – a practice that shapes peoples’ everyday ‘common sense’ ideas regarding race – is still prevalent in America, because Julius is racialized as black in the US, a concept he is unfamiliar with, for he perceives himself as biracial, not as black or white. This illustrates that race is a social construction that does not exist in Nigeria, yet it is very much prevalent in the US. Secondly, through the examples of the ‘white savior,’ the ‘white savior industrial complex,’ and general instances of racial inequality, Julius shows that American society divides people along the lines of race to structure their society. Thirdly, Julius exposes the fact that race is engrained in every aspect of American society and culture and, consequently, Americans – and even Julius himself – fail to see that misconceptions about race are all pervasive in America, and that such misconceptions exacerbate the societal positions of blacks in America.

Ifemelu also exposes the construction of race in *Americanah* in three ways. Firstly, Ifemelu, similar to Julius, reveals that race and racial hierarchy structure American society, yet Americans are generally not aware of this for it has become ‘common sense’ to them. Put differently, Ifemelu uses the racial project of revealing ‘common sense’ assumptions about race to illustrate that race and racialization pervade American society, which perpetuate racism. Secondly, Ifemelu also uses the ‘white savior’ and the ‘white savior industrial complex’ to mercilessly criticize white, liberal, middle-class Americans whose false assumptions regarding race perpetuate racial division and racism. Thirdly, Ifemelu dissects popular American attitudes regarding race and racism to demonstrate that race is such a sensitive subject in America that people prefer to pretend it is either not important, or that it does not exist and, consequently, false assumptions concerning race are difficult to address and debunk. After all, it is impossible to start a conversation about racial issues in America if people do not recognize such issues exist in the first place.

The following conclusions can be drawn to answer the research question. Cole’s representation of Julius’ identity construction aligns with Bhabha’s conceptions regarding cultural hybridity. Cole demonstrates that Julius’ identity is culturally hybrid, for a blend of Nigerian, European, and American cultures have shaped his identity. This identity, however, is unique to Julius, for his experiences of growing up as a biracial kid in Nigeria and his subsequent migration to the US make Julius’ identity different from the cultural identity of

other Africans and African-Americans whom are also part of the African diasporic communities that have sprawled all over the world. Julius' identity formation, therefore, is also in line with Hall's conceptualization of a black diasporic identity. Selasi's conceptualization of Afropolitanism, similarly, elucidates aspects of Julius' identity, such as the notion that his transnational border-crossings tie him to nations and cultures around the world that make Julius part of the newest generation of African migrants. Thus, postcolonial theory, alone, is not adequate to gain a thorough understanding of the multifaceted nature of Julius' identity. In fact, Bhabha, Hall, and Selasi's work all complement each other here and probably none of those works, when used in isolation, would fully grasp the complex identity formation of Julius.

Julius' identity, it must be noted, is not yet fully transnational, because a transnational identity – similar to an Afropolitan identity – is characterized by fluid global citizenship and, thus, a sense of rootedness in different places around the world. Julius' identity, however, is characterized by rootlessness rather than rootedness. His journeys bring Julius to countries in three different continents – Africa, North America, and Europe – and, as such, they could have provided Julius with roots around the globe, yet this is not the case. Julius, after all, is stuck wandering the streets of New York City, unable to ground himself anywhere due to his preoccupation with escaping his personal trauma of having raped Moji in Nigeria. This trauma, however, proves to be inescapable, for it haunts Julius wherever he goes. Julius' identity, therefore, can best be compared to Brussels during WWII. Brussels declared itself an 'open' city during the war; it opened itself up to German occupation in an attempt to preserve the city and spare it from bombardments and other military attacks. Julius, similarly, refuses to fight his own demons; rather, he opens himself up as a register for other narratives of suffering and violence, which allow him to construct and preserve his ideal identity.

Adichie's representation of Ifemelu's identity construction in the US correlates with Bhabha's conceptions of cultural hybridity. Adichie illustrates that Ifemelu initially struggles with forming her identity in the US, as she strips herself of her Nigerian culture and adopts the American culture as her own, but she eventually acknowledges that, to stay true to herself, she needs to incorporate her native culture with her newly adopted American culture. Ifemelu also learns that differences exist between Africans and African-Americans in America, for different experiences, particularly regarding race, have shaped their identities accordingly. This is also in congruence with Hall's conceptualization of a black diasporic identity. Ifemelu, however, does not remain in the US as Julius does; she returns to Nigeria, and her identity

formation in Nigeria particularly aligns with Selasi's conceptualization of Afropolitanism. Ifemelu, after all, fully re-roots herself in Nigerian culture and, subsequently, she celebrates Africa's complexity and, more importantly, her ability to feel at home in multiple cultures and countries, or, in other words, her fluid global citizenship. Thus, postcolonial theory, alone and in itself, similar as in Julius' case, is insufficient to gain a full understanding of Ifemelu's complex transnational identity.

In short, each of the theoretical concepts and approaches used in chapter two have partial validity for the analysis of identity formation in *Open City* and *Americanah*. In order to gain a thorough understanding of the complexities and the multi-layered structure of a transnational identity in particular, they should all be taken into account. Postcolonial theory is not adequate in and by itself to get a thorough sense of how a transnational identity is shaped and, therefore, the other concepts are of great importance, for they illuminate the fact that a transnational identity is the inevitable result of the cultural clashes that emerge from an interweaving of nationalities, cultures, and histories. It is, therefore, necessary to use a theoretical framework that extends postcolonial theory with transnationalism here in order to do full justice to the construction of identity in transnational novels.

Cole's representation of the construction of race, and the way it operates on micro- and macro-level in society is congruent with Omi and Winant's racial formation theory. Cole illustrates throughout his novel that the light-skinned, biracial Julius is immediately racialized as 'black' in America. Race is, therefore, a dynamic and fluid concept that means different things to different people. The two racist teens Julius encounters at the subway station, for example, equate Julius' blackness with him being a possible gangster. African-Americans, in contrast, read Julius' blackness as a sign that Julius is a fellow black 'brother,' while other African immigrants interpret Julius' blackness as proof that Julius is an African 'brother.' Cole, therefore, demonstrates how race operates on a micro, societal level: as a socially and politically constructed identity that is imposed on people. Cole also reveals how race works on a macro societal level. America, after all, is largely constructed for whiteness in which 'white' narratives that centralize white people, such as the myth of Ellis Island and the vast graveyard of Trinity Church that commemorates white patriotic Americans, occupy the center of American culture and society. 'Black' narratives that focus on Africans and African-Americans, in contrast, have always been relegated to the periphery of American culture and society. Thus, Cole foregrounds the largely invisible 'black' narratives in the US to illustrate that race and racism are also all-pervasive on a national level.

Adichie's representation of the construction of race, and how it works on a micro and

macro societal level also align with Omi and Winant's racial formation theory. Ifemelu, similar to Julius, only learns that Americans divide people in 'black' and 'white' – and that she is relegated to the former category – once she tries to assimilate into American society. She, more importantly, quickly learns that being black means that she occupies the bottom of America's racial ladder, and that another divide exists among black people too. Ifemelu is not just a black person; rather, she is an African, not an African-American. Adichie, here, not only illustrates that race is a social construct and how it operates on a micro-level, above all, she illustrates how difficult and unfamiliar it is for an outsider to navigate all the racial categories that prevail in American society. Thus, similar to Cole, Adichie shows that Americans tend to impose a socially constructed identity on people and, since these identities are politically charged and endowed with all kinds of connotations, identity becomes a political weapon in American society too. Americans, however, will not explain this to an outsider, as they are either unaware of this, or they prefer not to talk about this sensitive subject, yet they expect everyone to understand how American society works. This is only one of the American hypocrisies regarding race that Adichie lays bare in *Americanah*. Such hypocrisies, after all, also come to the fore on macro level in America. Adichie, after all, is particularly critical of liberal, white, middle-class Americans whose attitudes towards race, racism, and charity do more harm than good, for they actually perpetuate racial division and racism. In short, *Americanah* does exactly what Americans fail to do, for it illuminates, rather than hides how race works in the US and, therefore, the novel functions as a mirror of America's race politics.

In sum, Omi and Winant's racial formation theory, combined with Cole and Adichie's outsiders' perspectives regarding race and racism in America, have provided a useful framework for the analysis of the construction of race in *Open City* and *Americanah*. Cole and Adichie both demonstrate that outsiders in America can only navigate American society once they have learned to *see* race. Americans, after all, *see* race in the sense that they have endowed this concept with all kinds of social and political meanings. Americans are unaware of the extent to which racial hierarchy permeates their society and, consequently, they fail to *see* how they themselves perpetuate systemic racism in America. Adichie and Cole, thus, reveal that race is a normative and hegemonic concept, permeated with contradictions and hypocrisies, to which most insiders in America are *blind*. In short, the findings demonstrate that an outsider's perspective on America's race politics as provided by these transnational American novels is of pivotal importance to gain a thorough understanding of the extent to which race and racial hierarchies structure American society and culture.

Even though this thesis has contributed new insights to the debate regarding the construction of identity and race in transnational American novels, there are a few limitations that need to be addressed. Firstly, as noted in chapter two, I have primarily analyzed the concepts of identity and race in isolation, but the analysis in chapter two shows that both are inextricably linked and, therefore, race does feature in chapter two as well. Identity and race, in other words, cannot – and should not – be fully separated. Analyzing the novels with the theory of intersectionality would, consequently, also have been useful, but this would have taken me beyond the scope of this thesis. Thus, future research that takes intersectionality into account could potentially contribute even more new insights into the construction of identity and race in transnational American novels. Secondly, this thesis has used two transnational American novels as case studies to examine how the construction of identity and race in America are represented in those novels. It would also be worthwhile to compare an American novel with a transnational novel to answer the question whether or not transnational American novels actually provide new insights regarding American culture and society that American novels are unable to provide? Future research, furthermore, is needed to shed light on questions, such as: How can a transnational identity be defined? What does it mean to have a transnational identity? How can Postcolonial Studies be extended to include transnational identities/subjects?

In conclusion, *Open City* and *Americanah* expose and highlight the problematic racial discourse America, which greatly impacts the identity construction of the novels' protagonists in America. Shan, Blaine's sister in *Americanah*, complains "[Y]ou can't write a novel about race in this country [America]. If you write about how people are really affected by race, it'll be too *obvious* (...) so, if you're going to write about race, you have to make sure it's so lyrical and subtle that the reader who doesn't read between the lines won't ever know it's about race" (Adichie 335-336). Shan, indeed, as an African-American, is discouraged from writing about race in a manner that truly reflects her experiences with being black in America. Cole and Adichie, however, write in a response to this statement, because as outsiders of American race politics, they have actually done what Shan cannot do; they have explicitly written about identity and race, because America actually *needs* an honest novel about race.

Synopses *Open City* and *Americanah*

Synopsis Open City

Open City tells the story of Julius, a German-Nigerian immigrant, who is in the final year of his psychiatry residency in a New York hospital. In his spare time, Julius wanders the streets of New York City in an attempt to counter the monotony of his work at the hospital. Julius is both the protagonist and the narrator of the story. The novel is primarily set in post-9/11 New York City and, briefly, in Brussels. During his elaborate walks, Julius engages in conversations with all kinds of people: young, old, black, white, poor, rich, educated, non-educated, immigrant, and non-immigrant. *Open City* predominantly focuses on Julius' inner thoughts that are evoked by these conversations, the sounds and sights of the cities, and by past and present events.

On his first walk in the novel, Julius visits his friend and former professor, Dr. Saito, who tells Julius about the Korean War and the Japanese internment of the 1960s. On subsequent walks, Julius visits friends, museums, music stores, poetry readings, and he occasionally thinks of Nadège, his ex-girlfriend. Julius also expresses his desire to visit his grandmother, 'oma,' in Brussels whom he has not seen in years. Julius, moreover, dwells on other past events during his walks, such as 9/11, WWII, slavery, colonialism in Africa, and Idi Amin Dada's dictatorship in Uganda in the 1970s. Julius, furthermore, describes his childhood in Nigeria in great detail during his walks. He explains that he attended the Nigeria Military School (NMS) and that his father died of tuberculosis in his third year at NMS. Julius never felt comfortable at this school and, above all, he never felt truly Nigerian, because of his lighter skin color. In his final year at the NMS, Julius applied to several American colleges, and Maxwell offered Julius a full scholarship. Thus, after finishing NMS, Julius went on a plane and left Nigeria for the US.

Julius eventually decides to buy a plane ticket to Brussels to search for his grandmother, and he extensively describes his flight to Brussels as well as the people he encounters and the events that occur in the Belgian capital. On the plane, he converses with a woman, Dr. Mailotte, who is seated next to him, and the two arrange to meet again in Brussels. Julius fills his first days in Brussels searching for his grandmother, but to no avail. In a café, Julius meets Farouq, an Arabic immigrant, who introduces Julius to his friend Khalil, and the trio discuss various subjects including philosophy, politics, and religion. Julius returns to New York after a few weeks without having located his grandmother.

Back in New York, Julius describes encountering Moji at a store. Moji is the sister of

his Nigerian school friend, Dayo, and Julius claims to have no recollection of Moji. Nevertheless, Julius and Moji keep in touch and occasionally see each other in their spare time. Julius, moreover, has not visited Dr. Saito for a while, and when he calls the professor's house, Julius finds out that his friend has died. Julius, subsequently, calls Nadège to tell her the bad news, only to find out that she is now engaged and does not wish to have any contact with Julius anymore. Julius, subsequently, takes another walk to process Nadège's news and, while he walks back home, four black men violently rob Julius. The attack leaves Julius speechless, as he cannot phantom the fact that he had just been robbed by fellow black men. Later, during a picnic with friends, Julius realizes that he is attracted to Moji, but he does not pursue her yet. The pair meet each other again during a party and, to Julius' surprise, Moji confronts him with the fact that he raped her back in Nigeria – a violent act that he has never acknowledged, let alone apologized for. Julius, in fact, has buried this painful experience in the past and Julius does not know how to react to Moji's confrontation, which leaves Julius speechless once more. The novel ends a year later: Julius has finished his residency and now works as a psychiatrist in America.

Synopsis Americanah

Americanah tells the story of Ifemelu and Obinze who fell in love in secondary school in Lagos, Nigeria. Both subsequently attend the University of Nsukka, but Nigeria's military dictatorship makes it difficult for Ifemelu and Obinze to finish university in Nigeria. Ifemelu decides to follow many of her friends and migrates to the US. Obinze plans to join Ifemelu after his graduation. Obinze, however, is denied a visa after 9/11, and he goes to London instead. Fifteen years later, Ifemelu and Obinze reunite again, and they rekindle their love for each other and for their homeland. Ifemelu and Obinze are the protagonists of the story, and a third person omniscient narrator narrates the story. The story is set on three different continents – Africa, Europe, and North America – and *Americanah* features three plotlines in which the three continents intersect.

The first plotline is introduced in the opening pages of the novel. Ifemelu is on her way to the hairdresser. Ifemelu has built a successful life for herself in the US, but she misses 'home' and has decided to return to her native Nigeria. Ifemelu has quit her popular blog about race in America called: *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*, and she also broke up with her boyfriend Blaine, because she got dissatisfied with both. After years of silence, childhood-

lovers Ifemelu and Obinze have contact again. Ifemelu learns that Obinze has become quite successful in Nigeria, as he is now a wealthy businessman with a wife and a daughter. Obinze and Ifemelu email each other a few times, and it becomes clear that both feel incomplete and dissatisfied with their current lives and, consequently, Obinze is one of the reasons for Ifemelu's return to Nigeria. In Nigeria, Ifemelu feels overwhelmed by the hustle and bustle of the city, and she initially struggles to adapt to Nigerian life. Ifemelu's friend makes fun of her; calling Ifemelu an 'Americanah,' which is a term used to describe American returnees. Ifemelu finds a job and an apartment in Nigeria, but she does not tell Obinze she is back. After a while, Ifemelu has reconnected with her parents and all of her friends, and she finally feels 'home' again. Ifemelu quits her new job and starts another blog about daily life in Nigeria called: *The Small Redemptions of Lagos*. After months, Ifemelu finally calls Obinze and they meet up at a bookstore after which they continue meeting each other daily and, eventually, Obinze and Ifemelu rekindle their love for each other.

The second plotline predominantly involves flashbacks, for it revolves around Ifemelu's childhood and subsequent move to the US. Through flashbacks, Ifemelu describes her life back in Nigeria: Ifemelu grew up with a religious mother, a father who hides behind a façade of big English words, and an aunt who is infatuated with 'The General.' Ifemelu also recalls how she met Obinze at secondary school and how they fell in love with each other; and how her aunt, cousin, and friends all migrated to the US. Other flashbacks revolve around Ifemelu's early days in America: her first trip to the mall, her first days at University, the difficulty of getting a job and subsequent financial hardships. Ifemelu also remembers how she lost contact with Obinze, how she eventually became a babysitter, and, more importantly, how mystified she was when she learned how Americans dealt with race. Ifemelu, moreover, describes her first encounter with Blaine on the train as well as her first blogpost about America's racial ladder.

At the hairdresser's, Ifemelu contemplates her choice of moving back to Nigeria, while she thinks back of her first American boyfriend, Curt, the comfortable life she lived whilst with him, and the fact that Curt arranged a green card for her. Ifemelu, furthermore, remembers the first time she relaxed her hair for a job interview, which went horribly wrong, as she burned her scalp. Ifemelu, subsequently, decided to embrace her natural, curly hair instead. She eventually cheats on Curt and breaks up with him after which she starts her blog to document her experiences of being black in America. The blog becomes very popular; receiving large donations and Ifemelu is frequently asked to give talks about her blog. At one of the talks, Ifemelu meets Blaine again and they begin dating.

The third plotline also largely involves flashbacks, as it tells the story of Obinze's life in London, which was completely different from Ifemelu's life in America. Obinze overstayed his six-month visa, and lived as an undocumented immigrant in the UK for two years. Obinze takes on all kinds of menial jobs to save money for a sham-marriage, which will make him a legal UK-citizen. Through flashbacks and memories, Obinze recalls how he applied multiple times for a US-visa, but was denied a visa due to heightened security measures after 9/11. Obinze's mother, subsequently, arranged a UK-visa for him instead. Obinze also remembers his first month in London when he worked as a janitor, lived with his cousin, and how hurt he was when Ifemelu cut all contact with him. With borrowed money from a Nigerian friend in the UK, Obinze scheduled a sham-marriage, but on the day of his marriage the police finds out that he is a undocumented immigrant. The police, subsequently, detain Obinze and send him back to Nigeria. In Nigeria, Obinze builds a new and successful life for himself.

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