4. Misogynoir and the Construction of Difference

This chapter aims to examine the complexity of multilayered oppression inflicted on the Black female body and the unique ways Black women subvert these racial-gendered oppressive forces. I examine how Black women experience oppression through beauty and labor standards that dehumanize them, marginalize their body morphology, hair texture, and dispossess them of their labor currency. Unlike white women, Black women are forced to navigate gender expectations in ways that white women never have to. That Black people were either forcibly removed from their homelands to the Americas for enslavement or colonized in their homelands is an extensively researched discourse, also significantly represented historically by Black women's writings. Caught between Euro-American patriarchy and Black patriarchy, many Black female fiction writers (African, Afro-American and Afro-European) have had to deploy a transatlantic character to their storytelling projects. By exploring and adopting a range of positions reflecting their personal and collective consciousness of their struggle and experiences, they have not only adopted different strategies and most often parallel priorities from their white female counterparts, but have also come to share "similar aesthetic attitudes in spite of factors that separate them" (Ogunyemi 1985, 64). Contemporary Black women's writing continues in its creative labor of recognizing and advancing Black women's consciousness. These narratives continue to actively center Black women's humanity and discard both Western and pan-African single-axis cliches of liberational politics. Adichie's *Americanah*, Atta's *A Bit of Difference*, Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* are remarkable contributions to this ever expanding literary corpus.

4.1 White Gaze and the Undesirability of Black Hair

In *Americanah, A Bit of Difference, On Black Sisters' Street* and *We Need New Names,* the Black female characters' racialized relationships with their body takes central stage. For Black women and girls, this racialized relationship is not a recent development. Theories of racial superiority interwoven with physical features from European and white American race scientists have abounded since the 16th century. In the recently published book titled, *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*, Sabrina Strings builds on the indispensable contributions of Anglo-Saxon artists and scientists to the legacy of social distinction as we have it today, and the active role Black female bodies played in the development of these propagations. Undertaking a historiography of this racialized embodied abstraction show that these developments date back to the works produced by artists and philosophers during the Renaissance, in which Black women were depicted with the intention to further white supremacist rhetorics (2019, 8–49). An evolution in the relationship between skin color and beauty is set in this period, with whiteness becoming integral to the elevation and glorification of women's physical attraction and validation. While the Renaissance period set the stage, the rise of the transatlantic slave trade and colonial activities would contribute immensely to the promulgation of the "perverse primitivity" (52) and undesirability of Black femininity in modern discourse.

In *Americanah*, Black female characters' intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships with their bodies is focalized. The novel, partly set in Nigeria, the US, and the UK, begins with Ifemelu's visit to the African hair salon in the US. The hair salon, like all the other hair salons she knows is located in the racially Othered, low-income part of the city, exemplified by walls painted with "graffiti, dank buildings, and no white people" (Adichie 10). The vivid description of the African hair salons draws attention to the antithetical and Othered position of Black aesthetics within the broad cultural climate. In *A Bit of Difference*, the very first chapter titled "Reorientation" starts by foregrounding the magnified photograph of an African woman "with desert terrain behind her" with the caption "I am Powerful" (Atta 1). On Deola's arrival at the Atlanta airport from the UK, where she resides, she is confronted with this striking photograph. Following this prelude, a Black woman with an afro and silver hoops in her ears obscuring the photograph from Deola's view is pulled into the narrative frame. Atta strategically positions these interactive frames to foreshadow interactions and conversations around race, gender and class that is to run through most of

the novel. While waiting to be processed out of the airport, Deola reflects on the symbolic meanings of the magnified photograph. Even though she does not come to any conclusion on what the photograph could be suggesting, she nevertheless expresses hope that the model receives adequate compensation for her photograph. This expression of hope for labor reimbursement flags an implicit issue of Black women's images being exploited for public display of jarring counter-discourses. While the reader is still grappling with Deola's musing, another subtle but suggestive information is introduced into the chronology of the storyline. We learn that the photograph is used for the advertisement of a charity organization that Deola did not quite catch. She considers going back to have another glance but finally decides not to due to flight fatigue.

Contemplating to return to ascertain the name of the charity organization signals to the reader that this image piques Deola's curiosity so greatly, thereby offering a timely reflection on the global representations of Black women. This interactive moment of a Black woman character in afro and hoops, obscuring an amplified image of a Black woman, offers a space for a timely introduction to misogynoir and racial capitalism. By bringing a Black female character into the narrative frame and pulling the magnified photo into the background, Atta centers Black women in their everyday life as beacons of empowerment and self-acceptance within mainstream culture in opposition to the symbolic meaning of the photograph as "force of stereotypes" to serve and maintain the "hegemony of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (Bailey 2021, 1–2). For an African reader who is quite conversant with the pervasive pathologizing narrative of Africa, Africans and most especially African women on the global stage, this additional information with charity in the mix portends even more troubling narrative engagement with socio-political, racialized, and gendered issues. The first chapter, promptly crisscrossed with an undercurrent of postcolonial, race and gender issues, could be interpreted as a foreshadow of deeper, alarming confessions and connections to come. In a similar vein with *Americanah*, the plot is set in the transnational environ of the US, the UK and Nigeria. In *On Black Sisters' Street* and *We Need New Names*, the historic significance of afro hair and the pervasive racism Black women face because of their natural hair is also weaved into the narrative texts. From the first chapter of *On Black Sisters' Street*, the plot quickly moves to one of the four African women in the rush of preparing for work who is at the same time worried about her hair appearance. Joyce's hair is described as a "wilderness that would not be subdued" (Unigwe 5). The reader finds out that Sisi, the protagonist, is the only one who can braid and in the unmistakable absence of Sisi, Joyce settles

for holding the hair in a bun, hoping that their Madam would not pass any offensive comment on the state of her hair. In *We Need New Names*, reference is made to African women engaging in the activity of gossiping while doing "one another's hair" (26).

Returning to Adichie's *Americanah*, the reader first meets Ifemelu taking a train ride from one city to another to braid her hair. The salon in Trenton becomes a narrative place where a long flashback to Ifemelu's childhood life in Nigeria unfolds, centering societal attitude towards Black women's hair as a significant convention through which engagement with Black women's lived experiences in racially and patriarchally stratified spaces can be quantified. In addition, the salon set in a "shabby block", and the African women braiders described as set in their own way of doing things and immune to the "cosmetic niceties of American customer service" presents a politically charged narrative space with double or more signification (Adichie 15). To deconstruct the complexities residing in this fictional space, one must explore the cast of characters, economic relations, non-normative feminine practices, and social interactions being recycled. The cast of characters who walk in to get their hair braided come from a wide range of class, ethnic, and racial backgrounds. The African women braiders hold the power to decide the wage for their labor and enter into contingent negotiations with their clients. To enter is to accept to, if not conform, at least be open to explore the racialized feminine self-expression happening in this space. One of the ways the braiders transcend the limitations imposed on them by dominant culture is to establish some form of commonality with their clients on gender, racial, national, or ethnic level via chitchats. While the salon is located in a castaway part of the city, exploring the varied interactions inside the salon in their defiance of class, racial, national, and ethnic boundaries present a unique insight—that this salon and the braiders' social niceties remain untainted by dominant white America because of their segregation. Indeed, their seclusion to a poor urban area while imbued with anti-Black racist connotations, also returns them to the center and enables them to negotiate their agency without the added pressure of submitting to the palate of white supremacist consumption.

According to Tabora Johnson and Teiahsha Bankhead, the presentation of Black women's and girls' hair is inextricably linked to their identity (2013, 86). Throughout the ages, long before European interruption, hair for African people served as a significant outlet of self-expression used to denote "cultural identity, spirituality, character makeup, and notions of beauty" (87). Bewildered by the versatility and alteration embodied by Africans through their hair,

Johnson and Bankhead claim that one of the symbolic acts carried out by the European slave traders in their effort to dehumanize enslaved Africans would be to shave their heads (88). Against this background, to then declare Black women's hyper-awareness of their hair presentation a universal sexist convention experienced by women, would be to ignore the deep historical currents of Black hair symbolism alongside its violent racialized stigmatization. At the salon, one of the hair braiders shows her displeasure with Ifemelu's natural afro-hair, commenting on the maintenance difficulty. "Why you don't have relaxer?", she asks Ifemelu (Adichie 15). From the conversation, the reader comprehends that Ifemelu's refusal to use relaxer to straighten her hair is considered ludicrous by the braider. Even when Ifemelu attempts to make her reconsider her internalized anti-Black reservation by showing her the appropriate comb and how to comb natural hair gently, the braider is unwilling to reconsider her idealized notion of good, unproblematic, and appropriate hair. Ifemelu's proselytizing fervor for natural African textured hair is however not instinctual. Her relationship with her hair, as with other Black female characters, is from the onset defined through the gaze of whiteness. Altering our natural afro texture to relaxed, straight texture in order to successfully and uncontroversially navigate professional spaces is an unspoken rule familiar to Black women across the diaspora and on the African continent. Ifemelu's employment exigency in the US also requires this texture complicity. Her friend temperately instructs her to lose her braids and straighten her hair. "Nobody says this kind of stuff but it matters. We want you to get that job" (250).

This friendly advice reminds Ifemelu of her first introduction to an upsetting anti-Black American system. Her aunt Uju's casual and complacent decision to loosen her braids and relax her hair for her upcoming medical interviews bewilders her. "So there are no doctors with braided hair in America" (146), she asks to which Aunt Uju responds, "I have told you what they told me. You are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do if you want to succeed" (146). Akin to Ifemelu's counsel by her Black friend, Aunt Uju's benevolent direction is also bequeathed to her by her Black friend. Fully immersed in the system, Ifemelu knows not to disregard the instruction, because the profession suitable for unaltered afro "full and cool" (252) hair would be in the entertainment as a "backup singer in a jazz band" (252). The "full and cool" description used for afro hair denotes the exoticized category Black hair is assigned. A further distinction in articulation with skin color is made between professional curly and unprofessional curly, with afro "kinky" texture regarded

as the unprofessional kind. "[…] but if it's going to be curly then it has to be the white kind of curly, loose curls or, at worst, spiral curls but never kinky" (252). Even when her scalp is dangerously burned by the chemicals, it is considered "just a little burn" (251) by the hairdresser. A price to pay for submitting to the white supremacist beauty standard, looking "pretty" and attaining the desirable "white-girl swing" (251).

Deola, in *A Bit of Difference* and Darling in *We Need New Names* have similar experiences in the UK and the US. Deola's afro is racially Othered by her white classmates and exoticized by a boy in her class who requests to rub it for good luck. For Darling, who moved to Washington to live with her aunt, an accomplishment of a childhood dream to escape the legacies of colonial trauma, she soon realizes that her new life is an extension of her old life, only now with new additional intersectional struggles. Coming from a distressed post-colonial nation and witnessing its ruins, chaos, and degradation at the hands of power-hungry neo-colonial political leaders, Darling's struggle to break out of this doomed reality is manifested in her obsessive desire for escape. However, in America, she discovers another version of race relations and the humiliation of racism, which is an extension of her everyday experience in postcolonial Zimbabwe. In Washington, her difference is exacerbated by her isolation. She would wish for death to save her from the mockery of other kids about her name, accent, and hair. In the end, the trauma of the anti-Black dehumanizing conventions impacts her identity so greatly that she loses her connection with herself; "[…] in the end I just felt wrong in my skin, in my body, in my clothes, in my language, in my head, everything" (Bulawayo 165). For job interviews, Deola in *A Bit of Difference* chemically straightens her hair to increase the chances of positive outcomes. After she gets the job and switches back to her afrocentric hairstyles, a partner in her firm instantly comments that her braids are "unprofessional" (Atta 63).

The impact colonial legacy has on beauty aesthetics in which white Eurocentric features were located at the top of the hierarchy shapes not only the quality of Black women's lives but also their intrapersonal relationship and agential capacity. According to Shirley Tate, it comes as no surprise these legacies "continue to impact on judgements of beauty, femininity and desirability" (2007, 302). Meanwhile, anti-racist and anti-colonial counter discourse celebrating and centering the aesthetics of Black bodies have also emerged across the Black diaspora. The Black body, as a site of "political contestation" (Dash 2006, 27) has had its fair share of resistance and counter-resistance. In *Americanah*, Ifemelu's subjectivity undergoes gradual deconstructive phases.

After experiencing hair loss as a result of the harsh straightening chemical, she, with the support of her friend decides to cut her hair. Her activist friend fully given to her proselytizing demeanor, likens the relaxing procedure of afro hair to choosing to live in cage, and forcing one's hair to "do what it wasn't meant to do" (Adichie 258). It takes quite some time for Ifemelu to fully accept and embrace her natural 'kinky' hair. She avoids going to work, calling in sick, and "willing an unknown miracle to happen" (258) that can "loosen her hair's springy coils, stretch out the kinkiness a little […]" (258). In *A Bit of Difference,* Subu's inability to be seen without a hair weave despite her "born-again" status is noteworthy (Atta 29). While being born-again comes with a strict adherence to Christian norms that disavow of beauty aesthetics like makeup and weaves, Subu is nevertheless unable to relinquish her wearing of weaves—a manifestation of her disconcertment with her natural Black hair.

Ifemelu in *Americanah*, in addition to her self-deprecation, suffers the hyper-visible scrutiny of everyone. As Margo Okazawa-Rey et al. note, one of the pathological implications of racialized concepts of beauty materializes in Black women's internalization of their unattractive and undesirable physical qualities:

> If a dark-skinned young girl is constantly told that she is ugly, and experiences treatment that supports these views, she may begin to feel as such. This is particularly true when the treatment she receives within her community of origin, the black community, is consistent with the negative and self-deprecating messages doled out by the larger society (1987, 91).

Ifemelu's hair becomes entangled in linguistic, political, and symbolic referencing. In her tentative journey of acceptance, her hair is referenced as a "cool and brave look" by her white boyfriend (258), problematized as a possible political or sexual statement by her co-workers: "Why did you cut your hair, hon? Are you a lesbian" (262) and demonized by her aunt Uju: "There is something scruffy and untidy about natural hair" (269).

In *A Bit of Difference*, Deola's upper-class upbringing is entangled with anti-Black beauty standards. Her childhood friend, Bandele Davis, who like her was raised in both Nigeria and England, is reluctant to be associated with African quandaries, and characterizes only "skinny blondes with AA-cup" in his novel. His novel, about a "nineteen-year-old Nigerian who slept around" is shortlisted for an African writer's prize, yet he is committed to snubbing his fellow Black female writer's activist writings on misogynoir. He calls the Black events fruit-

less activities and the Black female writers' disposition "false angst" (Atta 47). His use of light skinned and straight-haired women as signifier of the beauty ideal in his novels, and his anger at Black women's self-affirmation is ironical in light of the racialized hierarchy embedded in his characterizations. In this context, Black women can only choose between an invisible or hyper-visible state. They are not considered desirable and under-represented in mainstream writings and are yet criticized for creating a safe space for the affirmation of Black beauty. Other male characters like Deola's brother and his friends, raised no doubt under the influence of the legacies of the colonial past, are only interested in girls with "foreign blood" (87). Their judgment of beauty and desirability follows a racialized pattern. Bandele's elder brother, has a girlfriend whose hair reaches her shoulders, fetching tremendous interest from numerous boys. Lanre, Deola's brother, ends up married to his high school sweetheart with foreign blood. It is clear that the assessment of femininity, beauty and desirability, following Eurocentric criteria, captures the psyche of African men as well. For Ifemelu in *Americanah*, when she finds out her boyfriend has been exchanging emails with another girl, her reaction reveals the subordinate relationship she has with her Black hair and body:

> Pictures she had seen of his ex-girlfriends goaded her, the slender Japanese with straight hair dyed red, the olive-skinned Venezuelan with corkscrew hair that fell to her shoulders, the white girl with waves and waves of russet hair. And now this woman, whose looks she did not care for, but who had long straight hair. She shut the laptop. She felt small and ugly (Adichie 261).

For Darling on the other hand in *We Need New Names*, whose pre-teen existential reality is scarred with hunger, deprivation, and violence, differently from Ifemelu in *Americanah* and Deola in *A Bit of Difference*, who belong to middle and upper class, her transformations informed by aspects and attitudes of her new place moves at a slower, guarded and non-committal pace. Perhaps, this is as a result of being an illegal immigrant which means having additional struggles to grapple. Living in the US and now on the verge of womanhood, we see a shadow of vulnerability and inadequacy in her notion of beauty, femininity and agential capacity. In describing her two new friends, she describes one with a weave and a sense of superiority that comes with owning a weave:"Kristal thinks that since she taught us to wear makeup and has a weave, she is better than Marina and myself, but the truth is she can't even write a sentence correctly in English to show that she is indeed American" (Bulawayo

199). This conscious link Darling draws between owning weaves and beauty superiority stems from newer discourses of body politic she is confronted with. Her tone however takes on a somewhat derisive, antagonistic quality to this layer of superiority. Her identity is still however provisional, undergoing re-constructions and a site of future eventualities and potentialities. The predominance of anti-Blackness and ingrained superiority complex reminiscent of white supremacist patriarchal structures insinuate that Darling might become so damaged by this Eurocentric scrutiny that she either suffers a split or loses complete agency. Will she be able to successfully negotiate the demands of the structures of racism and colonialism that leave the majority of Black female immigrants feeling inadequate and helpless? Will the constant performance of her identity and pandering to a white gaze disrupt her quest for her Black female subjectivity? Will she survive the traumatic character of these oppressive systems or will she internalize her own inferiority so much so that the possibility for cognitive modification is nullified.

If there is a preoccupation that ties the four novels together, it is the allusion to the mobility and consumption of Black women and girls' appearance as rooted in racialized and colonial notions of beauty. The transnational manifestation of anti-Black misogynoir is continuously reinforced. Black female characters in *A Bit of Difference* are frequently described with their hairstyles – weaves. In Nigeria, Ifemelu's mother is described as having full jet-black hair that:

> Drank two containers of relaxer at the salon, so full it took hours under the hooded dryer, and, when finally released from pink plastic rollers, sprang free and full, flowing down her back like a celebration. Her father called it a crown of glory. "Is it your real hair? Strangers would ask, and then reach out to touch it reverently. Others would say 'Are you from Jamaica?' as though only foreign blood could explain such bounteous hair that did not thin at the temples (Adichie 49).

As I extrapolated in the first few pages that the anti-Black control of Black women's hair aesthetics is an entree to the racial and patriarchal marginalization Black women's in the global world, this extract above is the first point of departure from the long flashback Ifemelu has in the salon in Trenton about her adolescence. After insisting to the hairdresser that she likes her hair "the way God made it" and refusing to accept that natural hair is difficult to manage, the narrative moves back to unfold the hair socio-politics in Nigeria with

Ifemelu growing up in the shadow of her mother's jet-black highly desirable hair (15–49). Ifemelu's desire for her hair texture to look like her mother's, carries more meaning than a young girl simply being in awe and desiring to walk in the footsteps of her mother. Ifemelu's desire demonstrates an internalization of a notion of hair beauty, stylization and presentation that adheres to a racial binary structure of desirable versus undesirable. One fine day into her tenth birthday, Ifemelu witnesses her mother chopping off and burning all her coveted hair, announcing her conversion from Catholicism to a "Bible-believing" denomination, and claiming to be a born-again Christian. While this action appears to be an ordinary religious doctrine, it becomes pregnant with meaning when read alongside the larger narrative of the patriarchal and racial policing of Black female character's bodies, and the inherited baggage of insecurities as consequence. A case in point is Subu in Atta's *A Bit of Difference*, who cannot go out without a hair weave despite her "born-again" status (29). Juxtaposing these two novels, the reader acutely feels this ratification of Black women's hair appearance as a precondition for their participation and acceptance into organized social spaces. While Ifemelu's mother eagerly cuts her relaxed hair to acquire this new badge of belonging, Subu is not as willing to be seen without her weaves. One clearly sees the intersection of Black women's social capital meticulously regulated through their hair, and the merit of whiteness in their repository of self-satisfaction.

In the secondary school Ifemelu attended in Nigeria, skin color and hair texture present an essential advantage in the beauty awards presented to students, emphasizing a connection between race and gender. Ginika, Ifemelu's best friend who is described as having "caramel skin and wavy hair that, when unbraided, fell down to her neck instead of standing Afro-like" (67) is voted prettiest girl every year. This narrative undoubtedly ties beauty to Eurocentric bodies or proximity to Eurocentric bodies. In *On Black Sisters' Street*, one of the sex workers, acquired for the purpose of sex work in Belgium is sent by her trafficker to a salon in Lagos. The particular type of hair he demands to be replicated on her is the common Eurocentric kind. When the braider attempts to do a different style, he emphatically tells her in pidgin, "perm am. Put relaxer. Make she look like *oyibo* [white] woman! I wan' make she look like white woman!' (Unigwe 31). The braider also appears to affirm the symbolic idealized hair standards present in Black spaces. She passes compliments on the young girl's hair texture over and over again; "You get good hair" (Unigwe 31). What appears to be a simple compliment is loaded with colonial racial binaries. This means that the young girl's texture adheres to the Eurocentric standard

because a review of Black hair discourse consistently shows that Black hair is neither considered good nor widely accepted transnationally (Thompson 2009, 836).

Ama, one of the sex trafficking victims, recounts a childhood story of distress revolving around her natural hair being straightened with a hot comb by her grouchy mother. After the completion, Ama would carefully touch her hair to confirm that she has "proper oyibo hair!" (Unigwe 126).[1] The symbolic ideal of good hair in the novel—straightened texture, wigs, and hair extensions—is consistently maintained with references to the hair of white people. Achieving and affording hair similar or close to whiteness is a goal of many of the Black women in the novels. A rag to riches story of Dele, the sex trafficker is constituted on the sales of human hair, indicating that quality human hair is coveted and in popular demand by Black women: "He had no competition when it came to good-quality hair extensions. 'Straight from India. Not the *yeye* horsehair you see all over this city. I get 100 per cent human hair' he often boasted, eyes bulging with pride" (51). For women, class status symbol is defined by the kind of hair extensions they can afford to buy and the hair salons they patronize. Hair is a key medium of the intersection of class and beauty accessibility and an evaluative tool for a woman's level of attractiveness. Ama would aspire to attain that class where she could afford to patronize "a salon like Headmasters, ask for a pedicure and a manicure while a professional hairdresser wove expensive extensions into her hair" (161). Compliments of their hair extensions are anticipated and cherished, especially because they have to spend "thousands of nairas for their hair" (161). Due to the loss of their organic cultural affirmation, these compliments provide for them affirmative rhetorics that their acquired hairstyle emulate the dominant beauty ideal.

In *We Need New Names* however, the characterization of weaves and women who adorn weaves follow a different route. A strong, implicit value judgment about good versus bad hair is quite lacking, perhaps because most of the events are focalized from a child's perspective. However, a beauty norm is evident. Hair consciousness rooted in Eurocentric standard reverberates throughout the narrative text. Hair description follows a similar pattern; "long shiny that isn't really hers" (Bulawayo 38), two black girls walk out of a Chinese construction site in "skinny jeans and weaves and heels" (45), the symbolic action of Black mothers straightening their hair with "red-hot rock" (59) on election days

1 *Oyibo* is a Yoruba word commonly used to refer to white people in the South-West of Nigeria.

to symbolize hope, beauty of optimism and change. Yet, there is a different tone to the narrator's cursory interests in other Black female characters who adorn weaves. Darling characterizes her African American friend's inability to write correct English as more significant than her ownership of a weave. Even though Kristal might believe in herself that she is superior to her because she "has a weave" (199), Darling believes there are other standards that define one's identity and superiority complex.

In *Americanah*, Ifemelu expresses a shocked reaction to her Aunt Uju's conformity to the American anti-Black standard of professionalism. Going by Ifemelu's shocked reaction, one might feel inclined to believe that Black female body politic in her home country, Nigeria, from which she migrated is not socially and culturally constructed through a Eurocentric gaze. However, deconstructing the yardstick used to validate racialized beauty, as well as Ifemelu's reflective journey to loving and embracing her natural hair in the US, exposes the racialized beauty hierarchy in Nigeria, with European features or proximity to European features considered the epitome of desirability and African features considered undesirable. Furthermore, a conversation amongst the women-returnees in Nigeria reveals that their natural hair journey, much like Ifemelu, who first loathed her natural hair and considered her physical appearance 'ugly', might just have begun with their sojourn in Europe and the US. A 2013 qualitative cross-cultural study, conducted by Vanessa King and Dieynaba Niabaly on the motivating factors that influence various hair choices for both African and African American women, substantiates my aforementioned analysis. Interviewing twelve study participants with natural and relaxed hair from both groups, the study asked the following crucial questions: "Would you say the current state of your hair is solely your choice, meaning what/who would you consider to have influenced your current hair choices? Do you feel that your hair choices play a role in how people perceive you? If so, please explain. Do you think that the racially/ethnically discriminatory history of Black people has affected Black women's hair?" (7–8). Noteworthy relevant particularities in each group's experiences are that, while African college women with relaxed hair classified their choice as simply a hairstyle uninformed by socio-cultural and institutional embargo, African American college women "felt that their hair was an important part of their identity […] and that it was important to be able to maintain their hair and tame the natural hair they were born with" (11). All participants with natural hair from both groups claim that their decision to wear their natural hair has garnered more societal and familial scrutiny and disapproval than

necessary in both their home countries and the US. However, African college women with natural hair admit that their exposure and decision to go natural is as a result of their sojourn in the US. One can conclude that before their arrival to the US, they had limited to no consciousness of the assimilatory forces that constrain their beauty ideal, taking for granted their marker of femininity as a reasonable attractive standard. This demonstrates that a white systemic standard that is not subverted or resisted by the majority of the female population, like in the Black diaspora, is present on the continent. On the symbolic representation and psychological underpinning of relaxed hair, all participants with relaxed hair disengage their choice from a desire to assimilate to a Western beauty ideal of femininity. Even though they all agree that Black hair has been historically oppressed, misrepresented, and stigmatized through colonization for Africans on the continent and slavery for African Americans in the Black diaspora, they contend that Black women's hair choices have evolved from a racialized subjugated indication to one of subjective beauty preference and discretion. Accordingly, it is important to acknowledge the heterogeneity of Black women's experiences stimulated by various socio-cultural, historical, and ideological shifts. However, one must be careful to declare that Black hair is simply hair positively relieved of political implications. According to Cheryl Thompson, despite the "plethora of hair options" at Black women's disposal, a review of the contemporary discourse on Black hair "reminds us that it is still a contentious issue", and natural hair "is so often negatively marked for its difference" and remains an "unwanted politically charged marker in the workplace" both in the Black diaspora and on the African continent (2009, 835–840).

In *A Bit of Difference*, Deola's mother remarks on her hair during her visit to Nigeria. "Is this a new hairstyle? […] It is a prelude to a disagreement they have too many times" (Atta 71). When Ifemelu returns to Nigeria in *Americanah*, her natural hairdo is sullenly described as *jagajaga* [rough and messy] by her office secretary. In a conversation with one of her co-workers who also returned to Nigeria after residing in the US for a number of years, the reader gathers that her co-worker's *dada* [locs] is also condemned and judged as unprofessional. She recounts to Ifemelu that her aunt's job offer at a bank came at the price of cutting her locs. Additionally, at the Nigerpolitan club meeting (an association for Nigerian returnees from Europe and the US), the women-returnees, all adorned in natural hairdos, engage in a virtuous discussion on the beauty climate in Nigeria. They all agree that the hair stylists in Nigeria have little to no experience with styling natural African hair. Instead, they propose

that the women-returnees' hair be relaxed for easy management. Conversely, in their revelation that the hairdressers "struggled and fumbled to comb natural hair, as though it were an alien eruption, as though their own hair was not the same way before it was defeated by chemicals" (Adichie 501–502), the women-returnees verbalize a certain kind of smugness and absurdity at the Nigerian women's obliviousness to their embodied subordination to European standards. What these social conventions demonstrate is that natural afro-hair is not considered an attractive appearance. It is within this shadow of skin color and hair consciousness that Ifemelu (as other Black girls) is raised, cultivated, and required to flourish.

4.2 Intersection of Anti-Black Misogyny and Fatphobia

Central to Adichie's *Americanah* is the cross-cultural discourse of fat stigmatization, with attention to how they negatively impact Black women in the US. In *We Need New Names* and *A Bit of Difference*, contours of body politic, anti-Black misogyny and fat stigmatization do not hold a central narrative but are alluded to several times. In *Americanah*, the pathologizing of Black women's bodies is narratively enmeshed with the devaluation of Blackness and Black hair. Adichie right from the first few pages of the novel takes a stab at the entangled character of the axes of stratification and oppression (race, gender, and class) in body discourse. Working and residing at Princeton, Ifemelu's Black (racialized) hair-care regimen requires her to travel to Trenton, known as a predominantly Black city, in order to get her hair braided. Bemoaning the lack of Black salons in Princeton, she however understands why this is the case, considering that Princeton is a predominantly white city, with only a few "light-skinned and lank-haired" Black locals. Her characterization of both cities reveals the layers of stratification existing in the US. While Princeton is described with words like tranquil, green, neutral smell, clean, delicately overpriced, quiet, affluent, ease, and certain, all evocative of de-racialization, Trenton is characterized with words like dank buildings, graffiti, hot, with a dysfunctional, absence of white people, all evocative of racialization and anti-Blackness. These signifiers of clean versus dirty reveal the structural gap between white privileged groups and Black underprivileged groups and the continuation of the constellations of systematic oppression Black people face. Regardless of the exclusionary measures she is forced to grapple with, Ifemelu is grateful for the privilege to be associated with white "affluent ease", to be afforded the opportunity to "pre-

tend to be someone else, someone specially admitted into a hallowed American club, someone adorned with certainty" (Adichie 3).

Not only are the two spaces described in absolute symbolic binaries, there is a juxtaposition between Black and white physical appearances. While the people waiting at the Princeton Junction station are characterized as "white and lean", the people crowding the platform in Trenton are characterized as "Black, many of them fat" (6). This characterization demonstrates that there is an intersection between fatness, status symbol (the body as an external indication of economic and social status) and race. During her first year in the US, Ifemelu discovers that thinness is a significant component of white American exceptionalism. A strong connection between body size, spatiality, social distinction and economic affluence is seen in the differentiation between "mostly slim white people" alighting at the "stops in Manhattan" and "mostly black and fat" people alighting at Brooklyn (6). Ifemelu quickly learns that the word "fat" is loaded with a repulsive, evil distasteful connotation, "heaving with moral judgment like stupid or bastard, and not a mere description like short or tall" (6).

Reading the analysis of Sabrina Strings's famous 2019 book *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* is very illuminating. In establishing the racial origins of fatphobia, Strings argues that Western preoccupation with thinness and aversion to fatness originates from historical racial and religious ideologies used to propagate and preserve white superiority and white hegemonic national identity. According to Strings, artistic renditions of Black Africans by European artists and philosophers were historically created only for self-serving purposes, to make visual commentary on Africans' embodied distinctiveness. This distinction was generated mostly from physical appearance, resulting in body shape and size, next to skin color, becoming integral to the elevation of a woman's physical attraction and validation. Depictions of Black Africans as plump, large, fat, well proportioned, gluttonous, lazy, and stupid saturated colonial writings into the nineteenth century. This stereotype already "lodged in the European imagination" from earlier generation of racial theories, as far back as the sixteenth century, became a symbolic identifier for Black Africans, and "well-rounded physiques" (2019, 16) that were earlier celebrated and revered as a beauty ideal prior to the 16th century soon acquired negative currency. Given that the racial project was for the advancement of white superiority and women were commonly represented as custodians of nation-state and "typically reduced to their bodies" (210), fat stigmatization was doubly used to denigrate Black women and control elite white women, resulting in the classification of body shapes and sizes that served to "natu-

ralize and normalize social hierarchies" (7). Black women's bodies became a "form of text from which racial superiority and inferiority were read" (67), and their beauty evaluation was based on their adherence to "European standards of race and physique" (79). Consequently, fatness persistently conflated with "savage and black" (210) and slimness with graceful white elitism instituted the versions of social hierarchy of desirability politic we have today, thereby appending "a much-needed intersectional component to the analysis of the development of fatphobia and the slender aesthetic" (212).

In *We Need New Names*, Bulawayo's cross-cultural characterization of body sizes reminds us that a social interactive dynamic is subject to contextual standards of meaning. The description of her Black characters living in Zimbabwe is socio-politically uncharged. There are no underlying meanings, especially disparaging valuations in descriptors such as tall thin woman, fat adults etc. They are simply vocabularies used to convey well-rounded characterization of her characters. However, a stark difference is noted in the characterization of white and Black characters living outside Zimbabwe. Her narrative tone acquires ample value judgment quality. A tall thin thirty-three-year-old woman from London, visiting Budapest for the first time, exudes graciousness towards Darling and her friends' appraisal of her thinness. She replies in a pleased voice that she "just came off the Jesus diet" (Bulawayo 8). The children, emblematic of a different socio-political climate and class are befuddled by her cheerfulness. "What is there to thank? […] What is a Jesus diet, and do you mean the real Jesus, like God's child" (8). A white couple is described in similar hypercritical tone. The man is tall and fat, while his wife is described as thin, "like maybe the man eats all her food, like she has the sickness" (114). Through this imagery, Bulawayo engages in a cross-cultural discourse of body politic, alluding to the fact that physique preoccupation and thin preference is rooted in imperial white supremacist patriarchal legacy.

In *Americanah*, Ifemelu's body in the US becomes hyper-visible and suffers overt disdain from a man in the supermarket who concerns himself with her oral appetite. By loudly condemning her purchase of a "giant bag of Tostitos", with the 'health' moralizing rant that "fat people don't need to be eating that shit" (Adichie 6), he draws a direct connection between her food consumption and body size. Even though mildly offended by this statement, she nevertheless internalizes this dogma, accepting it as an objective sensibility:

> But back home, as she stood and faced the mirror's truth, she realized that she had ignored, for too long, the new tightness of her clothes, the rubbing

> together of her inner thighs, the softer, rounder parts of her that shook when she moved. She was fat […] she was not curvy or big-boned; she was fat, it was the only word that felt true (7).

Fatphobia is also internalized and perpetuated by minor characters like Aunt Fostalina and Ojuigo in *We Need New Names* and *Americanah*. Their obsession with being thin enkindles their abidance by the problematic culture of dieting and body size obsession. Their desire for slimness impacts greatly on their lifestyle and their judgments of beauty and desirability. Ojuigo registers for several "weight watchers" programs, closely monitoring her weight, whilst sneakily eating Twix bars of chocolate (Adichie 302). Aunt Fostalina exercises regularly to instructional TV shows of non-Black women, with the hope that she is able to shrink her body. Her physical exercises and trainings are invested in the pursuit of white supremacist wellness and its signifier, thinness. Evidently, her weight loss exercises, as with the majority of women have absolutely nothing to do with being healthy, as mainstream medical health morality discourses have continued to imply, enforce, and moderate. Existing in a smaller body is the ultimate goal.

Accordingly, Strings maintains that the discourse of wellness in the medical industrial complex is rooted in the motivation to uplift the white race as well as control women's integration into full participation of beauty and desirability. As healthy bodies were gradually conflated with thinness in racial scientific literatures, intentional weight loss rationality and antipathy towards fatness in the medical field activated by the socio-political binary structure of anti-Black misogyny and white race preservation gained considerable traction. In fact, Strings asserts that historically the scientific management of bodies, femininity, weight, health, and dietary habits in the US and much of the West either completely overlooked Black women as they were considered eugenically deficient or focused on Black women to moderate the ethno-religious theories of white exceptionalism and supremacy (195–203). Against this background, the desire to be elevated into the top of the social hierarchy (white elite spaces) and gain social capital for Black women would mean to ignore the sensibility of socio-biological materiality of body variations, accept the cacophony of Anglo-European constructed fat anxiety, and emulate the dietary behaviors and aesthetic evaluations of white people, especially white women.

As African migrant women, both Ifemelu in *Americanah* and Aunt Fostalina in *We Need New Names* realize that slimness is a social currency they can appropriate to their advantage. Ifemelu on her arrival to the US is immediately con-

fronted with a new system of belief that conceives of thinness as a redeeming feature. Ginika, her friend who comes to meet her at the airport is noticeably thin, "much thinner, half her old size, and her head looked bigger, balanced on a long neck that brought to mind a vague, exotic animal" (Adichie 149). Ginika instantly launches into the social advantages of having a thin body. We learn that in Nigeria, manipulating one's body size to ensure thinness is disapproved of, but in America, it is the reverse. Sizing Ifemelu up and down, she evaluates her worthiness, declaring her body the kind of body they like in America. She further confesses that attaining a thin body goal became an aspiration as soon as she arrived in America, from which she developed an eating disorder and was "close to anorexia" (152). "Americans say 'thin.' Here 'thin' is a good word", she proclaims to Ifemelu (157). Ginika's social commentary on the difference in the framings of fatness between America and Nigeria highlights a symbolic cultural boundary. Aunt Fostalina's preoccupation with possessing a smaller sized body puts in motion her foray into diet culture. She constantly demands to know if her body corroborates her weight loss effort and compares her body size with other women. "You think I'm losing weight? Who is fatter, me or Aunt Da? Who is fatter, me or your mother?" (Bulawayo 155). She also experiments with exclusive fruit diets to the detriment of her health and loud misgiving of her partner. Darling watches her deterioration with morbid trepidation that she might soon begin to look as deathly bony as her father who died of HIV. More significantly, cross-cultural perception of fatness, wellness and overall aesthetic judgments reflect in Uncle Kojo's consternation. His clamorous remarks reveal that the thin obsession is a foreign beauty standard adopted by Aunt Fostalina:

> You know me, I actually don't understand why you are doing all this. What are you doing to yourself, Fostalina, really-exactly-what? Kick. And punch. And kick. And punch. Look at you, bones bones bones. All bones. And for what? They are not even African, these women you are doing like, shouldn't that actually tell you something? Three-four-five-six, and kick. And punch. That there is actually nothing African about a woman with no thighs, no hips, no belly, no behind. Squat. Bend your knees. Squat. Bend your knees. Squat … And last time I sent family pictures to my mother, she actually cried. Ah ah ah, my son, oh, please please please feed your wife and don't nah bring her here looking like this, you will embarrass us. That's what she said, my mother (Bulawayo 151–152).

In *Americanah*, Ifemelu on her return to Nigeria delays meeting with Obinze because of her weight. She resolves to manipulate her body size back to her teenage "slender self" before she informs Obinze of her return to Nigeria (Adichie 506). Obinze's instant disapproval of Ifemelu's contemplation of her body size also reveals a cultural gap between America and Nigeria. He labels her preoccupation with thinness an American obsession declaring her fatness desirable. Aunt Fostalina in *We Need New Names* purchases a smaller sized dress for a wedding she plans to attend and has to lose even more weight to fit into the dress. She takes pride in her ability to manipulate her body size into the required pounds she desires, yet she suffers from low self-esteem and fatigue. The little contentment she has is derived from comparing her body size to other women. She finally relinquishes her thin currency because she has to work two jobs but continues to torment herself with magazine pictures of thin white women and tv programs of weight loss information and commercials. Ojuigo in *Americanah*, also decisively discontinues her thin obsession because of the program's appellation of fatness as a mental health problem: "I'm not going there again. They treat you as if you have a mental problem. I said no, I don't have any internal issues, please, I just like the taste of food, and the smug woman tells me that I have something internal that I am repressing. Rubbish. These white people think that everybody has their mental problems" (Adichie 302). The Black female characters' profound struggles with conforming to the standard of desirable feminine body in the three novels highlights Sabrina Strings's argument that Anglo-European anti-fat convention that has persisted until today developed from a historical anti-Black imperialist project of racial superiority and exploitation.

4.3 Intersectionality in the Domestic Kitchen Space

The domestic kitchen space has been a site of inexhaustible controversy and debate in Anglo-European feminist discourse. Evoked countlessly as an embodied echo of binary power dynamic, Angela Meah argues that women in the West were entreated to deplore their exclusive ownership of the kitchen, annihilate the gendered division of house chores, contemplate their contribution to their own exploitation within the patriarchal mode of production, and advocate their way into the labor force (2014). Therefore, while the kitchen became an indication of women's inferiority and subjugation in a white heteronormative patriarchal system, the labor market came to symbolize

power, liberation, advancement and dismantling of this system (2014). While feminists in general have unquestionable reasons to criticize the gendered nature of domesticity, Black feminists however have evidentially emphasized that labor empowerment has not represented liberation for Black women in the way that it has been emancipating for white women, establishing that these criticisms only reflect the reality of a select group of women (hooks 1981, Collins 2000). Located betwixt multiple power structures, Black women have had to create distinctive strategies, peculiar to their layered oppression, for both their autonomous and community survival. Lola Young argues that expressive elements of survival strategy and wellness may be more evident in the writings and expressive creativity of Black diaspora women (2000, 52). One of such elements this sub-chapter deconstructs is the power dynamics evoked within domestic kitchen spaces in *The Book of Not*, *Homegoing*, *Americanah* and *A Bit of Difference*. By de-centering Anglo-European's abstractions of the intrinsic gendered oppression in domestic cooking spaces, and using Black feminist theories to cross-examine my selected novels, I explore the complex changeability of power dynamics present in Black women's domestic kitchen spaces. I advance that for Black female characters, their home kitchen space within the imperial white supremacist capitalist political economies be evoked as a paradoxical site of subjugation and independence, exploitation and empowerment, oppression and resistance, labor and pleasure, hardship and safety, confinement, and liberty, and finally, risk and refuge.

In both *Homegoing* and *The Book of Not,* the character of the power dynamics and distribution bordering Black women's domestic food labor is narrated through precolonial, slave trading, imperial rule, post-slavery, and postcolonial timeframes. In *Homegoing*, the gendered character of the power dynamics in pre-colonial pastoral Gold Coast society (now Ghana) is more formless and collaborative than binary and objective. Food labor is codified around both the private and public space, ultimately blurring and disrupting the distinctions between the masculine public and the feminine private domain underscored by Anglo-European feminists. The women of Fante and Asante villages prepare their foods in outdoor spaces, and the men gather and provide foodstuffs. The men and women congregate to eat, talk, bond, and share pertinent information and responsibilities. The food preparation communicates a much more complex practice that extends beyond delivering the end product of cooked meals. Food preparation encompasses the process of cultivating, harvesting, trading, conserving, fetching water, and cooking. Both boys and girls are tutored in gendered collaborative etiquettes and expected to contribute to the

sustenance and overall wellness of the family and community. Women's essential family responsibilities revolve around nurturing. This they combine with participating in agricultural labor alongside their men with little to no conflict. Activities such as drumming, singing, jostling by men and boys, impassioned war preparations, intra and inter-tribal negotiations and meeting accompany the cooking and eating of foods. Food preparation and consumption is undertaken by women with the objective to nurture and supply their men with physical strength and agility to fight, win and protect their community frontiers. The women are anything but silent, subjugated victims and their domestic responsibilities are handled with tremendous agential capability and power. According to Angela Meah, this was not applicable in the Global North, as women's domestic labor was both severely demarcated and an undervalued and marginalized contribution to the "productive economy in households" (2014, 672).

A conversation between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law in *Homegoing* reveals the amorphous distribution of power in the domestic kitchen space and a blurry boundary between private and public. Nana Serwah, the mother-in-law, chides Akua for not participating in the food work.

> Akua, what's wrong with you? Why are you just standing there? Come and help. These men need to be fed before the next meeting […] The men were shouting loudly, so loudly that it was nearly impossible to distinguish what one was saying from what the others were saying […] Akua could see her husband, but she did not dare look at him. She knew her place was with her mother-in-law, the other women, the old men, not begging questions of him with her eyes (Gyasi 181–182).

These activities and social interactions that unfold within this publicly situated domestic kitchen not only transcends gendered boundaries, but also enriches women's domestic contribution with value. Additionally, the old men occupying the same space as the women demonstrate that hierarchy is not established exclusively along gender binaries. Women are not isolated under one category and single-axis unit of analysis. According to Mojubaolu Olufunke Okome, the degrees of hierarchy existing in pre-colonial African societies is manifested in "socially specific ways between individuals, men and women alike" (2003, 79). This is in consonance with Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí's argument that draconian female inferiority was a value-system imported with colonial rule, before which identities were organized along amorphous boundaries like tribe, age, royalty, class, and various relationships to privilege and disadvantage (2006, 2003).

The spatial dynamics of the pre-colonial kitchen in *Homegoing* are characterized by freedom, pleasure, agency and, even more so, class intersection. This is in contrast to the dynamics of the colonial and slavery timeframe, which is fraught with oppression, mandatory labor, abuse, tyranny, non-consensual relations, enslavement, and anti-Black misogynistic prescripts. Abee, only four years old, is narrated as congenially participating in the kitchen. She "liked to hold the giant pestle and pretend that she was helping" and her mother would respond, "You are so strong" (Gyasi 179). Her childlike enthusiasm is applauded, while at the same time limited for her own protection from possible domestic accidents. Esi, the daughter of a renowned warrior of the Asante nation, is pampered and spoiled by her parents. Before her capture by the Fante warriors and auction to the British slave traders, her participation in the kitchen is on a voluntary basis. When her mother refuses to choose a house girl or boy from the war prisoners brought back to the village because Esi helps in the kitchen, her father passionately reinforces her social status with the response "Esi is my daughter, not some common girl to be ordered about" (35). The fundamental fluctuating, unstable identities and blurring of positions, spaces and relational dynamics imbued into the pre-colonial value system is also demonstrated in Maame's sentiment on autonomy. Cautioning her child on the modalities of power and control, she remarks: "Weakness is treating someone as though they belong to you. Strength is knowing that everyone belongs to themselves" (38). Considering the juxtaposition between her previous position as a slave and her current one as the beloved, favorite wife of the best warrior of the Asante nation evinces a potential for "both subversion and disruption […] and a much more complex and messy relationship between power, different spaces and the (gendered) performance(s) which take place" in pre-colonial pastoral African societies (Meah 2014, 673).

With imperial interruption came new forms of enforced normativity. Social organization along gender and race lines was an integral part of this value-system imported by Europeans. The spatial dynamics of the domestic kitchen and the relational dynamics performed in this previously public domain ultimately becomes altered. This however does not imply that pre-colonial African societies were not patriarchally structured, or that male domination was non-existent. Rather, what a nuanced reflection of the configurations of power within the two geographical spaces reveals is that "women's activities with work and family differed from those they encountered under slavery" (Collins, 2000, 49). In this colonial narrative timeframe, the domestic space in both *Homeland* and *The Book of Not* becomes inscribed with a conflux of

foreign elements and power dynamics. African women are obliged to perform domesticity for white men and white women alongside their own familial responsibilities, negatively impacting their subjectivities and transforming their subtleties of resistance.

In *The Book of Not*, Tambudzai and Ntombizethu, the two of six Black female students conscientiously selected to fill the Rhodesian government's five percent diversity quota, are subjected to the hostility of Black female cooks and cleaners in their white-centered colonial Christian college. On copious occasions, the Black female cooks slam and throw their plates of food at them. However, their behavior is differently pleasant when serving the white classmates. They set the dishes down "smiling gently" (Dangarembga 46, 122, 125). The cooks' display of hostility to Tambu and Ntombi could be interpreted as a constituent of the workings of resistance to their dehumanization and differential treatment under the imperial white supremacist patriarchal system. Situated within intersecting oppressions of race, class and gender impacts their ability to perform resistance from a radical approach. The only counterattack outlet available to them is to further dehumanize the Black girls who are more fortunate than them to be allowed into a white coveted space that is predicated on Black subjugation. This oppression-motivated-reactiveness is regrettably a common trope in marginalized discourse. According to Patricia Hill Collins, it is for this reason of endemic racism amongst others that the term feminism without the adjective "black" is not enough (1996, 13). Collins argues that in the same way the prefix's intent is to disrupt the false universality of advocacy for women's equity and liberty, so also must it model sensitivity to the heterogeneity of existing identities and positionality currently operating within the Black community. Minimizing hierarchical positionalities and intersections of oppression for the sake of collective empowerment would only lead to further division and withdrawal. In this sense, Tambu and Ntombi represent Black girls who are elevated in social class by virtue of the scholarships given to them by the white system. From their class mobility emerges an interesting pattern, which is the exigency to negotiate the oppression-motivated-reactiveness of the Black cooks on top of the commonality of racial oppression. Conversely, the Black cooks' hostility towards Tambu and Ntombi's social mobility is also complicit in the imperial white supremacist system operating collectively against them.

Comparatively with the operation of imperialism on the continent, enslaved Black women translocated to the Americas were also subjected to a new form of exploitation in their relegation to the domestic space, to be controlled

by their white female mistresses. In *Homegoing*, Black women not only had to work alongside Black men on the plantation field, but also in the domestic quarters, putting them in close proximity with white privileged women. Due to the combination of race and gender oppression unfolding within the "slave political economies" (Collins 2000, 52), they combine contributing to their community and family's well-being with also performing labor for their white owners. Just like Tambu's and Ntombi's experiences of antipathy from the Black maids, Ness, the daughter of Esi, suffers a similar fate on the plantation farm. For one unjustifiable reason or the other, the head house slave, Margaret, fills her glass with only a quarter of water claiming inadequacy in water supply, even though the "buckets of water on the porch behind her were enough to last a week" (Gyasi 72). The domestic space is yet again crisscrossed with intersections of white allocated privilege(s) that cause intra-group competition and conflict. Ness, by virtue of her lighter pigmentation, is considered "too pretty for a field nigger" and assigned to work in the domestic quarter of her white owners (72). Margaret, the head house slave suspecting that her status as the favorite house slave might be jeopardized by the new addition, expresses outward relief at Ness's final rejection due to her scarred skin. "It a shame, really. For a second, I's thought you mighta been prettier than me.' She clucked her tongue twice and left the room" (74). Under slavery, the signification of the domestic space and Black women's participation in this space is altered.

The transition to the free labor market during the tumultuous reconstruction period composed of emancipation in the Northern and Jim Crow enforced racial segregation law in the Southern United States also has little to no effect on Black women's fate. In *Homegoing*, Black female slaves' performance of domesticity is narrated as a never-ending responsibility. Notwithstanding their legal freedom, they still have to cook and clean all day with no consideration for their humanity. Anna, a pregnant freed slave and Ma Aku, an aged runaway slave are obligated to work in their delicate conditions. Anna combines cooking and cleaning for her white employers with caring for her own husband and seven children until her due date. Ma Aku cleans through her age-related "never-ending coughs and aches" (Gyasi 112). Ma Aku would clean until her condition deteriorates and Anna until she is "bleary-eyed" and "could no longer walk without waddling because of her enormous belly" (123). Agnes, Anna's daughter, takes a cleaning job immediately she turns sixteen. As the older child, she is the designated home carer for her six siblings. As soon as she begins her job outside the home, Beulah, her younger sister assumes responsibility for the home. This indicates that for Black girls, there is only a short time

for youthful innocence in their identity formation. From a young age, they are compelled to join their mother in contributing to the welfare of the family unit.

In terms of the caring labor of African American women, Collins establishes that Black American women's motivation to seek out jobs in the public domestic work sector was not predicated on any quest for gender equality with their men. During this period, African American men and women continued to suffer racial segregation and economic oppression, so the issue for African American women was "less one of achieving economic parity with their Black male counterparts and more of securing an adequate overall family income" (2000, 53). With their exclusion from the burgeoning part of the market economy, aside from working in the fields with their men, "domestic work constituted the other primary occupation" of their wage labor (54). In fact, it would be hardly surprising if African American women coveted the everyday life of their fellow white women and would prefer to have their responsibilities organized around their familial domestic work, because their double role indicated that they were not "feminine" in the framework of the gender ideology in that period. However, Collins argues that this was not the case. African American women's eagerness to withdraw from the labor force is invested in the sentiment to "remove themselves from the exploited labor force in order to return the value of their labor to their families and to find relief from the sexual harassment they endured in domestic service" (54). For Black American women, domestic service in this context signified exploitation, subordination and powerlessness, and the wherewithal to replace their public domestic labor with just their own home duties was eagerly desired.

This powerlessness and subordination infused into the domestic space in white supremacist capitalist political economies is affectively captured in *Homegoing*. Wille, the granddaughter of Anna, is sexually violated while performing her domestic wage labor in the public sphere. Her disenfranchised husband is ordered by two white men to perform sexual acts on her for their amusement. White people routinely violate Black families' privacy, and Black women are mostly at the receiving ends of such violations. This sexual violation amongst many other anti-Black misogynistic behaviors they have had to negotiate in the past finally leads to the traumatic end of Willie's marriage. Left with a child to care for on only the wages of her domestic labor, her living condition deteriorates. She is sacked from several jobs because of her inability to get private childcare for her child. Bringing a child to work under this capitalist political economy is unacceptable because she is considered a paid worker. For most Black American women, the choice of prioritizing their

family unit, and being a wife and mother is simply an imaginary idea, way out of their reach as the novel suggests.

In African countries, where prior to colonialism African women "routinely combined childcare with their contributions to precapitalist political economies", I argue that the gender system also undergoes a transformation under colonialism (2000, 5). Middle-class Black women as represented in the novels, would come to consider prioritizing familial domestic duties as a form of privilege as well as an act of resistance against the white oppressive system that is built on the dehumanization of their Black men. In *The Book of Not*, Maiguru, a middle-class British educated African woman suffers a stretch of anxiety for her husband's welfare under a heavily embattled Rhodesia. Her husband, Babamukuru is also a British-educated African man who returns home to become the head teacher at a mission school. During the Zimbabwean war of liberation between the Big brothers, who want to reclaim expropriated lands, and the Rhodesians (signifier for British interlopers), a six o' clock curfew is imposed on the towns, affecting Babamukuru's work ethics. Maiguru and her daughters are narrated as "peeping cautiously out of various windows, peering for long squinting moments without bothering to exhale", waiting anxiously for the safe return of their husband and father back to the mission house (81). On several occasions, she expresses her frustration at their powerlessness, as well as her husband's insistence on defying the curfew. She regards her domestic responsibility positively, using it to express material comfort, warmth, and love to her nuclear family. She has a housemaid who assists her in her domestic duties yet considers her being a wife and mother her primary responsibility. She has a garden, which she tends to fondly.

Maiguru's labor is in the purview of her domestic service to her family, and she is narrated as pouring so much love into the earth as if it belongs to her. In return, her garden blossoms and "produces prodigiously" to the envy of other under-privileged African women (181). Taken by amazement at the fertility of her garden, other women express their desire to obtain their independence from the British rule and advance the economic condition of their family and community; "soon, every woman will have a patch like that! For her to work with the strength of her hands! After the war, everyone will have something. That's what the elder siblings are promising" (182). Immediately Babamukuru arrives at the house, Maiguru starts dishing food for the whole family. Very much attuned to her husband's needs, she positively regards her domestic duties, constantly praising God "for providing and at the same time bringing Babamukuru whole, down the mission road" (85). On a few occasions, she uses

her domestic responsibility to relieve her daughters and husband of external white supremacist pressures. When Tambu receives a negative assessment on her report card, Maiguru promptly attempts to alleviate both father's anger and daughter's pain with food.

> But she does have the three A-Levels, Baba!' Maiguru tried to soothe him by placing several large joints of chicken on her husband's plate. 'Have some, Daddy-dear!' she lilted on the brink of baby talk in her effort to keep peace at the table. 'I thought since Sisi Tambu has passed, we should celebrate with something delicious.' She turned to me and offered the plate. 'Most people only take three subjects, you know! Of course, Sisi Tambu, you're just as good! (185).

When Babamukuru would not relent in chiding Tambu, Tambu looks to her for help but all Mai does is offer them more food. This action of recurrently offering her home-prepared dishes can be interpreted as an act of resistance to the violent force of imperial white supremacist dynamics that continually tries to upset the wellbeing of her family. In the framework of the intersection of oppressions she has to organize her identity, work, and family around, her domestic labor is rather empowering and valuable, because it is focused on nurturing and keeping her family together in the face of their subjugation to colonial power. For Maiguru, her familial domestic service is not a manifestation of her inferiority and subjugation. Alternately, this private space serves as protection against the violence of the imperialist white supremacist capitalist political economies that brutalize, humiliate, and exploit Black women. So rather than conceive of her domestic labor as a form of exploitation by her husband, she is aware of her privilege and grateful for the provisional opportunity to be able to nurture her family in the way other African women desire.

The end of colonialism saw previously colonized countries bedeviled with conflicting value systems. Returning to how things were is an impossible task and going forward is also plagued with colonial constructions of racial and gendered ideologies. In postcolonial Nigeria, the kitchen space as chronicled in *A Bit of Difference* and *Americanah* is entangled in layers of material and symbolic power dynamics. A flexibility in the way the Black female characters interact with the colonial-instituted private domestic space emerges. Crisscrossed with multiple factors of advantage and disadvantage, the kitchen space in postcolonial patriarchal Nigerian setting attains a concurrent signification of subjugation, risk, agency, pleasure, and survival. In *A Bit of Difference*, principally, the

narrator assumes a critical stance, painting the picture of postcolonial Nigerian girls with the brush of subservience and servitude, and describing them as "essentially housewives-in-training" (Atta 37). They are raised to be dexterous in their cooking repertoire. Anything less is unacceptable and considered uncultured. Conversely, the upper- and middle-class Nigerian women are portrayed to have a different attachment to their domestic space and responsibilities. All or a majority of them have housemaids and cooks at their disposal. Deola's mum has a housemaid at her disposal who does errands around the house. The housemaid's duties entail sometimes cooking, serving the food, cleaning and generally providing domestic services to the entire household. Deola, who has lived in the United Kingdom for an extended number of years, expresses shame at her childhood dependence on her parents' house-helps for "everyday inconveniences" (81). It suffices to surmise that her additional migrant identity is the source of her newly acquired embarrassment.

In postcolonial Nigeria absent of visible racial markers, the domestic space acquires new or additional meanings. Since power is no longer racially distributed, African women can act as an authority on the interpretation of food work, as well as negotiate their relationship with this private domestic space. Eno, Deola's sister-in-law, delivers a pot of Native soup, prepared by her cook, to her father-in-law. Her father-in-law dramatically dances and sings around the dining table, even though he knows she cannot personally cook and definitely did not prepare the soup. Eno's lack of or disinterest in domestic labor is not represented as problematic to either her husband or her father-in-law. For these women, their gendered obligation within their domestic spaces is used as mechanisms of survival. Deola's mother is described as skilled at getting whatever she wants from her husband. She first feeds him and right after tenders her demands. In this regard, she uses food as a mechanism to subdue and placate, affording her agency and power which may yet be contemptible to an outside observer.

In *Americanah*, Ifemelu's Aunt Uju carries on a relationship with a married General. In an economically ailing Nigeria, Aunt Uju is able to use the domestic space as a survival tool. Unable to get a job after graduating with a degree in medical studies, she gets involved with a rich politician who commits to providing all her needs. She luxuriates in her brand-new lifestyle, combining reading with cooking for the General on his infrequent visits. Her appropriation of the kitchen space supplies her with the required tool to transcend and circumvent both heteronormative patriarchy and an "ass-licking economy" (Adichie 93). On a few occasions, she is able to assist her

family with financial support by paying off a year's worth of house rent among other things. Like Maiguru and Deola's mother, she has a housemaid and considers herself fortunate "to be licking the right ass" (93). For Aunt Uju, her retention and translation of the domestic space empowers her with a degree of freedom, social currency, and financial security. One can argue that even though there is an undertone of female subordination in the entirety of the postcolonial social structure, African women as portrayed in the literary texts transgress the system in their own unique ways and habitually manipulate it to their own benefit. For these women, their relationship with their domestic kitchen spaces opens up endless possibilities, ranging from the expression of resistance to acts of nurturing.

African female migrants, who arrive to Europe and the US with diverse cultural backgrounds and yet must deal with the construction of Black femaleness as typified by their subjecthood, quickly realize that a certain amount of self-determination and self-definition that excludes them in the public space is guaranteed within their domestic space. With their new identities and spatial dynamics, their domestic space will also come to undergo transformations and acquire new significations. In *Americanah*, Ojuigo and Aunt Uju's relocation to the UK and the US respectively alter their identities and shift their gendered boundaries contrastingly. While they both previously operate from dissimilar social positions back in Nigeria, they both come to share similar desires and aspirations in their host countries. They both desire to experience belonging and alliance. Ojuigo, previously portrayed as an insubordinate, nonconforming and intelligent university student, undergoes a contrasting transformation to her social identity in the UK. In the UK, she is characterized as a demure and subservient wife, who answers "Yes, Nicholas" to almost every of her husband's requests (Adichie 296). We come to understand the reason for this alteration in her gender performance. While her citizenship was realized through her postgraduate student status, her husband was for many years undocumented. For Ojuigo, her domestic labor is altered by the intersection of marriage and the public space (UK), and her acquisition of power through the domestic space is an exemplification of committed support to her husband's immigrant struggles. Cooking, serving his food, supervising the needs of the children, raising well-assimilated children, and generally exclusively performing housewife duties is her own way of renegotiating status, positionalities, liberation, and power in a racially oppressive system.

Aunt Uju's relocation to the US with her infant, in order to escape the wrath of General's legal wife, is not without hurdles. She experiences profes-

sional failure, racial discrimination, and poverty, and must learn to navigate this white supremacist society differently as a racially subjugated and ethnic Other. After multiple attempts at writing the medical licensing examination, she gains certification, but is confronted with racism from patients at her workplace. Finding a way to cope with her experiences of degradation and alienation, she premeditatively chooses to form a relationship with Bartholomew, a US-based Nigerian man. One of her paramount reasons for choosing to pursue a relationship with Bartholomew is their ethnic affiliation. On his first visit to her place, she cooks "peppered gizzard", delighting in his comments on her cooking and her possibility of being a good wife and cook (141). She derives so much joy in the performance of domesticity, slipping smoothly into her light-hearted habit, "lunging to pick up his fork when it slipped from his hand" and "smiling a smile that promised to be demure to him but not the world" (142). Choosing a partner based on national, ethnic, and racial commonality, and sliding into the habit of performing domesticity is her way to re-establish some cultural familiarity, counter her hyper-visibility, and restore the love and warmth that is denied her in the US public space. The relationship fails due to a number of reasons, topmost of which is Bartholomew's reductionistic and universalist conceptions of gender dynamics. Complaining bitterly to Ifemelu, Aunt Uju expresses the intersectionality that is lacking in Bartholomew's gender performance:

> Both of us work. Both of us come home at the same time and do you know what Bartholomew does? He just sits in the living room and turns on the TV and asks me what we are eating for dinner […] He wants me to give him my salary. Imagine! He said that is how marriages are since he is the head of the family, that I should not send money home to Brother without his permission, that we should make his car payments from my salary […] All he wants is for me to hand over my salary to him and cook peppered gizzard for him on Saturdays while he watches European League on satellite. Why should I give him my salary? Did he pay my fees in medical school? […] Everything is money, money, money. He keeps wanting to make my work decisions for me. What does an accountant know about medicine? I just want to be comfortable. I just want to be able to pay for my child's college. I don't need to work longer hours just to accumulate money. It's not as if I'm planning to buy a boat like Americans (269–271).

From this extract, it is clear that Aunt Uju's interpretation of her domesticity as a form of drudgery and exploitation is within the specific context of the US's

"social and structural conditions" (Meah 2014, 680). Bartholomew's contradictory behavior predicated on both white-centric and Afrocentric gendered ideologies is unscrupulous and profiteering only for him. Aunt Uju interprets his unwillingness to perform tasks that previously had been delineated as women's responsibilities, while at the same time obligating her to participate in waged public labor, as a form of gender asymmetry. Since subjectivities are products of social spaces, I argue that the gendered social conditions Aunt Uju must conform to in the US engenders an extension to her conceptualization and embodiment of masculine and feminine subjectivities.

Based on my analysis of events focalized in the four novels, it is no exaggeration to argue that Black women's negotiation of the kitchen space shows nuance beyond the monological crippling discourse of subjugation, silence and denigration prominently represented in Anglo-European discourse on gender oppression and the kitchen as a symbol of ubiquitous patriarchal social arrangement.