

ESTUDOS ANGLO-AMERICANOS

The Americanah Project

Immigrant Writing in the 21st Century USA

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Abstract

The Americanah Project: Immigrant Writing in the 21st Century USA aims to understand how contemporary immigrant literature contributes to the construction of American identity, by focusing on the work of two writers who have explored the migrant experience in the United States in their novels: *Americanah* (2013), by the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie, and *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2020), by the Vietnamese American writer Ocean Vuong.

Theoretically grounded on Studies on New Immigrant Writing and Memory Studies, as well as Masculinity Studies, Feminist Studies, and Studies on Race and Class, this dissertation addresses 'marginalized' identities through an intersectional lens, paying particular attention to migrant, gendered, racialized and queer bodies, and their role in rethinking American identity.

This, *The Americana Project* discusses how contemporary American immigrant writing has been constructed throughout historical trauma, as well as individual and collective memory, and how the discussion around borderland identities, and the notions of belonging and not-belonging are redefined by these "bodies out of place" in the 21st-century American society – in their way to finding a "home".

Key-words: identity, immigration, 'bodies out-of-place', borderlands, memory

Resumo

O Projeto *Americanah: Escrita de Imigrantes nos Estados Unidos do Século XXI* tem como objetivo compreender como a literatura contemporânea de imigrantes contribui para a construção da identidade americana, centrando-se no trabalho de dois escritores que exploram nos seus romances a experiência do migrante nos Estados Unidos: *Americanah* (2013), da escritora nigeriana Chimamanda Adichie, e *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2020), do escritor vietnamita-americano Ocean Vuong.

Apoiada teoricamente nos Estudos sobre a Nova Escrita de Imigrantes e nos Estudos sobre Memória, bem como nos Estudos da Masculinidade, Estudos Feministas e Estudos sobre Raça e Classe, esta dissertação aborda identidades "marginalizadas" através de uma perspectiva interseccional, prestando particular atenção aos corpos migrantes, genderizados, racializados e queer, e ao seu papel na redefinição da identidade americana.

Assim, o Projeto *Americanah* discute como a "escrita de imigrantes" americana contemporânea tem sido construída através do trauma histórico, bem como da memória individual e coletiva, e como a discussão em torno das identidades de fronteira e das noções de pertença e não pertença é redefinida por esses "corpos fora-do-lugar" na sociedade americana do século XXI – na sua busca por um espaço a que possam chamar "lar".

Palavras-chave: identidade, imigração, 'corpos fora-do-lugar', fronteiras, memória

Introduction

When we came to Australia, what I first remember (or at least what I remember remembering) is all the dust, and how it made me sneeze and my eyes itch. When I returned to England, I felt the cold pinching my skin. The intrusion of an unexpected space into the body suggests that the experience of a new home involves an expansion and contraction of the skin, a process which is uncomfortable and well described as the irritation of an itch.

Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (2000)

President Joe Biden's government established new priorities to ensure protection and smooth arrival processes of immigrants to the United States. The U.S. immigration trends and policies have certainly been transformed since January 2021, taking into consideration the quite different restrictive approach Trump's administration had in the last several years (Esterline & Batalova, 2022).

In order to set the ground for further discussion, statistics from a 2020 American Community Survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau will be advised. According to the 2020 American Community Survey, approximately 78 percent (241 million) of all 308.8 million U.S. population ages 5 and older speak English at home. The other 22 percent (67.8 million) U.S. residents speak a language other than English at home. Those who do not speak English at home reported to be speaking Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese, Arabic, French, Korean, Russian, German, Hindi, Portuguese, Amharic, Yoruba, Igbo, other Afro-Asiatic and Western African languages, Yiddish, Italian and other languages. The second figure we will address in the study is the participation of the immigrant workers on the United States civilian labor force. The study has reported that out of the civilian labor force in the U.S. (166.3 million people), 17 percent (28.6 million people) were immigrants. It is important to note that since 1970, the number of immigrant workers

participating in the U.S. labor force has increased more than three times (Esterline & Batalova, 2022).¹

Statistics and numbers certainly speak for themselves about the modern United States population and its peculiarities, however constructing the contemporary American identity is a task of no simplicity. It is challenging to determine where America lies, where are its limits and what do borders bring with them to the ‘whereness of America’ to use Ana Calvo Manzananas’ phrasing (Manzananas, p. 73, 2011).

As Manzananas states in her essay “What are you bringing from Mexico? Border Dialogues in Process” (2012), borders are definite but broken lines, borders speak two languages, they are something but also something other (p. 71). The minute the individual or in Manzananas’ terms *the individual crosser* engages with the border, the image of the country is transformed, so is the individual crosser. Respectively, the border is always in transit and exchange with the world outside of it but at the same time it is the national tranquilizer. It is what creates the invisible unity inside at the same time distinctively separating the inside and the outside. Thus, the individual crosser’s engagement with the border raises the question of identity and belonging either with the inside or the outside, or perhaps an entirely different third category. We will come back to this idea in the further chapters of this dissertation.

In order to further discuss the idea of an individual’s engagement with the border and the meanings created as a result of the act, it is essential to understand what is immigrant writing and how it is defined. In a 2011 essay on the contemporary American novel “Immigrant Writing: Changing the Contours of a National Literature”, Bharati Mukherjee explores the new term of ‘the Literature of New Arrival’ and demonstrates the clear distinction between the new term and the rather traditional, as the author calls it, ‘canonical U.S. immigrant literature’ (2011, p. 681). Mukherjee defines traditional immigrant literature as writing which is centered in the process of ‘rehousement after the trauma of forced or voluntary unhousement’ (*ibidem*). With this definition of immigrant literature, she also urges academics not to confuse the above mentioned with postcolonial

¹ In order to read the full study, please advise the official website of the American Community Survey (ACS) at <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs>.

or diasporic literature.² Mukherjee explains that in the beginning of the twentieth century when the majority of the immigrants in the U.S. were Europeans escaping poverty or political or religious oppression, deliberate loss of homeland and identity was very much possible, often desirable.³ And here is where Mukherjee raises the defining question: if these European immigrants who were economic, religious or political refugees wanted their children to succeed in the assimilation into the U.S., then what about the immigrants who had incredibly strong ties with their countries of origin and had no intention of completely surrendering to the U.S. and erasing their memory of their homeland? As stated by Mukherjee, especially the immigrants who are meant to be writers simply cannot give in to assimilation without holding onto their homeland, as according to the author ‘writers are creatures of mental reservation and evasion’ and the act of writing itself, is an embodiment of the above-mentioned mental reservation and evasion (2011, p. 681).

As Mukherjee further elaborates, language is centered in the midst of immigrant experience and immigrant writing. Naturally, for both traditional, canonical immigrant writers and the writers of ‘the Literature of New Arrival’, English is not their mother tongue. However, these two bodies of writing move in quite different directions in the context of language. The canonical immigrant writers have often chosen simple, as Mukherjee calls it ‘serviceable’ English, easily accessible for the American readers, as a means to make a living (2011, p. 683). The physical and professional survival of these first group of immigrant writers heavily depends on forgetting their mother tongues and relying on English in order to ‘make it’ (2011, p. 683).

As for the writers of the current direction of American immigrant writing - ‘the Literature of New Arrival’ – the choice of not surrendering to English as the only language of writing is quite obvious. Mukherjee explains that the immigrant writers such

² According to *The British Academy* website, diaspora literature refers to works written by authors who live and write outside of their country of origin. The main elements of Diaspora literature are the questions of identity, uprooting, re-rooting, nostalgia, nagging sense of guilt and others.

As for postcolonial literature, it is a broad term which encompasses writing by people from the former colonial world, as well as from different minority diasporas in the west (2019, par. 4).

³ Philip Roth spoke with Terry Gross in 2009 of not knowing where exactly his grandparents had come from because they had wanted to forget it and they could never return anyway. Roth explained that his grandparents never felt they belonged in that pocket of Galicia, that they were never welcomed or even tolerated in their homeland, so they had lost nothing in leaving it. They embraced America as they understood it, totally, without reservation or evasion. European immigrants who arrived in the early decades of the twentieth century – as economic, political, religious refugees – were grateful to the US for asylum and opportunities for self- betterment (Mukherjee, 2011, p. 680).

as Edwidge Danticat, Junot Díaz, Aleksandar Hemon and Gary Shteyngart do not intend to forget their linguistic as well as historical inheritance (2011, p. 681).⁴ As we further read, Mukherjee explains that for these writers the two different countries are forced to merge. Respectively, the two different languages also end up merging in the body of writing. Interestingly, this is not done consciously by the writers. Mukherjee explains this as the immigrant mindset being the space of automatic and involuntary synthesis of memory and experience and not a ‘compartmentalization’ that is done on purpose (2011, p 682). Furthermore, this space created by ‘migrant-memory’ consists of not only the writer’s personal experience but also the orally passed on communal memories of the homeland (2011, p. 682).

Hence, Mukherjee goes on to identify ‘broken narratives’ and ‘language fusion’ as the characteristics of the ‘Literature of New Arrival’, as solely through ‘broken narratives’ and ‘language fusion’ it would be possible to create a body of writing that is centered as the author calls it ‘in the nuanced process of rehousement after the trauma of forced or voluntary unhousement’ (2011, p. 683).⁵ As we will see further in the dissertation, this will be particularly evident in Ocean Vuong’s work.

The ‘Literature of New Arrival’ accepts narratives of lives that have been disrupted, plots that have been interrupted, unconventional characters, language fusion, deconstructurization, and lack of shape. Mukherjee believes that despite the resistance, the U.S. will adjust to the ‘loud, emerging voice’, as politically and socially the country will have to adjust to the new demography, a population in which, as the author states, in a few decades, the white American schoolchildren will be a minority in the classrooms

⁴ Edwidge Danticat is a Haitian-American novelist and short story writer. Danticat has since written or edited several books and has been the recipient of many awards and honours. As of the fall of 2023, she will be the Wun Tsun Tam Mellon Professor of the Humanities in the Department of African American and African Diaspora Studies at Columbia University. Junot Díaz is a Dominican-American writer, creative writing professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and was fiction editor at *Review*. Central to Díaz’s work is the immigrant experience, particularly the Latino immigrant experience. Aleksandar Hemon is a Bosnian-American author, essayist, critic, television writer, and screenwriter. He is best known for the novels *Nowhere Man* (2002) and *The Lazarus Project* (2008). Gary Shteyngart is a Soviet-born American writer. He is the author of five novels (including *Absurdist* and *Super Sad True Love Story*) and a memoir.

⁵ Mukherjee urges to see examples of ‘broken narratives’ and ‘language fusion’ in Oscar Hijuelos’s Pulitzer-winning *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* (1989), Edwidge Danticat’s *The Dew Breaker* (2004), and Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007).

(2011, p. 684). Mukherjee seems rather convinced in the above-mentioned adjustment, as she explains: “In the second half of the last century, all America became just a little Jewish, because of the movies, the comedians, and the literary outpouring. [...] In the coming decades, we will all become just a little Asian and a little Hispanic, because that’s the way America works” (2011, p. 687).

Mukherjee certainly explains how the body of immigrant writing is largely constructed on the absence of the immigrant writer’s feeling of being at home in the United States and at the same time the improbability of return to homeland. As far as Sara Ahmed is concerned in her 2000 *Strange Encounters. Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, apart from engaging with the border, migration brings two meanings to the concept of home. The first one being a place of origin and the second one a world of everyday experiences (2000, p. 90). According to Ahmed, the narratives caused by migration refer to a total reconfiguration of a self and acquisition of a new home; however, it is still questioned how individuals or – as Ahmed describes them – *bodies* re-inhabit the new home (2000, p. 90).

In her 1997 essay “Home”, published in *The House that Race Built*, Toni Morrison plays with the meaning of ‘home’ to address the loss or preservation of a shareable world, through the metaphor of the house and the metaphor of the home (2020, p. 17). Morrison explains that the space given her by the term ‘home’ allows her to destroy the power of racial constructs in language (1997).⁶ As Morrison continues to explain, the only way she can gain a ‘home’ is through writing. Writing is the tool she believes will grant her freedom and power; however, Morrison is unsure of whether or not creating a home through writing would mean ‘eternal homelessness for her’ (1997, p. 4). Interestingly, in the struggling process of constructing a ‘home’, Morrison admits that the involvement of the reader is crucial in succeeding. Unlike Mukherjee, Morrison states that in order for the narration created by the writer to reach its goal of re-building the racially constructed ‘house’ into a ‘home’, the reader should be willing to step outside the formerly set boundaries of race and identity (1997, p. 8-9). This makes the reader’s participation in

⁶ This essay was first published in *The House that Race Built*, in 1997; it was later republished by Toni Morrison with minor changes as “Race Matters” in *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Mediations*, in 2020.

constructing a home through a body of writing a rather curious part of the process of defining American identity.⁷

The definition of American identity and being an American is far more complex, requiring analysis of the ideas of borderlands, identity, belonging, intersectionality, re-inhabitation of space and reconfiguration of bodies, the shared and the different – the idea of belonging to America and the idea of shaping the American identity. The question of what becomes of home and where home is in the context of two cultures and two nations becomes key. Does home become an ambiguous concept, a romanticized idea, a practical and geographical location? As described by Ahmed, more than one homes appear in the context of the narrative of leaving home (2000, p.80).

The two authors whose novels will be thoroughly addressed throughout this dissertation, Ocean Vuong and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, do not share the same home, neither do they share similar backgrounds or stories. Ocean Vuong was born on a rice farm, in Saigon, Vietnam in 1988 and was forced to emigrate to the United States with his mother when he was two years old (“Ocean Vuong”, 2022). Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, on the other hand, was born in Enugu, Nigeria in 1977. Unlike Vuong, her emigration to the United States was a conscious choice which she made at the age of nineteen, when she left her studies in Medicine in Nigeria and moved to the States to continue her education in Communication and Political Studies (“Ifemelu’s Blog”, 2021). Vuong was raised in the United States, in a working-class family of nail salon and factory workers, and he experienced a clash of cultures firsthand while growing up. Whereas Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was already a full carrier of her Nigerian heritage and culture as an adult, and was calling Nigeria home, when she started encountering the immigrant experience of the acquisition of a new home.

Despite having completely different stories and carrying different cultures, both authors have been greatly contributing to contemporary American literature particularly American immigrant writing. Starting in Manchester Community College, then continuing his studies in International Marketing in Pace University, Ocean Vuong ended up dropping out of Business School and pursuing a degree in Brooklyn College in

⁷ Toni Morrison’s 1997 essay “Home” will be further discussed in Chapter 1 of this dissertation in order to address the importance of racial construct and identity in creating a body of immigrant writing.

Nineteenth Century American Literature. His first full-length poetry collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* was published in 2016 and, in 2019, he published his first novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*.⁸ Vuong is also an author of the 2022 poetry collection *Time is a Mother*, as well as two chapbooks *Burnings* (2010) and *No* (2013). Throughout his career, Vuong went on to receive multiple awards and prizes. In 2017 he received the T.S. Eliot Prize for his poetry and in 2019 he became a MacArthur Fellow. In 2020 Vuong was the recipient of the American Book Award for *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, as well as was shortlisted for the Dylan Thomas Prize. The author has also won the NAAAP Pride Award and was shortlisted for the Griffin Poetry Prize for the poetry collection *Time is a Mother* in 2020. Vuong is currently a tenured professor at NYU, where he teaches Creative Writing and continues his literary career as a renowned poet and author ("Ocean Vuong", 2022).

Adichie started pursuing her literary career after receiving a degree in Communication and Political Science at the Eastern Connecticut State University. She went on receiving a Master's Degree in Creative Writing at John Hopkins University and afterwards, a Master's Degree in African History at Yale University. Since then, she has been a receiver of several fellowships at Princeton University in 2005-2006 academic year, MacArthur Fellowship in 2008, and a fellowship at the Redcliffe Institute of Harvard University for the academic year of 2011-2012. Her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, was published in 2003, and it won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize. *Americanah*, her third novel, was published in 2013 and won the US National Book Critics Circle Award and was a New York Times bestseller. Adichie is also the author of the 2010 short stories collection *Africa's Best Stories*, the 2014 short story *Letters Home*, the 2021 memoir *Notes on Grief*, the 2009 short story collection *The Thing Around Your Neck*, the 2006 novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and the 2014 essay "We Should All Be Feminists". Currently, Adichie lives in the United States and Nigeria, dividing her time between the two countries ("Ifemelu's Blog", 2021).

⁸ The title is taken from one of the poems in *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, a poetry collection in which Ocean Vuong revisits his own family story. See further explanation of the title in Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

The title of this dissertation, which we have chosen to be *The Americanah Project. Immigrant Writing in the 21st Century USA*, consists of two parts – ‘The Americanah project’ and ‘Immigrant Writing in the 21st Century USA’. The first half of the title – *The Americanah project* – is taken from the term used by Adichie to describe those who have been to the U.S. and returned to their country of origin with American pretensions and moreover, pretended not to understand and speak their mother tongues anymore, as well as refused to eat the local food that they have always had at home, and finally, constantly reminisced and referred back to their lives in the U.S (National Public Radio, 2014).⁹ By including the term ‘Americanah’ in the title of this dissertation, our goal has been to demonstrate how Adichie’s term is not exclusive to Nigerian immigrants in the U.S. and how it can serve as a universal evaluation of the millions of immigrant experiences in the contemporary United States. As for the second half of the dissertation title – *Immigrant Writing in the 21st Century USA* – we have aimed to closely read and compare Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* and to see how they address and critically look into the question of American identity in the underlying context of the 21st century American immigrant writing. Furthermore, Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* and Adichie’s *Americanah* will be used to demonstrate how both authors’ experiences as immigrants in the United States and their literary work contribute to changing the landscape of the American literature.

It is important to note at the start of this dissertation that Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* is a memoir based on his own and his family’s experience of immigrating to the United States from Vietnam. However, in a panel discussion in the International Literature Festival in Berlin in 2020, Vuong mentions that the novel is a combination of history, facts and memories (2020, 26’ 10”). Vuong elaborates by explaining that the book does invite an autobiographical reading, but it is not entirely a memoir. According to the author, choosing not to write a memoir was important to him and purposefully done on his part, as Vuong believes that a memoir aims to arrive at historical truth. Arriving at historical truth through his book was never his goal, that is why Vuong begins the book with truth, with history but the true realization of the book

⁹ For this precise reason, Adichie has titled her novel *Americanah* as well. The term itself can be found in the novel several times by other characters describing the protagonist, Ifemelu, as an ‘Americanah’.

can only occur by imagination. In other words, Vuong invites the reader to enter the book as a total non-fiction and leave the work as a novel, as art. Vuong describes how he considers it a magical act when he can take his life and then make something from it, something that no one has lived, something that never existed. He sees this very process as turning what one had into something that is in a way potential, a foundation of truth realized by art (*Internationales Literaturfestival Berlin, 2020*).¹⁰

Adichie's *Americanah*, on the other hand is loosely based on her own experience in America; however, according to the author, it is also not a fully autobiographical novel and does include fiction. In a 2013 interview to *ArtsBeat, The New York Times Blog*, Adichie particularly emphasizes that the protagonist of *Americanah*, Ifemelu, spends 13 years in the U.S. before she moves back to Nigeria, whereas Adichie herself only spent four years before moving back to Nigeria. Adichie highlights this fact as she believes that the difference here is significant between how her and Ifemelu's characters are shaped. Adichie also mentions that she does not believe in writing what she does not know, so the fact that she has lived in the U.S. lets her tell 'a story partly about America' (2013, par. 3).

It is important to understand the connection between reality and fiction in order to explain our choice of dedicating this project to these particular two novels by Vuong and Adichie. In the International Literature Festival in Berlin in 2020, Ocean Vuong explains that he chose to write a fictional novel as he is an artist and not a spokesperson of his people. Vuong makes it clear that as an artist, he believes in creating context of reality and respectively, creating fiction out of the aforementioned context; however, under no circumstances does he present himself as a representative of the community where he comes from (2020, 30' 15"). For him, it is the practice of writing that can teach how to construct life. Similarly, Adichie, in the 2013 interview to *ArtsBeat, The New York Times Blog*, states that her position "as somebody who is not an American" gives her a certain

¹⁰ Vuong also mentions that he has been inspired by James Baldwin's 1952 semi-autobiographical novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. The novel tells the story of John Grimes, a teenager in 1930s Harlem, and his relationship with his family and his church. The novel also reveals the back stories of John's mother, his biological father, and his violent, fanatically religious stepfather, Gabriel Grimes, focusing on the role of the Pentecostal Church in the lives of African Americans, both as a negative source of repression and moral hypocrisy and a positive source of inspiration and community.

The genre and the structure of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* will be thoroughly addressed in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

privilege as she is able to look at race in America from the outside, to write about the different arrangements of race and, as she specifies, ‘blackness’, and particularly the assignment of ‘blackness’ to individuals in the U.S: “When I came to the U.S., I became fascinated by the many permutations of race, especially of blackness, the identity I was assigned in America. I still am fascinated.” (2013, para. 11). In the same interview Adichie adds that she prefers “fiction that has something to say and doesn’t ‘hide behind art,’ novels that feel true, that are not self-conscious experiments” (2013, para. 8). “I read a lot of contemporary American fiction and find the writing admirable”, says Adichie, “but often it is about individuals caged in their individuality, it says nothing about American life, is more about style than it is about substance (...). *The Great Gatsby*, for example, says something about American life in a way that many contemporary novels no longer do.” (2013, para. 8). This echoes a comment made by Adichie three years before, in the 2010 Texas Book Festival, when she stated that her goal was showing the day-to-day reality of individuals in her books, which is why, in her own words, “I’m not interested in being a spokesperson or anything more than what I am, which is a writer.” (2010, para. 17).

Through both novels, *Americanah* and *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, this dissertation will aim toward attempting to convey Vuong’s message of how writing is not just depicting reality, it is creating reality. In addition, we will also explore Adichie’s idea of the ability of fiction to portray American life, instead of only depicting ‘individuals caged in their individualism’.

We find it crucial to note that both novels convey the importance of writing within a body of writing. In Vuong’s book, writing takes place in the form of letters, as the book itself is a letter addressed to the narrator’s mother. In Adichie’s book, the first form of writing within the body of writing is a blog, authored by Adichie’s protagonist, Ifemelu.¹¹ Furthermore, similarly to Vuong, Adichie also includes letters in the novel which are authored by the second protagonist, Obinze, as he is telling about his experiences as an immigrant in the United Kingdom. Both Ifemelu’s blog and Obinze’s letters partially

¹¹ The blog is titled ‘Raceteenth, or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known As Negroes) By a Non-American Black’ and will be further referred to in the upcoming chapters of this dissertation.

function as diary entries, describing their honest reflections of their everyday lives as immigrants.

Adichie's *Americanah* and Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* have been previously used in some important studies to discuss a variety of topics concerning race, gender, masculinity, and media representation, which were useful for this dissertation. As these studies discuss, Adichie's book has particularly created the space to focus on race as a social construction, at the same time allowing the reader to explore beauty, hair and skin color and their connection to the current reality of race in the States. Despite the current media representation of race and transforming beauty standards, one of those studies, Veronica Pardiñas' "Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*: (Re)Opening a Conversation About Race and Beauty", has highlighted how black hair and colorism still influence beauty and success by the social media representing "white beauty" standards even in the multiethnic reality of today's United States (2014). *Americanah* has also been used to study immigration and racial identity in the United States, particularly emphasizing the African representation in America. Adichie discusses the matter by including the presidential elections of 2008 in the States, when Obama was elected as the first African-American president of the United States. Hanane Bentayeb's and Meriem Ladjal's study "Immigration and Racial Identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*" has discussed the book by showing that the racial problems do very much exist in today's America since many Americans believe that since a black president was elected the times of slavery and racial segregation are in the past (2018). Finally, "The Anonymous Web in Adichie's *Americanah*" by Michelle Jude Gibeault has approached Adichie's *Americanah* from the point of view blogging as a means of influence and communication. The study has particularly showed how the novel introduces an anonymous blog into African-American cultural performance (2019).¹²

¹² Adichie's novel has also been the subject of discussion by Sanne Jannsen in her study "Writing an Honest Novel About Race. An Analysis of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*" to argue that even though it is not African American literature, it provides new insights into African American literature, particularly the concepts of race and gender in African American literature by using postcolonial and gender theories (2015). Moreover, in her study "Formation Within the Nation" Emma Flodqvist has discussed Benedict Anderson's ideas of Nations and imagined communities and Edward Said's *Orientalism* in the context of Adichie's *Americanah* and used to argue that the colonial American discourse is not only present in the novel but also places Ifemelu, the protagonist of the novel in Western marginalization (2018).

On the other hand, Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* has also been widely studied in the contexts of the memoir genre peculiarities, liminality, healing from trauma, Vietnamese language, form, memory and the concept of remembering as a second chance. The study conducted by James Ricks in 2021, named "Gorgeous Healing: Liminality in Memoir and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*" focuses on historical trauma and explores the ways in which traumas exist throughout time and pass on to generations. The study argues that those traumas are a part of the intersectional experience of being a person of color in the United States (2021). Mannhi Nguyen Tran's 2020 study "Literary and Literal Bodies: Vietnamese American Form, Affect, and Politics in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*", in Georgetown University, questions the choices Vuong has made in the novel concerning form and the genre of memoir. The study argues that the way in which the author uses these structures lead to viewing the linearity of time in approaching historical events in a completely different manner, as well as expand the geographical framework for Vietnamese America (2020). In his study *Memory as a Second Chance: An Intersectional Reading of On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Audun Westermann Ryeng adds on by arguing that the novel is an important relic towards reimagining today's America, as well as American and world history as not just a master narrative. The study highlights how the deconstruction of language and form can aid conveying meaning, while presenting the novel as a tool to navigate identity, historical trauma and the concepts of memory (2022).

Both *Americanah* and *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* have been vastly studied in recent years as individual novels, however, in this dissertation we will be conducting parallel reading of the two novels for the first time. This parallel close reading of the two novels will help us demonstrate how both authors reflect about the construction of American identity in the 21st century. Furthermore, both novels will provide us with the bodies of writing which create the space of finding or re-finding – and of defining and re-defining – 'home'. Adichie's and Vuong's portrayal of how writing within writing can equip the marginalized bodies with a voice and authority to look for a new center will be essential in attempting to decode the contemporary American immigrant writing in the context of finding 'home', whether the 'home' is within borderlands, or rather a borderless one. The literary comparative analysis of the two novels conducted by us will also address the question of identity and how contemporary American immigrant identity

is formed throughout different means, be it through addressing writing as a tool, a constructing of home, or a revisiting historical memories to construct new memories.

In order to fully explore the novels and reach the aim of understanding their role in transforming and newly defining contemporary American literature, the dissertation will adopt an intersectional approach, combining Studies on New Immigrant Writing and Memory Studies with Masculinity Studies, Feminist Studies, and Studies on Race and Class. These theoretical tools will be crucial to address the migrant, gendered, racialized and queer bodies depicted in the novels, as well as their role in rethinking American identity.

Throughout *The Americanah Project*, a thorough exploration of three topics will be conducted. In Chapter 1, titled “Spatial Conversations and Bodies Out of Place. Notes on Immigrant Writing”, we will discuss the landscape of contemporary American literature, particularly cultural diversity and immigrant literature. The idea of how national identity is built will help us understand processes of assimilation and integration in the United States immigrant culture. Moreover, the concepts of belonging and not-belonging will lead us to concluding Chapter 1 with spatial conversations and a discussion of the idea of bodies out of place. We will address the idea of America being a *rhetorical battleground* and not *an overarching synthesis* (Bercovitch, 1987). Naturally, the multiversity of the American nation and the wholeness of American exceptionalism in the 21st century will be central in those discussions (Santos, 2012).

In Chapter 2, titled “Gorgeous Bodies: Maintaining a Sense of Self”, gender, sexuality, race and class will be examined. We will see the obstacles of daily existence as immigrants on the American soil from intersectional perspectives. Discussions of feminism and masculinity, social mobility, the American dream, and racial prejudice will lead us to the demonstration of how writing can be a way of maintaining a sense of self on a foreign land.

In the final Chapter, titled “Untangling History: Memory, Silence, Trauma”, geographical space will be addressed by including the histories of the two countries the two authors come from – Vietnam and Nigeria and the imperial relationships both countries have had throughout their histories. Discussing historical trauma in Vietnam and Nigeria will help us understand the peculiar connections the authors have with their countries. In addition to reflecting on historical trauma, Sara Ahmed’s definition of

‘home’ will be addressed in the attempt to understand how individuals identify with a history through forgetting, not remembering what their home was (2000, p. 78).

The Nigerian-American and Vietnamese-American experiences of America and what American identity represents for immigrants shown throughout both novels provide us with the opportunity to look into what borders mean in everyday lives of thousands of people who directly experience America. As Ahmed states, migration, in general, achieves questioning the nature of an individual’s identity itself (2000, p. 80). Close reading of *Americanah* and *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* will lead to the question of where America lies, how borders shift constantly and organize exchange with the outside world, what that shift and exchange mean to the individuals, language and sense of belonging. How does the journey of crossing borders shape the migrant, what other barriers break? And, finally, what is the identity that is forged as a result of these ‘transactions’? Is this the American identity, is it, perhaps, the immigrant identity, or is it an entirely third identity accumulated as a result of borderland mechanisms?

CHAPTER 1

Spatial Conversations and Bodies Out of Place: Notes on Immigrant Writing

The second generation wants to be known. We are here, we are proud, we want to honor our journey. But the elders tell us it's time to hide yourself in order to protect yourself. And that's the great conundrum of being an immigrant and we don't have to solve that. We can honor both perspectives.

“Ocean Vuong’s Life Sentences”, *The New Yorker*, 2019

It is safe to say that in the recent years ‘identity’ and various questions concerning ‘identity’ have become central in overall human and social sciences. As explained by Paul du Gay, Jessica Evans and Peter Redman, in the Introduction of *Identity: A Reader*, even in fields such as politics and international relations, the ‘identity’ of the modern nation-states has been questioned, taking into consideration global interconnectedness (2002, p.1). Moreover, in the context of intersectionality, it becomes evident that the previous dominating state of ‘class’ as the ‘master identity’, as Gay, Evans and Redman put it, in which all the other social identities mediate, is no longer the case.¹³ In her 1991 “Mapping Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color”, Kimberly Crenshaw pointed out that the problem of identity politics is not the failure of transcending differences, but quite the opposite, it is the fact that it often ignores ‘intragroup differences’ (1991, p. 1242). Crenshaw goes on to explain that despite sexism and racism frequently intersecting in people’s lives, these two do not seem to do the same in feminist and ‘anti-race’ studies.¹⁴ Considering what Gay, Evans and Redman, as well

¹³ The term ‘intersectionality’ has its roots in Black feminist activism, and was originally defined by American critical legal race scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989. Crenshaw used the term intersectionality to refer to the double discrimination of racism and sexism faced by Black women. Specifically, Crenshaw highlighted legal cases wherein women were required to choose between bringing a claim of racism or sexism and could not say that they had been discriminated against due to the combined effects of race and sex (Crenshaw, 1991).

¹⁴ Crenshaw went on to explore the different ways in which race and gender intersect in contributing to shaping political, structural and representational aspects of violence against women of color. To further read about Crenshaw’s Intersectionality theory, please advise her 1991 essay “Mapping Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color”.

as Crenshaw argue, it seems important to note that the concept of ‘identity’ needs to be constantly reexamined.

According to Stuart Hall’s influential essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, identity is neither transparent nor simple. What Hall claims is that identity is never a fact or a state that is accomplished; it is always a process, a process that is always ongoing and, most importantly, formed and shaped from within representation (1990, p.222).

Hall approaches ‘cultural identity’ from two sides. According to him, the first position represents cultural identity as one shared culture (as he puts it, ‘a collective one true self’) which is shared by people who have the same or a common historical and ancestral background. Through those common historical and ancestral experiences, people are provided with unchanging references and meaning. As Hall explains further, this approach to cultural identity is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth (1990, p.226). While this approach focuses on all the ways in which people are similar, the second approach, does the opposite. It is truly these differences that constitute the transformation of identity throughout history. While the first approach dives back into the past and looks for traces of identity and similarities in the past, this second approach refers to cultural identity as something belonging not only to the past but also to the future. Hall believes that, as everything else which has history and derives from the past, cultural identity is also in transformation and change, thus, it cannot solely belong and stay in the past. It does go on, change, transform continuously, and in doing so it not only questions the matter of ‘being’ but also the matter of ‘becoming’.

In his essay, Hall refers to three ‘presences’ which contribute to constituting cultural identity: the African, the European and the New World¹⁵. The latter is particularly interesting for our discussion because it contributes to the attempt to decipher cultural identity. He considers religion, spirituality, music, rhythms as traces of Africa and not

¹⁵ The first presence Hall describes is the ‘Présence Africaine’, which is the context of the repressed and silenced deriving from slavery, plantations, religion, spirituality, and music and rhythms of the enslaved people. Interestingly enough, Hall believes that the mere presence of all the above-mentioned traces of Africa are a result of the continuous transformation process (1990, p. 231). He considers religion, spirituality, music, rhythms as traces of Africa and not Africa itself, since Hall believes that original Africa is no longer there, despite being the main source where these traces originate from.

Africa itself, since Hall believes that original Africa is no longer there, despite being the main source where these traces originate from. This perspective of Africa resembles Benedict Anderson's concept of 'imagined community'. In *Imagined Communities*, (2006), Anderson defines a nation as an 'imagined community', in that, the nation, being a socially and culturally constructed community, is in essence, imagined by the people who consider themselves to be a part of that very group (2006, p. 8). Moreover, the nation as an 'imagined community' has also transformed, and along with it transformed the nation's consciousness, as well. That is why and how the Africa, which is a part of the Caribbean imaginary, does not exist anymore.

As Hall describes, the 'New World' presence, unlike the European presence, is not about power but rather about place, ground and territory (1990, p. 234).¹⁶ In essence, this presence is the 'empty' land, as Hall puts it, which is the territory for strangers coming from all over the world to encounter each other and each other's cultural identities. Hall describes the American presence as the signifier of migration and as the origin of the postmodern concept of a nomad. As the 'New World' presence is the place, the ground of displacement and coming together, it brings forth the continuous striving to return to 'lost origins', to go back to the start, to reunite once again (1990, p. 236). However, as aforementioned, Hall believes that the reunion is impossible since the 'lost origin' place, the ground to go back to is no longer there because it has also transformed itself and it still continues to do so.

Hall's 'presences' urge us to place identity in the context of philosophical and anthropological schools of thought. According to Hall, racism is viewed as a great structure of knowledge and representation. Hall believes that this very structures of knowledge and representation are constructed systems of defense, a "way of securing us 'over here' and them 'over there', to fix each in its appointed species place" (1992, p. 16). Hall argues that in fact, racism and its portrayal in the media and culture, marks how

¹⁶ The European presence immediately opposes the African presence, since it is heavily about power and dominance (1990, p. 232). This presence is where colonial discourse and romantization of the exotic derive from. But despite the number of attempts to view it and categorize the European presence as something completely external, it is impossible to refuse that it has become a part of the cultural identity. Here the question is not whether European presence is or is not part of the cultural identity. The question is, how can one objectively position it without fear or violence, instead of always being positioned by this very presence. As Hall asks, is it even possible to acknowledge the influence of the European presence without being swallowed by imperialism? (1990, p. 234)

strongly the ‘over here’ and ‘over there’ are connected to each other and how necessary the concept of ‘the Other’ is in shaping and re-confirming a dominant sense of identity. Even in the context of colonization and imperialism, the dominance, the power is perceived through the idea of ‘the Other’ and without ‘the Other’, as Hall states there would be no possibility of dominance, that is why, as Hall claims: “the Other is not out there, but in here. It is not outside, but inside” (1992, p. 16).

In his *Interrogating Identity: Frantz Fanon and the Post Colonial Prerogative*, Homi K. Bhabha describes the two postcolonial traditions in the discourse of identity which he differentiates as the philosophical tradition of identity and the anthropological view of identity (2000, p. 95). He explains the former as the process of self-reflection in the mirror of human nature. The latter, on the other hand, Bhabha explains as the difference of human identity as situated in the division of Nature and Culture. He goes on to elaborate by referring to Edward Said’s idea that the postmodern world has managed to reinforce the stereotypical way in which the Orient is viewed and perceived by the West. According to Said, the Orient has become closer and more accessible for the Western citizen and has become less of a myth and more of a target for American interests (*ibidem*). In this context, Bhabha uses an excerpt from the poem by Meiling Jin, “Strangers on a Hostile Landscape”, to point out the chaos of identity and to introduce the idea of an immigrant being invisible:

We arrived in the Northern Hemisphere
when summer was on its way
running from the flames that lit up the sky
over the colonial estate.
We were a bunch of immigrants in disarray
in a lily-white landscape.

...
One day I learned
a secret art,
Invisibili-Dade, was its name.
I think it worked
because even now you look
but you never see me

Only my eyes will stay to watch and haunt
and turn your dreams
into chaos.

(Jin, pp. 126-7, cited in Bhabha, 2000, p. 94)

In this poem, the speaker, a black woman who finds herself in a new continent, is the subject. Bhabha suggests that the protagonist, as a subject, cannot possibly be seen and perceived as not invisible. In other words, the protagonist, the migrant woman looks without being seen even when the beholder sees her as Other, even if there is a racist or a sexist context present, in a way, the postmodern context places her in a spot where she is being looked at but not being seen (2000, p. 96). Bhabha argues that it is not that simple and that there is immense ambivalence when it comes to the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, the Other (*ibidem*). Bhabha introduces the concept of *mimicry* to explain how the Other, the subject as he calls the migrant woman in this case, tries to create a space in which the colonized and the colonizer are ‘almost the same but not quite’, and this space by itself not only causes problems in the relationship between the colonized and the colonizer but also, and more importantly, the very concept of identity (2000, p. 97).¹⁷ What Bhabha means with the term *mimicry* is the imitation of the behavior, language, and the culture of the colonizer by the colonized (*ibidem*). However, it is not as simple, as mere imitation. According to Bhabha, what makes it special and worth exploring is the fact that even though the colonized or the subject imitates the language and culture of the colonizer, he/she changes it at the same time, thus in fact, empowering the colonized, since the colonizer no longer has the full power to define the identity of the subject, the colonized (*ibidem*). Taking into consideration the concepts of mimicry and ambivalence, it is curious that Bhabha explains that the problem of being is no longer central in understanding identity and what truly matters is the moment in which, as Bhabha puts it, ‘demand for identification becomes, primarily, a response to other questions of signification and desire, culture and politics’ (2000, p. 98). In that way, Bhabha’s conclusion to what identity is not and most importantly what identity is coincides with Stuart Hall’s definition of identity and it being a process of transformation. Similarly, to Hall, Bhabha determines that identity is never a finished product, and it is always the process of reaching an image of totality (2000, p. 100).

If identity is never a finished product, if identity is always in transition, and if it always transforms and strives for completeness, then, where does this transformation occur? What are the physical spaces that not only make this transformation possible, but

17 As Bhabha's book title reveals, his work is heavily influenced by Franz Fanon's theories.

also contribute to it by their very presence? Could borders be these spaces contributing to identity transformation?

Borders are established to define the safe and unsafe places and to clearly distinguish ‘us’ from ‘them’ as Gloria Anzaldua explains in *Borderlands La Frontera* (1987, p. 3). Despite the rather concise and simple definition, Anzaldua goes on to explain that a borderland is not a determined place, on the contrary, it is vague and undetermined. Moreover, a borderland is a constant state of transition (*ibidem*). In that sense, Anzaldua’s definition of a borderland seems to coincide with Stuart Hall’s understanding of a national identity and it too being in a constant state of transition. Another definition of borders can be found in the chapter “What Is the Border?”, in Ana M Manzanar and Jesus Benito’s *Cities, Borders, and Spaces in Intercultural American Literature and Film*. The authors agree that there is no one way to define borders. According to them, one way of looking at borders can be interpreting them as incomplete bodies which are always in transformation as a result of constant communication with the outside world (2011, p. 113). Another possible way of perceiving the border can be looking at it as a ‘national tranquilizer’, such as the Great Wall of China, for instance, a historic figure that creates a sense of belonging that is clearly separated from the outside and is impossible to divide from within (2011, p. 113-114). And the third way a border can be defined, according to Manzanar and Benito, is in fact, the idea of treating borders as the key to nation building, to stabilizing the collective sense of identity by discarding the internal differences within the nation and setting clear distinctions from other nations and other senses of self. In this context, the border can be viewed as the means or the space which has the potential and ability to construct meaning (2011, p. 114).

Anzaldua’s perception of borders and those who inhabit them, however, seems to be rather determined – she describes the ones who live in the borderlands as *los atravesados*, those who do not fit the category of ‘normal’, those who do not belong anywhere else (1987, p. 3). With this definition and terminology of *los atravesados*, Anzaldua does exactly what Glenda R Carpio explains in *Contemporary American Immigrant Literature* as a shift in power from monolinguals to bilinguals (2012, p. 68). This power shift created and assisted with language largely contributes to Anzaldua’s further definitions and descriptions of borderlands, identities and notions of belonging and not-belonging.

Furthermore, Manzanas and Benito discuss that Anzaldua's *Borderlands/La Frontera* has changed the course of literary imagination, as it has widely embraced divisions, gaps, wounds, absences and silences (2011, p. 65). The Chicano writer represents the 'zero point where spatial and temporal axes intersect' and, in doing so, changes the narrative times and spaces, thus enhancing transformation from colonial Mexico to a 'post border reality' (2011, p. 66). What the author further explores is the idea of a 'declaration of difference' and the role it plays in a nation's identity and its definition (*ibidem*). Manzanas and Benito go on to give the example of the American colonies declaring independence from Britain and in fact, comparing the declaration of independence to a declaration of difference. As Manzanas and Benito explain, the *mestizo* nation, who are the people living in the borderlands, as named by Anzaldua, were not only in need of physical borders, but also and more importantly, cultural, narrative and ideological borders to be able to call themselves a nation and declare both independence and difference (*ibidem*). Anzaldua explains this as not only the *mestizo* nation being in the need of physical limits for physically identifying borderlands but in fact, using those physical limits to access the hybridity in the very consciousness of the nation, which is the key to its formulation (2011, p. 67). Manzanas and Benito interpret Anzaldua's 'hybridity' as an important component of a nation which is 'deterritorialized', thus making 'hybridity' something that can be dangerous for 'sameness', since the latter is artificially cultivated by the power of nationalism (2011, p. 68). The struggle and fight for 'hybridity' is fascinating, as it actually does not aim to completely discard the American, on the contrary, it develops and nurtures the idea of embracing the hybrid identity that is already there, it already exists, and nationalist power or force is unable to discard it.

And Anzaldua does exactly that, as Manzanas and Benito explain: she does not accept the already integrated and finalized versions of identities and cultures, she chooses to define and theorize the *mestizaje*, hybridity (*ibidem*). In other words, Anzaldua does not believe that there is only one direction in which cultures and identities are influenced, she states and develops further the idea of 'two-way traffic of cultural and identity production' (*ibidem*). In this context, what is extremely important for elaborating on this 'new' two-way traffic approach on culture and identity is location. As explained in Michel

Foucault's *The Order of Things*, location is crucial for identity and similarities among things:

Their edges touch, their fringes intermingle, the extremity of the one also denotes the beginning of the other. In this way, movement, influences, passions, and properties, too, are communicated. So that in this hinge between two things a resemblance appears. (1970, p. 20)

As explained by Foucault, physical adjacency results in a relationship between things, which respectively, produces back and forth, exchanges finally causing the emergence of new similarities (2011, p. 68). In this context, it is essential to be tolerant toward ambiguity, that gray zone in the borderlands, which make it impossible to draw limits and borders. Manzanos and Benito argue that this is exactly how Anzaldua erases the limits of the nation by embracing that ambiguity which in its turn opens the door to the possibility of focusing on the cultural exchange and the factors which 'hybridity' constitutes (*ibidem*). As Anzaldua explains in *This Bridge Called My Back* (1987), 'hybridity' can only occur in those 'in-between spaces', spaces that are unpredictable, always in transition, never stable, always lacking clear boundaries. Only then 'ours' and 'theirs' will be impossible to clearly see and define, only then there will no longer be one perspective, one view, only then diversity will emerge and only then the *mestiza* nation and its consciousness will be driven by this diversity (1987, p. 11).

Anzaldua does not solely describe national identity. She goes on to explore the idea of being 'zero, nothing, no one', yet finding existence in that negation. She writes that 'she is not and yet she is' and what is crucial is that this idea spreads in all directions of a possible identity or thereof the lack of it (2011, p. 69):

As a mestiza I have no country, my homeland cast me out, yet all countries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races.) I am cultureless because, as a feminist, I challenge the collective cultural/religious make-derived beliefs of Indo-Hispanics and Anglos: yet I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture. (Anzaldua, 1987, 80-81)

Apart from being that gray, unpredictable space, the borderlands have been portrayed as ‘wounds that will not heal’. In her *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldua does represent borderlands as open wounds that never stop bleeding and are never definitely sealed (2011, p. 93). For the Chicano poet and scholar, the question is more focused on the process, never a result. She explains that the borderlands are always in the process of healing (*ibidem*). Anzaldua sees this process of healing as borderlands either being healed scars, no longer under the danger to get infected; and as an open wound, presently in the process of healing (2011, p. 94). If in the first case, Anzaldua believes that the scar formed can be a bridge connecting people who have grown, the second perspective of borderlands being fresh, open wounds, is quite complex. Anzaldua explains that the open wound can result in fear, in anxiety of the nation to keep trying to sanitize the wound. Anzaldua talks about this anxiety both in terms of keeping the wound sanitized in the geographical context and the socio-cultural context (*ibidem*). Interestingly, according to Anzaldua, on the other hand, if an open wound causes fear and anxiety, a wound that has become a scar results in security and feeling of nationhood (2011, p. 95).

In the context of Anzaldua’s description of the ‘gray space’ it is essential to refer to Homi K. Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* and the ideas of ‘hybridity’ and ‘third space’.¹⁸ According to Bhabha, as a result of the mix of different cultures in the postcolonial context, ‘third space’ holds the result of these different cultures encountering each other (1994, p. 65). These ‘hybridity’ that Bhabha explores does not require to establish any sort of ‘cultural supremacy’ over other spaces, on the contrary, it positions the ‘partial culture’ to construct a version of a community, accompanied by historic memory that as Bhabha explains give a narrative form to “the outsider of the inside; the part in the whole” (1994). This new space that Bhabha speaks about can be in a way similar to an experience that does not include having a ‘home’, a ‘homeless experience’. What Bhabha proposes is not that the ‘third space’ is already there along with the other spaces. What Bhabha states is that the ‘third space’ must be constructed as a result of cultural reconciliation, a space where cultures can be negotiated by interacting with the

¹⁸ Please advise Chapter 1 for further elaboration of the concept of ‘third space of enunciation’.

differences that exist in the different cultures: “Culture does imply difference, but the differences now are no longer, if you wish, taxonomical; they are interactive and refractive” (1994). According to Bhabha, it is through this very negotiation that ‘hybrid’ identities and ‘third space’ become possible: “hybridity to me is the ‘third space’ which enables other positions to emerge”. Bhabha’s concept of the ‘third space’ very much applies to how race, class and gender attribute to different postcolonial experiences.¹⁹

Now, this may sound controversial, and one may ask how can a wound result in security and moreover bear a feeling of nationhood? How can a ‘no-man’s-land’, as explained by Manzanias and Benito, provide communities with a sense of identity, a sense of belonging and nationhood?

If we go back to the U.S.-Mexico border, a situation that hasn’t been addressed yet becomes a key factor in constituting identity. The immigrants who cross the border illegally, who physically go through the no-man’s-land and win their way to the United States forever remain trapped in the process of their crossing the border even when they successfully make it to the other side (Manzanias & Benito, 2011, p. 102-103). These are the outcasts, the figures who live in the spaces of non-identity. For them the space of non-identity never vanishes, never transforms because they forever remain invisible, despite the physical and geographical space they occupy. Manzanias and Benito call these immigrants ‘hyphenated’ Americans (2011, p. 103). As the authors go on explaining, it is the first-generation of the ‘hyphenated’ Americans who tell their narrative of witnessing the denial of American identity for them, at the same time, slowly losing their original ‘ethnic’ identity, as a result becoming ‘hyphenated’ inhabitants of this new geographical space, where their wounds are never healed (*ibidem*).

Losing the original ‘ethnic’ identity may greatly contribute to the idea of ‘home’ and how one perceives it in the context of identity and borderlands. In her 1997 essay *Home* Toni Morrison defines and explains her concept of home and how race and home are a priority for her as a writer in the attempt of telling her own story by using her own voice, without giving in to the imposed perception of what race and home have been

¹⁹ Bhabha’s concepts of ‘hybridity’ and ‘third space’ will be further referred to in the next chapters of this work.

explained to be by the default white voice.²⁰

Morrison's view of 'home' or possibly even identity in this context is a rather conscious one, one that she chooses to construct disregarding the identity that is being imposed on her by the 'all-knowing law of the white father' (1997, p. 4). Morrison accepts the reality ruled by this exact 'all-knowing white father', however, she does not accept the fact that she cannot partake in rebuilding that house, recreating it as she sees fit with enough windows and doors which she can use to raise her voice and tell about her own identity herself without being forced (1997, p. 5). The only way for her to be able to rebuild the house and make it into a 'home' and attempt to define her own identity is through writing.

This makes us wonder – what if by escaping the identity constructed and forced by the 'all-knowing white father' and by trying to create an identity that would be as close to the true identity of the writer as possible, the latter would eternally remain as something unreachable and never possible to acquire in real life? What if by constantly chasing the idea of 'home' and 'true self' composed and explained by oneself, the writer would never be able to recognize it in the world where Morrison has not re-built 'houses' into 'homes' yet?

Interestingly, in her fight toward constructing a 'home', Morrison admits that the involvement of the reader is crucial as well in succeeding.²¹ She explains that in order for the narration created by the writer to reach its goal of re-building the racially constructed

²⁰ Morrison believes that the utopian 'Edenesque' world where race does not matter, has been situated to be perceived as something impossible to ever achieve. Instead of calling this utopian idea of a world where race does not matter, Morrison prefers to call it 'home' (1997). Morrison goes on to explain the three reasons for her choice of the term 'home'. First, as we have seen, she states that the term 'home' lets her differentiate between the metaphor of the house and the metaphor of the home in the context of racial construction. Then, she explains how the term 'home' contributes to creating the distance between the known 'impossible future or an irretrievable and probably nonexistent Eden' as she puts it, and the more realistic, possible and manageable human activity. And third, Morrison explains that she is able to destroy the power of racial constructs in language and that this is also what constitutes the term of 'home' (1997, p. 4-5).

²¹ Similarly, in Adichie's *Americanah*, the blog created by the protagonist Ifemelu, succeeds in creating a community, a sense of belonging for these people, largely because her writing invites relevant presence of her readers and encourages immediate feedback, that way creating and maintaining the opportunity for a conversation to take place.

‘house’ into a ‘home’, the reader should be willing to step outside the formerly set boundaries of race and identity (1997, p. 4).²²

In Sarah Ahmed’s *Strange Encounters. Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (2000), she approaches the concept of home from the perspective of what ‘home’ represents for an individual and for the collective. Ahmed explains that home becomes ‘Home’ as a result of a process of losing memory. She states that once a failure of an individual’s memory occurs, it is compensated by the collective memory and the body of writing which includes the history of the individual’s nation. It is in this body of writing that individuals may find a space to fit in the collective past (2000, p. 77). Ahmed believes that this past in which the individual attempts to fit is already lost when it is in the body of writing and it is through that very loss that the collective ‘we’ becomes ‘Home’: “It is the act of forgetting that allows the subject to identify with a history, to find out, to discover, what one has already lost: what is already lost is the fantastic ‘we’ of a nation, city and house” (2000, p. 78). However, according to Ahmed, ‘Home’ is not only in the past, ‘Home’ is also in the future. As she states: “Home becomes the impossibility and necessity of the subject’s future (one never gets there, but is always getting there), rather the past that binds the subject to a given place” (*ibidem*). Despite the fact that Ahmed does not specify where ‘Home’ is in this context, one thing seems to be clear – ‘Home’ is somewhere else, but it is always where, as Ahmed puts it, “the subject is going” (*ibidem*). Ahmed further explores the status of those individuals who have forgotten their ‘home’ and are considered to be strangers. Ahmed defines these strangers as the migrants who have left the home of their nation, the country of their origin, and are now bodies out of place in the communities where they move to live (*ibidem*). Interestingly, for Ahmed,

²² Morrison concludes her essay *Home* by discussing Nationhood and anxiety of belonging. According to her, anxiety of belonging is no longer occasional. On the contrary, it goes hand in hand and cannot be separated from the discourse on globalism, nationalism, transnationalism, redistribution of alliances, falling apart of federations and any remnants of sovereignty. As Morrison believes, nationhood, just like anxiety of belonging is never constant, it never remains the same. Nationhood is always newly established, or re-established as a reaction to migrations, displacements, wars and political conflicts. One thing though that Morrison believes to remain the same even in those constant changes is the fact that despite being in constant shifts, nationhood and identity often remain racially constructed. In the same way as Morrison believes that a world where race does not matter is ‘Edenesque’ and impossible to be real, an un-raced nationhood or identity are also never a possibility. They always remain an imagined land, a utopia that will under no circumstances become ‘home’ (1997, p. 10-11).

the moment of the migrant becoming a stranger, becoming a body out of place is when one leaves the country of origin, the original home and not when they move to a new place (*ibidem*). It is in further exploring the idea of the strangers, ‘the bodies out of place’ that Ahmed refers to Iain Chamber’s 1994 *Migrancy, Culture and Identity*, in which the author argues how migration becomes a means of interrogating the nature of identity. Ahmed points out Chamber’s idea of migration being a journey in which the migrant crosses borders and in doing so breaks barriers of thinking and experience (Chamber, 1994, as cited in Ahmed, 2000, p. 80). Chamber’s idea revolves around the body out of place, not as a stranger who has been dislocated from home, but a stranger who has come to learn ways ‘to think without a home’. For Chambers, the prominent point in the experience of the stranger’s journey is the wandering of the thought, as in the process of migration, the thought requires translation. And it is in this process of wandering, of translation, that the idea of the thought moving away from home becomes central in migration: “Thought wanders. It migrates, requires translation. Migration is generalized, such that it comes to represent the very nature of thinking itself, in which to think is to move, and to move away, from any fixed home or origin” (Chamber, 1994, as cited in Ahmed, 2000, p. 80).

Ahmed seems to agree that migration is centered around movement. Moreover, she explains that the process of moving is often surprisingly felt through one’s skin sensations (2000, p. 90). She recalls her own experience of first moving to Australia as a child, and how the dust made her sneeze and her eyes itch. And then, another skin sensation after returning to England, which she recalls as: “I felt the cold pinching my skin” (*ibidem*). It is here when Ahmed explains that the body reacts to the new space by expanding and contracting, which often times can be as uncomfortable and inconvenient as an ‘itch’. As Ahmed puts it: “Migration stories are *skin memories*: memories of different sensations that are felt on the skin. Migrant bodies stretch and contract, as they come across the borders that mark out familiar and strange places” (2000, p. 91). At this point, Ahmed builds up to the question of: “How do bodies re-inhabit space? And even, ‘how do spaces re-inhabit bodies?’” (2000, p. 90). The author argues that in the process of migration, leaving home becomes about ‘the failure of memory to make sense of the place one comes to inhabit’, one that transmits to the uncomfortable experience of being a migrant body, a body that becomes to feel out of place (2000, p. 91). Here Ahmed comes

to the conclusion that migrant bodies cannot be located in one or the other side of identity and be defined in a similar manner. Ahmed states that ‘estrangement’ is what is necessary to create a community where migrant bodies, bodies out of place can reach out to each other and share the ‘out-of-place-ness’ (2000, p. 94). Ahmed believes that out of all the things that migrant bodies may have in common, it is truly the shared feeling of being out of place that brings them into the same space and makes a community of ‘bodies out of place’ (*ibidem*).²³

The concepts of ‘home’, ‘mimicry’ and ‘ambivalence’, ‘hyphenated Americans’, borderlands and ‘no-man’s-lands’, ‘bodies out of place’ and ‘strangers’, that we have discussed above will be used to read Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* and Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*. Certainly, both books extensively deal with the idea of creating a ‘home’, both depict borderland identities and ‘bodies out of place’, both reflect about ‘mimicry’ and ‘ambivalence’, and both are of course examples of immigrant literature – although the former is a novel that invites an autobiographical reading and the latter, also having an autobiographical foundation, leans toward the genre of memoir.

The question of what contemporary American immigrant literature is constituted of certainly does not restrict us solely to the 21st century and events we have all witnessed. The question takes us back to the second half of the 19th century and of course, the 20th century and several historical events followed by great migration waves. According to Glenda R. Carpio’s essay “Contemporary American Immigrant Literature”, the first major immigration wave to the United States was involving around 5 million immigrants mostly coming from the United Kingdom, Ireland, Germany and Scandinavia (2012, p. 54). Until the second half of the twentieth century, the immigration waves to the United

²³ In order to examine the relationship between the ‘reinhabiting’ of bodies community and estrangement in migration journeys and narratives, Ahmed considers the collection *Flaming Spirit*, which was produced by the Asian Women’s Writing Collective in the United Kingdom in 1994: “The book is itself a journey in migration: migration is not its object (not all the stories are *about* migration), but allows for the very gestures of identification through which the book becomes readable as a collection. The book is made possible through the forming of a migrant community of writers brought together under the problematic, if not impossible, signs of ‘Asian’, ‘women’ and ‘writers’. Hence, the editors reflect on how the forming of the collective did not pre-suppose a shared identity (either as Asian, women or writers), but made apparent that the criteria for who should belong to the community can always be contested” (2000, p. 93).

States continued and still mostly involved immigrants coming from Europe; however, after the 1965 Hart-Cellar Immigration Act, which completely shifted the U.S. immigration policy, the homogeneity of white immigrants changed. Before the Hart-Cellar Immigration Act, the Congress of the United States had restricted naturalized citizenship solely to the ‘white’ immigrants, which was evidently discriminating against immigrants coming from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Due to the 1965 Hart-Cellar Immigration Act, the immigrants who started arriving in the United States in the 1980s and onwards were mostly from Asian, African and Latin American countries (“How the Immigration Act of 1965 Changed the Face of America”, 2019).²⁴ Therefore, the general overview of the ethnic backgrounds of the immigrants constituting the population of the United States drastically changed influencing many other aspects of the American experience, culture, and literature. As Carpio states the new literature of immigration portrays and discusses immigrant experiences of people who do not have a European background or ancestry and are immigrants or descendants of immigrants who have arrived in the United States from Asia, Latin America, and Africa (2012, p. 55).

Interestingly enough, in her essay “Contemporary American Immigrant Literature” (2012), Carpio touches upon the idea that the new immigrant literature in the United States can be perceived as more critical compared to the old literature. She argues that this might be caused mostly because of the fact that new immigrants have come from countries with colonial and neocolonial backgrounds. Additionally, new immigrant literature has been largely influenced by the fight for racial equality (2012, p. 55). Of course, it has never been as simple or as straightforward. As Carpio goes on to discuss, the question of identity, particularly of an immigrant who has also become American becomes central. As questioned by Carpio, what is the right word or name to call an African immigrant who now have also become an American? African American is certainly not what would identify the African immigrant living in the United States since it is the accepted term used to call black Americans having African ancestry and who have been born and raised in the States going back several generations and whose ancestors have been through slavery in the United States (2012, p. 56). In her 2009 Ted Talk *The Danger of a Single Story*, Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie mentions that she

²⁴ Retrieved from: <https://www.history.com/news/immigration-act-1965-changes>

became to consciously identify as an African only after she went to study in the United States. Before that, as a young woman in Nigeria, she never had to identify as an African, simply because she didn't have to think about what her national identity was constructed of. A question arises here – what makes someone consciously acknowledge their own identity? Is it a new location, a new language, a different religion, new political views, the expectations of 'others'? Moreover, where does the sense of individual and collective belonging fit here?

The precise moment when an African faces the clear distinction between African-American and non-American-African will be addressed in the further discussion of Adichie's *Americanah*. In order to have the full picture, first, it is essential to address the role ethnicity has played and continues to play in the new states in Africa. Nigeria, where part of the novel *Americanah* takes place, is not an exception. Moreover, as described in Pade Badru's 1998 *Imperialism and Ethnic Politics in Nigeria, 1960-96 Africa World*, "There is no other place where this ethnic time bomb is more frightening than in Nigeria, which already has gone through a major civil war" (p. 1). The 100 million population of Nigeria coming from diverse backgrounds makes the country the most populated nation in sub-Saharan Africa (p. 2). The 100 million population consists of two hundred and fifty ethnic groups and thousands of different languages and dialects. According to the Foreign Affairs Ministry of Nigeria, the four major ethnic groups that constitute the Nigerian population are the Fulanis, the Hausa, the Igbos, and the Yoruba (2023, para. 3).

As Badru explains in *Imperialism and Ethnic Politics in Nigeria*, the diversity of ethnicities in Nigeria may be causing the constant instability in the political landscape of the Nigerian state (p. 3). As Badru describes, because the geographical area of Nigeria made the country rich with natural resources, such as crude petroleum, uranium, tin, gold, and rubber, the British, Germans and French were all interested in it (*ibidem*). In 1884, at the Berlin conference when Africa was partitioned among the above-mentioned states, the British came to gain control over three protectorates, inhabited by a diversity of people. A few decades later, in 1914, the British merged these three protectorates and established a new country, now known as Nigeria (p. 4). In other words, the creation of the new nation and the new state held solely administrative purpose at first. What Badru defines as a key factor in nationalism in Nigeria is the fact that throughout the one hundred years that the British were in control of Nigeria, they never tried to make the nation one;

on the contrary, the British saw the divisiveness of the country as an opportunity to hold power over it (*ibidem*).

What is crucial in understanding the Nigerian society Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie describes in *Americanah* is how colonialism defined the formation of initial social classes and elites in Nigeria, particularly, the formation of the working class, people who worked in agricultural and mining industries. Interestingly enough, there was no significant working-class action, since a proper infrastructure for recruiting new workers into the colonial capitalist enterprises was lacking. This job was undertaken by the local ethnic organizations such as Igbo Union and Egbe Omo Oduduwa (p. 6).²⁵ In the midst of the working-class formation and the increasing importance of the ethnic organizations, Nigeria was slowly but assertively walking toward independence.²⁶

However, the new waves of migration occurring in 1967, also referred to in Adichie's *Americanah*, created an abrupt turn in the course of political and historical events.²⁷ The continuous nature of the ethnic problems within the military forces and the inability to address those problems eventually led to the civil war in Nigeria (p. 79).²⁸ As Badru explains, from the 1960s to 1990s, Nigerians proposed several models of democratic governments that would primarily address the problems of ethnicity in the country.²⁹ One of the models was the Ideological option, which supported the idea that, to resolve the ethnicity problem and the general crisis in the country, a fundamental class reconfiguration was needed which would be completely devoid of ethnic or religious components (p. 149). By the end of 1990s, the class consciousness among the Nigerians was still very much ethnocentric. That is why there was the need to build a brand new

²⁵ These ethnic organizations were recruiting new workers from rural areas, providing housing and temporary financial support for the new arrivals (p. 6). Because of this, the representative of the newly forming working class were staying loyal and supportive of these ethnic organizations, hence, contributing to the rise of ethnic solidarity, instead of class solidarity (p. 6).

²⁶ After the 1957 Constitutional conference, Nigeria held the first national election in 1959, to establish an independent government.

²⁷ In 1967, the Muslim Hausa and Fula people carried out mass killings of thousands of Christian Igbo people, causing new waves of migration within the territory of Nigeria (p. 12).

²⁸ The civil war lasted for four years, caused millions of deaths. Most of the people who lost their lives in the civil war were Igbos from southern Nigeria (p. 79).

²⁹ The failures of the British parliamentary system and the American style of government further enhanced the above-mentioned models and their enforcements.

political culture which would support the idea of finally achieving national identity. As Badru concludes, the national identity in Nigeria could only be reached by redefining the relationship of Nigeria to the British imperial state and the country's colonial past (*ibidem*). What Badru seems to be certain about is that a redefinition of that relationship would be possible if Nigerian intellectuals contributed with their efforts to that process by further researching the African oral tradition in order to find and bring back the lost model of African democracy (p. 150).

In *The Cambridge Companion to Asian American Literature* (2015), Crystal Parikh and Daniel Y. Kim state that the fact that critics and literary historians have brought a variety of theoretical and methodological paradigms to the close analysis of Asian American literature contributed to reshaping the American literary studies and have contributed to the expansion of how national culture and literary canons have been viewed previously (2015, xxi). As Parikh and Kim go on to explain, 'Asian' is, certainly, a name referring to a huge geographical space constructed with people of different cultures, and, also, complex and fast-changing socio-political contexts.

According to Justin Corfield's 2008 *The History of Vietnam*, at the end of the 19th century, Vietnam was part of the Indochinese Union, also known as French Indochina, which was led by the office of the governor-general (p. 25).³⁰ As part of Indochina, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos were monarchies, and Vietnam, in particular, was led by the emperor; however, this power was only symbolic, since the French were the ones who chose the emperor, and the local Vietnamese population had no say in the election of the governing body. This all changed when World War I started.

With the Great Depression in Europe, the situation started changing in Vietnam, as well. Many factories were closed, and people were left without jobs and income. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Vietnamese population was mostly poor, working in rubber factories and being poorly paid. Slowly, the situation led to the rise of communist ideas. Despite the French efforts to suppress the rising communist movement, they could not put off the fire completely (p. 36). The political context in Indochina also changed drastically during and particularly, after WWII, when in 1945, the Japanese forces struck Vietnam and, despite the significant losses, managed to remove the French colonialists

³⁰ The governor-general office mostly consisted of French, who were the officials in all the senior positions.

from Vietnam. This led to the proclamation of independence and the establishment of the independent Kingdom of Vietnam in 1945 (p. 40). After their victory in WWII, the British were trying to restore the French colonial regime in Vietnam. This became possible, as the Chinese Communist forces had to leave Vietnam, since the Chinese Civil War was on the rise. Only a year later, the presence of the United States became apparent, as they agreed to aid 15 million US dollars to France to continue the war.

Since 1954, the presence of the United States military officers and advisers had been increasing in South Vietnam and by 1963, there were 11000 American soldiers located in South Vietnam (p. 75). Soon enough, there were 500.000 American troops fighting in Vietnam. With a large number of men being posted to Vietnam to fight in the war, with an increased representation of African American men, the war soon became extremely unpopular, leading many American men leaving the country and fleeing to Canada and other countries to avoid being sent to war (p. 81). One year later, President Richard Nixon started his effort to put into practice his promise of “peace with honor” in Vietnam War (p. 88). Although the armed conflict went on for several more years, the Paris Peace Accord was reached in 1973 between the American and North Vietnamese governments, resulting in a ceasefire, in which, all the South Vietnamese and North Vietnamese forces would remain where they were; moreover, in 60 days, all the American forces would leave the territory of Vietnam and all the prisoners of war would be handed over (p. 96). The peace did not last long and only a year later, in 1974, North Vietnamese forces re-launched an attack on South Vietnam (p. 98). Despite the massive attack by North Vietnam, the U.S. President Gerald Ford announced that for the United States, the Vietnam war finished. After several decades of war, in 1976, Vietnam was unified under the Communist regime as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, causing large amounts of imprisonments of millions of people and thousands of refugees fleeing the territory of the newly established Socialist Republic of Vietnam (p. 96).

The brief overview of the historical and socio-political context throughout several decades in Vietnam contributes to understanding the history of the country in the context of migration and experiences of migrant bodies especially in the United States of America. According to Parikh and Kim, the name ‘Asian-American’ itself mentions the hybridity of the above-mentioned complex cultural and socio-political contexts and the United States (2015, xxi). Having this hybridity in their very roots, Asian-American

Studies have been dealing with social difference, coherent identity, political affiliation and unity, and questions of belonging and not-belonging. Interestingly, as explained by Parikh and Kim, the term ‘Asian-American’ has been a collective category that brought together representatives of various diasporas, and more importantly, various historical moments. The term ‘Asian-American’ describes not only the people who identify as ‘Asian’ but also the people who have been identified as ‘Asian’ by others (2015, xxi). Therefore, the literary body that has been created as a representation of the term ‘Asian-American’ has always been in transformation, never in a frozen state but always with a moving and continuous notion of identity and culture (2015, xxii).

As Parikh and Kim further explain, the complex nature of the ‘Asian-American’ identity can be traced in different historical events, such as war, immigration, empire, and globalization. According to the *Companion*, the American presence in Asia and the Asian presence in America in the context of the above-mentioned historical events have informed and contributed to the emergence of ‘Asian-American’ writing (2015, xxii). Parikh and Kim draw attention to the term ‘transnational turn’ and argue that the term has contributed to the transformation of American Studies. The authors particularly refer to the transition of ‘Asian-American identity’ from a United States-centered definition and approach to one that has been shaped by the Asian American literary tradition deriving from, as Anzaldua puts it, ‘hybrid’ experiences, and cultural shifts caused by this very ‘transnational’ and diasporic experiences (2015, xxii).

In order to understand these shifts, it is important to look into four factors that Parikh and Kim bring forward. The first factor that contributes to understanding the ‘transnational turn’ and ‘Asian-American’ identity shift is, certainly, the historical formations since the nineteenth century, outlining the arrival of Asians in America. Peculiarly, even though Asian communities have been fully present in the United States since the nineteenth century, until 1965, they did not acquire the ‘status’ of Americans (2015, xxiii).

The second factor contributing to the ‘Asian-American’ identity shift, has been war, as Parikh and Kim point out. War, as such, has been an important force in defining a context for not only cultural identity but also ‘Asian-American’ writing (2015, xxiii). Besides defining a context, different wars fought in Asia have constructed a canon of racial images that have been backbones in ‘Asian-American’ writing. In addition, war has

been a central and re-occurring theme considering that the traumatic experiences of war survivors and their ascendants have become part of the 'Asian-American' identity.

The third factor that Parikh and Kim distinguish as one contributing to the construction of 'Asian-American' identity is the expansion of the dominant genres of Asian-American literature. As the authors explain, the exploration of genres that were not prominently used in Asian-American literature as were considered extravagant before has led to a deep understanding of form and convention that has redefined Asian-American writing (2015, xxiii).

And finally, the fourth factor that Parikh and Kim mention as the last contributing factor to the 'transnational turn' in Asian-American identity and writing is the notion that the very term 'Asian-American' is a rather newly constructed and evidently political category of identity. Moreover, this perception of the 'Asian-American' identity derives from American definitions of cultural identity, centralizing masculinity, and homophobia. The shift which Parikh and Kim describe in the 'Asian-American' identity and writing centralizes themes underlying feminism and queer theory, brings forth multiracial and 'disabled' subjects resulting in eye-opening aspirations of comparative race and 'hybridity' shaping the 'Asian-American' identity (2015, xxiv).

These four factors once again demonstrate how a single perspective can construct a nation that is far from being whole and inclusive. This very identity shift is widely referred to in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. Vuong's novel is a family's story about migration, as Vuong puts it 'a history of violence from generation to generation mostly performed on migrant and female bodies', a journey in which identity is always a process, having the idea of constructing a new 'home' in the center (Vuong, 2020, 49' 15"). It is important to note that in Vuong's book this very process of constructing a 'home' takes place by the act of writing. It is through the act of writing that Vuong manages to rebel the 'incredibly lonely and isolating experience' as an Asian-American. In the 2020 International Literature Festival in Berlin, Vuong compares stepping into America as an immigrant to entering a house of mirrors. He emphasizes the moment when in the house of mirrors, one attempts to find themselves in the mirror but fails to do so as the whole experience is rather disorienting. This very instance of disorientation and failure to find one's own body's reflection in the mirror is what leads Vuong to look closer into the mirror. And it is then when the migrant body in the house

of the mirrors realizes that the mirror is not quite empty, it does have writings all over it and other bodies who have already signed their names. Vuong further explains that these other bodies who have already been in the house of mirrors previously are writers such as Carlos Bulosan³¹ and Toni Morrison (Vuong, 2020, 56' 03"). The 'homes' constructed by these bodies encourage the migrant body who has just entered the United States of America to write his name on the mirror as well and in doing so, construct his 'home'.

Immigration certainly sets various restrictions in immigrants' lives, however, as Carpio explains, the new immigrant literature also demonstrates how even though the economic, legal and other restrictions are still very much present, immigrants no longer have to lose contact and sense of origin from their birthplace in order to be able to survive in the place where they have immigrated to (2012, p. 57). In addition, they are also not forced to merge their original identity and self of sense into the new American identity (*ibidem*). As Carpio further explains, this is possible somewhat due to the development of technologies and access of easy and fast traveling because immigrants are not bound to physically stay in their 'new home' and can go back home and make occasional or frequent visits. They are also not bound to newly construct an American identity.

The new immigrant literature has been able to use its power to shift the balance from readers speaking only one language – English, in case of the United States. So, authors contributing to that power-change have used bilingualism to empower immigrant readers and encourage the opportunity of not having to assimilate and fully depart from the origins in order to be perceived and accepted as American (Carpio, 2012, p. 68). This power shift is certainly important when it comes to language, but it has an equally powerful voice in opening more than one single view and a single story to the reader. A reader's identity and the development stages of it may deeply depend on the literature they are exposed to. So, when Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie in her Ted Talk on *The Danger of a Single Story* shares how as a child reader her perceptions of the world, human interactions, everyday matters and dreams were constructed based on the books she was reading which had nothing to do with what she was living herself and seeing with her

³¹ Carlos Sampayan Bulosan was a Filipino novelist and poet who immigrated to the United States on July 1, 1930. His best-known work today is the semi-autobiographical *America Is in the Heart*, but he first gained fame for his 1943 essay on *The Freedom from Want* (<https://content.lib.washington.edu/exhibits/bulosan/index.html>).

eyes, the danger of a single story becomes impossible not to recognize (2014, 1' 10'"). Of course, as Adichie explains the American and the British books she was reading as a child were enhancing her imagination, giving her access to new worlds and dreams but they were certainly not providing her with the feeling of belonging. For Adichie, the African writers she eventually got familiarized with 'saved her from having a single story' (2014).

The danger of a single story translates into our daily lives more often than we think. In the Ted Talk, Adichie recalls when her college roommate in the United States made several assumptions about the language Adichie was speaking, the music she was listening to and her everyday life back in Nigeria after meeting her for the first time, the roommate was naturally addressing her understanding and her perceptions of what an identity of someone from Nigeria would be. The roommate is certainly not evil or not to blame, as her assumptions about a young girl from Nigeria, a country she has never been to but has formed some understanding of through media, popular culture, and possibly, literature or rather thereof the lack of it, are quite expected and somewhat natural, only because as Adichie describes she had a 'single story of Africa' (2014, 4' 21").

Adichie also addresses an essential question of one's identity and the time and consequences in which one becomes aware of one's own identity. As mentioned before, Adichie says that she became to consciously identify as an African only after she went to study in the United States. As Adichie believes, literature is a powerful force contributing to providing readers with single stories, however, at the same time it is the force destroying the notion of one true single story. Literature can empower and humanize stories, as well as people who see themselves or find their identities in those stories. As Adichie puts it, stories can help to restore broken dignities and misperceptions about identities (2014, 17' 41").

In the 2020 International Literature Festival in Berlin, Ocean Vuong describes the concept of Asian American as being monolithic. As Vuong put it: "Just yellow. Or maybe just brown" (Vuong, 2020, 73' 37"). What is incredibly problematic is that the realities and politics and the regional differences among the many Asian countries are so intricate that attempting to describe all these in the term Asian American is simply going to fail. Vuong explains that there are so many layers, depths and intricacies of what identity is and how individuals carry it (2020, 74' 16"). In the 2022 interview to the *Louisiana Channel*, Ocean Vuong states that identity is present and embedded in everything and one

should curiously look beyond it. And if one fails to do so, they will be restricted to a checkbox and a category, which according to Vuong leads to loss of identity because once one is categorized, they become manageable. Vuong explains that writing can become the way of curiously looking beyond identity: “When I write I feel much larger than the limits of my body”. Additionally, writing can also help us find the way to unlock all the realities and the ‘ancestral soup’ of who one is as an individual and as a representative of one’s people (2022, 41”).

In a way, Vuong refers to writing as a practice of freedom, as a practice of being. Vuong believes that life itself, the act of living is the artist’s ‘residency’. In *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, Vuong describes writing as “getting down so low the world offers a merciful new angle, a larger vision made of small things, the lint suddenly a huge sheet of fog exactly the size of your eyeball” (2019, p. 154). He believes that the act of telling a story empowers the storyteller. After speaking to other Vietnamese-American writers, Vuong realized that it is rare for Vietnamese-American families to talk about war. In Vuong’s family, speaking of the war came as a result of boredom, of having no other form of entertainment, no TV, no money:

But there was something else going on, too. The stories, at first, were folklore. My grandmother would tell a ghost story, then she would say: oh, that was after the napalm. So through cycles of these stories, that world started opening and as a child I would ask: what’s napalm? They ploughed on. It was almost intoxicating for them to create a mythology of their lives, because they were so powerless. They were all women. The men were gone; they did their harm and were gone. And they were empty hands, had no English, were powerless everywhere else. But when it was time to tell the story, they held everything.” (The Guardian, 2019, para. 7)

It is interesting to observe Vuong’s explanation in the International Literature Festival in Berlin, of how storytelling, be it in writing or not, holds the incredible capacity of turning oneself into a myth and living that myth in an empowered state. Even though Vuong only started writing poetry when he was in college, he believes that he was trained his whole life to be a writer through his mother’s and aunts’ and grandmother’s incredible skills of storytelling and origin from oral tradition (Vuong, 2020, 14’ 50”).

The story of Ocean Vuong's name is also rather telling. In the Berlin festival, he has spoken about where his name comes from and he has described it as 'an act of false translation' (2020, 9' 46").). Ocean's name was Hay, which is the Vietnamese word for Ocean. When the author's mother moved to the United States with him when he was two years old, she wanted to give him a name which would allow him to easily integrate in the culture of American names. As Hay is a very common name in Vietnamese, Vuong's mother's belief was that Ocean, which is the literary translation of the Vietnamese Hay, is as common in the United States as Hay in Vietnam. That is why, Vuong describes the very act of his name a false translation and the onset of his life in the United States as a 'literary act from his mother' (2020).

As for Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, her name was chosen and constructed by the author herself. According to the 2021 article in *The Guardian*, Adichie chose the name Amanda at her Confirmation at the Catholic church in Nigeria. The author remained with the name Amanda until she moved to the U.S. where the fact that the name was not unique and was pronounced in the 'American way' made Adichie change her name once again. Since the author wanted an Igbo name and wanted to keep 'Amanda' in her name, she came up with 'Chim' to construct her new name. For Adichie, 'Amanda' was already her identity, her name in the passport, driver's license, and bank account, so the author retained the name by making it Igbo (Akinyoade, 2021, para. 15).

For both authors their names have been significant in constructing their identities as individuals and more importantly, as writers. As we have come to see throughout this Chapter, 'identity' can be questioned in many ways, including with one's name. The 'identity' of the modern nation-states has not only been questioned by placing it in the context of global interconnectedness, but also dismantled, analyzed and re-constructed freshly, ensuring the various factors constituting the very notion of cultural identity, the very roots of the 'hyphenated American' identity and the role that these transformations have had in contemporary American literature.

2. Gorgeous Bodies: Maintaining a Sense of Self

I am thinking of beauty again, how some things are hunted because we have deemed them beautiful. If, relative to the history of our planet, an individual life is so short, a blink of an eye, as they say, then to be gorgeous, even from the day you're born to the day you die, is to be gorgeous only briefly. Like right now, how the sun is coming on, low behind the elms, and I can't tell the difference between a sunset and a sunrise. The world, reddening, appears the same to me—and I lose track of east and west. The colors this morning have the frayed tint of something already leaving. I think of the time Trev and I sat on the toolshed roof, watching the sun sink. I wasn't so much surprised by its effect—how, in a few crushed minutes, it changes the way things are seen, including ourselves—but that it was ever mine to see. Because the sunset, like survival, exists only on the verge of its own disappearing. To be gorgeous, you must first be seen, but to be seen allows you to be hunted.

Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019)

In the 2020 International Literature Festival in Berlin, Ocean Vuong recalled how Toni Morrison would always say that she wrote about black people because they were central to her life. Then, Vuong mentioned Leo Tolstoy and Ivan Turgenev, who in a similar manner would write about white Russian aristocrats, simply because they were the center to their lives. Vuong continued to explain that he writes about Asian-American bodies, brown bodies, yellow bodies, not as a representative of these communities, or to a strategic make move in contemporary literature, but simply because he is surrounded by these bodies, these Asian-American bodies are central to Vuong's life (2020, 69' 57"). Vuong explains how he finds black bodies, brown bodies, and yellow bodies gorgeous and valuable to be written about. Vuong finds the concept of Asian-American in America quite monolithic – just yellow or just brown, however the real politics and the regional differences in Asian countries are so intricate and complex, with so many depths and layers, Vuong explains, that he has to insist on showing the “vibrant South East Asian identity” (2020, 73' 27"). In doing so, as an American participating in American literature, Vuong deliberately widens what Asian American means in contemporary American literature and immigrant writing.

In the 2010 Texas Book Festival, Adichie has mentioned how she often receives feedback on how readers are surprised by encountering people ‘just like them’ in Adichie's works. Adichie approaches this with patience, as despite accepting that it is

annoying, the author also understands that readers in the West think of Africans as ‘different species’. For Adichie, reading is what guides people to think for themselves about Africa instead of relying on the existing outdated stereotypes, as Adichie puts it: “Africa as a place of AIDS and people killing each other”. Adichie emphasizes the importance of writing about people ‘falling in and out of love’, having personal, financial or political problems, as she claims that as a writer she strives for depicting the daily reality of individuals (2010, para. 17).

In the previous chapter, we have extensively addressed Toni Morrison’s and Sarah Ahmed’s concepts of ‘Home’, highlighting how for Morrison ‘Home’ can be created through a body of writing along with the active involvement of the reader, and for Ahmed, ‘home’ can turn into a ‘Home’ as a result of an individual’s loss of memory and his/her construction of a collective one.³² In this chapter we are going to further explore the idea of ‘Home’, exploring how gender and sexuality, race, color, social class and mobility intersect on the migrant bodies in *Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* and *Americanah* and determine the way they feel at home in their own bodies.

2.1. Gender and Sexuality in Adichie’s *Americanah*³³

In her 2014 “We Should All Be Feminist” essay, which was originally a Ted Talk presented by Adichie in 2013, the author states that even though, we as human beings, have evolved, our ideas of gender have not changed very much: “The problem with gender is that it prescribes how we *should* be rather than recognizing how we are. Imagine how much happier we would be, how much freer to be our true individual selves, if we didn’t have the weight of gender expectations” (2014, p. 12).

Adichie reminds us that socialization exaggerates the biological differences of the sexes and then serves as an onset of a ‘self-fulfilling process’ (p. 12). Adichie addresses our way of defining femininity and masculinity as incredibly narrow. She states that females are taught to make themselves smaller, to ‘shrink’ themselves:

³² Please see Chapter 1 for further elaboration.

³³ Although gender, sexuality, race, colour, and class are linked in Vuong’s and Adichie’s works, for purposes of analysis we are going to focus on gender and sexuality first, then race and class, and at the end of the chapter social class and class politics. However, please bear in mind that they are all interconnected.

“We say to girls, ‘You can have ambition, but not too much. You should aim to be successful but not too successful, otherwise you will threaten the man. If you are the breadwinner in your relationship with a man, pretend that you are not, especially in public, otherwise you will emasculate him’.” (Adichie, 2014, p. 10)

And as for males, Adichie considers that they are placed in a cage, a cage of masculinity, in which they are taught to be frightened of fear, to not under any circumstances, show weakness or vulnerability: “We teach them to mask their true selves, because they have to be, in Nigerian-speak, a *hard man*” (p. 10).³⁴ Adichie goes on to say that despite many people’s believes that today there is a fairness and equality within the genders and how the society interacts with them, the reality is more difficult and more complex. She is convinced that as social beings, we internalize ideas from our interactions with other people and from what it may seem those interactions have not yet led to a fair and equal for genders society (p. 10).

In order to demonstrate her anger and opposition toward how females and males are looked upon and treated today, in *Americanah* Adichie creates female and male bodies that raise these very questions about gender and sexuality and fight for the construction of a fairer society. According to Tesi di Laurea’s “*Americanah* or Various Observations About Gender, Sexuality and Migration”, *Americanah* can be considered to be a modern novel of ‘gender’, where the characters deeply experience the expectations formed by various cultural conceptions of what may black femininity and black masculinity represent and how these representations may often be misleading and incomplete (2014, p. 11). As Laurea states, Adichie’s protagonists, Ifemelu and Obinze, perceive femininity and masculinity in the way they view and react to different gender stereotypes depending on whether they are in Nigeria, the United Kingdom, or the United States (2014, p. 10). Adichie describes and discusses the black female body as a space in which racial and cultural questions may be negotiated. Throughout the story, we observe Ifemelu reflecting on her own body and appearance from different standpoints which are created by the different cultural experiences she has as the story moves along. As for masculinity, Obinze’s journey is, as well, rather curious, as Adichie voices different aspects of

³⁴ Masculinity studies and Vuong’s concept of ‘toxic American masculinity’ will be further explored later in this chapter.

masculinity that may be frowned upon in the modern world and popular culture, such as showing vulnerability and emotions, traits that more often may be used to describe femininity.

In order to attempt to analyze Ifemelu's perception of her own femininity, it is essential to refer to Bhabha's ideas of 'hybridity' and 'third space'.³⁵ In Adichie's *Americanah*, Ifemelu's body can be viewed as this 'third space', created as a result of the encounter of the Nigerian and American cultures and Ifemelu's experiences as a female in the two contexts of Nigeria and the United States. Ifemelu's body is the space where cultural, racial and gender components are discussed in the context of how femininity is perceived in various social experiences. It is rather curious to observe how Ifemelu struggles with her own perception of her femininity and beauty standards as an adolescent girl and a young woman in Nigeria, and how an immediate change occurs once she migrates to the United States, and then later, another change when she moves back to Nigeria as a young woman.

Ifemelu's hair is a recurring theme in *Americanah* and serves as one of the keys in observing how Ifemelu's perceptions of beauty and racial standards develop as the story moves along. In *A Companion to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie*, Cristina Cruz-Gutierrez explains in her essay "'Hairitage' Matters: Transitioning & the Third Wave Hair Movement in 'Hair', 'Imitation' & *Americanah*" that in the context of body politics as a current common theme in contemporary Nigerian fiction, Adichie is particularly interested in hair as a 'powerful signifier of ethnic and cultural difference' (2017, p. 551). Hair is a central signifier in Adichie's novels, not to mention her 2007 short-story titled "Hair".

When we first encounter Adichie's protagonist Ifemelu, she is on her way to going to a hair salon from Princeton to Trenton, to get her hair braided. The fact that Ifemelu is not pleased about this commute and the fact that there are no hair salons that know how to take care of 'kinky' hair and she has to travel to a salon in Trenton is obvious, however, it is also worth to mention that when Ifemelu does get to the hair salon and the African immigrant woman working in the salon asks her what she wants to do with her hair, she immediately and assertively says that she prefers not using a hair relaxer

³⁵ Please advise Chapter 1 for further elaboration of the concept of 'third space of enunciation'.

and she prefers her hair ‘the way God made it’ (2013, p. 12). In this episode, we witness Ifemelu’s confidence and perception of her own race and beauty deriving from the various experiences and doubts she had experienced throughout her life as an immigrant black woman in the United States. As a young girl, back in Nigeria, we see Ifemelu gain her first perception of her own beauty through hair. Particularly, when the narrator describes Ifemelu’s mother’s hair and how Ifemelu sees her mother’s hair as an absolute symbol of beauty and a longing of reaching that standard herself. However, as opposed to her mother’s black and thick hair, which would “sprang free and full, flowing down her back like a celebration”, Ifemelu’s hair “grew reluctantly and cut braiders like a knife” (2013, p. 47). Hair like her mother’s remains a symbol of beauty and femininity for Ifemelu even after her mother cuts her hair after joining a radical church group. Instead of getting used to her mother’s new hair and perceiving it as the new beautiful, Ifemelu loses her fascination for her mother’s femininity since she no longer carries the long, beautiful hair.

According to Cruz-Gutierrez, Ifemelu is a representative of those African American women whose perception of their own bodies and identities transition after the ‘Big-Chop’, which Cruz-Gutierrez explains as cutting the ends of relaxed or chemically treated African American hair (p. 552). Cruz-Gutierrez goes on to explain that Ifemelu and her transition process through hair would be a perfect example of the third wave of the hair movements.³⁶ A significant trait of the third wave ‘hair movement’, as explained by Cruz-Gutierrez, has been the emergence and evolution of Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and other social media platforms, which as alternative media, have become more inclusive creating space to challenge the beauty canon (p. 554).³⁷

As we read in *Americanah*, in the United States, Ifemelu’s attitude to her own hair and how she takes care of it changes not only because of the American beauty standards

³⁶ ‘Hair movements’ originated in the United States as socio-political demonstrations directed towards visibilizing the importance of Black natural hair in process of identity formation. Cheryl Thompon defined and described the first two ‘hair movements’. According to her, the first and second ‘hair movements’ were taking place in the context of the Civil Rights Movements and in the 1980s (p. 557). Scholars have also noted the emergence of the ‘Natural Hair Movement’ in the 2000s due to social networks. Cruz-Gutierrez considers the ‘Natural Hair Movement’ as the third wave ‘hair movement’ (p. 557).

³⁷ According to Cruz-Gutierrez, “Another significant trait of the third wave of the hair movements is its pedagogic approach and the importance conferred to promoting self-love in children and young Black women. In this sense, hair and self are interrelated, since loving one’s hair is deemed a symbol of self-acceptance and self-knowledge. In this context, the identification of hair and self stems from the intent of depoliticizing hair which comes to be seen as a reflection of individuality” (Cruz-Gutierrez, 2017, p. 543).

and what femininity represent there but also due to simple economic reasons – braiding hair is quite expensive in the United States. Now, as an immigrant young black woman, Ifemelu can no longer afford to treat her own hair as a mere symbol of her femininity or beauty:

Since she came to America, she had always braided her hair with long extensions, always alarmed at how much it cost. She wore each style for three months, even four months, until her scalp itched unbearably and the braids sprouted fuzzily from a bed of new growth. (2013, p 203)

In the United States, as a black woman, Ifemelu starts to notice not only the economic implications of various hairstyles but also what they mean in different social contexts. One of these instances she first experiences is when Ifemelu decides to take her braids out for an interview, as she is led to believe that the way her hair looks in braids will affect her getting a job: “I have to take my braids out for my interviews and relax my hair. Kemi told me that I shouldn’t wear braids to the interview. If you have braids, they will think you are unprofessional” (2013, p. 119). Ifemelu’s aunt Uju, is confused and asks Ifemelu if there are no doctors with braids in America and Ifemelu replies that she is simply saying what she has been told and that they are in a country which is not theirs and in order to succeed one must do whatever they have to do (2013, p. 119).

According to Maxine Leeds Craig *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen?* (2002), the Western culture and the views on how one should present themselves in a certain social situation, a work interview, for instance, have been transformed even within the African American community in the United States. African American women have started to change their hair in order to be perceived in a certain way and in this forced change they have come to believe the newly negotiated norm of what short and natural African American hair may represent and how it may be perceived as ‘unprofessional’ (2002, p. 13).

Thus, when Ifemelu agrees to straighten her hair for an important interview, she does not feel content with how she looks without her braids and her ‘kinky’ hair. Despite agreeing to change her hair and make it resemble the ‘white woman hair’ beauty standards, Ifemelu does not seem to be enjoying the change, even after the hair salon women tell her that she looks pretty and that she “has got the white-girl swing!” (2013, p. 203). However, as Cruz-Gutierrez argues Ifemelu is not immediately convinced to start

her ‘transition’ and start wearing her hair naturally. Even after she succeeds in the job interview despite not having the ‘perfect, white style straight hair’, she still wonders if she could have gotten the job if she was wearing her natural ‘kinky’ hair (2017, p. 557).

As discussed earlier, *Americanah* is a semi-autobiographical novel, which invites to read some of Adichie’s own experiences as a young Black Nigerian woman living in the United States. Cruz-Gutierrez recalls some instances in Adichie’s interviews in which she would tell about her very similar experience to Ifemelu, when she had a bad experience relaxing her hair and ending up receiving bad burns on her scalp. The bad experience led her doubt and ask herself why she was relaxing her hair, which eventually led her wearing her hair naturally and accepting that very fact (National Public Radio 2014, as cited in Cruz-Gutierrez, 2017, p. 558).

It is rather curious how the narrator describes Ifemelu’s acceptance or rather the lack of it after her newly and freshly straightened hair:

Her hair was hanging down rather than standing up, straight and sleek, parted at the side and curving to a slight bob at her chin. The nerve was gone. She did not recognize herself. She left the salon almost mournfully; while the hairdresser had flat-ironed the ends, the smell of burning, of something organic dying which should not have died, had made her feel a sense of loss. (2013, p. 203)

Cruz-Gutierrez states that another significant trait of the third wave ‘hair movement’ is the sense of the newly gained community within the adult Black women, as from what it seems like many adult Black women do not know how to take care of their natural hair (2017, p. 543). This is when the role of various blogs is incredibly important, as through these forms of media online communities are constructed to encourage conversations among women with natural hair (p. 543).

The website *HappilyKinkyNappy.com* is one of these media platforms which Ifemelu encounters after deciding to go back to her natural, brizzy, ‘kinky’ hair. *HappilyKinkyNappy.com* not only teaches her actual techniques on treating her own natural hair but also provides her with a community of black women who have all experienced beauty standards that do not include them and their ‘kinky’ hair. With the help of this new community she senses belonging, and in doing so, Ifemelu goes on to learn about the mainstream Western representations of what black beauty and black

femininity may be and recognizes how these representations do not portray the variety of hairstyles that black women have. In this journey, Ifemelu gains a newly formed confidence and love for her natural hair and perceives them as truly beautiful and describes them as she would describe her mother's hair when she was a kid in Nigeria – as glorious (2013, p. 213).

It is important to note that it is after finding a 'safe space' of women who share similar anxieties, thoughts and concerns about hair, that Ifemelu feels encouraged to start her own blog, *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those formerly known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*, in which she could freely express her own thoughts and views on gender, sexuality and race as a Nigerian woman living in the United States (Cruz-Gutierrez, 2017, p. 562). One of Ifemelu's blog entries is titled "A Michelle Obama Shout-Out Plus Hair as Race Metaphor", in which the protagonist uses hair as 'the perfect metaphor for race in America' (Adichie, 2013, p. 297). In this blog entry, Ifemelu starts with sharing her white friend's genuine belief that Michelle Obama's hair is naturally straight, then moves on to talking about how mainstream media sources have always portrayed the hair of Black women as 'bad hair' which needed to be 'tamed and beautified':

Hair. Ever notice makeover shows on TV, how the black woman has natural hair (coarse, coily, kinky, or curly) in the ugly "before" picture, and in the pretty "after" picture, somebody's taken a hot piece of metal and signed her hair straight? Some black women would rather run naked in the street than come out in public with their natural hair. [...]. Imagine if Michelle Obama got tired of all the heat and decided to go natural and appeared on TV with lots of woolly hair, or tight spirally curls. [...] She would totally rock but poor Obama would certainly lose the independent vote, even the undecided Democrat vote. (Adichie, 2013, p. 297)

Cruz-Gutierrez is convinced that Ifemelu's transition through her hair leads her to perceive race and gender inequality and build up the voice to speak about it (2017, p. 566). As Cruz-Gutierrez states: "Ifemelu's transition and the online hair community she first explores instigate her to gain agency in order to start a blog which turns into a safe place of communication and production of counter-discursive thoughts" (2017, p. 566).

In a 2019 interview to *The Economist*, Adichie discussed the importance of the hair movements not only in the United States but also in Nigeria. She explained how the third wave 'hair movement' is still newly developing in Nigeria and is largely due to women like her protagonist, Ifemelu, who move back to Nigeria from the United States and create the demand for wearing their hair naturally (2019, 23' 29"). Cruz-Gutierrez argues that for these women, their 'transitioning' starts when they are still in the United States and completes when they return to their country of origin, to their 'home' and are ready to wear their hair naturally (2017, p. 544).

Hair, which is an incredibly significant feature of national and gender identity, also plays a crucial role in portraying social class difference among Black women. We will further address the role of hair in determining class differences in *Americanah* when viewing social class in the book, but for now it is important to note that, along with hair, Adichie uses body and body shape to address the question of maintaining identity on a foreign land as an immigrant.

It is no surprise that in today's world both men and women have struggles accepting their own body images due to generalized public perception of what a beautiful body may look like. In *Americanah*, Ifemelu's perception of her own body, similarly to her hair, is bound to change along with her experiences as a young girl in Nigeria, a young adult in the United States and later again in Nigeria. As a reader, we begin to recognize the different standards of each culture, when Ifemelu meets her school friend Ginika in the United States. Back in Nigeria, Ginika was considered to be the most beautiful girl in the school, so naturally, Ifemelu, would compare her own body to hers and have her complexes about her body in this comparison. When Ifemelu meets Ginika in the United States after not having seen her for years, to Ifemelu's surprise, Ginika is much slimmer and does not have the same appearance that she used to have in Nigeria. Ginika hurries to explain to Ifemelu that the American beauty standards are different and in fact, Ifemelu meets them perfectly well since she is "thin with big breasts":

"Do you know I started losing weight almost as soon as I came? I was even close to anorexia. The kids at my school called me Pork. You know at home when somebody tells you that you lost weight, it means something bad. But here somebody tells you that you lost weight and you say thank you. It's just different

here.” Ginika said, a little wistfully, as though she, too, were new to America. (2013, p. 124)

It is rather curious how Ifemelu’s understanding of body image and how to speak about it in the United States immediately connects with language and specific vocabulary she starts to develop when speaking about body image. As Laureas states, Ifemelu ‘re-thinks’ and ‘re-sizes’ body in the linguistic context first and changes her vocabulary, and eventually her perception of body image in general, as well as of her own body. For example, when Ifemelu avoids using the word ‘fat’ or using the words ‘slim’ or ‘thin’ not in a negative context but quite the opposite (2014, p. 29). The different perceptions of her body in the two cultures – Nigerian and American – lead Ifemelu to a confusion, as everything that she knew about perceiving and describing bodies in Nigeria does not seem to be working in the United States; thus, she must learn a new way of understanding. Due to this, Laureas argues that Ifemelu’s performance of feminine body is in a ‘third space’, which is difficult to define by the Nigerian or the American standards that have contributed to shaping the above mentioned ‘third space’ (2014, p. 32).

2.2. Gender and Sexuality in *Vuong’s On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*

Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* places gender, sexuality, queerness, and non-normative masculinity in the context of Vietnamese, American and immigrant cultures. The title of the book is the first signal Vuong gives to the reader. In the 2020 International Literature Festival in Berlin, Vuong explained that the choice of the word ‘gorgeous’ in the title was deliberate on his side to not only include the American vernacular language but also the word which is commonly used within the queer community in the United States to celebrate each other. The author explained that he put the word ‘gorgeous’ in the title of the book ‘as a nod to the vernacular, to draw it onto the stage of literature’ (2020, 50’ 24”). Starting from the peculiar and conscious wording of the title, Vuong goes on to emphasize the importance of language in speaking about gender and sexuality.

In a 2019 interview at the *Late Night with Seth Meyers* show, Vuong stated that in the English language words of destruction are used to define and describe success, especially from the male perspective:

In this culture we celebrate boys through the lexicon of violence. ‘You’re killing it,’ you’re making a killing,’ ‘smash them,’ ‘blow them up,’ ‘you went into that game guns blazing,’ and I think it’s worth it to ask the question what happens to our men and boys when the only way they can value themselves is through the lexicon of death and destruction? (2019, 4’ 11’)

Vuong believes that when men perceive themselves as valuable only when they possess the power to destroy things, reaching toxic masculinity becomes inevitable (2019). At the 2019 interview to *The Paris Review*, Vuong shared his personal struggle with being a male. He particularly said that he was never comfortable being male, ‘being a he’, as all his life being a male meant participating in ‘hegemonic masculinity’:

Everywhere I looked, he-ness was akin to an aggression that felt fraudulent in me — or worse, in the blue-collar New England towns I grew up in, self-destructive. Masculinity, or what we have allowed it to be in America, is often realized through violence. Here, we celebrate our boys, who in turn celebrate one another, through the lexicon of conquest. (2019, para. 17)

In the 2019 interview with Seth Meyers, Vuong believes that there is a strong link between this “lexicon of conquest” and the violent past of the United States of America (2019, 4’ 41”). As Vuong explains, starting with the Founding Fathers and continuing to Manifest Destiny³⁸ America’s identity was derived from the myth the “self-made revolutionary” and a founder of new world, subject to colonization (2019, 4’ 22”). Vuong

³⁸ A phrase created in 1845, is the idea that the United States was destined – by God – to expand its dominion and spread democracy and capitalism across the North American continent. The philosophy drove 19th-century U.S. territorial expansion and was used to justify the forced removal of Native Americans and other groups from their homes. The rapid expansion of the United States intensified the issue of slavery as new states were added to the Union, leading to the outbreak of the Civil War (History.com Editors, 2019, Retrieved from: <https://www.history.com/topics/19th-century/manifest-destiny>).

goes on to state that the “avatar of the pioneer”, the man who he calls “the courageous and stoic seeker”, refuses to recall and erases the genocide of the Native American people. Vuong believes that the American paradox of ‘hegemonic masculinity is also a paradox of identity’. As the myth of America and American life was built on death and destruction, the very American identity had to celebrate it. That is why in the interview with Seth Meyers, Vuong states that because death and destruction were seen as progress, the metaphors and language describing those became ‘the measurement of life, of the growth of the boys’ (2019, 4' 09").

In order to further discuss gender and sexuality in Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, it is important to thoroughly refer to the concept of ‘hegemonic masculinity’, which Vuong mentions in the *Paris Review* piece. The concept of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ was coined through the work of Raewyn Connell in 1987 in *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics*. Connell later revisited and redefined the concept with Messerschmidt. The development of the concept has largely been influenced by Antonio Gramsci’s concept of ‘hegemony’ which legitimized the interests of those holding power in the society within specific historical periods. In the 2005 essay “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept”, Connell and James W. Messerschmidt have come to argue that ‘hegemonic masculinity’ became the most dominant and socially encouraged form of masculinity for men (2005, p. 830). As Connell and Messerschmidt explain hegemonic masculinity places itself above other forms of gender identities that presumably do not match up to the dominant ideal of this particular form of masculinity. ‘Hegemonic masculinity’ not only supposes power over female identities but also other, as Connell and Messerschmidt call, marginalized or subordinated forms of male identities (2005, p. 831). ‘Hegemonic masculinity’ prizes and encourages characteristic traits such as assertiveness, aggression, courageousness, invulnerability, refusal of weakness and sensitivity. Connell and Messerschmidt recognize that this form of male identity is not easily and perfectly performed by individual men and serves more as a set of idealized norms and male bodies should aspire to (2005, p. 839).³⁹

³⁹ In the 2005 essay “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept”, Connell and Messerschmidt have addresses the different critics approaches to the concept of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ and have arrived at the concept of a re-thought ‘hegemonic masculinity’, taking into consideration the critique. After a careful reconsideration of what ‘hegemonic masculinity’ represent, Connell and Messerschmidt have come to recognize that the fundamental feature of the concept is still the plurality and hierarchy of masculinities.

In Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, the way in which the protagonist's, Little Dog's mother prepares him for what it means to be a male in the United States is very much linked to the concept of hegemonic masculinity and what traits it encourages. When as a child, Vuong's protagonist, Little Dog goes home to his mother having been beaten up by boys in the street, Rose tells him: "What kind of a boy would let them do that? [...] You did nothing. [...] Just let them" (2019, p. 26). Then she goes on telling Little Dog to stop crying and that he is always crying. After giving Little Dog a few slaps, Rose goes on to say:

"You have to find a way, Little Dog," you said into my hair. "You have to because I don't have the English to help you. I can't say nothing to stop them. You find a way. You find a way or you don't tell me about this ever again, you hear?" You pulled back. "You have to be a real boy and be strong. You have to step up or they'll keep going. You have a bellyful of English." (2019, p. 26)

Evidently, Rose's understanding of masculinity is total absence of vulnerability and emotion. A male would not cry and would stand up for himself, despite the unfairness of the situation. Similarly, Rose recognizes her own inability to step up and help her son but also encourages him to use the gift of the English language which she clearly perceives as a privilege and a power that Little Dog can use to be a 'real boy'. A question may be raised here: would Rose still feel unable to stand up for her son and not forbid him from crying if they were a white American family? How much does race affect Rose's perception of male masculinity, and moreover how much does being an immigrant affect her sense of what a 'real boy' feels and does?

Historical context is essential in the attempt of understanding how gender roles are assigned to the Asian American community. According to David L. Eng's *Out Here and Over There: Queerness and Diaspora in Asian American Studies* (1997), historically, the Asian American men were not granted citizenship in the United States. The only subjects in 1943-1952 to the American citizenship were the white males. As Eng argues,

The authors have also agreed that the concept needs reformulation in the following four aspects: the nature of gender hierarchy, the geography of masculine configurations, the process of social embodiment, and the dynamics of masculinities (2005, p. 847)

the fact that the Asian American men were not granted American naturalized citizenship would derive them from the categorization of 'male' as well (1997, p. 34). Thus, according to Eng, gender cannot be isolated from race when it comes to understanding immigrant communities.

Similarly, when later in the novel, we see Little Dog's and Trevor's relationship, it becomes evident how Little Dog finds out how gender and a form of 'hegemonic masculinity' have already been forced into his relationship:

But it was over before it began. Before my tip brushed his greased palm, he tensed his back a wall. He pushed me back, sat up. "Fuck." He stared straight ahead. "I can't. I just—I mean..." He spoke into the wall. "I dunno. I don't wanna feel like a girl. Like a bitch. I can't, man. I'm sorry, it's not for me—" He paused, wiped his nose. "It's for you. Right?" I pulled the covers to my chin. I had thought sex was to breach new ground, despite terror, that as long as the world did not see us, its rules did not apply. But I was wrong. The rules, they were already inside us. (2019, p. 120)

As described, Little Dog's expectations of his sexual relationship with Trevor being a revelation and a means to answer many questions do not coincide with the reality which Little Dog learns to see as a stage for portraying heteronormative masculinity (Eng, 1997, p 41).

On the other hand, for Little Dog, home is not a place he is seeking, it is rather a feeling, a sense of 'non-otherness', possibly of acceptance. The very act of coming out distances Little Dog from home even further. The home that is considered here is Little Dog's mother's home which undeniably is a heterosexual space. In "Memory as a Second Chance: An Intersectional Reading of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*", Audun Westermann Ryeng argues that since immigrant communities and diasporas have always been placed in between nations and national identities, in those communities, family has predominantly become the space of feeling at home. However, this space has historically been presumed to be heterosexual (2022, p. 36). So, if an individual belonging to the Diaspora comes out as homosexual, they are automatically further distanced from the system of 'home' which is constructed in families. Despite holding a heterosexual space, Little Dog's mother, Rose, does not follow the narrative of further distancing her queer

son and robbing him of sense of home. On the contrary, she takes Little Dog in and thus provides him with a continuity of what home can mean for him (2022, p 36).⁴⁰

In the 2020 International Literature Festival in Berlin, Vuong explains that in the Western culture, the notion of failure is a taboo, and failure is embedded in shame and capital. On the other hand, Vuong, states queer people understand that failure is the very beginning of their identity. They fail to fit in with the rest of the world, they fail to meet the standards, they fail to please their parents, their little towns (2020, 55' 24"). Vuong believes that queerness demands “survival beyond failure”, as no one tells the queer community how to find pleasure; in fact, many queer people find pleasure through failure, trial and error (2020, 55' 31"). So, in a sense, for the queer community, failure is not an end, it's a way to move forward. That is precisely what Vuong tried to have the characters of the book do – see failure as the first step in a culture which sees failure as the final step.

When it comes to Trevor, as a white working-class family male, he experiences a failure of masculinity, of what he is expected to represent. Vuong asks: “What happens if such a boy begins to reject his milieu? He can no longer fit into the masculinity ideal” (2020, 56' 58"). Despite ‘failing in masculinity’ himself, Trevor as well sees and expects Little Dog to be what might be considered as ‘feminine’ and submissive. The fact that the submissive and ‘feminine’ role is assigned to Little Dog, the Asian male in his relationship with Trevor, may portray the heteronormative view of dominance, as well as the way masculinity is assigned to the white male in a homosexual relationship. In the 2020 International Literature Festival in Berlin, Vuong explained that despite Trevor’s assumed heteronormative masculinity, he is still queer, and according to his family and he cannot be identified as a ‘real man’. And if he is not a ‘real man’, he cannot be a human under the American standards of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ (2020, 57' 22").

According to Audun Westermann Ryeng’s “Memory as a Second Chance: An intersectional Reading of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*”, the novel certainly places the Asian American bodies and their masculinity and femininity in the center of the storyline; however, doing so, Vuong also emphasizes the American ‘hegemonic

⁴⁰ The topic of queerness, masculinity, and sense of belonging is further discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

masculinity' through showing Trevor's and his father's relationship (2022, p. 42). In the novel, we learn that Trevor's uncle fought in the Vietnam War and according to Trevor's father he served the United States well by killing Vietnamese people. It could be argued that here Vuong describes the hegemonic white masculinity in the context of the very American ideals that encouraged the Vietnam War in the first place, that valued and emphasized nationalism, imperialism and domination on the Western front and amongst American soldiers (2022, p. 42).

In Joane Nagel's and Meredith Kleykamp's "Introduction: Race, Gender, Class, Sexuality, and War" (2007), it is argued that the Vietnam War caused the emergence of various places where the Asian women were taken advantage of sexually. According to Nagel and Kleykamp, many American soldiers were encountering Vietnamese women in brothels and clubs and in that context the Vietnamese women were perceived as submissive sexual bodies that could have been taken advantage of from the Western white dominant perspective (2007, p. 30). Vuong has addressed this in the International Literature Festival in Berlin, by stating that he initially aimed to tell 'A history of violence from generation to generation, mostly performed on female bodies and migrant bodies' (2020, 45' 30").

Returning to Little Dog's and Trevor's relationship allows the reader to observe how the intimacy the two boys build together, despite being heavily defined by heteronormative dominant and submissive roles, at times grows into an alternative space, in which both Little Dog and Trevor are allowed to portray their alternative masculinities. Their sexual relationship creates and maintains, even if only for a short period of time, the space for the emergence of these alternative masculinities:

I touch your shoulder with the gentleness Trevor showed me back in the river. Trevor who, wild as he was, wouldn't eat veal, wouldn't eat the children of cows. I think now about those children, taken from their mothers and placed in boxes the size of their lives, to be fed and fattened into soft meat. I am thinking of freedom again, how the calf is most free when the cage opens and it's led to the truck for slaughter. All freedom is relative – you know too well – and sometimes it's no freedom at all, but simply the cage widening far away from you the bars abstracted with distance, but still there, as when they 'free' wild animals into nature preserves only to contain them yet again by larger borders. But I took it

anyway, that widening. Because sometimes not seeing the bars is enough. (2019, p. 215)

As described above, Little Dog's and Trevor's relationship did create the space in which they both could be free of the gender roles and power structures imposed by the American reality. Although Little Dog remains aware and recognizes the 'widening of the borders' as something temporary and specific to the space created by his relationship and intimacy with Trevor, he seems to appreciate the very possibility of that space being created.

In his article at *The Paris Review* "Reimagining Masculinity", Vuong asks: "Can the walls of masculinity, set up so long ago through decrees of death and conquest, be breached, broken, recast – even healed? I am, in other words, invested in troubling he-ness" (2019, para. 12). Vuong aims to expand and change the 'masculinity cage' and the 'he-ness' by not leaving it, by deliberately staying in it. Despite the struggle and the lack of belonging to the 'dominant ranks' of the 'masculinity cage', Vuong chooses to hope that the cage will grow to hold him better. Vuong is hopeful in that one day the walls of the masculinity cage will no longer have fixed borders, neither will they have only one center or margins. Vuong wonders if this change that he is longing for is 'queering of space', as well (2019, para. 12).

Another character in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* who might contribute to further understanding gender roles and masculinity is Little Dog's grandfather. Little Dog's grandfather's name is Paul and he is an American white veteran of Vietnam War, who met Little Dog's grandmother Lan during the war in Vietnam, as she was forced to be a sex worker in order to survive. Despite Lan being a sex worker, she started a relationship with Paul because he was not like the other American soldiers, and also he was not her client:

But Paul, shy and sheepish, who often spoke with his hands in his lap, was not her client – which was why they hit it off. According to Lan, they did, in fact, meet at a bar. It was late, nearly midnight, when Lan walked in. [...] They talked over drinks and found a common ground in their shared rural childhoods, both having been brought up in the "sticks" of their respective countries. These two unlikely hillbillies must have found a familiar dialect that fused the gap between

their estranged vernaculars. Despite their vastly different paths, they found themselves transplants in a decadent and disorientating city besieged by bombing raids. (2019, p. 48)

As described above, despite the role that Paul is assigned to have as a white American soldier fighting in Vietnam War, he demonstrates an alternative masculinity, one that is not about dominating, one that leads him to ‘find refuge’ in a Vietnamese woman with who he shares a similar context in being raised in the farm back in the United States.

2.3. Race in Adichie and Vuong

Vuong and Adichie portray race as a social construction, which allows to further see how beauty, hair, and skin color are related to the reality of how immigrants experience race in the United States and the United Kingdom. In the discussion of race and beauty, social media and its immense influence will be further analyzed in the chapter, demonstrating how reinforced images of beauty in the media are relevant and still play a powerful role in determining ideals of beauty deriving primarily from western beauty standards, despite the multi-ethnic realities in today’s world.

In the 2018 interview to *JSTOR Daily*, Adichie explains that she wasn’t black until she moved to America and that she became black in America (2018, para. 12). Adichie says that she did not think about race growing up in Nigeria as she simply did not need to think about race.⁴¹ Before moving to the United States, Adichie thought of herself as a Nigerian, Igbo and Catholic. She goes on to explain that moving to America changed her sense of identity, as because of the history of the country, she felt forced upon to a new identity – being a Black woman. Adichie is honest in describing how in the beginning of her experience in America she felt resistance to accepting the identity that was being given to her, as she could not ignore all the negative stereotypes that were attached to ‘blackness’ (2018, para. 23). A pivotal moment for the author to understand what

⁴¹ According to Adichie, even though many problems exist in Nigeria, they are mainly related to religion and ethnicity, not race (*JSTOR Daily*, 2018, para. 22).

‘blackness’ was in America was when she was in university, at a class, and after finding out that it was Adichie who had handed in the best essay the professor was genuinely surprised:

“I remember realizing then that, “Oh, so this is what it means.” This professor doesn’t expect the best essay in class to be written by a black person. And I had come from a country where black achievement is absolutely normal. It wasn’t remarkable to me the idea that black people are academically superior because, you know, everybody in Nigeria was black. So the people who were bright were black. So I resisted it. I didn’t want to be black. I would say to people, “I’m not black, I’m Nigerian.” Or, another identity that America gives me was African, so that in college people just wanted me to explain Africa. I knew nothing about anywhere else, apart from Nigeria, really.” (2018, para. 25)

The author’s resistance to accepting being Black in America led her to learn more about African-American history. She started reading about post-slavery and post-reconstruction, and Jim Crow⁴² and only then she started to understand why America was forcing ‘blackness’ onto her. This is also when she started identifying as Black and claiming that very ‘blackness’ she was rejecting earlier. Adichie explains that African-American history did not start on the slave ships, it started in Africa, which made her understand that as America labeled her as Black meant that whatever Black people experience, she also experiences (2018, para. 27).

The storyline that Adichie builds in *Americanah* is very much a demonstration of Adichie’s struggle and journey with ‘blackness’ and demonstrates that race is still an important factor in today’s world and especially in the United States. In one of her blog posts, titled “Understanding America for the Non-American Black: American Tribalism”, *Americanah*’s protagonist, Ifemelu, explains that United States operates based on a ladder of racial hierarchy:

⁴² Jim Crow laws were a collection of state and local statutes that legalized racial segregation. The laws existed for about 100 years, from the post-Civil War era until 1968 and were meant to marginalize African Americans by denying them the right to vote, hold jobs, get an education or other opportunities. Those who attempted to defy Jim Crow laws often faced arrest, fines, jail sentences, violence and death (History.com Editors, 2023, Retrieved from: <https://www.history.com/topics/early-20th-century-us/jim-crow-laws>).

There's a ladder of racial hierarchy in America. White is always on top, specifically White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, otherwise known as WASP, and American Black is always on the bottom, and what's in the middle depends on time and place. (Or as that marvelous rhyme goes: if you're white, you're all right; if you're brown, stick around; if you're black, get back). (2013, p. 184)

Adichie explains and compartmentalizes what being a black person means in the United States of America and how race, as a socio-cultural construct plays a significant role in shaping an immigrant black woman's identity. Ifemelu's blog shares her views and experiences on what it means to be an 'American Black' and a 'Non-American Black' (2013, p. 4). In her blog and throughout the story, the protagonist also differentiates between African Americans and non-American Africans. She refers to the former group as American Blacks and to the latter as Non-American Blacks. Even though Ifemelu manages to name the above-mentioned categories and differentiate between these groups, the very fact that there is the necessity for her to do so proves that race is a complex construct in the United States. Despite the multi-layered and immensely diverse population, the socio-historic norms still view skin color as a primary feature of what race may mean.

According to Glenda R. Carpio's "Contemporary American Immigrant Literature", there are dual tendencies in recent immigrant writing in the United States when it comes to America's "investment in race" and the oppression history of the Native peoples, African Americans and non-white immigrants (2012, p. 55). Carpio argues that the first tendency is of the new immigrant literature being more critical of the United States, as many of the immigrant writers do come from countries that experienced colonialism and neocolonialism. The second tendency, according to Carpio is that new immigrant literature focuses on being inspired in the struggle for race and equality, and in doing so challenges historically and socially embedded racial beliefs (*ibidem*). Carpio goes on to raise the question of: "What does one call an African immigrant who has also become American?", as she believes that calling the African immigrant in America an African American is simply inaccurate, as the term of African American has been used to describe black Americans of African descent who have lived in America for several generations and many of them through the violent history of slavery (2012, p. 56).

However, what Carpio finds problematic with the term of African American and the already set racial categories and how they are used to classify a large group of people, is that it extensively leaves out other large groups of immigrants from the Caribbean and other Latin American countries, where the people were largely affected and went through slavery, but their identities from a racial perspective do not fit in the white or the black groups (*ibidem*). The question is what becomes of the racial and cultural identities of those groups? Do they have to find a category that would be the closest to them, or make significant compromises in order to be allowed to fit the already existing boxes of black and white?

In one of her blog posts, titled “To my Fellow Non-American Blacks: In America, you are Black, Baby”, *Americanah*’s protagonist Ifemelu raises the very question of self-identity and the eventually re-shaped identity as a Non-American Black, when she encourages her ‘fellow Non-American Blacks’ to stop saying that they are Jamaican, or Ghanaian, as in America, first and foremost they are black and the resistance to this reality does not certainly help to show the socio-historic American norms about race that there is another truth (2013, p. 220). This particular blog post written by Ifemelu attempts to demonstrate the complexity and multi-layeredness of race in America. When she argues that all the Non-American Blacks have their ‘moment of initiation into the Society of Former Negroes’ which may look like them being asked to give the ‘black perspective’ in a class, or in a conversation, when, in fact, they have no idea what the ‘black perspective’ entails (2013, p. 220).

In addition, the blog post also places race in a space where there is a clearly set distinction between the races in America and where they each stand in ‘America’s race ladder’:

And admit it – you say “I’m not black” only because you know black is the bottom of America’s race ladder. And you want none of that. Don’t deny now. What if being black had all the privileges of being white? Would you still say “Don’t call me black, I’m from Trinidad?” I didn’t think so. So you’re black, baby. (2013, p. 220)

Throughout the novel, Adichie portrays how race is viewed differently from country to country. Obizne, the other protagonist of the novel, explains how he

experienced and saw race in the United States saying that, in the United Kingdom, a white boy and a black girl from the same working-class neighborhood can potentially get together, and race will be secondary. However, in the United States that situation would never be the case, as for a white boy and a black girl from the same working-class neighborhood, race would be primary (2013, p. 275).

In another blog post, titled “Is Obama Anything but Black?”, Ifemelu addresses the definition of race in which race is claimed to be a “genotype”, something that matters due to the biological reality (2013, p. 337). Ifemelu writes about how non-black Americans say that Obama is not black and call him everything but black – biracial, multiracial, black-and-white because his mother was white. But for Ifemelu the fact that Obama’s mother is white, does not matter as for her that is not why race matters:

But race is not biology; race is sociology. Race is not genotype; race is phenotype. Race matters because of racism. And racism is absurd because it’s about how you look. Not about the blood you have. It’s about the shade of your skin and the shape of your nose and the kink of your hair”. (2013, p. 337)

Ifemelu clearly refuses to go along with the belief that race a biological concept and a biological reality. She believes that in America people cannot just simply decide what race they are, since the way they look already predetermines how they are going to be perceived in various social situations. So, Ifemelu is certain in her belief that if Obama was on a bus 50 years before, he would have to sit at the back of the bus just because of his appearance. And if a black man committed a crime, Obama, would again be stopped and questioned just because of the way he looked, just because he would be a black man (2013, p. 338).

Adichie has also explained that it is important to recognize that to be a black immigrant is different and entails a different experience in America. The author is convinced that a black immigrant who is from a country where most of the population is black, has a particular level of confidence, and naturally, expects to see other black people achieve success. And in America, the experience of African Americans is certainly different (*JSTOR Daily*, 2018, para. 27).

In *Americanah*, prior to the Presidential elections in the United States, Adichie explains that if Barak Obama wins the presidential elections, he will no longer be black,

and here she refers to Oprah Winfrey, saying, “He will no longer be black, just as Oprah is no longer black, she’s Oprah” (2013, p. 356). Adichie continues on saying that, in case of Obama, the phenomenon of his ‘fame’ and representation in the American popular culture lies in the fact that he is not simply a black man from Georgia, United States. His background and family identity make an immense difference in how he is perceived by the black community, the white community and the American population, in general. Adichie continues explaining that if Obama did not have a white mother and was not raised by his mother’s parents and his roots were not originating from Kenya, Indonesia and Hawaii, he would simply be a black man from Georgia who decided to run for President. However, since he did have all these identities unified in his public figure, it was easier for him to be relatable for a variety of communities in the United States (2013, p. 356).

In the 2022 *White Review* interview with Alok Vaid-Menon, Vuong speaks about the importance of inclusion and appreciation of the creative work of the Asian-American community in the United States (2022). Vuong explains that the way he chose to construct *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, in which there are countless philosophical and what the author calls “meditative” detours within the story, is his refusal to be read cohesive, to perform “a temporal linearity” (2022, para. 7). Vuong states that Asian-American individuals are often seen as bodies of service and when that is disrupted, it becomes very unusual for the ‘white gaze’. As within the ‘white gaze’, people are not used to Asian-American bodies refusing to be explained, to be translated, to make sense:

As bodies of color, it is often demanded that we perform ethnography through our art, to drive the tour bus, and also put the microphone on and say, ‘Look, to your left, this brown suffering of the Global South.’ Then this is supposed to elicit empathy in a liberal white reader. And this is where I have a lot of trouble. For me, what it actually does is keep whiteness complicit in our erasure. (2022, para. 8)

In Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, race and gender forms are often interwoven in challenging the already set socio-historic systems of domination in the United States. Similarly to Adichie’s Ifemelu, Little Dog and his family only started learning about color when they moved to the United States in 1990:

When we arrived in America in 1990, color was one of the first things we knew of yet knew nothing about. Once we stepped inside our one-bedroom apartment in the predominantly Latinx neighborhood on Franklin Avenue that winter, the rules of color and with it our faces, had changed. (2019, p. 51)

Just like Ifemelu had learnt that once having entered the United States she had become black, Little Dog and Rose had become Asian-American after moving to the United States and race and color and language had immediately started mattering immensely, however in very different ways than they used to. Little Dog goes on to recall that in America, Lan, his grandmother, who in Vietnam was considered dark, in the United States was considered lighter and Rose, his mother, was so light that she could ‘pass for white’ (2019, p. 51).

When Little Dog remembers the comment of his mother about ‘American milk’ and how she would encourage him to drink the milk to grow. As Little Dog recalls this episode, he makes the following comment:

I’d drink it down, gulping, making sure you could see, both of us hoping the whiteness vanishing into me would make more of a yellow boy. I’m drinking light, I thought. I’m filling myself with light. The milk would erase all the dark inside me with a flood of brightness. (2019, p. 27)

It is rather curious how the way Little Dog and his family are seen as ‘the Other’ in the United States affects their way of seeing themselves. Rose, Little Dog’s mother, sees her and her son’s being non-white very similarly to how the white Americans perceive them, and it could be argued that she almost believes that there are ways of becoming whiter, of finding a sense of a racial belonging in the United States among the white population, and one of those ways can be consuming the ‘American milk’. As for Little Dog, his impression of the ‘American milk’ erasing all ‘the dark’ inside him is a rather curious belief, as apparently, he also, sees himself as ‘the Other’ through the eyes of the other side – the white Americans.

When Little Dog starts working at a farm, on his first day he encounters the very phenomenon discussed earlier by Carpio and Adichie on immigrant bodies from different

countries immediately becoming Black when entering America. When the other farm workers start speaking Spanish to Little Dog and he replies saying that he does not speak Spanish, after being surprised at first, one of the man “realizes” his mistake and calls Little Dog “Chinito! Chinito!”. Little Dog humbly agrees, not wanting to correct the man on his first day of work (2019, p 87). In this context, the man’s two attempts of categorizing the new kid on the farm according to the features that were familiar to him are interesting. First, he goes for language and not just any language but Spanish, in particular. It can be assumed that given the circumstances and the majority of the workers on the farm being Spanish speaking immigrants, he immediately puts Little Dog in the same group with all of them and only after acknowledging that Little Dog does not ‘meet the requirement’ of speaking Spanish, calls him Chinese, the closest category, familiar to him, in which due to his appearance and lack of Spanish knowledge, Little Dog can perfectly fit in.

Further in the book, Little Dog is called a ‘Chinese boy’ again but that time it is Trevor’s father who refers to Little Dog as a ‘Chinese boy’ (2019, p. 142). It is interesting to observe how the first time it is the Mexican, Cambodian, Dominican immigrants who call Little Dog Chinese. Whereas the second time he is called Chinese, it is the white dominant male figure who categorizes him. It can be assumed that the first instinct of all these men calling an Asian-American boy Chinese seems to have permanently affected how a Vietnamese-American, a Korean-American, a Japanese-American or a Chinese-American boy is referred to in the American racial reality.

Both *Americanah* and *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, have created the space to discuss and describe race a social construct, leading this discussion by various elements which are part of the above-mentioned construct, such as color, beauty, hair, and language.

2.4. Class in Adichie and Vuong

As discussed above, *Americanah*’s protagonist Ifemelu writes a blog about her experiences as a Nigerian immigrant in the United States and over time her blog gains popularity and a loyal and engaged audience. In one of Ifemelu’s blog posts which is titled “Sometimes in America, Race is Class” she writes, “‘Blacks’ as a whole are often lumped with ‘Poor Whites’. Not Poor Blacks and Poor Whites” (2013, p. 166). As we can

see, according to Adichie in the American society, regardless of their economic situation, the Black people would be low on the social class ladder.

In the 2017 Edinburgh International Book Festival, Adichie addresses the fact that in America being Black comes with many presumptions on the behalf of the society. She recalls an episode from her own experience from years before, when she went into a rather fancy clothing store in the United States. Adichie describes how the staff of the store made it very clear that she was not welcome in the store and what startled Adichie the most was how the staff had made their judgement by merely taking a glance at her. Adichie further explains that in Nigeria, despite the diversity, it is difficult to tell who is who by just taking a glance at them. So the fact that that sort of an immediate discrimination takes place in America is unthinkable for the author (2017, 19' 35").

In one of the instances in *Americanah*, this is clearly demonstrated when after answering the door in the house where Ifemelu works as a babysitter, the white man who is a cleaner is absolutely startled by the idea that a black woman can afford to own such a house. The way his prejudiced perception leads him, there is no possibility for him to understand that race does not determine one's economic situation and social status (2013, p. 166). A few moments later, when he finally finds out that Ifemelu also works in the house and is the babysitter, he seems to be relieved as the reality he lives in starts making sense again. The reality in which a black woman cannot be above a white man in the economic and social class ladder in the United States.

In one of her blog posts titled "What Academics Mean by White Privilege, or Yes It Sucks to Be Poor and White but Try Being Poor and Non-White", Ifemelu recalls an episode about a white guy claiming to their Professor that there is no such thing as white privilege, as he grew up extremely poor in West Virginia and his family is on welfare (2013, p. 346). Ifemelu further comments on the episode:

Right. But privilege is always relative to something else. Now imagine someone like him, as poor and as fucked up, and then make that person black. If both are caught for drug possession, say, the white guy is more likely to be sent to treatment and the black guy is more likely to be sent to jail. [...] The black guy on the street in New York doesn't want to think about race, until he tries to hail a cab, and he doesn't want to think about race when he's driving his Mercedes

under the speed limit, until a cop pulls him over. So Appalachian hick guy doesn't have class privilege but he sure as hell has race privilege. (2013, p. 346)

This paragraph brings us back to the quote we discussed earlier by Obinze, the other protagonist of *Americanah*, who claims that for a white boy and a black girl who grow up in the same working-class neighborhood, class will be secondary, whereas race will always be primary (2013, p. 275). Obinze's experience of class and race perceptions in the United Kingdom are quite interesting to discuss, as well, since he believes that unlike the United States, in the UK, class is 'in the air': "I think class in this country is in the air that people breathe. Everyone knows their place. Even the people who are angry about class have somehow accepted their place" (2013, p. 275).

In another blog post titled "Understanding America for the Non-American Black: American Tribalism", Ifemelu states that there are four categories in which 'American Tribalism' can be distributed within – class, ideology, region, and race (2013, p. 184). As Chinenye Amonyeze states in her essay "Writing a New Reputation: Liminality and Bicultural Identity in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*", Adichie discusses the concepts of identity creation and maintenance by analyzing how socio-historic and political power sustains and encourages prejudices in racial and class constructs (2017, p. 4).

This rather curious connection between how much one's social class belonging defines the way they perceive race and racial prejudice can be explored in another episode where we see Obinze hosted in his friend's Emenike's and Georgina's, his British white wife's house for a dinner. The dinner is quite fancy and the hosts want to particularly show off the plates they have bought in India when they were traveling, which to Obinze look slightly lumpy on the edges and 'amateurly finished'. We see Obinze reflecting on the fact and thinking to himself that in Nigeria they would never put these plates on the table for guests, whereas in the UK, in an upper, upper-middle class household they are used as objects of admiration, as they were acquired in India and are handmade by the poor people of this foreign country (2013, p. 271).

As argued by Mnena Abuku and Joseph Nietlong in the essay "Migration and Realism in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*", the novel engages with the 'delicate subjectivities' of the middle class in Nigeria and in doing so Adichie attempts to challenge the global association of Nigeria and other African countries with tragedy and poverty

(2017, p. 318). In the 2016 *The Atlantic Washington Ideas Forum*, Adichie points out the kind of the immigration which she addresses in *Americanah* as a new way for the reader to think about immigrants from the African continent and their representation in the West. The author explains that in the book she described the kind of immigration in which people are seeking more choices, they are not starving, they have jobs, but they want more. As the author explains, Africa, as a continent is not allowed that – wanting to escape the familiar, in the search for more (2016, 2' 15").

As Adichie describes in *Americanah*, a Nigerian struggling writer would have to write horrible things about their own people if they wanted to do well and be accepted by the public. This would naturally be accompanied by the writer describing how the Africans were to blame for all the problems and how the West has always helped Africa in the journey of improvement and progression. The narrator explains that after writing that, the writer will be famous and respected and of course, well-paid (2013, p. 318).

In their essay “Migration and Realism in Chimamanda Adichie’s *Americanah*”, Mnena Abuku and Joseph Nietlong argue that *Americanah* addresses the ‘finely calibrated nexus of class and privilege’ in contemporary Lagos, Nigeria. When Ifemelu moves back to Lagos, we see many occasions in which her perception of class is rather different. For instance, when back in Lagos, Ifemelu, is judged by her friends and called ‘self-righteous’ or a ‘judgmental bitch’. Even Ifemelu’s new blog, which she starts in Lagos, called “The Small Redemptions of Lagos”, demonstrates her judgmental attitude and superiority over Lagos and its people (2017, p. 319).

Once again intersectionality among class, ideology, region and race is significant if we attempt to further explore the question of class in *Americanah*. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Adichie uses hair throughout the novel, to demonstrate its crucial role in portraying racial prejudices, as well as social class difference. As stated by Amonyeze, in Nigeria women in wealthy classes wear their hair naturally or as afro, which is a feature that distinguishes them from lower social classes (2017, p. 6). This can be demonstrated as a clear example of how even the same feature, in this case, hair, can carry completely different meanings in the two countries and among different social classes. However, it is interesting to note that the recurring hair theme in Adichie’s *Americanah* comes to reach a point where it is not about race or social class. As Carolette R. Norwood states in her “Decolonizing my hair, unshackling my curls: an autoethnography on what makes my

natural hair journey a Black feminist statement”, in this era of free media and self-empowerment movements, wearing hair naturally is solely an act and demonstration of self-care and self-empowerment for black women across all ethnicities, as well as social classes (2017, p. 70). Therefore, Ifemelu’s journey that we witness as a reader, along with sharing her beliefs about emancipation from racial, social class and gender prejudices, leads the protagonist through a self-empowerment process in which her race, ethnicity, gender and social class play an essential role.

On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous also addresses class in its intersectional view of American current society. According to Mannhi Nguyen Tran’s “Literary and Literal Bodies: Vietnamese American Form, Affect, And Politics in Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*”, Vuong places his Vietnamese American refugee working-class mother in the center of the novel and views her as a literary body in the context of Vietnamese American and canonical American forms (2020, iv). As Tran further discusses, the novel, which is essentially Little Dog’s letter to his mother, is immediately addressing “his mother’s marginalized positionality as an illiterate Vietnamese refugee working class woman” (2020, p. 18). Tran argues that Little Dog’s mother’s social class position is represented in the form the novel takes, as it is not constructed as a traditional Vietnamese American novel (2020, p. 19).

In *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, Vuong constantly reminds the reader about how language engages with the earlier discussed body of Vietnamese American and American canonical literary forms. In the episodes, where Rose and the other women working in the nail salon, as well as Little Dog and the other non-white working-class men who work on the tobacco farm use the word ‘sorry’ to ensure their continuous work opportunity is a way of economic survival for them:

The most common English word spoken in the nail salon was *sorry*. [...] I have seen workers, you included, apologize dozens of times throughout a forty-five-minute manicure, hoping to gain warm traction that would lead to the ultimate goal, a tip – only to say *sorry* anyway when none was given. [...] It no longer merely apologizes, but insists, reminds: *I’m here, right here, beneath you*. It is the lowering of oneself so that the client feels right, superior, and charitable. [...] Being sorry pays [...] because the mouth must eat. (2019, p. 92)

Through these instances Vuong discusses how the Vietnamese-American, Latin-American, Chicano working-class people go through similar experiences of America and its socio-economic ladder, regardless of where they come from. The intention and striving for a work opportunity is what unites them.

Little Dog describes his mother's working hands as the 'wreck and reckoning of a dream' (2019, p. 79). He describes how Rose's hands are blistered from three decades of hard work in factories and salons. But other than being a means of earning living, those factories and especially the salons are more than an employment place. The narrator explains that the salons are a place of work and a place of constructing beauty, but they are also a place where children are raised and brought up (*ibidem*). It is also a place where tales, folklore and rumors from the countries of these women are told and exchanged resulting in laughter, which quickly fades away into silence given the place of work. The salons are also a place where the newly immigrated women hope to make a quick stop, as they are spending most of their salaries to study English and to land better and more real jobs in the United States (2019, p. 80). These working class immigrant women, like Rose, after several unsuccessful attempts of leaving the salon and finding a real, permanent job with a contract and insurance, end up going back to the salons and realizing that the salon is 'a place where dreams become the calcified knowledge of what it means to be awake in American bones – with or without citizenship – aching, toxic and underpaid' (2019, p. 81). Rose's hands are how Vuong shows the working-class implications for the Vietnamese-American women in the United States and the intensity for striving towards sort of an exceptionalism when arriving in the United States.

Through this intersectional reflection on how gender, sex, race and class determine American socio-political structures and relationships, both Adichie and Vuong aim to portray what the process of re-gaining a sense of identity looks like for the immigrant population in the United States.

3. Untangling History: Memory, Silence, Trauma

Dear Ma, I am writing to reach you – even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are. I am writing to go back to the time, at the rest stop in Virginia, when you stared, horror-struck, at the taxidermy buck hung over the soda machine by the restrooms, its antlers shadowing your face. In the car, you kept shaking your head. “I don’t understand why they would do that. Can’t they see it’s a corpse? A corpse should go away, not get stuck forever like that.”

Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, 2019

Each memory stunned her with its blinding luminosity. Each brought with it a sense of unassailable loss, a great burden hurtling towards her, and she wished she could duck, lower herself so that it would bypass her, so that she would save herself.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah*, 2013

Memory and identity are dominant leitmotifs in Adichie’s *Americanah* and Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*. Both authors’ language is filled with hopefulness that the very act of remembering, of recalling family history through a body of writing will lead to healing wounds and bringing families closer.

The opening of Vuong’s letter to his mother who cannot read is the author’s attempt to portray the power of writing in addressing generational and collective trauma: “Dear Ma, I am writing to reach you—even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are” (2019, p. 3). In the paragraphs that follow this sentence (used as epigraph to this chapter), Little Dog, the narrator, recalls stories from different instances of his life: his mother staring at a taxidermy buck; his mother and him shopping at Goodwill; then Rose, his mother, beating him for the last time when he was 13 years-old (2019, p. 3). As Michael Kaler explains in his 2019 article “Memory Can Be a Second Chance: Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*”, these several paragraphs immediately draw our attention to the instances of affection and abuse which the narrator’s and his mother’s relationship is built on, and take turns with the narrator’s

thoughts on literature, writing, and eventually monarch butterflies and their migratory habits.⁴³

As for Adichie's words also used as epigraph to this chapter, they refer to the moment when Ifemelu tries to save herself from the memories of home and Obinze, her first love, to avoid them as hard as she can; this leads the protagonist through a journey of writing down her experiences and memories, letting the body of writing function as the main means of working towards healing those wounds from the past. As Quan Manh Ha and Mia Tomkins explain in an essay on Vuong's book, but that we can use to read Adichie's as well, generational trauma, memory loss, remembering and silence are key in discussing resistance to 'historical amnesia' and the myth of the American dream (2021, p. 201). In *A Companion to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie* Louisa Uchum Egbunike refers to Adichie's words about formerly colonized people in her essay "Narrating the Past Orality, History & the Production of Knowledge in the Works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie". Egbunike emphasizes Adichie's statement of the formerly colonized people being conditioned by their history and their place in the modern world to look towards 'somewhere else' to receive validation. Despite this striving for validation, Adichie believes that these people still see themselves as inhabitants of the margins. And the author does not only speak about the political term used to describe the formerly colonized people and their countries as 'Third World'; she points to the concept of being 'outside' in the context of metaphysical and psychological ways. Adichie's use of the Igbo language, culture and oral tradition is how she chooses to contribute to the 'decolonization project' of the 'Third World' (2017, p. 57).

The narrator of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* tells his family history through not only his but also his mother's and grandmother's memories. Vuong builds the novel around three historical events: the Vietnam War, the Opioid Crisis and 9/11. From a historical perspective these are the events that constitute the backbone of the novel as we see Little Dog and his family experience those moments. Little Dog, having migrated to the United States as an infant with his mother and grandmother, is certainly a character who often struggles with his own identity and belonging. In part one of the novel, Little

⁴³ Little Dog's reflections on monarch butterflies and their migratory habits will be addressed in detail further in this chapter.

Dog recalls one of his early memories as a 5-year-old boy, playing a prank on his mother and scaring her with a ‘Boom’ sound which was not simply perceived as a naive prank. This is one of the first memories Little Dog has of interacting with the memory of war and experiencing it himself, despite the war having ended many years before. When his mother hears the sound, instead of being moderately scared, she starts “sobbing, clutching her chest against the door and gasping” (2019, p. 4). And this is when Little Dog unambiguously identifies himself as an American boy imitating what he saw on TV, certainly without recognizing the war trauma his non-American mother was carrying. This is when the narrator goes on to say that:

I didn’t know that the war was still inside you, that there was a war to begin with, that once it enters you it never leaves – but merely echoes, a sound forming the face of your own son. Boom. (2019, p. 4)

Interestingly, even during this incident of experiencing the war trauma himself as a child through his mother’s identity, the narrator, does not understand it, nor does he recognize it as a historical trauma. Him being an American boy is not as straightforward, however. Little Dog recalls his first time going to KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken) and indulging himself in a crispy meal there, without having his Vietnamese or American or Vietnamese-American identity in mind, very soon to hear the words of his mother: “Remember, don’t draw attention to yourself. You’re already Vietnamese” (2019, p. 219). Little Dog’s mother seems to be convinced of her son’s identity as a Vietnamese boy. Although she recognizes the benefit of speaking English and using language as a tool to get around, she still sees him as a carrier of the Vietnamese identity and culture.

In her essay “No Place for Self-Pity, No Room for Fear”, Toni Morrison once again addresses the importance of language and writing in what has power to heal a nation. Morrison’s essay starts by addressing the 2004 elections in the United States in which George W. Bush was re-elected. This was precisely the reason for Morrison’s despair and feeling of intellectual paralysis which she was trying to explain to a friend who had called her, when the friend interrupted the author shouting: “No! No, no, no! This is precisely the time when artists go to work – not when everything is fine, but in times of dread. That’s our job!” (Morrison, 2015). Morrison’s friend’s urge to go to work brings Morrison closer to the artists who have ‘gone to work’ in prisons, in hospitals,

when they were exiled, wounded, or in despair. Morrison goes on to explain that any form of art is crucial in maintaining sense of freedom and hope for healing in a nation:

I know the world is bruised and bleeding, and though it is important not to ignore its pain, it is also critical to refuse to succumb to its malevolence. Like failure, chaos contains information that can lead to knowledge – even wisdom. Like art. (Morrison, 2015)

Similarly, in his semi-autobiographical novel, Vuong retells disrupting historical events through memories to heal. Those memories are inspired by his mother's and grandmother's experiences as they were directly affected by historical events. If that is the case, a question arises: should we assume that *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is a writing of history?

As we have already discussed in the Introduction to this project, Vuong has stated in a *New York Times* interview that portraying historical truth through the book was never his goal; what he was interested in doing was turning the truth into art, through the magical act of writing (2020). Vuong thus asserts the importance of the role of the writer or artist in healing wounds, in healing generations, and in healing civilizations. At the same time, by retelling Little Dog's and his family's experiences, Vuong gives voice to intergenerational historical trauma, in the sense that historical trauma passes from generation to generation, contributing to the experience of being a child of immigrants and of being American.

In this very way, Vuong is able to portray the importance of the role of the writer, of the artist in healing wounds, in healing generations, and in healing civilizations.

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous, the narrator's and his family's experiences voice the phenomenon of historical trauma in that historical trauma remains throughout time and passes from a generation to a generation contributing to the experience of being a child of immigrants and that experience constructing the identity of the narrator in the United States.

In this work, we have already discussed Sara Ahmed's view of home as a space which occurs through the failure of individual memory, and which is replaced by collective memory (2000). Rather curiously the question of how individuals identify with

history through forgetting and not remembering what their home was leads to what Marianne Hirsch defines as ‘postmemory’. According to Hirsch’s *The Generation of Postmemory Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, ‘postmemory’ is the relationship that ‘the generation after’ receives from the generation before by means of stories, images, behaviors and interactions in the environment of which they grew up (2012, p. 36). Of course, the generation after has not experienced those stories or images by themselves but the connection with those experiences is so strong that the generation after seems to have formed memories of their own regarding those stories and images (2012, p. 38). We will further address Hirsch’s concept of ‘postmemory’ later in this Chapter.

In their 2023 essay “Decolonized Trauma: Narrative, Memory and Identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*”, Behzad Pourgharib, Moussa Pourya Asl and Somayeh Esmaili refer to postcolonial studies in which ‘trauma’ is regarded as a complex and paradoxical phenomenon that strongly affects individuals’ identity, memory and life stories, and at the same ‘fosters cross-cultural solidarity’ among those who have been affected by the trauma (p. 17).⁴⁴ Pourgharib, Pourya and Esmaili point out to the transformation of the last two decades in which many limitations and biases of Western theorization of trauma have been identified by critics and scholars. Critics particularly addressed the fact that until now the theory on trauma has failed to include painful experiences and memories of non-Western individuals and communities not only in the diaspora but also in their own countries of origin (p. 17).⁴⁵ That is precisely the reason for recent studies on African-American and Asian-American identity and experience highlighting the necessity for an updated theorization of trauma (2023, p. 17). The authors refer to Stef Craps’ new decolonized model of trauma as an alternative to the conventional

⁴⁴ Pourgharib, Pourya and Esmaili refer to Nicole A Sütterlin’s definition of trauma. From a psycho-analytical perspective, trauma is a form of lack that implies a fixation or an obstruction that precludes the language from being substituted (Sütterlin, as cited in Pourgharib, Pourya and Esmaili, 2023, p. 20).

⁴⁵ As explained by the postcolonial psychologist Frantz Fanon, such Eurocentric understanding of trauma overlooks colonialism as a causal factor in the development of trauma in non-European countries. As the author stated: “The truth is that colonization, in its very essence, already appeared to be a great purveyor of psychiatric hospitals” (Fanon 181). The body and mind of the colonial subject are equally wounded, and the body becomes a prison for the soul. The failure to consider the colonial conditions in traditional theorizations of trauma delimits such definitions and makes them unsuitable to non-European or Global South cultures and societies (Fanon as cited in Pourgharib, Pourya and Esmaili, 2023, p. 21).

Western approach. According to Craps, trauma not only includes historical events but also, and more importantly, everyday events that are permanent and continuous (Craps, as cited in Pourgharib, Pourya and Esmaili, 2023, p. 21). Pourgharib, Pourya and Esmaili also explain the notion of ‘collective trauma’, which according to them, is the result of a socio-cultural and ‘narrative action’ to construct traumatic experience (2023, p. 23). The authors argue that the idea of ‘collective trauma’ helps to further look into history and development of colonialism and decolonization and in doing so helps to understand the traumatic persistence of colonialism to this day (2023, p. 23). The authors also emphasize the importance of the link between trauma and narrative, a link that is not easy nor straightforward. They state that a body of writing is known to provide the space for sharing experiences and life stories of individuals and communities, which ultimately may echo a process of healing.

It is in this context that Adichie’s *Americanah* can be read as well, paying particular attention to the novel’s representation of the trauma experienced by Nigerians both in Nigeria and in the diaspora (p. 18). The traumatic themes and storylines in *Americanah* have come to portray the realistic demonstration of Nigerians’ life experiences as immigrants (2023, p. 18). Pourgharib, Pourya and Esmaili argue that Adichie’s representation of trauma goes out of the conventional forms of a novel and by doing so encourages understanding and healing of trauma (p. 18).⁴⁶ As for Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, even as a five-year-old boy, the narrator carries the ‘collective trauma’ that is transferred to him by his family’s experiences back in their homeland, Vietnam and in the United States, as first generation immigrants. The narrator identifies as an American boy and he is not yet questioning his national identity; however, interestingly, at a quite early age, and as a consequence of historical events and his family’s history of migration, he is forced to question his identity as a son, as a child, as

⁴⁶ A decolonized theory of trauma is a controversial and complex subject that has been studied by many critics and researchers, including Stef Craps, Michael Rothberg, Roger Luckhurst, and Irene Visser. To them, the study of decolonized trauma theory is a gradual process and a new field constructed by the relationship between trauma studies and postcolonial criticism which sheds light on both individual psychic suffering and communal cultural difficulties in minority groups. These scholars unanimously argue that the concept of trauma is fundamentally essentialist and white Eurocentric and needs to be decolonized in order to be able to address Global Southern experiences. Hence, the development and the implementation of decolonized trauma theory, which in turn redefines certain concepts such as narrative and melancholy and serves to challenge the prevailing definitions and assumptions of Western understandings of trauma (2023, p. 20).

a care-receiver. In order to explore that, it is important to note that Little Dog's mother, Rose, speaks very little English and at a young age Little Dog has no choice but to become the translator for his mother. This very act of teaching his own mother as a child, reversed their very roles as a caregiver and a son. As Vuong describes in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, the act of a son teaching his mother reversed the hierarchy set by default by the nature and more importantly meddled with the identities of the mother and the son:

The time I tried to teach you to read the way Mrs. Callahan taught me, my lips to your ear, my hand on yours, the words moving underneath the shadows we made. But that act (a son teaching his mother) reversed our hierarchies, and with it our identities, which, in this country, were already tenuous and tethered. (2019, p. 5)

In *Americanah* we find Adichie's protagonist Ifemelu migrating to the United States as an adult, by her own choice and without her family. Ifemelu, migrates to the United States as an undergraduate student to finish her studies and is forced to find her way in a society where the existing racial reality is completely unknown to her.

In the context of multicultural and multilingual Nigeria, language plays an important role in constructing the Nigerian identity. When, at the beginning of the novel, we first encounter Ifemelu, we are immediately introduced to her complex and ambiguous identity as a Nigerian woman in the United States. One of the first situations revealing Ifemelu's inner conflict to the reader is when the woman who braids Ifemelu's hair asks her if she speaks Igbo to which Ifemelu responds almost offended that of course, she does: "'Of course I speak Igbo.' Ifemelu said, defensive, wondering if Aisha was again suggesting that America had changed her" (2013, p. 40).

It is rather curious how Ifemelu is insecure about being changed in the United States but at the same time, it is evident that she does not place her as an equal to these ladies who, similarly to her, have emigrated from different African countries to the United States for the possibility of a better choice. As Adichie puts it, even the 'shared space of their Africanness' does not comfort Ifemelu's inner conflict of her own identity (2013, p. 103).

Language continues to raise questions for Ifemelu, as we see her very first experiences in the United States when she goes to live with her aunt who had to flee

Nigeria after the political assassination of the father of her child, who was a military leader in Nigeria. Another moment is when Ifemelu, without giving it much thought, speaks Igbo to her young cousin Dike, and her aunt asks her to stop doing so. Aunt Uju particularly asks Ifemelu not to speak Igbo with the boy, as exposure to two languages might make him confused. It is in that moment that Ifemelu herself becomes confused. To her question of why the boy would be confused, as he is used to speaking two languages back at home, aunt Uju replies saying that it is not the same, as now they are in America and things are different in America (2013, p. 109). It is almost like aunt Uju is implying that America truly accepts English only, and the only way of fitting into the glorious new country is pretending that your mother tongue has never been your language. Very fast, it becomes obvious that Ifemelu is in a country that is ‘not her own’, as Adichie put it, and that she should do what she must do if she wants to succeed (2013, p. 119). Three years later, however, Ifemelu accepts a stranger’s comment about her ‘sounding totally American’ as a compliment and replies with a ‘thank you’ (2013, p. 175). This ‘thank you’ demonstrates how the immigrant experience and the forced desire to fit in continues shaping the identity constructed by the immigrant experience.

In *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, Vuong describes language as the object which is in a constant relationship with pleasure for a writer who writes in their mother tongue (2019, p. 31). If for Ifemelu, dropping her American accent can be somewhat freeing and bringing her closer to her being a Nigerian-American, for Little Dog, speaking Vietnamese is largely about war: “Ma, to speak in our mother tongue is to speak only partially in Vietnamese, but entirely in war” (2019, p. 32). It seems that for Little Dog, Vietnamese and English are truly distinct means of expressing certain experiences and one cannot replace the other. For example, he explains that in Vietnamese, the expression *I love you* is rarely spoken and when the Vietnamese-Americans have the desire and the intention to say *I love you*, they simply choose to do it in English (2019, p. 33).

When we meet Adichie’s Ifemelu for the first time, she has already been living in the United States for fifteen years. The idea of integrating into the American culture may open the discussion of biculturalism as a concept, which as defined by Chinenye Amonyeye, in the 2017 essay “Writing a New Reputation: Liminality and Bicultural Identity in Chimamanda Adichie’s *Americanah*” is the comfort and proficiency with a person’s heritage culture and the culture of the country where they have moved to live (p.

3). In Adichie's *Americanah*, we observe somewhat of *adaptive biculturalism*, which as Amoneyeze explains, is an extreme response to discrimination through emphasizing and taking pride in heritage culture and rejecting major attributes of the culture of the second country, in this case the United States (2017, p. 3). It is important to consider the moment when Ifemelu decides that she is going to drop her American accent and speak English as she always did in Nigeria. This very act of Ifemelu retaining her language and accent is a portrayal of her refusal of losing her Nigerian heritage, culture and her identity. However, a question may be asked here – at this point in her experience in the United States, does a moment occur in which Ifemelu stops being solely a Nigerian woman and becomes a Nigerian-American? Despite the first strangeness toward her heritage culture and identity of being a Nigerian, when Ifemelu moves back to Nigeria from the United States, a question rises of whether we can assume that her American identity is portrayed in all sorts of encounters with the locals in Nigeria or is Ifemelu's American identity seen only in the context of her interactions with Americans. Perhaps not the latter, as when Ifemelu does move back to Nigeria, her Nigerian friends tease her by calling her 'Americanah' and saying that she looks at things with her 'American eyes' (2013, p. 385). However, even Ifemelu's American experience and 'American eyes' are not enough for her Nigerian friends to consider her a 'real Americanah', like when her friend Ranyinudo teases her about it: "Americanah! But the problem is that you are not even a real Americanah. At least if you had an American accent we would tolerate your complaining" (2013, p. 385). This sentence once again portrays the liminality of Ifemelu's Nigerian-American identity, even in the eyes of the Nigerian community where she grew up.

Interestingly, the duration which one has spent as an immigrant seems to count on other people's perceptions of them. When the women in the air salon ask Ifemelu how many years she has already lived in the United States, her belief is that to be taken seriously among Nigerians in the United States, among Africans in the United States and among all the immigrants in America, she would need to have experience of many years of being an immigrant. As if the number of years would give her identity a new face, would imply all the experiences she has had and would gain her somewhat of a respect among all those communities in the United States:

“How long you in America?” [...] Years ago she had been asked a similar question, [...] and she had said two years, which was the truth, but the jeer on the Nigerian’s face had taught her that, to earn the prize of being taken seriously among Nigerians in America, among Africans America, indeed among immigrants in America, she needed more years. Six years, she began to say when it was just three and a half. Eight years, she said when it was five. Now that it was thirteen years, lying seemed unnecessary but she lied anyway. “Fifteen years”, she said. (Adichie, 2013, p. 16)

Apart from the respect, the number of years of having left the country of home seems to be the factor that contributes to being more tolerant and more understanding toward fellow immigrants. When in the same hair salon, Ifemelu opens up a granola bar and starts snacking, one of the women in the salon explains to the other woman, who is a rather new immigrant, that since Ifemelu has lived in the United States for fifteen years already, her act of eating a granola bar is understandable (2013, p. 39). Therefore, can it be assumed that not only location but also time plays an important role in shifting the idea of home and belonging? Despite all of it, Adichie’s Ifemelu is determined to remember her Nigerian identity and culture.

In Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, the white mainstream culture of the United States seems to be more prevalent, leading to Vietnamese-Americans portrayed in the novel forgetting their history and culture. In his essay “Speak of the Dead, Speak of Viet Nam”, Viet Thahn Nguyen calls the act of forgetting one’s own history and culture ‘dehumanization’ (2006, p. 10). Nguyen argues that calling oneself an Asian-American today implies the responsibility of remembering a shared past that the nation as a whole is determined to forget. The author believes that if Vietnamese refugees continue telling their stories about their own people, they will be able to recover the history and to recover from that very history of dehumanization (2006, p. 32). This is how Nguyen argues it would be possible to leave the victimization of minorities and their stories behind because the Vietnamese-Americans would not require the need for their story to be unique, through remembering and telling about it would prove once and for all that the story is already unique and dehumanization of refugee and immigrant bodies is not a necessary component (2006, p. 33).

In Chapter 1 of this project we have addressed Anzaldua's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* and her idea of 'ambiguous' identity being an inclusive identity enriched by all the pieces that had to contribute to it, including language – both Spanish and English. According to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's 1994 *Decolonising the Mind*, the choice of language and how language is being used is central to how people define themselves in the context of their natural and social environments (p. 4).⁴⁷ Ngũgĩ is convinced that through storytelling and literature, language and culture carry 'the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in our world':

How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their politics and at the social production of wealth, at their relationship to nature and to other beings. Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world. (p. 16)

Ngũgĩ explains that his choice of writing in Gĩkũyũ language⁴⁸ is his way of participating in the Kenyan identity, by remembering the anti-imperialist struggles that people in Kenya and other African countries had (p. 28). Ngũgĩ believes that he and other African writers ought to do for their languages what Milton and Shakespeare did for English and what Tolstoy and Pushkin did for their language; that is to create literature in their language, which is what opened the language for science, philosophy, technology and all the other forms of human creative endeavors (p. 29).⁴⁹

⁴⁷ As Ngũgĩ states that language has always been at the centre of the two contending social forces in the twentieth century Africa. The contention started in 1884, when Europe carved the entire continent of Africa with diverse population and languages into colonies. Ngũgĩ argues that this division under which Africa is still living was evidently an economic and political step, however it did carry a significant cultural component. According to the author, African countries, as colonies, and even now as independent countries, became defined by Europe and also to define themselves in terms of the languages of Europe: English-speaking, French-speaking and Portuguese-speaking African countries : "Unfortunately writers who should have been mapping paths out of that linguistic encirclement of their continent also came to be defined and to define themselves in terms of the languages of imperialist imposition" (1994, p. 5).

⁴⁸ Kikuyu or Gikuyu is a Bantu language spoken by the Gĩkũyũ of Kenya.

⁴⁹ Ngũgĩ referred to Chinua Achebe's 1964 speech titled "The African Writer and the English Language", in which Achebe asked if it is right that a man has to abandon his mother tongue for someone else's and named it a 'dreadful betrayal' and one which causes guilt. Then, Achebe states that for him, however, there has never been the option of choosing, so he intends to use the language he has been given to the fullest (p. 7).

In the 2020 International Literature Festival in Berlin, Ocean Vuong explains that *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is an act of impossible reception – as the letter, with which the book starts, addressed to the narrator's mother, will be never received, as the narrator's mother is illiterate. Ocean goes on to explain that in such an instance, when one is writing a letter that will never be received, the pressure entirely lies on language and the question of language every being enough arises (2020, 81' 50"). Vuong states that for him as a writer the book was an attempt to turn language into an architecture in which we as humans think and inquire, feel and are. In that very attempt, Vuong explains that the Vietnamese language has improved his English as a writer. The author explains that in Vietnamese the word 'ma' has multiple pronunciations and six different meanings depending on how it is pronounced. And for that very reason one has to pay close attention, even as a child, one learns how to listen by closely paying attention, as Vuong puts it: "listen with the breath". So, as Vuong explains his 'training' of listening to Vietnamese 'with the breath' has taught him how to read in English and see the breathing between the syllables of words (2020, 82' 38").

Very early on, Vuong explains why he decided to use English as the main language of creating the body of writing. Vuong, as well as Little Dog, the narrator in the book, have decided to use the language which is the most 'abundant' for them – English because their Vietnamese has been 'clipped by war', it is the language of a third-grade level, the level that both Vuong's and Little Dog's mother and grandmother have (2022).⁵⁰ Similarly to Vuong, Little Dog's mother and grandmother have stayed in the language of a third-grade level:

As a girl, you watched, from a banana grove, your schoolhouse collapse after an American napalm raid. At five, you never stepped into a classroom again. Our mother tongue, then, is no mother at all—but an orphan. Our Vietnamese a time

⁵⁰ Vuong also admits to his choice of not further improving his knowledge of Vietnamese already as an adult. The author explains that at some point, he did continue developing his knowledge of the language, however in an instance in which he used a word in Vietnamese and his mother did not understand him, the author decided to pause his education for the time being, as he did not want to get further and further from his family (The White Review, 2022).

capsule, a mark of where your education ended, ashed. Ma, to speak in our mother tongue is to speak only partially in Vietnamese, but entirely in war. (p. 19)

Vuong continues to explain that when on readings with the audience, he reads the Vietnamese words and expressions in the book in Vietnamese, and readers ask him to translate those words and expressions, he replies saying that he is not going to translate and that if he wanted to translate he would have written in English (2022). Similarly to Ngũgĩ's choice of writing in Gĩkũyũ language as his way of 'being' Kenyan, Vuong participates in the Vietnamese identity by not compromising to translate the Vietnamese words.

Adichie writes in English, however, she does use words and expressions in Igbo, without translating them in *Americanah*. In doing so, Adichie, demonstrates her awareness of English as the language which was introduced to Nigeria as a direct and undeniable result of colonization. In the 2018 essay "The Right Not to Translate: The Linguistic Stakes of Immigration in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*", Marlene Esplin refers to Adichie stating that it was important for her to have the Igbo bits in *Americanah* because she aimed to capture the reality of the characters who constantly speak and live in two languages: "I had read books written in English where bits of French or bits of Italian were thrown in, because the writers wanted to create the texture of their characters' lives. I didn't see why it should be different for an African language" (p. 77). Esplin interprets the use of Igbo in the novel as Adichie's pointed commentary in providing a window into the lives and voices of the people whose 'language movements' do not fit in the standard English (*ibidem*). Esplin points out that the Igbo words and expressions we read in *Americanah* are most often words for showing affection between the characters, sharing emotions with each other and expressing themselves in idiomatic expressions (*ibidem*). Esplin argues that through codeswitching between English and Igbo in *Americanah*, Adichie constructs a new argument that besides being a language of colonization and linguistic oppression for African writers, English can also be a language of rebellion, carrying 'a similar decolonizing potential' just like Igbo (*ibidem*).

Vuong's and Adichie's choice to approach the books from the space of their own experience of language, identity, trauma and memory, certainly leads the structure and form of the two books to be unconventional and a true representative of the authors'

voices. In the 2020 Berlin festival, Ocean Vuong speaks about himself as an ‘unreliable novelist’ precisely because of his decision of the book’s structure and form. Vuong explains that he aimed to write a novel that would enact his generation’s ‘honest disintegration’, taking into consideration the time period in which Vuong was growing up – the 9/11, the Opioid crisis and the 2008 recession. So, as Vuong states, his childhood was not what other generations had told his generation it would be. Naturally, the utopia, the dream of childhood for Vuong fell apart, thus making Vuong an ‘unreliable novelist’ (Vuong, 2019). Vuong explains that he was rather curious in the idea of the novel being a dream. The author assumed that in case of poor writing, the reader might fall out of the dream and this is what interested Vuong the most: “I was interested in what would happen if the dream fell apart?” (2020, 18' 30"). In order to meet his own curiosity and answer the question, Vuong relied on a non-linear structure for the novel. Vuong further explains that for him genres can be as fluid as genders and that the very experimentation of genres can happen right there on the page. Which is why he finds the sentence the most important element and follows the sentences ahead of everything else: “At the end of the day, I am an apprentice of the sentence” (2020, 20' 15").

Vuong states that the book starts with an essay that was published in *The New Yorker* in 2018. The essay is the letter to the narrator’s mother who cannot read. And the rest of the book builds up on this essay. Vuong says he had no intention of giving a linear narrative, thus, he constructs the book in a structure of fracture, ‘of a puzzle of memoirs’, ‘different threads of the present and the past of his family members’ experiences’ (2020, 23' 40").

The author refers to Western narratology and its very clear formula of constructing a body of text – introduction, development, climax, conclusion. According to Vuong, this structure has a ‘very phallic tendency’, as the body of text works towards the climax, as how Vuong puts it: “[...] exchange of building pleasure and emotionally manipulating pressure towards release”. It is this ‘climax-centered’ structure that Vuong had no intention of repeating, so naturally, the author aimed to find a new way of talking about life, as Vuong puts it, ‘life that is actually not free’ (2020, 25' 40").⁵¹

⁵¹ Vuong refers to the myth of America about being the land of the free. According to the author, the myth is already fractured at the ‘very genesis of the country’, referring to the genocide of the Native Americans and slavery (Vuong, 2019).

‘Kishōtenketsu’ is the form Vuong found which would let him be the ‘unreliable novelist’ he wanted. As Vuong explains, *kishōtenketsu* is an ancient Japanese structure Hayao Miyazaki⁵² has used in anime films. *Kishōtenketsu* has a four-part structure which does not deploy a conflict in order for the story to progress. The form consists of introduction of a character or a scene; development, deepening of things, as Vuong calls it; turn, which is not a plot twist, but the turn in which something entirely different is introduced; and accumulation, the step in which everything is brought together. Vuong admits that it was important to him to use this particular form as he wanted to write about American historical violence, and not to make another climax. As Vuong explains the *kishōtenketsu* form helps to build ‘tension through proximity’ by simply laying elements side by side. And for Vuong, that very process sounded very similar to poetry, the way the words are located on the page, side by side, according to Vuong builds tension: “It’s like chemistry. Hydrogen on its own, oxygen on its own, put them together – water. Proximity can create transformation”. Vuong further explains that this proximity in the text, allows the protagonist not to destroy anything or anyone in order to realize himself. The form allows not only Little Dog but also the other characters of the book to keep their autonomy, so they have the opportunity to pursue their lives and their desires on their own terms. Vuong states that he did not want to see his participation in literature as an act of battleground and the *kishōtenketsu* form allowed freedom away from all the destruction (2020, 28’ 05”).

As Vuong further explains, the novel as a form becomes an ark, as in Noah’s Ark. The author admits having been really informed by the allegory of the Ark which led him to see the process of the creation of the text as ‘loading the ark’ by everything he cares for and loves, including voices of other marginalized authors who came before him (2020, 28’ 40”). For Vuong, this was exactly what queer theory is about – not wanting to choose only one voice, wanting and striving for plurality. Both the form the author chose and the plurality of the language we encounter throughout *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* are ways of Vuong ‘loading the ark’: Vuong not only codeswitched between English and

⁵² Hayao Miyazaki is a Japanese animator, filmmaker, and manga artist. A co-founder of Studio Ghibli, he has attained international acclaim as a masterful storyteller and creator of Japanese animated feature films, and is widely regarded as one of the most accomplished filmmakers in the history of animation.

Vietnamese, but the author also uses different kinds of English. He admits having been inspired by Joan Didion's 'essayist expressions', as well as the vernacular of the New England dialect, in which the 'g's are dropped at the end of the gerund form. This was Vuong's way of encompassing everything and striving for plurality; showing that novel is the amplification of life (2020, 43' 16"). However, Vuong does not consider himself a revolutionary when it comes to using the form he used in the book. The author states that he has had role models, other marginalized voices such as Ann Carson, Teresa Ha Kyung, Kafka, Toni Morrison and others. In these marginalized voices he found the encouragement to write in a new form and language, finding his way as a queer Asian American writer who has decided not to compromise (2020, 18' 08").

When it comes to Adichie's *Americanah*, the author's choice of not staying within the conventional form of the novel is evident. According to Mary Jane Androne's "Adichie's *Americanah*. A Migrant Bildungsroman", *Americanah* is a novel, using the omniscient third person narrator, which Adichie switches between Ifemelu and Obinze (2017, p. 515). Throughout the novel, Ifemelu's blog posts are scattered in the main narrative. Androne explains that the blog posts in the novel, as well as Obinze's letters can be considered as an epistolary device, which would portray how *Americanah* is indebted to the epistolary tradition.⁵³ The nature of Ifemelu's blog posts and Obinze's letters allow Adichie to portray the characters' personal perspectives and experiences from a more intimate point of view, as the blog posts and the letters do not require a third-person narrator, they directly speak to the reader (2017, p. 517).

In her 2015 essay "Narrative Ethics and Alterity in Adichie's Novel *Americanah*", Nora Berning demonstrates that Adichie's *Americanah* has caused a new ethics of novels to emerge in which the authors are concerned with 'intercultural alterity' (p. 4). Berning sees 'alterity' as having 'a fundamental relation to the other which calls into question the very notion of identity itself: the identity imposed on us, the identity for which we search, the identity we claim for ourselves' (p. 5). For that precise reason, Berning argues that the narrative form of *Americanah* as an intercultural novel persuades the reader to come to accept the notions of self and 'other' and to accept the concept of 'alterity' (p. 5). It is

⁵³ An epistolary novel is a body of text in which the narrative is constructed through letters, diary entries, blog posts, newspaper articles and other documents.

in this context that Brening explains that the form of the novel is often constructed as ‘enabling cultural translation’, as a way of allowing the readers to engage in the process of ‘other-making’ (p. 5). In *Americanah*, it is Ifemelu’s blog posts and Obinze’s letters that create the possibility for the readers to participate in the process of ‘other-making’.

Berning goes on to call *Americanah* a twenty-first century social novel, as it contradicts what she calls ‘the unworldliness of the American novel’ (p. 6). In this context, *Americanah* ‘signals’ to the reader that Adichie does not put herself in the discourse of ‘self-referential’ and ‘inward-oriented’ fiction writing. Berning explains that “[b]y inserting discussions of other novels in her own novel and by staging a critique about reading, writing, and the act of interpretation both with regard to novels and other forms of writing (e.g. blogs), Adichie advances a critique of contemporary US-American fiction and books, how they're read, and what they do or fail to do in the world” (p. 6).

In Adichie’s *Americanah* home is a blurred space, a vague territory, which cannot be located or defined: “Home was now a blurred place between here and there” (2013, p. 117). At the start of her journey, Ifemelu seeks home in the United States, as it is the place where her dreams will have to come true. However, home means different things to the different characters we encounter in *Americanah*. For instance, when Ifemelu meets Kimberly, a white American woman, through the language Kimberly immediately marks Ifemelu as the ‘other’: “I’m sure back home you ate a lot of beautiful fruits and vegetables, but you’re going to see its different here” (2013, p. 147). Kimberly sounds rather confident in her evaluation of Nigeria as a ‘home’ for Ifemelu even if it has nothing to do with what it means to Ifemelu at that point in her experience in the United States. However, it is hardly possible to dislike or judge Kimberly’s evaluation as it is based on her sincere belief and assessment of what an African country may be as a home to someone like Ifemelu. This episode once again reminds the reader of Adichie’s “The Danger of a Single Story” and the example of her roommate in university having a single story of Africa when she becomes astonished by the fact that Adichie spoke English to her, despite being from an African country (Adichie, 2009).

As the narrative develops, we see that Ifemelu’s understanding of home vastly changes. When we observe her at the start of the novel, we realize that after having lived in the United States for fifteen years, Ifemelu’s understanding of home expanded in borders. When Ifemelu enters the hair salon, this is evident in the way she is greeted:

“Halima smiled at Ifemelu, a smile that, in its warm knowingness, said welcome to a fellow African; she would not smile at an American in the same way” (2013, p. 11). It can be argued here that for Ifemelu, as well as Halima and the other women in the hair salon, the idea of home expanded from the country of their origin to the whole continent of Africa. This can also be seen in one of the dialogues Ifemelu has in the hair salon, when she asks where Halima’s sister is and Halima answers that she is in Africa, to which Ifemelu, rather impatiently asks again where in Africa. When Halima answers, Ifemelu asks her, ‘Why do you say Africa instead of just saying the country you mean?’ (2013, p. 15). Halima’s reply here is rather logical, as she goes on to explain that if she says she is from Senegal in America people would not know where Senegal is, they may think it is in Latin America or elsewhere. Apart from making the Americans’ jobs easier of locating an African country, the borders among the African countries seem to disappear thus expanding the concept of home and belonging from one country to an entire continent.

The expanded idea of Nigeria and the African continent as home, do not mirror in Ifemelu’s experience of viewing the United States as home. Her ‘otherness’ and the constant distance she experiences in the United States, place her in a situation in which she desperately seeks home but is unable to see passed the ‘borderlessness’ she experiences. When we first encounter Ifemelu, she is in the state of ‘piercing homesickness’, as Adichie describes it:

[a]nd yet there was cement in her soul. It had been there for a while, an early morning disease of fatigue, a bleakness and borderlessness. It brought with it amorphous longings, shapeless desires, brief imaginary glints of other lives she could be living, that over the months melded into a piercing homesickness. (2013, p. 6)

In her essay “Afropolitan narratives and empathy: Migrant identities in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* and Sefi Atta’s *A Bit of Difference*”, Dobrota Pucherova claims that in that moment, when Ifemelu decides to move back to Nigeria, she makes a compromise, since she realizes that she is unable to reach the state of belonging she has been working so hard to achieve in the United States (2018, p. 412). However, a question rises here of what if Ifemelu never moved to the United States and did not spend those fifteen years as an immigrant, as a Nigerian-American woman, as an

African-American woman, as a black woman in America, would she recognize her longing for Nigeria as ‘home’, as the place where a sense of belonging could be reached, and as a place where borderlessness would vanish and no longer matter?

For Vuong, home is perceived as a memory, as a point of identification, that is why in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* Little Dog connects his mother's childhood home in Vietnam, which was destroyed during the war, with the state of his mother's language – also destroyed and impossible to gather in a pile, as ‘orphaned’, separated from the home as a result of war trauma. Vuong seems to be convinced that a country cannot be or become a home. He views a country as a ‘borderless sentence’, ‘What is a country but a borderless sentence, a life?’, ‘What is a country but a life sentence?’ (2019, p. 8).

If we refer back to Hirsch's ‘postmemory’, what is quite curious is that despite the whole concept having to do with memory, she describes it as a new creation, as something that does not solely remain in the past and is portrayed in the present as a memory (2012, p. 38). Hirsch mentions that postmemory carries a danger in itself as the intensity of those past and collective stories, images and behaviors may become so overbearing that they may displace one's own life stories and behaviors with those of the ‘generations before’. According to Hirsch, these stories and images from the past in the form of ‘postmemory’ are so binding because despite being finished in the past their effect transfer into the present (2012, p. 39).

In one of the interviews given by Marianne Hirsch to the *Columbia University Press*, the author explains how her curiosity about the concept of memory and ‘postmemory’ rose when she started noticing that certain stories told to her by her parents were more vivid in her memories than her actual memories from her childhood (*Columbia University Press*, para. 5). She goes on to describe that these stories heard from her parents did have the qualities and textures that her own memories had but they evidently were not her memories, as she did not experience them herself. One of the key questions Hirsch raises is how can the ‘generation after’, the second generation who did not directly experience those events in the past respond to the historical trauma that these events carry (2013, p. 2)?

As a means to address this question, Hirsch sets a clear distinction between the concepts of ‘post-memory’ and ‘rememory’. For Hirsch, these two are considered to be

opposites. Hirsch defines ‘rememory’ as “self-wounding and retraumatization”, as the individual experiencing the historical or generational trauma in the form of ‘rememory’ is fully immersed in the event itself and lacks the distance which would give them the space to show critical approach to the event. As for ‘post-memory’, Hirsch describes it as a form of identification in which one possesses the “bodily memory of trauma” but also has the critical approach to it (2012, p. 86).

In *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, the narrator continuously addresses the Vietnam War, which despite taking place before he was born, plays an essential role in his identity and the identity of his family. The semi-autobiographical novel portrays how the war trauma caused by Vietnam War has not gone anywhere and is still very much defining in the identities of the ‘generations-after’:

I read that parents suffering from PTSD are more likely to hit their children. Perhaps there is a monstrous origin to it, after all. Perhaps to lay hands on your child is to prepare him for war. To say possessing a heartbeat is never as simple as the heart’s task of saying yes yes yes to the body. (p. 15)

Vuong brings up memory and describes what ‘the history of memory’ is when he recalls an instance of a memory of his own. He describes how one morning looking out the window, early in the morning, he sees a deer standing in the dense fog, and then notices the second deer standing close to the first one, looking like ‘the unfinished shadow of the first’ (2019, p. 8). The presence of the second deer and the manner in which the second deer is related to the first deer is what the narrator calls the history of memory, which he goes on to further develop the way the history of memory experienced:

Migration can be triggered by the angle of sunlight, indicating a change in season, temperature, plant life, and food supply. Female monarchs lay eggs along the route. Every history has more than one thread, each thread a story of division. The journey takes four thousand eight hundred and thirty miles, more than the length of this country. The monarchs that fly south will not make it back north. Each departure, then, is final. Only their children return; only the future revisits the past. (2019, p. 8)

Vuong uses the migration of the monarch butterflies from Canada or the United States to Mexico in the winter as a metaphor for the migration of the Vietnamese refugees of war to the United States, showing how delicate and vulnerable can the migration of the war refugees be:

They perch among us, on windowsills and chain-link fences, clotheslines still blurred from the just-hung weight of clothes, the hood of a faded-blue Chevy, their wings folding slowly, as if being put away, before snapping once, into flight. It only takes a single night of frost to kill off a generation. To live, then, is a matter of time, of timing. (2019, p. 4)

In Vuong's monarch butterflies there is a sense of purpose, a sense of legacy in them, one that Little Dog and his mother cannot survive without. The metaphor of the monarch butterflies implies immense hopefulness on Little Dog's part in 'growing wings and heading home' (p. 157).

According to Vuong, if only the future revisits the past, then can it be suggested that when going back from the past to the future, memory of the past constructs an entirely new experience in the approach to the future; as this memory itself is not the precise event that occurred in the past? If referred back to Marianne Hirsch's concept of 'post-memory', in the case of Vuong's narrator, the mere act of remembering builds the distance Hirsch identifies as the key factor which can distinguish between 'rememory' and 'post-memory'. Instead of being fully immersed in the event and having no space to approach it critically, Little Dog seems to have the awareness of his memory of the past being distinct from the actual past itself.

The choice of writing is an important step in the act of remembering for Vuong's narrator. In *Social Forces*, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Chana Teeger explain that forgetting is a way of remembering, just like not seeing is a way of seeing (2010, p. 1107). So, when Little Dog chooses to write a letter to his mother and to remember the past as he is writing, he simultaneously chooses to forget and not see whatever he leaves out in his writing. According to Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger, similarly to a narrative, memory is built around silences and blind spots (2010, p. 1107). In western texts and narratives, the Vietnam War is remembered and documented solely through the 'white gaze' as a tragedy that hit the United States and in many aspects the ways the Vietnamese

experienced and suffered through the war is forgotten and not seen. As Audun Westermann Ryeng states in “Memory as a Second Chance: An Intersectional Reading of *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*”, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* is precisely the narrative which reacts and responds to those blind spots and silences concerning the Vietnam war (2022, p. 27).

Interestingly, from Little Dog’s narrative it can be observed that memory is not something fixed, something that can never be touched and changed. Every time Little Dog’s grandmother, Lan, tells a story or recalls a past event some changes are inevitable. Can it be implied that the memories constructing the past are not linear? And would that suggest that the past itself is also not fixed? Since every visit to the past, every recollection of a memory may reconstruct the past itself and the way the past events are seen in the present. This reconstruction of the past occurs as the context regarding the emotional and logical meanings corresponds to the present moment. One final question rises in the way Little Dog visits and revisits past family events through his writing – can memory, or in Hirsch’s terms ‘post-memory’, become a tool which is capable of more than critical distance, can it become a tool of healing from historical and generational trauma?

In Adichie’s *Americanah*, memory certainly plays a crucial role in approaching the historical past events that the author touches upon. According to Adichie, the act of writing is a way of constructing memories, history, reconciliation and identity (p. 6). In *Americanah*, Adichie approaches the blog written by the protagonist, Ifemelu, as a way of constructing and preserving collective memory and putting it up for discussion. This is rather curious, as a reader we first follow the storyline of Ifemelu experiencing life events as an immigrant in the United States, then we revisit the same events in the form of writing in Ifemelu’s blog when she herself recalls them as memories but is not describing them as direct experiences but rather approaches them with Hirsch’s ‘critical distance’. In the latter, what we, as a reader, observe is ‘postmemory’ and possibly the act of dealing with trauma and the very occurrence of healing.

Apart from remembering Ifemelu’s immigrant experiences as a newcomer in the United States, Adichie approaches history and memory in the context of defining and redefining immigrant identity and the concept of ‘otherness’. Moreover, the concept of memory takes a quite curious turn when considered in the context of Ifemelu’s interactions with Nigeria as her homeland while being an immigrant in the United States.

In his essay “Adichie’s *Americanah*: Remembering Home, Negotiating Identity”, Charles Cliff Feghabo brings up the idea of the place of memory and Ifemelu’s mental interaction with her homeland and how this interaction in the form of remembering leads her to the idea of returning home (2019, p. 3). Feghabo introduces two types of Nigerian immigrants we find in *Americanah* – ‘cultural compromisers’ and ‘culture loyalists’. He explains that the cultural compromisers are the characters whose behaviors and attitudes in the country where they have immigrated are not influenced by the memory of their homeland, that is why we see them making compromises and denouncing their cultural and national identities to a supposedly superior western culture. One of Adichie’s characters in *Americanah*, Emenike, who is a Nigerian immigrant in the United Kingdom, demonstrates what loss of memory of one’s homeland may look like. He is married to a British lawyer, has a British passport, and lives a rather comfortable life in the UK. His disconnection from Nigeria and loss of memory of homeland are well portrayed in the extract where Emenike, speaking to Obinze, remarks how his British wife would not survive a trip to Nigeria, as Nigeria would be something like a jungle to her and that would make Emenike ‘the interpreter of this jungle’ (Adichie, p. 305).

In Feghabo’s terms, Ifemelu would be a culture loyalist, as she seems to not only remember but also not compromise her cultural identity derived by her memory of Nigeria, as her homeland (2022, p 5). However, as the narrative progresses, Ifemelu does experience what could be called a temporary memory loss toward her national and cultural identity. Later, she is certainly able to re-establish her connection with her memory of home, which is followed by her dropping her American accent and going back to her natural, ‘kinky hair’.

Now, if we consider Sarah Ahmed’s theory about the occurrence of too many homes when one leaves their Home, navigating through memory of home would become a rather complex process. According to Ahmed’s *Strange Encounters*, when one has too many homes as a result of leaving Home, memories start attaching themselves to all these homes and it becomes almost impossible to remember the first, original Home as a point of reference, as it becomes something that is never going to be imitated, a feeling that turns into a fetish, a desire to recreate, a memory to revisit over and over again:

It is the ‘real’ Home, the space from which one imagines oneself to have originated, and in which one projects the self as both homely and original, that is

the most unfamiliar: it is here that one is a guest, relying on the hospitality of others. It is this home which, in the end, becomes Home through the very failure of memory: 'I couldn't remember anything'. (2000, p. 78)

In the context of migration, Ahmed believes that the act of remembering is experienced as a feeling of discomfort, the inability to be fully present in the current space.

If we take these examples of 'un-remembering' home for characters like Emenike, we can conclude that for him it was possible to find a new home in the UK because of the very act of memory loss of Nigeria as home. Ahmed explains that the failure of memory leads to obtaining a new Home and only in that case an individual has the chance to find a replacement for the original Home (2000, p. 77). According to Ahmed's statement about one having too many homes and the improbability of remembering one's first home, Emenike, then, would not be able to take pride in his British passport, wife, and home if he did not 'un-remember' Nigeria as Home. It can be assumed then that Ifemelu, respectively, did not obtain a Home in the United States after living there as a Nigerian-American woman for fifteen years because she did not experience a memory loss of Nigeria as her Home. In many ways she does find comfort and 'home-like' experiences in the United States but the discomfort and the inability to be fully present do not leave her, thus not granting a new Home.

In Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Tiger Woods is mentioned a number of times by the narrator as a symbol of representation of Asian-American identity. Tiger Woods' name is recurrent throughout the narrative as his identity as a Vietnamese-American is not perceived accurately by the American society. As we find out, Tiger's father, whose name was Earl, met Tiger's mother, Kultida, when he was serving in the Vietnam war. Kultida comes from Thai and Chinese background. Tiger's very name comes from the Vietnam war as he was named after a soldier who died in the war. So, as Little Dog explains, when Tiger Woods was being referred to as African-American or black, the narrator's mother would get upset as she would feel that Tiger's true Asian-American identity was somehow disregarded and forgotten (2019, p. 63).

It is rather curious how Tiger Woods' identity was perceived by Little Dog's mother as an Asian-American, and the popular American culture and the media as an African-American. However, as we learn later in the novel, when asked about his national identity, Tiger Woods would call himself 'Cablinasian':

When asked how he identifies his roots, Tiger Woods called himself “Cablinasian,” a portmanteau he invented to contain his ethnic makeup of Chinese, Thai, Black, Dutch, and Native American. To be or not to be. That is the question. A question, yes, but not a choice. (2019, p. 63)

The story of Tiger Woods and his heritage is one of survival. In the book, Vuong raises the question of what does it mean to be a ‘survivor’: “Maybe a survivor is the last one to come home, the final monarch that lands on a branch already weighted with ghosts” (p. 13). If the final monarch to come home is the survivor, then who is the monster? When his mother asks him if she is a monster, Little Dog replies saying that she is not, but then he admits he has lied:

What I really wanted to say was that a monster is not such a terrible thing to be. From the Latin root *monstrum*, a divine messenger of catastrophe, then adapted by the Old French to mean an animal of myriad origins: centaur, griffin, satyr. To be a monster is to be a hybrid signal, a lighthouse: both shelter and warning at once. (2019, p. 13)

In the context of this definition of a ‘monster’, Little Dog sees himself fit in the word as well. He remembers as a kid at school being called ‘freak, fairy, fag’: “I would learn, much later, that those words were also iterations of *monster*” (2019, p. 14). The word ‘monster’ comes up again throughout the novel when the narrator draws an incredibly vivid picture of a scene at the Vietnam War when the Vietnamese men capture a macaque monkey and split its brain open to eat the animal’s brain to enhance their strength and resilience, as well as their sexual power and fertility. The scene indeed is horrific but the fact that it is followed by another episode from the war in which an American soldier is holding the gun towards a Vietnamese mother and a daughter portrays the cycle of life and death (2019, p. 35).

Alongside exploring what history means to individuals, the question of what it means to be at home and to call a particular place a home led us to the concepts of ‘re-memory’ and ‘postmemory’ and the analysis of how these two are significant in Adichie’s

and Vuong's portrayals of what a 'home' can be for an immigrant individual: "a question, yes, but not always a choice".

Conclusion

6.
*The scream
of an illegitimate voice*

*It has ceased to hear itself, therefore
it asks itself*

How do I exist?

*This was the silence I wanted to break in you
I had questions but you would not answer*

*I had answers but you could not use them
This is useless to you and perhaps to others*

7.
*It was an old theme even for me:
Language cannot do everything—*

*chalk it on the walls where the dead poets
lie in their mausoleums*

*If at the will of the poet the poem
could turn into a thing*

*a granite flank laid bare, a lifted head
alight with dew*

*It if could simply look you in the face
with naked eyeballs, not letting you turn*

*till you, and I who long to make this thing,
were finally clarified together in its stare*

Adrienne Rich, “Cartographies of Silence”, 2009⁵⁴

Sharing the same language is not a guarantee for a successful communication between individuals. In her poem “Cartographies of Silence”, Adrienne Rich claims that silence is only a means to avoid issues when an individual does not find the words to speak about those issues. On the other hand, the very act of staying in silence as a result of missing words, missing language, has the potential to leading an individual to a new

⁵⁴ These are two excerpts from Adrienne Rich’s poem “Cartographies of Silence”. Please see the full poem in the following website : <https://poetrying.wordpress.com/2008/12/15/cartographies-of-silence-adrienne-rich/>

perspective. In a way, Rich believes that in cases when language fails, silence will never do so.

Throughout *The Americanah Project*, we have addressed silence in the context of ‘gorgeous’ migrant bodies being brought into a state of acceptance, a state of continuous struggle to prove their worth and still remaining as ‘bodies out of place’. However, what has interested us the most throughout this work has been that very moment when the ‘gorgeous’ migrant body decides to break the silence and find writing as the way to break the pattern of remaining unspoken. By exploring that very same writing we have come to address the idea of ‘bodies out of place’ working their way to be heard, or rather to be read.

This project has examined American identity and the idea of constructing a ‘home’ from a marginalized point of view. By focusing on ‘marginalized’ identities or the immigrant voices writing from the margins we have addressed the possibility of authors such as Adichie and Vuong claiming that there is no center in the contemporary American identity, that possibly, the first space that has come through the American tradition of Manifest Destiny and the idea of the New Eden has become more fluid and hybrid. Similarly to how Ocean Vuong believes in the fluidity of genres and the writer solely following the sentence, being an ‘apprentice’ to the sentence as the true way of maintaining a sense of self, we have inquired into the possibility that breaking away from historical and generational trauma can lead to viewing American identity in contemporary literature as something that is fluid, something that lacks the categorization of one center and different margins, something that is more hybrid than one can imagine.

Taking into consideration Ana Calvo Manzananas’ reflection on the ‘whereness of America’, this project tried to show that the answer to the question of ‘where America lies’ does not exclude the possibility of recognizing that America doesn’t always lie in the center and doesn’t always hear the voices from the margins. Manzananas believes that borders are not definite lines, but rather broken ones that allow hybridity, or as Vuong says ‘fluidity’, and they are meant not only to exist but also to start a process of transformation. The moment the individual engages with those borders with broken lines, the image of what is inside those borders shifts, so does the individual. Considering history of the American nation and the country, those borders have been crossed countless

times by millions of individuals, which brings us to the idea that, because of all that engagement, the American identity has been transforming ever since.

However, even the transformation cannot be viewed as a single continuous process. Bharati Mukherjee's concept of 'Literature of New Arrival', which we have also addressed in this project, comes to highlight the fact that 'immigrant literature' in the United States is a rather broad term and has also been transforming with each individual engagement with it. If we consider 'immigrant writing' as a body of literature having only one center, we would be dangerously close to having a 'single side of the story' as Adichie puts it. The very concept of 'Literature of New Arrival' portrays that migrant bodies' voices do not come from the same space, they are as diverse and as varied as the individual experiences that these bodies carry with themselves to the American land. It is important to not only address the individual experiences of the migrant bodies but also the collective memory of their homelands they bring with themselves through the 'broken and blurred lines' of the American borders. As we have explored through research, the migrant bodies who after arriving in America are not interested in forgetting their homelands and languages have been central to our project.

The two writers whose work we have been thoroughly addressing, Ocean Vuong and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, are certainly not interested in full assimilation and surrender in the United States. On the contrary, Vuong and Adichie are interested in, as Mukherjee puts it, mental reservation of the individual and collective experiences and memories they have carried with themselves as well as gained in the United States as immigrant writers.

The way Vuong and Adichie deal with the conventional literary novel form and their refusal to use the language of the mainstream are forms of not surrendering their voices in the collective body of American immigrant writing. Both authors write from the margins, particularly margins that are borderless twice, as Adichie's voice is both an immigrant and a black woman; and Vuong's both an immigrant and a queer person. It is from these 'double borderlessness' that Vuong and Adichie construct bodies of immigrant texts. The work that Vuong and Adichie have undertaken is not a simple one, as in addition to constructing texts representing the 'double borderless' experiences of immigrant bodies, they also have to fulfill what Vuong calls 'nature's requirements from its refugees'. What Vuong refers to here is the question of which story will an immigrant

writer bring along with oneself and which story will one leave behind. Vuong claims that this choice is inevitable as a body is a limited library, a limited space and one's memory can only hold so much (*Internationals Literaturfestival Berlin*, 2020, 13' 50").

In *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Vuong portrays his choice of fulfilling the 'nature's requirement' by not claiming a single genre or a single form of language to create the full body of text. As we have demonstrated throughout this project, Vuong has chosen to use the ancient Japanese *kishōtenketsu* technique in order to succeed in refusing to deploy a conflict for the means to show progress. As a poet, Vuong believes that the way words sit next to each other in poetry creates intimacy, proximity and as a result tension. By doing this very thing in the novel, Vuong has portrayed the possibility of starting a transformation without requiring destruction of any kind.

In *Americanah*, Adichie's determination to speak her voice through writing within writing is another manifestation of 'fulfilling the nature's requirement' of choosing which story to bring and which story to leave behind as a migrant body. The blog entries and the letters which Adichie incorporates into the body of the text allow her to speak directly from the center of her protagonist's experience as an immigrant and as a black person in the United States.

As for language, codeswitching in Vuong's case between English and Vietnamese, and in Adichie's case between English and Igbo, once again proves as Mukherjee calls it the 'involuntary synthesis of memory and experience' of migrant bodies, especially those who according to Mukherjee were meant to be writers. Vuong's and Adichie's refusal to use the conventional literary novel form and language to speak their voices is the very portrayal of the transformed American identity through the engagement of the immigrant bodies with the borders of the United States.

However, as we have come to note throughout this project, the body of immigrant writing is not only constructed around the immigrant writer's refusal to surrender and total assimilation but also the absence of the immigrant writer's feeling of 'being at home' in America, alongside with the impossibility of the return to their original homeland. In this project, we have deeply dived into Sara Ahmed's concept of 'home', which can primarily be interpreted within two meanings – home as a 'place of origin', and home as a 'world of everyday experiences' (Ahmed, 2000, p. 90). The latter meaning of 'home' has given us the space to further explore how immigrant writing largely centers the

transformation of one's self and the process of gaining a new 'home' within that very transformation. We have also been largely informed by Toni Morrison's concept of acquiring a 'home' through the process of writing, as it is through this process that Morrison believes the freedom to gain a 'home' will be granted. For Morrison, however, the process of writing cannot solely be responsible for gaining a 'home' if the reader is not ready to step outside the conventionally set borders of identity. In other words, Morrison states that if the reader is not willing to make that step of transformation themselves, the body of writing will not fully achieve its goal of regaining the feeling of 'being at home'.

Throughout this project, we have also discussed how the landscape of the contemporary American immigrant writing has been constructed and the ideas of how borderland identity, concepts of belonging and not-belonging have led us to looking at 'bodies out of place' in the context of American identity. We have also addressed the historical contexts of Nigeria and Vietnam and the imperial relationships both countries have had with the West. Addressing historical and generational trauma has been a central discussion in this work to attempt to understand what it means to be 'home' by considering an individual's own experiences along with the collective memories one carries within their identity. And finally, we have addressed gender, sexuality, race, and class in the context of 'bodies out of place' and the construction of a 'home'. Through discussing the themes of gender and sexuality, race and color, class, and social mobility we have referred to what maintaining a sense of self may look and feel like for bodies and voices speaking from the margins and how it may contribute to constructing a new 'home' for these migrant bodies.

As this project was centered around the idea of conducting a parallel close reading of Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and Adichie's *Americanah*, we have had to make the conscious choice of not including several themes in the body of this work. Even though we have addressed the historical context of both Nigeria and Vietnam in terms of their imperialist pasts with the United States and the United Kingdom, we have decided not to extensively explore the context of the Nigerian Civil War, also known as

the Nigerian-Biafra war.⁵⁵ Even though the Vietnam War was addressed in the context of it being recorded through the ‘white gaze’ only, as well as Vuong’s own family history being partly incorporated into *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, we have chosen not to deeply explore the text through War studies, including the contexts of politics, international relations and international diplomacy. We have decided to do so deriving from the fact that this dissertation aimed to discuss and focus on immigrant identities and the construction of a new ‘home’.

Additionally, throughout this project, we have viewed Adichie’s *Americanah* and Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* in the context of American literature and immigrant writing. We have not referred to Adichie’s *Americanah* as a Nigerian or an African text, and Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* as a Vietnamese or South-East Asian text. In case of an opportunity in the future, we would like to further explore both texts as not only pieces of immigrant literature in the contemporary American literature but also as pieces of Diaspora literature in the context of African and South-East Asian writing. Given such an opportunity, we would particularly explore features of Diaspora literature such as alienation, displacement, and nostalgia. Especially in the context of Adichie’s *Americanah*, the book does include the protagonist’s return to Nigeria after thirteen years of her immigrant experience in the United States. This would give us the space to further look into the above-mentioned features of diaspora literature and to further discuss them having Ifemelu’s experience in the center of the discussion. We started this section by referring to Adrienne Rich’s idea of language not being enough to achieve successful communication and that silence is often needed. At times, silence has certainly found its place in Adichie’s and Vuong’s works in portraying the idea that – ‘on America we are briefly Gorgeous’.

⁵⁵ The Nigerian Civil War, also known as the Nigerian-Biafran War ended in 1970 and caused million deaths in Nigeria. In 1967, following two coups which led to about a million Igbos returning to the south-east of Nigeria, the Republic of Biafra seceded with 33-year-old military officer Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu at the helm. The Nigerian government declared war and after 30 months of fighting, Biafra surrendered. On 15 January 1970, the conflict officially ended (“Remembering Nigeria’s Biafra War That Many Prefer to Forget”, BBC News, 2020, retrieved from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-51094093>).

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