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"If They Don't Tell You, the Hair Will": Hair Narrative in Contemporary Women's Writing

Darina Pugacheva

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“IF THEY DON’T TELL YOU, THE HAIR WILL”:
HAIR NARRATIVE IN CONTEMPORARY WOMEN’S WRITING

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University
and Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of French Studies

by

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to my mothers

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	viii
ABSTRACT.....	x
INTRODUCTION.....	1
Chapter Overviews.....	17
CHAPTER ONE: HAIR AS LITERARY DEVICE IN CLASSICAL FRENCH LITERATURE.....	20
Combing Hair as a Narrative Device in French Medieval Literature.....	21
Hair as the Representation of the Other in the Nineteenth Century Poetry and Prose.....	30
CHAPTER TWO: TWISTED RELATIONSHIPS IN TONI MORRISON’S <i>BELOVED</i> AND FABIENNE KANOR’S <i>D’EAUX DOUCES</i>	50
CHAPTER THREE: UNDER BAKER’S KISS CURLS: AN INTERTWINED HAIR NARRATIVE IN GISÈLE PINEAU’S <i>FLEUR DE BARBARIE</i>	85
CHAPTER FOUR: FROM NARRATIVE TO LOCALITY: HAIR AS A CREATIVE SPACE IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE’S <i>AMERICANAH</i> AND BEYOND	124
CONCLUSION.....	156
Future Projects	164
WORKS CITED.....	167
VITA.....	174

LIST OF FIGURES

1 – Andre Walker’s definitions of hair types.....	14
2 – Amazon marketing strategies for textured hair.	15
3 – Oiseuse. Illustration from <i>Le Roman De La Rose (The Romance of the Rose)</i>	28
4 – Jeanne Duval by Felix Nadar (year unknown).....	33
5 – Josephine Baker	86
6 – Josephine Baker’s kiss curls, les accroche-cœurs.....	90
7 – Sarah Baartman “The Hottentot Venus”.....	91
8 – A German tobacco card of Josephine Baker, holding Bakerdoll.....	96
9 – Pluko advertisement.....	97
10 – Bakerfix advertisement.....	98
11 – The banana belt	108
12 – <i>Americanah</i> cover from the USA.....	146
13 – <i>Americanah</i> cover from Russia.....	146
14 – <i>Americanah</i> cover from Denmark.....	146
15 – <i>Americanah</i> cover from Italy.....	146
16 – <i>Americanah</i> cover from the UK.....	148
17 – <i>Americanah</i> cover from Portugal.....	148
18 – <i>Americanah</i> cover from Serbia.....	148
19 – <i>Americanah</i> cover from Croatia.....	148
20 – <i>Americanah</i> cover from Nigeria.....	149
21 – <i>Americanah</i> cover from Kenya.....	149
22 – <i>Americanah</i> cover from Spain.....	149

23 – <i>Americanah</i> cover from France.....	149
24 – <i>Counting</i> by Lorna Simpson (1991).....	162

ABSTRACT

The history of colonial and racial oppression made hair stories and testimonials fundamental to understanding hair as a unifying element particular for women of African descent in the post-slavery era. Seen as such, their hair narrations provide the first-person perspective of their life experiences while at the same time inviting a critical investigation of colonial and racial oppression. Contemporary women writers develop these types of narrations into a special language of hair that helps them tell a story that is not apparent or straightforward. This literary device that uses hair to uncover deeper social and political issues is bound up in identity politics that I call hair narrative. In my dissertation, I will analyze the works of authors from France, the United States, Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Nigeria: George Sand's *Indiana* (1832), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Fabienne Kanor's *D'eaux Douces* (2004), Gisèle Pineau's *Fleur de Barbarie* (2005), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), and Rokhaya Diallo's *Afro!* (2015). Very few critical works examine portrayals of hair in literature or analyze the meaning of hair representations in women's writing. In fact, no work has considered interrogating the way the history of hair is reflected in women's Anglophone and Francophone writing or the techniques women writers use to portray hair-related routines. This project will address this gap in the scholarship by investigating how and to what ends contemporary women writers use hair to tell an ancillary story of mother-daughter relationships, colonial oppression, displacement and diaspora, race and identity.

INTRODUCTION

I do not remember exactly when I noticed this, but once as I was watching the French musical *Notre Dame de Paris*, I eventually started wondering why Esmeralda, a dark-haired French Roma girl, had to die. Éponine in *Les Misérables*, whose hair is chestnut, died, too. Is it Hugo's signature to kill off the brunettes? And while I am it: why in a love triangle does a blonde always win the guy? These silly questions bothered me as I read more books, watched more movies, and listened to more operas and musicals. The patterns repeated themselves. Naïve as I was, for the longest time, I believed that dark-haired female protagonists are just not as fortunate as fair-haired ones. I was puzzled. As a *châtaine* (a French word actually used in Russian to signify a woman with chestnut hair), I have always loved the color of my hair, and the idea of dying it, like a lot of Russian women do, was never appealing. Yet somehow, unconsciously, I have considered any blond to be a threat to my love life, and up until recently all of my girlfriends (and this is true!) were mostly dark-haired.

Obviously, as I grew older, and especially after I started doing this research, I understood the gender politics of hair representations and the ways they affect people's readings of hair. Researching the dichotomy of "bad" dark-haired versus "good" fair-haired women in Medieval French literature helped me recognize that for centuries this distinction affected all genres of artistic creation in the Western hemisphere: literature, ballet, painting, etc. Only recently have musical, opera, and theater productions started to diversify the cast and move away from gender and racial stereotypes in order to debunk the long-lived dichotomy. Still, in the 2012 screen adaptation of *Les Misérables*, Cosette is a blonde, and Éponine is a brunette. Éponine sacrifices her life for Marius and dies, whereas Cosette marries him and lives happily ever after. How would the musical change if Cosette had dark hair, and Éponine were a blonde? One may easily imagine

this. Or think of any other artistic production, in which the protagonists are stereotypically represented with only a certain type/color of hair. It will probably seem wrong and strange. One will not be able to explain why, but blonde Esmeralda or Carmen would “feel” weird;¹ and a blonde witch, could no longer be a witch anymore, she’d have to be a fairy! When the female protagonists are represented, the audience assigns them particular qualities depending on the color and texture of their hair. These stereotypes are real: they affect our perception not only of literary or movie characters, but also of other people and ourselves. And like any other prejudices, they are incredibly hard to identify and therefore to overcome.

Hair is “everywhere:” it grows on people’s heads and into other people’s news feeds. Just recently, Lupita Nyong’o wore golden Afro picks in her hair with fists for handles for the Met Gala; her statement made people share the look on social media and express their thoughts on her Black power statement.² Missy Elliot noticed that in *Birdbox* (2018), Trevante Rhode’s character’s hair stays intact and does not grow after five years of overall decay in the world; somehow the audience is led to believe that under the terrifying circumstances of the movie, where the monsters took over, he finds time to look sharp. A lot of people who followed Missy laughed and vented over the plot holes and overall screenwriting negligence. Black Widow, the Marvel character portrayed by Scarlett Johansson, has changed her hair color from red to blond and back to red during the last installment of *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). The fans have looked for the clues as to why: some thought it meant to help the audience identify the timelines, and some dug for a deeper meaning of her sacrifice.

¹ Interestingly, the traditionally blond Rapunzel in Disney’s *Tangled* (2010) metaphorically loses her powers and becomes a short-haired brunette after Flynn (not the witch like it is in the original) cuts off her hair.

² I will discuss the meaning of an Afro pick and the fist on the handle in Chapter Four while discussing Rokhaya Diallo’s *Afro!*

People, famous and not, cut their hair, grow it, color it, braid it, shave it, etc.— somehow this very personal data finds its way into other people’s feeds and stirs debate. While remaining very intimate, hair participates in our everyday life. It irritates, amazes, puzzles, angers, seduces, charms, and represents us. Hair is a charged topic, and social media has contributed into making discussions about it even more stimulating. In 2012, Gabby Douglas’s “wrong” hairdo caused a backlash against her white parents. After her victory, the first African-American woman to ever win the individual all-around gold in gymnastics in the Olympics, Douglas, then a sixteen-year-old, dealt with the criticism of her adoptive family; they were accused of not taking good care of her hair. This criticism was and still remains a tendency. A famous case is 2009’s social media reaction concerning Zahara Jolie-Pitt, whom Angelina Jolie adopted from Africa. People were airing their apprehensions about how Jolie should take care of her daughter’s hair. In 2012 and 2015, a number of bloggers and journalists expressed their ideas about why and why not White parents should be judged for the way the hair of their adopted African children looks. In 2014, a famous blog “Chocolate hair, vanilla care” became a book with a similar title. It instructed parents in biracial/transracial families on the basics of natural hair styling.³ Also in 2014, the public was outraged about new military regulations on grooming, which “were considered ‘racially biased’ against women with ethnically diverse hair” (Stampler). In the winter of 2019, many Americans cheered because “the New York City Commission on Human Rights [released new guidelines stating that] the targeting of people based on their hair or hairstyle, at work, school or in public spaces, will now be considered racial discrimination” (Stowe).

³ In 2016 and 2018, French blogger and hairdresser, Nathalie Avomo Essono, turned her website <https://lpmdcc.com> into two books *Le petit manuel de cheveux crépus* (2016) and *Le petit manuel de coiffures crépues* (2018), which helped French and Francophone women of African descent understand their hair and embrace its natural state.

As for the fashion stigma over wearing natural hair, it has eased in the last couple of years mainly because famous women of color make a fashion and political statement out of it. Oprah posed for the September 2013 issue of *O-Magazine*'s cover wearing an Afro wig and inviting conversations about hair; Maria Borges, a Victoria's Secret model, wore a short Afro for the 2015 runway.

A noteworthy hair event abroad included a widely recognized exhibition *Cheveux chéris: Frivolités et trophies*, showed in the Musées du Quai Branly - Jacques Chirac in Paris in 2012 – 2013. This was a great display of hair from different cultures and epochs.⁴ A more intimate observation on hair and identity belongs to Cameroonian director Josza Anjembe, whose moving short film *Le bleu blanc rouge de mes cheveux* (2017) tells the story of a girl-teenager who wants to become a French citizen against her Cameroonian father's will. The real obstacle though is her Afro since it does not fit in the photo ID frame, symbolically indicating that she does not fit into French society.⁵ The girl goes to the nearest hair salon and has her hair shaved off.

The big moment for Black hair in cinematography came with the screening of *Black Panther*, a 2018 blockbuster that featured natural African hairstyles. The hair director for the film, Camille Friend, “insisted on natural hair for the actors and drew on [varied African ethnic groups'] looks,” (Miles).⁶ The inspiration behind natural hair looks was fairly simple: as people of

⁴ The exhibition was additionally on a display in 2018-2019 in the Abbaye de Daoulas, Brittany.

⁵ The movie was in part inspired by the director's personal experience.

⁶ This year, Camille Friend created two different hair styles and make-up looks for Lupita Nyong'o's characters in Jordan Peele's *Us* (2019). To portray the protagonist's frightening doppelganger, the actress wears a disheveled Afro wig. For the protagonist herself, the hair director used Nyong'o's natural hair to create sisterlocks, a thinner version of traditional locks. The two different hairstyles produce a strong cinematic effect: the combination of a crazy gaze and matted natural hair makes Nyong'o look out-of-this-world scary.

Wakanda, Marvel's imagined country in Africa, never knew slavery and White oppression, their hair was not repressed either. At one point in the movie, General Okoye, who has to wear a wig over her shaved head, calls the wig "a disgrace." Other leading actresses wear "Wakanda knots," elaborately woven braids, regal snow-white dreadlocks and decorate their bald scalps" (Miles). This "blockbuster moment for Black hair" led *Allure* to invite Lupita Nyong'o, *Black Panther's* lead actress, to pose for the cover of its first-ever issue on hair, entitled "The Culture of Hair," and discuss her hair journey. This happened within weeks of British *Grazia* magazine photoshopping her hair out of its cover and Nyong'o posting on social media with a hashtag #dtmh ("don't touch my hair") (Lee 22).

The rise of public awareness about hair of people of African descent has become possible mainly to the natural hair movement, which started in the 2000s in the U.S. and inspired women of color in every corner of the world, including France, Italy, Egypt, South Africa, Nigeria, etc. to share their hair stories.⁷ These stories and testimonials, originating in every corner of the world, have become fundamental to understanding hair as a unifying element, particularly for women of African descent in the post-slavery era. In this way, women's hair narrations provide the first-person perspective of their life experiences while at the same time inviting a critical investigation of colonial and racial oppression.

Contemporary women writers develop these hair concerns into a special language that helps them tell a story that is not apparent or straightforward. I call this literary device that uses hair to uncover deeper social and political issues bound up in identity politics *hair narrative*. In

⁷ "Over the last fifteen years, there has been an unmistakable movement among Black women to "go natural" (Norwood 1). I will discuss the natural hair movement and its global influence in Chapter Four, which is dedicated to Adichie's *Americanah*, a contemporary novel that touched the questions of immigration, diaspora, hair salons, and blogging.

my dissertation, I will analyze the works of authors from France, the United States, Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Nigeria: George Sand's *Indiana* (1832), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Fabienne Kanor's *D'eaux Douces* (2004), Gisèle Pineau's *Fleur de Barbarie* (2005), and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013). Very few critical works examine portrayals of hair in literature or analyze the meaning of hair representations in women's writing. In fact, no work has considered interrogating the way the history of hair is reflected in women's Anglophone and Francophone writing or the techniques women writers use to portray hair-related routines. This project will address this gap in scholarship by investigating how and to what ends contemporary women writers use hair to tell an ancillary story of slavery, colonial oppression, displacement, diaspora, and family relationships, and construct a subtle storyline, fed by hair narrative, through which they indirectly discuss politics, power, race, identity, gender performance, and class.

The idea of hair narrative stands at the intersection of two traditions: European and African. The literary European tradition of allusive storytelling, which I will explore in Chapter One, dates back to the Middle Ages and allows us to examine hair as a rhetorical device. By contrast, in Africa, hair is a language, which allows individuals within one ethnic group to demonstrate their social status, religious and political affiliation, cultural legacy, gender, ethnicity, etc. It is known that the hair styles of some tribal societies in Africa "reflect age, clan, occupation, status, sex and even mood" (Morrow 17). Therefore, hair becomes a form of communicating the self and tells a person's story. Volume 2 of *A Cultural History of Hair* poses an important question that I attempt to answer in my study: "If hair is a language, the next obvious question to ask is what does it communicate? Is there a common grammar even if it is the most basic sort? Is there a general consensus with regard to meaning?" (Milliken 1). I believe that hair narrative answers these questions by linking the traditions of verbal/literary and non-verbal storytelling.

Since hair unites anthropological, historical, philosophical, and societal studies, in my Introduction I address the meaning of hair and the hair of people of African descent in particular. Hair as a source of a serious study and research is often trivialized and overlooked. The Foreword to the volume entitled *Hair: Styling, Culture and Fashion* (2008) expresses the idea that “hair [has] exciting and diverse potential as an academic topic [...], so critical analysis of its practice and experience provides a fascinating and engaging entry point to contemporary debates around the body and its fashioning” (Cox ix). It calls for “a serious approach” to hair, as “a subject area richly deserving of new research” (Cox ix). Indeed, hair is an exciting field of research that, mostly due to the rise of importance of the fashion and hairstyles of the African diaspora, has started to receive more recognition recently.

In the Introduction to Volume 2 of *A Cultural History of Hair*, Roberta Milliken proposes an examination of hair studies as a field that has departed from purely “universal interpretation of hair as a symbol” (Milliken 9). She sees hair as an area of study which “views hair as a subtle and deceptively complicated cultural symbol, one that plays an integral role in establishing identity – both personal and social (8). Even though it is still common for hair scholars to associate hair “to varying degrees with sexuality and sexual potency [...] it is also important to note that they do so while simultaneously understanding that there is a flexibility and fluidity behind all of these principles that prevent them from ever forming anything as grand or as rigid as a comprehensive grammar of hair” (8-9). By “grammar of hair” she means a very limited interpretation of hair only as a sign of male/female sexuality, or of their social class. Instead, she suggests that contemporary hair studies offer “a more general embracing of the multivalent nature of the symbol that in turn leads to more focused studies of it within particular contexts” (9). This way, the scholars do not limit themselves to interpretation, but actually widen the scope by focusing on “specific periods,

places, and/or groups while [aiming] the lenses [...] at a certain kind of hair – whether it be the presence or absence of it; the length or the style of it; its locations on the head, face, or body; or the role it plays in rituals” (9). By connecting the emotional expressiveness of hair to the issues of power and taboo, such studies “get at such nuanced sophisticated topics that contemporary scholars often make use of more blended, interdisciplinary approaches” (9).

My project fits into the ongoing contemporary scholarship on hair and concentrates on hair history, racial tensions, identity, and social prejudices. The most famous works I use include Willie Morrow’s *400 Years Without a Comb* (1973), Ingrid Banks’s *Hair Matters* (2000), Ayana Byrd and Lori Tharps’s *Hair Story* (2002), Althea Prince’s *the Politics of Black Hair* (2010) and numerous articles by Deborah Pergament and Cheryl Thompson. Their rigorous research and extensive analysis of hair representations of people of African descent in the slavery and post-slavery eras help shed light on the conditions of enslaved people and their hair in addition to explaining beauty standards that African-American women are held to today.

A Martinican sociologist Juliette Sméralda in *Peau Noire, Cheveu Crépu: L'Histoire d'une Aliénation* (2004) explores the politics of hair of Afro-Caribbean women. She interrogates ethno-cultural colonial domination of one group over another showing the social control over appearances of individuals within the colonial system by means of using dominant norms and values. She also demonstrates the ways in which the hair of people of African descent responds to this domination.

Immediately upon their arrival to the American and Caribbean shores, African slaves learned very quickly that their skin and hair marked them as ugly: “In this new land dominated by pale skin and straight hair, African hair was deemed wholly unattractive and inferior by the Europeans” (Byrd and Tharps 13). Worse than human branding tattoos, African “nappy” hair

stigmatized generations of black women and men long after the abolition of slavery. At the same time, those stigmas aid in debunking the problematic binaries around which the hair issue centers: “the natural/unnatural Black, good/bad hair, and the authentic/inauthentic Black” (Thompson 831).

Terence Turner in “The Social Skin” explores interactions between society and the self through dressing and adornment:

The surface of the body, as the common frontier of society, the social self, and the psychobiological individual;[*sic.*] becomes the symbolic stage upon which the drama of socialization is enacted, and bodily adornment (in all its culturally multifarious forms, from body-painting to clothing and from feather head-dresses to cosmetics) becomes the language through which it is expressed. (486)

He concludes that in many cultures, hair is used as a means of communicate the social self: it speaks of mourning or distress, of a religious obligation, or “indicate[s] key stages in [people’s] lives” (Hahner 83).⁸ In this sense it unifies the experiences of men and women in the postcolonial era and gives them agency to engage in this “drama of socialization” and grants them voices (Turner 486). Hair and its management, being at the intersections of creative, experimental, practical but also cultural and political, is both a personal and a social practice, and as such remains fundamental to understanding our experiences as humans.

Some African ethnic group’s traditions, namely the Mende’s, provide a good example of hair’s “eruption into social space” as a means of a human being’s interactions with society (Turner 488). When hair is carefully trimmed and adorned according to the norms of the ethnic group, it manifests a social bond with and within the given group. Disheveled hair translates an individual’s “disharmony with society, the insane signal of their alienation from cultural norms and social

⁸ For example, the Yoruba use hairstyles to “designate age groups, distinguishing small boys and girls form each other and from those who entered adulthood through initiation rites” (Way 118).

integration” (Siegman 72). It is also important to mention that hairdressing in Africa is always entrusted to a friend or a relative because hair in the hands of enemies can be used to harm the owner of the hair or to steal their soul.⁹ In the Yoruba anthropocentric cosmology, the emphasis is on the head *Ori*. *Ori Inu*, the inner head, is chosen in the workshop of Ajalamopin, the heavenly potter, which is believed to contain an “enabling power,” *ase* (Lawal 93-94). *Ori Ode*, “the outer shell for the inner head,” is the physical head, which has biological and social importance and is perceived as “a site of perfection, communication, and identity” (95). The human head is, therefore, a binary vessel, in which both parts are equally important. “The desire for harmony between the two aspects of the head is expressed in the popular prayer “*Ori inu miko ma ba ti ode je*” (May my inner head not spoil my outer one), implying that our hair is a way to communicate our inner selves to the world (Lawal 95). Like among the Mende, Yoruban customs associated with death and mourning demonstrate how hair communicates the self:

[...] a widow was required to undo her braids, leave her hair disheveled, and remain indoors until the completion of her husband's funeral rites, which may last about three months. At the end of the mourning period, her head would be shaved clean to mark a symbolic separation from her deceased husband and a return to normal life. (Lawal 102)¹⁰

The widow's hair, first unkempt, then shaved off, is her sacrifice to the Gods, her husband, and the community. As the link between hair and social ceremonies can be clearly identified, all hair practices are ritualistic. A ritual, as Femi Euba explains,

whether physically or mentally, consciously or otherwise performed, presupposes a problematic state of mind which desires either a solution through a change or a maintenance of a certain condition or state of affairs. The ritual is therefore a confrontation or a struggle with fate, which requires a sacrifice. Without a conflict,

⁹ In this sense, one can consider forced head shaving or hair relaxing as a way of stealing one's identity. For more on that, see Chapter Two and Chapter Three.

¹⁰ As the Yoruban tradition dictates, “the head of the corpse, male or female, was shaved clean before burial” (Lawal 102).

there is no need for a sacrifice; and sacrifice is the focal point of the drama. (Euba 6)

This definition, although formulated for theatrical plays, will work well in understanding the tension that women experience when it comes to hair braiding, care, alterations, shaving, etc. These hair rituals are (usually) repetitive and invite “a change or maintenance” of the condition of one’s head. The outcomes vary depending on the intention, but they serve as means of controlling/regulating one’s hair in accordance with the rules of one’s community. In the novels that I will examine, the protagonists, willingly or unwillingly, pay the price for the hair ritual: they may sacrifice their time, comfort, relationships, their identity or health, and sometimes, their lives. As we shall see, hair always creates a relationship between the person touching it and the person whose hair is touched. It is not always a relationship of trust and respect, but it creates a drama— a core element of any good storytelling.

The story of hair that I will study in this dissertation begins in Africa but extends to the North America and the Caribbean. African slaves did not have either time or “treasured utensils,” African combs, to fix their hair in the New World (Byrd and Tharps 12). It is also known that “out of desperation for a tool to replace the African combs, slaves began using a sheep fleece carding tool to untangle their hair” (12). Consequently, as slaves could not care sufficiently for their hair, “scalp diseases like ringworm became pervasive among the slave population, as did lice infestations” (13). *Hair Story* mentions that slaves attempted to hide infections and scabs by covering their heads and wearing head rags, which would cause “a worse infection [to] ensue, creating a vicious cycle of hair problems, breakage, and patchy baldness” (13). As time went on and slave masters understood that they needed to “protect their investments,” slaves were allowed a little more time for personal hygiene. House slaves played a crucial part in what Willie Lee

Morrow, a famous barber and black hair historian, calls the “hair care revolution” (Morrow 35). According to his book *400 Hundred Years Without a Comb* (1973), a house slave was “a special slave who gradually grew indispensable to the slave tradition” (37). House slaves knew their masters’ habits: they were around to see how their masters cleaned themselves and what they did to their hair. Thus, “the house slave[s] were able to instruct the field slave[s], when [they] came into contact with [them], in the proper way of grooming according to the masters [themselves]” (37).¹¹ Morrow concludes that the house slaves became the first barbers and hairdressers after the Civil War.

The history of hair during slavery and colonialism is especially important, because it lays the foundation for understanding current trends in racial and beauty oppression in the U.S. and globally. In addition, the review of American scholarly writing on hair of people African descent allows us to note that these scholars examine “Black hair,” as they call it, mostly within the context of American history, thus using the word “Black” to represent *all* people of African descent or applying it solely to African-American experiences and often overlooking the role of hair for other regions of the world.

In this sense, the usage of “Black hair” generalizes and universalizes the uniqueness of the hair experiences of people of African descent in different parts of the world. As a scholar, I find the usage of the term “Black hair” controversial and problematic. One is tempted to ask a question: who is “Black”? Are Creoles “Black”? Do they have *Black* hair? What about Afro-French? Or Maghrebians? Or Cubans? Some of them are of African descent, yet they are not “Black,” in the

¹¹ Morrow often refers to a slave as “he” almost neglecting female slaves and their experience. In order to underline the ubiquitous horror of the slave experience for both men and women, I prefer to use a pronoun *they*.

sense that they may have their own ideas of “Blackness.” Besides, the hair of Afro-Caribbean people is not similar to the hair of Nigerians or Senegalese. Even African hair types and textures are very diverse, which is the reason why their hairstyles differ from group to group.

In answering this concern, Carolette R. Norwood reminds us:

it is self-determined and more about identity politics than physical attributes, as people who are “Black” (self-defined or otherwise) may vary in physical attributes: from fair to dark skin; from straight to tightly coiled hair; from narrow to wide nostrils; from a flat back to an ample trunk, etc. [Therefore,] race is very much about power dynamics; it is an oppressive force that manifests and reproduces social hierarchies and inequities. (Norwood 3)

This means that both “Black” and “Black hair” are racial and social constructs, which, on the one hand, attempt to universalize the practices of “Black” people. Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* (2000) explains that “Black” women are oppressed along three dimensions—political, economic and ideological—and that these oppressions can be felt at the personal, group and/or systemic levels of social institutions (Collins quot. in Norwood 3). Norwood concludes that “when it comes to Black women’s hair, all of these work simultaneously under the yoke of a global, interlocking system—what hooks aptly calls “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (Norwood 3).¹² This implies there is a certain “solidarity coalesced through mutual experiences under colonialism and slavery” (3).

This thought leads to another question: what kind of hair do people of African descent have then? Will it be more appropriate to focus on its texture, rather than the “color”? Andre Walker’s (in)famous hair chart classifies all hair types the following way:

¹² For more on “Black” womanhood under White patriarchy, see Chapter Two.



Figure 1. Andre Walker's definitions of hair types.

Created back in 1990s, the “hair chart” helped Walker sell his products, but in 2010s it has been criticized for being hierarchical thus reinforcing the old biases of straight hair being “good” and kinky hair being “bad.” Nevertheless, nothing better has been invented since and a lot of websites that promote natural hair care, like <http://www.naturallycurly.com/> or <https://www.kinkycurlycoilyme.com/> have adapted the chart, added more subclasses under types 3 and 4, and use the classification to recommend the best treatment for different types of hair. Recently, “textured” hair has been chosen as the umbrella term for coily, kinky, springy, frizzled, frizzy, ringlets, corkscrews, and curly—a more neutral term devoid of racial connotations associated with the words “woolly,” “nappy,” or “ethnically diverse hair”. An inclusive word for all people who have “grain” in their hair and include people of Jewish and Arabic descent, for example, who often have to deal with the similar problems with their hair as do people of African descent: from entanglement, dryness, breakage, to other people attempting to touch their hair while calling it a “Jewfro.” Many Jewish and Arabic girls relax their hair and boys shave it off or chop it close to the skull.

Commercial brands have embraced “textured hair,” a trendy word for their viable purposes. Garnier started targeting biracial families by producing shampoos under the trademarks *Whole Blends*. Their marketing slogan is #blendedmakesusbetter. Earlier in 2019 Amazon begun promoting the following kinds of product labels and advertisement to people of color:



Figure 2. Amazon marketing strategies on textured hair.

Employing the term “textured” is a great way to address hair without using race as an indicator. But it is obvious that Amazon failed to use it inclusively. Judging by the pictures, they target African-Americans who have the types of hair indicated in Figure 2. Amazon attempted to make a commercial representation that avoids using “Black hair” and technically could have included all the diverse representations of textured hair in the visual component but chose not to do so.

My overall observation is that since I started my research in 2014, there has been a narrative shift toward accentuating texture over color when discussing the hair of people of African descent. Recently, “textured” and “coily” are the adjectives that I have seen and read in scholarly and journal articles to replace “Black,” which seems like a step in the right direction.

The writers I will study use the word “black” or “noir” in very specific contexts, which do not always concern hair. Adichie in *Americanah* talks about “American Blacks” and “Non-American Blacks” (4). She uses “Black hair” to discuss a specific culture that exists in the United States and controls the lives not only of African-American women but also of women of African descent who immigrate to the U.S. Kanor’s heroine describes other women’s hair (her mother’s, for example) as *noir*, but she refers to her own hair as *crépu*.¹³ Pineau uses the word *cheveu* without an adjective describing its color or racial attribute. In Morrison’s universe, hair is just hair, not “Black hair.” She only color-codes the hair of white people. This also means that the women writers that are classified as “Black” do not necessarily see themselves or their characters as such: they allow themselves and their heroines a variety of ways to be women of color.

In understanding that “Black” expresses both uniformity and diversity in the experiences of people of African descent, I will not fully adopt the term “Black hair” in its generalizing implications for my research, but I will use it to discuss African-American hair history and examine the hair locality of “American Blacks” and “Non-American Blacks” in *Americanah*. In order to illustrate some similarities in hair experiences among African-American, Afro-Caribbean, Afro-French communities and African ethnic groups, I will simply use the word *hair* or hair of people of African descent. To specify the uniqueness of hairstyling practices and traditions, I will talk about African-American hair, Afro-Caribbean hair, Nigerian hair, etc. This detailed work will allow a more diverse insight into the hair history of people of African descent around the world.

¹³ For more on *cheveux crépus*, see Chapter Two.

Chapter Overview

Chapter One: Hair as a Literary Device in Classical French Literature explores the representations of women's hair in classical literature from Chrétien de Troyes to Charles Baudelaire, from Marie de France to George Sand. It examines the difference between hair descriptions in men's literature, where hair is an object of men's desire, and in women's literature, where hair usually demonstrates a relationship between a woman, her hair, and her voice. For example, in *Indiana* (1832), Sand uses the description of a dead Creole woman's hair to uncover the truth about her death. Here, hair represents Indiana, the protagonist, but it does not tell her story or give her a voice, thus still treating her as a passive character without agency. This colonial framing of hair narrative contrasts with the rest of my dissertation, in which I analyze hair narrative in postcolonial contexts that makes female protagonists active participants and grants them their voices.

Chapter Two: Twisted Relationships in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Fabienne Kanor's *D'eaux douces* explores the deeper meanings of mother-daughter conflicts by examining hair narrative in portraying disturbingly twisted and traumatizing relationships between women who take care of their own and each other's hair. Hair narrative in these novels develops the idea that hair in a mother-daughter relationship reveals a relationship that is not simply a conflict, but rather a power play that can easily lead to death. Authoritarian mothers who are unable to cope with their own lives under oppressive and racist conditions seek control over the only thing that is available to them: their daughters' hair. Under these circumstances daughters and their hair become both a source and a target of their mothers' power, which they wield using the weapons they have at hand: a brush and a hot comb.

Chapter Three: Under Baker's Kiss Curls: an Intertwined Hair Narrative in Gisèle Pineau's *Fleur de Barbarie* analyzes the controversial influence of the figure of Josephine Baker ("the Black Venus") and her coiffure on the life of Josette, a young girl from Guadeloupe, whose French adoptive mother both deepened her alienation by shaving her hair off and made her confident and self-aware by comparing her to "the Black Venus." Hair narrative in this novel is intertwined with the hair story of Josephine Baker. Josette's foster mother shaves off her hair, and makes her wear Baker's banana belt as a child for Mardi Gras. The belt and her shorn head symbolize her repressed identity, as this is the only hair model that is available to her. Later in life, during Mardi Gras in Guadeloupe, after Josette learns how to take care of her hair, she decides to shave it off again as a means of celebrating her newly found identity, which for her is anchored in Baker's "flapper" look. This hair narrative arc paradoxically reconnects her with her younger self and helps her embrace what it means to be her.

Chapter Four: From Narrative to Locality: Hair as a Creative Space in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* examines hair both as a narrative and as locality, a type of social bond that exists between displaced people of the same ethnic backgrounds and experiences, which unifies them in their attempt to be and feel 'local' while living abroad. Ifemelu, a Nigerian woman who lives in the United States, claims that she became Black only when she moved to the U.S. As she searches for a space where she can express herself freely, she turns to her hair as a source of inspiration. Puzzled by the pressure of being "Black" and conducting herself as such, and trying to make sense of her hair and the racism associated with it, she breaks the polite silence and starts a blog that invites women to comment and contribute, thus designing a virtual community for everyone who has "Black hair." Adichie develops hair narrative into a virtual space, in which hair becomes a marker of "locality" (as Appadurai calls it): a safe space for the main character, where

she can be herself and be at home. A noteworthy example of hair locality in contemporary French literature is presented by Rokhaya Diallo's book *Afro!* (2015). The book creates a "relational and contextual" space within which people's stories, literary texts, songs, and other forms of artistic creation have a meaningful conversation about hair (Appadurai 1996, 178).

To tell the story of hair is inevitably to tell the story of a person and the society. My dissertation uses hair as a lens through which I explore humanity, contemporary culture and politics. Hair narrative is a subtext, a micro story, that aims to understand wider issues at play while focusing on a personal story. Micro narratives grant readers a large-scale view of history and society that some macro narratives may fail to achieve. This implies that hair narrative is crucial for expressing a socio-political stance and criticism. As hair has become a fast-growing global market, hair narratives allow us to question and interrogate beauty oppression that simply masks racial oppression. What remains is the following question: how can hair narrative help us better appreciate and embrace diversity and end racism?

CHAPTER ONE

HAIR AS A LITERARY DEVICE IN CLASSICAL FRENCH LITERATURE

Depicting Samson's strength or Rapunzel's sexuality, Medusa's insanity or Mary Magdalene's sin and repentance, hair has always been a feature worth describing. From the Middle Ages to the modern era, hair has "not [been] just ornamental, but [a] magical" element that adds a symbolic depth to a character, a female one in particular (193).

In this chapter I will examine the development of hair descriptions as a literary device in French men's and women's writing from the Middle Ages to modern times and demonstrate how and to what extent, hair, as a body part and a signifier of gender, race, and class surpasses the descriptive realm and plays a crucial narrative role.

In the Middle Ages combing hair was a means of talking about the text itself, as well as metaphorically representing women, while in the nineteenth century, the narrative functions of hair are mostly metaphorical and symbolic. On a larger scale, the narrative dimension of hair representations in the Middle Ages lays a foundation for the metaphorical function of hair later in French literature. If in the Middle Ages authors use portrayals of hair to distinguish "good" characters from "bad," in the nineteenth century, as Romanticism invites readers to dive into the pool of a character's emotions, and Realism strives to represent new social classes of men and women, hair metaphors begin to extend the good/bad dichotomy and allow deeper insights into characters, especially women. As I will demonstrate, hair descriptions and their metaphorical meaning in men's and women's writing up until the nineteenth century do not differ considerably: in both men's and women's works female hair usually represents a woman as object of male gaze and desire. However, George Sand's *Indiana* (1832) is an exception: while still allowing the male gaze to dominate her hair descriptions, the writer introduces a different kind of female character,

a *Créole* woman, whose hair reveals her social and racial identity. Sand, unconscious of racial prejudices linked the image of the Other, creates a powerful, if colonial, hair narrative.

This chapter is a brief sampling of hair portrayals in different time periods. I am not attempting to present a comprehensive study of hair in French literature but rather, by contrast, to find several representative examples, which define my project. I have chosen hair descriptions from medieval and nineteenth-century French literature, as I believe that they illustrate convincingly how authors used hair to narrate stories in the past, which helps me trace the development of hair narrative to the contemporary writing that I will discuss in the succeeding chapters.

Combing Hair as a Narrative Device in French Medieval Literature

A valuable example of an early comparison between a poetic discourse and well-combed hair can be found in Geoffrey de Vinsauf's *Poetria Nova* (~1200). First, he names six vices that can “disgrace” a poem, and he then asserts: ¹⁴

Lo, I have given you a comb, with which, if they be combed, your poems may gleam – as well those in prose as the metrical. And if you ply the comb well, you will be able with this mirror to discern beauty plainly: when you consider the appearance of a word, to see if perchance some lurking worm befouls it, let not the ear nor the mind alone be the judge. (103)¹⁵

Any text, the author suggests, is synonymous with hair, therefore the writing, poetic and prosaic, needs to be brushed out in order to shine and tell a good story. Geoffrey de Vinsauf's “comb” is a

¹⁴ According to Geoffrey de Vinsauf, these vices are: a frequent juxtaposition of vowels, an inordinate amount of alliteration, an excessive repetition of words, and word endings, sentences with too many subordinate clauses, and “violation of normal word order” (102).

¹⁵ Unfortunately, I was not able to find either the version in French/Old French, or in the original Latin. It is a guess, but perhaps a “lurking worm” was a mistranslation of “lice” in Latin, which would have worked so well with the metaphor of a comb. I am not sure how a comb is supposed to brush out a worm, unless it simply reveals it.

combination of rhetorical tools which, if used as directed, will clean the text of wordiness and awkwardness. The “mirror” in this message represents a way of looking at the hair/text and estimate its silkiness/smoothness by the eye, “not the ear not the mind alone” (103). A woman, who observes herself in the mirror and brushes her hair, an important Medieval poetic trope, becomes a rhetorical representation of a text reflecting on its own beauty.

Geoffrey de Vinsauf’s hair/text care toolbox invites us to further examine the usage of hair in the French Medieval literature. Chrétien de Troyes’s narrative verse romances provide many intriguing examples of hair metaphors and narrations. For example, in *Le Roman de Perceval ou le Conte du Graal* (1180-1181), Blanchefleur, Perceval’s sweetheart, is first introduced by her hair:

Les chaveus tieux, s’estre poïst,
Que bien quidast qui les veïst
Que il fuissent tot de fin or,
Tant estoient luisant er sor. (1811-1814)

[Elle avait laissé ses cheveux libres et leur nature était telle, si la chose est possible, qu'on aurait dit à les voir qu'ils étaient entièrement d'or pur, tant leur dorure avait de lumière]. (Méla 145)¹⁶

As Milliken explains, on the one hand, the physical description of women in medieval literature always precedes any other information shared about them; and this is how the readers know if the women “are [morally] good or bad” (2012 41). In this description hair plays the ultimate role: “a woman's hair is time and time again singled out as a basic attribute of her beauty, her desirability, or even her worth. Therefore, it is not only the basic feature of her identity; it is also highly significant of her cultural value” (41). Therefore, it is not accidental that the ideal of hair Medieval

¹⁶ Translation by Charles Méla. Chrétien de Troyes, *Le conte du Graal ou le roman de Perceval*, trans. Charles Méla. Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1990,145.

aesthetics is blond, golden hair: “[The] blonde hair is often linked to gold, for this association conveniently underscores its desirability and worth. A girl or woman with long, radiant gold tresses represented the ideal; she was the epitome of loveliness largely because of her blonde tresses” (41). Joseph Bédier in his twentieth-century retelling of the twelfth-century narrative poem of Tristan and Iseut provide another good example of a heroine whose blond hair identifies her.¹⁷ She is called “Iseut la Blonde,” “Belle aux cheveux d’or,” and later “la reine aux cheveux d’or” as her hair is her primary characteristic (Bédier 20, 28, 43). Milliken asserts that “in this tale Iseult is functioning as a typical heroine of romance, which means she must be beautiful,” a conclusion that can be attributed to any of Chretien de Troyes’s romances: “If a woman is a worthy lady in this genre, one who inspires and motivates a good knight, she does so because she is deserving of such attention, which means she is beautiful. In short, if a lady is beautiful, she has beautiful hair” (41).

The description of Blanchefleur in *Le conte du Graal* fits this statement perfectly. Her hair is golden; she makes a pleasant impression both on Perceval and the reader. Hence, she is a good and beautiful woman. Yet on the narrative level, her extraordinary freely-flowing hair, elaborately described and glorified, symbolizes the text of Chrétien de Troyes. It is so precious that it is golden! He admires his own creation and creativity, expressing it by means of hair writing.

Similarly, in *Lancelot ou le Chevalier de la Charette* (1777 - 1881), after the abduction of Guinevère, the wife of King Arthur, Lancelot seeks to find her. Lancelot is also in love with the queen, so he is torn between his duty to the king and his feelings for the queen. During his quest in the forest he finds an ivory comb, which belongs to Guenièvre, but Lancelot does not know this yet. He sees that the woman who lost the comb “avait laissé aux dents du peigne / Bien une demi-

¹⁷ Tristant or Tristam are the alternative spellings in other versions of the story, as well as Iseult.

poignée de ses cheveux” (1367-1368). This hair is a means of introducing this ‘unknown’ woman without naming her just yet. As the color of her hair is not stated, the readers do not know right away if she is “good” or “bad,” which creates an enigma about her.

As Lancelot admires the locks and the ivory comb, his fellow traveler explains to him:

Que les cheveux que vous voyez
Si beaux, si blonds, si étincelants,
Qui restent accrochés aux dents du peigne,
Viennent de la chevelure de la reine. (1426-1429)

Now we know that this blond, shimmering hair belongs to Queen Guenièvre, the object of the knight’s desire. Both her hair and the comb represent the knight’s longing for the woman. These objects are the closest that Lancelot can be to her right at that moment, and his interactions with them illustrate how Guenièvre’s hair is a metonym for her sexuality. When the knight’s companion asks him to pass her the comb, Lancelot agrees:

Le lui donne, mais pas avant d'en avoir retiré les cheveux
Si doucement qu'il n'en rompt aucun
Jamais yeux ne verront
Honoré un objet
Comme il se met à révéler les cheveux ;
Bien cent mille fois il les applique
Contre ses yeux, contre sa bouche,
Contre son front et son visage :
Leur contact le plonge dans l'extase.
Les cheveux de la reine sont pour lui bonheur et richesse :
Sur sa poitrine, près du cœur, il les place
Entre chemise et chair. (1470-1481)

As Guenièvre’s hair is a metonymical representation of her, the act of pressing her locks to Lancelot’s face is an allegory for love making. As her hair stands for her whole self, the knight climaxes while touching it.

It is important to note here that touching one's hair, as I will explain in this study, holds the key to hair storytelling. In many examples that will follow, I will accentuate how hair 'talks' when it comes in contact with a touch of a hand. Yet, it is mostly postcolonial women writers who will initiate hair narrative with a touch of a hand. In Medieval literature the male gaze is more powerful than touch; hair mainly functions as a visual aid.

On the narrative level, hair and a comb are textual representations of the beautiful poetry of Chrétien de Troyes. This argument is supported by the way Lancelot treats that precious objects. Just as Lancelot carefully frees the hair from its ivory prison without breaking a single strand, so does Chrétien unravel the story of the Queen and foreshadow her future encounter with Lancelot without breaking a single narrative strand. Like Lancelot who touches the hair, his "bonheur et richesse" "cent mille fois," the author rereads and admires his polished and beautiful text, which is as shimmering and marvelous as the Queen's hair; as he "brushes" his poem with Guenièvre's comb and admires her strands of hair and his poetic lines, he reaches ecstasy (1479, 1475).

De Vinsauf's concept of "combing the text" allows us to understand a deeper connection between the hair, its narrative dimension, and the text. In *Le Roman de la Rose* (~1230 – 1280) the poetic uses of a mirror and a comb in the hands of a woman who brushes her hair continue the narrative tradition of sexual and textual symbolism of hair representations.¹⁸ Here, the blond hair remains the metonym for woman's sexuality, but acquires a new layer of meaning: observing oneself while combing hair signifies laziness, frivolity and sexual licentiousness.

The allegorical poem follows l'Amant (the Lover) who tries to obtain the object of his desire, la Rose (the Rose). He attempts to spy on her and gets inside a paradise-like garden, where

¹⁸ According to *A Cultural History of Hair in the Middle Ages* (volume 2), *Le Roman de la Rose* was "completed between 1269 and 1278" (164). Other sources indicate that Guillaume de Lorris started writing it around 1230 and Jean de Meun completed it, in a different style, ca. 1270-80.

he meets Oiseuse (Idleness), whose hair is “blonds comme un basin” (37). It seems as if the storyteller respects the traditional female-character depiction, describing in the usual order the woman’s hair and its color, and then her face and the eyes, followed by her skin, body, clothes, etc. Yet, after the narrator finishes the portrait, he turns his attention back to her hair:

Courait un chapelet de roses,
En sa main un miroir brillait,
Un riche peigne maintenait,
Surmontant sa riche coiffure,
Les tresses de sa chevelure
[...] Car était faite sa journée
Quant ses cheveux avait peigné. (39)

The presence of a comb and a mirror reiterates de Vinsauf’s writing advice: as the maiden spends a whole day brushing and braiding her hair, as well as narcissistically admiring herself in the mirror, the author as well spends days writing, polishing, and brushing his text, and his day is done when the beautiful narration is written. Then he, idly, like Oiseuse, can admire his creation, at the same time looking into the narrative mirror and “discern its beauty” (Geoffrey de Vinsauf 103). The beautiful braid ornamenting Oiseuse’s head is the indicator that his day’s work is finished.

As for the metaphorical representation of hair, “all of these references to the fair tresses of the beautiful woman deliberately serve to solidify the connection between idleness, vanity, and feminine sexuality or lust. As demonstrated here in the figure of Idleness, they open the door to unwise and unhealthy cupidinous love” (Milliken 2012, 115). The rose in Oiseuse’s hair is supposed to confuse l’Amant and make him think that she is the Rose. Yet, there is another indication that the idle golden-haired beauty in front of him is not his beloved: she wears a cord around her shoulders, which is supposed to hint to an attentive reader that Oiseuse is an easy woman. Milliken explains that “the connection between long, loose uncovered hair and unchaste women seems so profound that in addition to being a stock feature of representations of lust it also

becomes a popular emblem of promiscuous women and prostitutes” (115). The manuscript of *Le Roman de la Rose* produced in 1365 contains an image of a woman with her hair loose, no comb or mirror in her hands (Figure 3).¹⁹

Like in many other portraits, she has long blond hair, yet if the comb and the mirror allegorically represent her as idleness, their absence in play with her loose hair stands for lust. Milliken explains that “any woman who was using her sexuality to make a living or simply enjoying it would be mindful and careful of her long hair and thus use it to her advantage by drawing attention to it through artful display” (115). She further asserts that “to differentiate a harlot from a "good" or "honest" [woman...] dictated that prostitutes needed to sport certain clear signs to identify them as such. Sometimes striped hoods or aiguillettes (a braided cord on/around the shoulder) were required.” (115).

¹⁹ Traditionally Oiseuse is depicted with both the comb and the mirror. “Illustrations of the character Idleness from *Le Roman de la Rose* further strengthen the connection to vanity and lust simply by representing her with a mirror and a comb in hand. For instance, in one illustration of her from a fourteenth-century manuscript of the work, Idleness occupies the center of the frame, sitting on a grassy knoll with the Lover on one side of her and a tree on the other. It is not difficult to identify the subject of the miniature as the Lover's initial meeting with Idleness. Nor is it difficult to identify Idleness, for she is in the midst of styling her hair. Even though the Lover seems to be talking to her, she still seems utterly absorbed in the reflection of herself in the mirror while in her left hand she grasps her comb. In other words, her uncovered head with loose, long blonde hair, the mirror, and the comb are sufficient details to establish both who the figure is and what she represents. In fact, most of the other details Guillaume de Lorris integrated to distinguish her and her beauty are not depicted in this miniature; for instance, gone are her distinctive coat and gloves, and even her chaplet of gold and roses are absent” (Milliken 2012, 115).



Figure 3. Oiseuse.²⁰

Le Roman De La Rose (The Romance of the Rose) University of Chicago Library MS 1380. Image courtesy of the Sheridan Libraries, Johns Hopkins University.

Oiseuse is often depicted with her dress cut low, but the cord is hardly noticeable on her shoulder. Nevertheless, de Lorris, who wrote the first part of the *Roman*, gives as clear description: “[Elle] a lacets étaient ses deux manches, / un cordon régnait tout autour” (de Lorris and de Meung 39). In this manner the narrator warns the readers: the woman l’Amant is talking to is a prostitute.

Woman’s loose hair as a signifier of her social and sexual behavior is pertinent in other literary and artistic representations. Some of the most remarkable of them are the Medieval depictions of Mary Magdalene as a saint. Traditionally, she is represented naked but with her loose, long hair covering her fully, thus clothing her. Her hair in these iconographic images doubles as her clothes that are simultaneously absent and present. Yet it is unclear who she is either, because she “has seemingly become her hair” (Howell Jolly 166). This representation is a rhetorical ornament: in Medieval literature the naked body represents the truth about a person. As Mary

²⁰ *Le Roman de la Rose*, University of Chicago Library MS 1380, [image number 17], [leaf number 3], Special Collection Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

Magdalene's hair hides the truth about her and her past, it symbolizes her repentance and represents her rebirth. Howell Jolly suggests that "her long hair paradoxically recalls her vanity and promiscuousness, but also her renunciation, conversion, and penitence," whereas Milliken indicates that "the direct connection between women, sexuality, and hair makes it almost impossible not to see the holy woman if not as another suspiciously sexual woman, then at the very least as a less than perfect ideal. In short, her long tresses mark her as the ambiguous creature that her androcentric society believed her to be" (Howell Jolly 166, Milliken 2012, 6). This ambivalent representation of an important religious figure is a vital indicator of the mores of Medieval society, where a woman should clearly be either "good" or "bad."

This idea is particularly vital when exploring Sémiramis, the Queen of Babylon, who is depicted both as combing her hair, as braiding it, and as having it loose. An anecdote, told by Valerius Maximus and retold by many writers, like Guillaume de Machaut and Christine de Pizan, recounts how Sémiramis, a great female sovereign, while having her hair done in her apartment, received a messenger, who announced that Babylon had rebelled. With her hair half-braided, Sémiramis stormed the city, swearing that she would not finish braiding her hair until she conquered the capital. When she did, to celebrate her victory, a bronze statue was cast of the queen fully armed with her hair half-braided.²¹ Due to this visual representation and the fact that the queen had an incestuous relationship with her son and allegedly married him, there are two perceptions of Sémiramis: Christine de Pizan suggests that she is a great warrior and leader, regardless of her transgressions, whereas Bocaccio thinks that the queen is "lost through her immoral desire" (Szkilnik 72). Her hair is a representation of this ambiguity: she is a "proper"

²¹ Michelle Szkilnik and Cynthia Jane Brown, "Antoine Dufour: Vies Des Femmes Célèbres." *The Cultural and Political Legacy of Anne De Bretagne: Negotiating Convention in Books and Documents*, Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 2010, 71.

woman with braided hair, who is fit to rule the kingdom, and a loose, immoral woman with her untamed hair. In this instance, hair is both a metaphor for how the woman is represented and a narrative which tells of her ambiguous representation.

Hair as the Representation of the Other in the Nineteenth Century Poetry and Prose

In the nineteenth century hair representations shift from direct text allegories to non-text metaphors yet they retain the same narrative functions. As we have seen, in the Middle Ages hair narratives were developed by male writers primarily; in the nineteenth century this tendency persists. Honoré de Balzac in *Le Père Goriot* and *Eugénie Grandet*, Gustave Flaubert in *Madame Bovary* and *L'Éducation sentimentale*, Zola in *Nana*, Stendhal in *Le Rouge et le noir*, and other novelists “feature women as central and important characters” and “concern themselves with hair” (Rifelj 30). Carol Rifelj in *Coiffures: Hair in Nineteenth-Century French Literature and Culture* (2010) suggests the following:

As readers, we expect that when a physical trait is highlighted, it is relevant to the impression we should form of the character. In general, portraits of women include more direct physical description than those of men, mentioning specific parts of the body and giving details about them. These portrayals often convey a great deal of information, and hair is frequently prominent in them. (22)

Not much changes in literary portrayals of women’s hair since the Middle Ages: its representations still provide descriptive characteristics for the female protagonist that tell readers about a woman’s character, mood, age, and sensuality that they “must read” in order to understand her (33). What does change is that “the words *cheveux* (hair) and *chevelure* (used for a full head of hair), are often replaced in novels by more precise terms [, which] not only suggest status or character traits: they also refer to particular styles in vogue at different periods and in different social contexts” (34).²²

²² For more on the language of hairstyles in nineteenth-century France, see Carol Rifelj, 32-82.

This implies that hair descriptions become more elaborate, conveying a wider range of attributes and allow for more personalized and intriguing insights into the lives of characters. Additionally, hair narratives now include not only depictions of high-class aristocratic women, but, with the rise of realism and romanticism, of women from different social classes and from other, usually exotic, places.

Many anthropologists and hair historians argue that “through the eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth” hair becomes instrumental in distinguishing the Europeans from the non-Europeans (Vermeulen 135). It was during this time that “comparative studies of human anatomy were used to separate humans into ‘races’” and “hair [was] foregrounded as a means to discriminate among various *Homo sapiens*” (Cheang 28, Vermeulen 135). For example,

“the *Europaeus*” had “long, blond hair,” while “the *Afer*” (African) had “‘frizzled’ black hair. [...] Such classifications and ordering of humans and other animals, in turn, aided emerging conceptions of “race” designed to exclude persons from the African continent from Enlightenment notion of “universal” equality and freedom. According to popular scientific theories [of that time], “hair” was the purview of white Europeans, whereas “wool” was the proper designation for the hair of African persons, whom the theories sought to animalize and distinguish from the “human.” (Vermeulen 135)²³

²³ Cheang notes that “by the eighteenth century, racial theories were being developed along with white Western imperialism and slavery, so that the racial hierarchy confirmed a worldview in which white socio-economic domination over non-whites was somehow ‘natural’ (28). As I discussed in the Introduction, the same ‘classification’ allowed the colonizers to characterize the hair of the enslaved peoples as “bad.” This idea has haunted generations of people of African descent, and the debate around it being the reason for both beauty oppression and commodification of human hair goes on, for example, in Chris Rock’s documentary *Good Hair* (2009). Additionally, the concept of “universalism” was debunked by the writers of the Negritude movement, like Martinique’s Aimé Césaire, and later, by the philosophers who proclaimed *créolisation* as anti-universalism, like Édouard Glissant, who declared “le droit à la différence” for everybody. (Glissant 203).

This ‘distinction’ allowed the shameless collection of hair from the inhabitants of the colonies, which was promoted as “the pursuit of knowledge of colonial subject,” and cemented “the metonymical relationship between hair, bodies and identities [implying] that hair makes a good substitute for the whole person,” which invested the hair of the *Other* with fetishistic attributes (Cheang 35-36). Moreover, as the white male gaze views colonized women’s hair as a fetish, it marks their bodies as both desirable and taboo.

This type of colonial narrative is an important ingredient of Charles Baudelaire’s poetry. *La Chevelure* (1857), a deeply sensual poem is dedicated to his lover, Jeanne Duval (c.1820-1862) (Figure 2), a Haitian-born Créole woman of French and Black-African descent. The rumor has it that the poet called her “the mistress of mistresses” and his *Vénus noire*.²⁴ The fact that Baudelaire called his lover “Black Venus,” (probably after he heard of or perhaps saw the Hottentot Venus) suggests that the poet trivializes and reduces her image to just the body, thus depriving her of any agency. Hair narrative in *La Chevelure* spells this out.

Felix Nadar, a nineteenth-century photographer, took a picture of Jeanne Duval presumably in 1858 (Figure 2). One look at her portrait explains the reason why Baudelaire was so obsessed with her hair: without any doubt, she had beautiful *chevelure*! Although the poem is an anthem of the beauty of her hair, it is obvious that she is deeply othered and objectified by the poet.

²⁴ This name seems to echo Sara Baartman (alternative spelling: Sarah Bartmann), an African woman known as so-called Hottentot Venus, who was “exhibited in England and in France between 1810 and 1815, as a natural and exotic beauty [...] When alive, her body was the subject of great scientific and popular experiments in Europe, and particular attention was paid to the size of her buttocks, and the shape of her genitalia, as sensual proof of black women’s animalistic sexuality, and of Hottentot racial status as extremely low.” (Gilman quot. in Cheang 34) I will discuss the Hottentot Venus in more detail when I examine Josephine Baker, who was called *Vénus d’ébène* in France, and whose stage nickname imitates the Hottentot’s.



Figure 4. Jeanne Duval by Felix Nadar (1858).²⁵
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Baudelaire describes his sexual desire for her through the terms and turns of phrase which nowadays would be deemed racist:

Ô toison, moutonnant jusque sur l'encolure!
Ô boucles! Ô parfum chargé de nonchaloir!
Extase! Pour peupler ce soir l'alcôve obscure
Des souvenirs dormant dans cette chevelure,
Je la veux agiter dans l'air comme un mouchoir! (Baudelaire 46)

The male narrator is intoxicated by his sexual desire for the Other. Both reminiscing and dreaming of his sexual encounter with an 'exotic' woman from Africa or Asia, the author wants to possess this woman whose hair he calls *toison* (fleece or sheep's wool). Besides this, he makes two more allusions to animals: *moutonnant*, from *mouton*, a reference to a sheep's fluffy wool, and *l'encolure*, which denotes the neck of a horse (Rifelj 269 n. 68). Derogatory terms, at least as they seem today, characterized the hair of the exotic Other in the nineteenth century, and indeed, earlier,

²⁵ Some scholars believe that this is a photo of Jeanne Duval. Others believe that this is a photo of unknown model dating 1858.

during the Age of Enlightenment. Such terms bring to light the colonial aspect of the poet's lust. It seems that in othering this woman, he desires her even more. And the hair he touches drives him to intoxicating yearning.

Furthermore, *moutonnant* means 'foaming,' like the ocean's water, and the narrator wants "plonger [...] ma tête amoureuse d'ivresse/ Dans ce noir océan où l'autre est enfermé" (Baudelaire 47). *La Chevelure*, an abundance of hair, opens for him an ocean of pleasure only this woman and her hair can give him access to. Dreaming that he "[...] plonger[a] [s]a tête" in her hair, reiterates a recurrent trope that we have already seen in Chrétien de Troyes *Lancelot ou le Chevalier de la Charrette*, where similar trope symbolizes the sexual act of possessing hair instead of a woman who is not present – an allegory for intercourse (47).

Yet Baudelaire's epithets for hair are more elaborate than those from the Middle Ages. When he again compares the hair of his lover to the massive body of water: "Tu contiens, mer d'ébène, un éblouissant rêve / De voiles, de rameurs, de flammes et de mats," he reinstates the French colonial victory and the discovery of unknown and desirable lands, from where this woman and her hair originate (46). He does not glorify the slave trade, but he does not shun it either. *Mer d'ébène*, which he uses as a metaphor for the woman's Black hair, is also, in the context of the Triangular Atlantic Trade, an allegory of the waters of the sea or ocean in which African slaves drowned, trying to escape their harrowing destiny. *Mer d'ébène* is the Atlantic Ocean filled with the sweat and blood of *rameurs* and the bodies of the enslaved people.²⁶

²⁶ A century later, Édouard Glissant will rage against the sea slave trade in *Le Sel noir*, in which he links commodified bodies of slaves, and their sweat, which saturated the Atlantic Ocean between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries to the other most expensive colonial products, salt, which is at the same time the taste of the sea and ocean water.

Regardless of hair references associated with slavery and animalistic sexuality of women of African descent, not all Baudelaire's colonized hair epithets and metaphors have a derogatory connotation:

Cheveux bleus, pavillon de ténèbres tendues
Vous me rendez l'azur du ciel immense et rond;
Sur les bords duvetés de vos mèches tordues
Je m'enivre ardemment des senteurs confondues
De l'huile de coco, du musc et du goudron. (47)

“Blue as a wing of a crow” is a hair descriptive that usually illustrates white women's dark or black hair, which is used in literature of that time to distinguish them from women of African descent and their *toison*. Jeanne Duval is a *métisse*, and Baudelaire's poetic representations of her hair explain her origins. She comes from a land, according to the poet, which produces coconut oil, musk, and tar used in metropolitan France for cooking, perfumery, and in the tobacco industry. The association between those products and Jeanne's mane extends hair into the dimension of colonial products used to sexually please the colonizer.²⁷

The last stanza summarizes the narrator's desire to possess sexually the colonized at all times and continue the colonial relationship forever:

Longtemps! toujours! ma main dans ta crinière lourde
Sèmera le rubis, la perle et le saphir,
Afin qu'à mon désir tu ne sois jamais sourde!
N'es-tu pas l'oasis où je rêve, et la gourde
Où je hume à longs traits le vin du souvenir? (47)

The image is disturbing, as the narrator holds his colonial subject by the hair, which implies the latter's immobility and helplessness to move and get away. In the end, the hair imagery in the poem become synonymous with colonial possession and violence over the subjugated woman,

²⁷ For more on hair as a colonial product, read Chapter Two and Three.

who can be paid for her submission with precious stones. Baudelaire claimed that he loved Jeanne Duval more than any other woman in his life, yet it is obvious from the way he expresses his desire for her hair that his longing for her had a distinct colonial undertone, of which, I imagine, he was unconscious.

In 1869 Baudelaire published a prose-in-verse version of *La Chevelure*, entitled *Un hémisphère dans une chevelure*. Presumably this happened after the death of Jeanne Duval.²⁸ It seems that her hair remained his obsession after she died. Indeed, hair plays metonymical and fetishistic functions, and because it does not decay it can represent the person even after his or her death.²⁹

In *Indiana*, first published in 1832 and then revised in 1843, George Sand also uses hair as “a relic of the dead” (Rifelj 237). In this novel Sand is the first female writer to construct the narrative of women’s hair. Before her, hair in men’s writing is used to describe protagonists and characterize the difference between them. For example, Marie de France, Marguerite of Navarre, Madame de Aulnoy, Madame de Lafayette, Germaine de Staël “are concerned, like their predecessors, almost entirely with the color of the hair, rather than its length, quantity, or texture” (Tytler quot. in Rifelj 137).³⁰

²⁸ The year of her birth and death are only known approximately.

²⁹ In *La Chevelure* Maupassant describes one man’s insane obsession with the hair of an unknown dead woman (Rifelj 231). His maniacal behavior leads him to madness. He ends up in an asylum. The depictions of the man’s fetishist possession of this hair make one think of Lancelot and Guinevère’s hair.

³⁰ Rifelj explains this by the fact that “physical description was not prominent before the nineteenth century realist novel, [and] readers did not expect more” (137). For example, Valincour, a contemporary critic of Lafayette’s *Princess de Clèves* (1678), expressed surprise that the author mentioned her hair: “La blancheur de son teint et ses cheveux blonds lui donnaient un éclat que l’on n’a jamais vu qu’à elle; tout ses traits et de charmes. (84)” (Lafayette cited in Rifelj 137). For more on the hair color in women’s and men’s writing in French literature before and during the nineteenth century, see Rifelj, 136 – 143.

Sand's novel tells a dramatic story of Indiana, a young woman from the Île Bourbon, now La Réunion, who lives in France in an unhappy marriage to M. Delmare, a man twice her age. Her cousin and Indiana's peer, Sir Ralph, secretly loves her, but has lost all hope: she treats him only as a friend. Raymon de Ramière, a young man who pretends to seek business advice from colonel Delmare in fact seduces Indiana's maid and companion Noun. This sets off a chain of dramatic and tragic events. Despite of affair with Noun, Raymon falls in love with Indiana, who eventually reciprocates. Noun, having discovered that she is pregnant and that young M.de Ramière does not want to be with her anymore, drowns herself. After Indiana confronts Raymon about the cause of her maid's death, he loses interest in Indiana and breaks up with her. Devastated, she returns to the Île Bourbon following her husband, who at this point is bankrupt in France. M. Delmare violently abuses Indiana, and she flees back to the *metropole* only to find out that the 'entrepreneurial' Raymon has finally improved his social mobility and has married someone wealthier. Desperate and broken, she reaches out to Ralph, who follows her to France to save her. They agree to return to the Île Bourdon, where they were born, and supposedly commit a double suicide. As they prepare to die, he confesses his love for her and she, now calm and less emotional, accepts it. "In a much-criticized happy ending [...] they begin a new life together, far from all the corruption of the society" (237).³¹

In Sand's *Indiana*, "hair is prominent throughout the novel" (Rifelj 237). Noun and Indiana's hair, body, and features are depicted through Raymon's gaze: "Noun, en déshabillé blanc, parée de ses longs cheveux noirs, était une dame, une reine, une fée" (Sand 20). This describes the time when he longs for Noun, in whom he soon loses all interest. After he meets

³¹ The ending is largely associated with Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's novel *Paul et Virginie* (1788)

Indiana and becomes sexually interested in her, Raymon comes to a ball, during which Indiana attempts to avoid him; he is again looking for *cheveux noirs* and a woman dressed in white, but this time both belong to another woman: “En vain il chercha autour d'elle la robe blanche et les cheveux noirs d'Indiana” (33). He follows her to declare his love, eloquently and elaborately, because he is a master of dramatic and pompous love affirmations, and women seem to enjoy this. In his long list of how he would love her, if he had a chance, he mentions: “J’aurais baisé sans bruit les tresses de vos cheveux” (35). This Medieval motif of metonymical intercourse, which we have already seen with Lancelot and Guenièvre’s hair, and in Baudelaire’s *La Chevelure*, demonstrates Raymon’s dangerous desire to possess Indiana, even if just through her hair.

Later, when Noun confesses to Raymon that she is expecting their child, and he rejects her. Her crying somehow makes her more desirable because her glorious hair “tombaient épars sur ses épaules larges et éblouissantes” (41). Loose or disheveled hair is a sign of distress in many world cultures. Indicating mourning, madness, “emotional or physical disarray,” in the European tradition, contrary to, for example, some African customs associated with bereavement, it is not “necessarily tied to grief.” (Rifelj 63) *Cheveux épars*, “the conventional expression for undone hair in the eighteenth century,” inspires and is transformed by nineteenth-century novelists (63). Often it appears at “moments of high drama” (63). *Cheveux épars* “had come to be used in a particular way, in scenes that combined the erotic with pain, situations we might therefore call sadistic: the female victim is attractive precisely because she is suffering. Other elements were standard in such scenes, including bare shoulders and clothing in disarray” (63 - 64).³²

³² For more examples of the literary representations and usage of *cheveux épars* and *cheveux dénoués* in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French novels, see Carol Rifelj, 60 – 66.

This is a “moment of high drama” for Noun (63). She is abandoned by her lover and she is feeling weak and vulnerable. She cries: “Je suis perdue, je suis déshonorée!...Je serai chassée peut-être. Je vais donner la vie à un être qui sera encore plus infortuné que moi” (Sand 40). She feels the repercussions of her romance with a frisky bachelor who does not want either her or her baby. She is broken and lost, and her hair is its powerful representation. Yet in the way Sand sets this up this scene, Noun’s disheveled hair has a double effect on Raymon: on the one hand, her desperation makes her more desirable to him, and as she “le couvrait de ses longs cheveux : ses grands yeux noirs lui jetaient une langueur brûlante, et cette ardeur du sang, cette volupté tout orientale,” he capitulates to his desire. His desire for her exotic otherness is palpable. On the other hand, her clothes and hair make him “song[er] à une autre” (41):

[...] Raymon ne voyait d'elle que la robe d'Indiana. S'il baisait ses cheveux noirs, il croyait baiser les cheveux noirs d'Indiana. C'était Indiana qu'il voyait dans le nuage du punch que la main de Noun venait d'allumer ; c'était elle qui l'appelait et qui lui souriait derrière ces blancs rideaux de mousseline ; ce fut elle encore qu'il rêva sur cette couche modeste et sans tache, lorsque, succombant sous l'amour et le vin, il y entraîna sa créole échevelée. (41)

It is obvious whom Raymon really wants, but as Noun receives him in Indiana’s bedroom, dressed in Indiana’s negligee, the servant sets up the metaphorical confusion between the two. When the lovers lay together, “his partner seems no longer to be Noun. She seems to turn into items belonging to Indiana (her dress, ribbons, and perfume)” (Rifelj 238). Now, Noun’s hair is “échevelée,” which is not far from the meaning of “épars,” but does not have the same dramatic undertone. In this context it mostly implies that Noun’s hair uncombed and tousled, which represents her sexuality and desire for Raymon, and also confusion, as she does not know what will happen after intercourse. Rifelj suggests that “unlike Noun’s, Indiana’s hair is always orderly,

like her virginal bedroom” (239). Yet, I argue that it is unclear who “sa créole échevelée » is, as he beds one woman and sees the other.

The description of this intoxicating farewell lovemaking brings back *cheveux noirs* and demonstrates how for Raymon, drunk on wine, lust, and obsession, Indiana’s body and hair merges with Noun’s. The doubling of female protagonists foreshadows the upcoming hair confusion and frames an important scene of the novel in which the truth of Noun’s death and Raymon’s cruel seductions are revealed. Hair narrative plays a crucial part in this revelation and, similar to Baudelaire’s poem, gives access to the racial aspect of hair treatment in nineteenth-century metropolitan France. Because hair ‘speaks’ for the female protagonists and explains their origins, actions, and connections to another character, it also allows readers to understand the mores of the society depicted. Therefore, Sand’s is a fully developed hair narrative, which is quite similar to those contemporary women writers use. The big difference is that Sand’s narrative, highly sexualized, remains colonial and ‘patriarchal:’ the female protagonists are described through Raymon’s lusting male gaze, which at times reverberates with the Baudelairian othering of Jeanne Duval.

When Raymon takes *sa créole échevelée* to bed, it is unclear who is this *créole* because of the metaphorical doubling between Indiana and Noun. Rifejl points out: “The hair of Noun and Indiana links these two “sœur de lait” [children nursed by the same woman]” (238). Additionally, the novel “reproduit [...] des ambiguïtés et des confusions du discours métropolitain de l’époque sur la race et l’identité des peuples colonisés” (Prasad 79). The most common usage of « créole » indicates a person “née ou naturalisée dans une colonie tropicale (telle que les Antilles, les Mascareignes ou les Indes occidentales) ou en Amérique, mais d’origine européenne ou africaine” (79). Even though “the term referred to Europeans, during the nineteenth century Creoles were

often described as though they were another race” (Miller quot. in Rifelj 238). Usually dictionaries distinguish “créole” from “noir créole” to differentiate the origin of the person, who is born in the colonies, which means that *Créole* can be of any race (80). Therefore, is it safe to say that “Il est utilisé avant tout pour se distinguer des indigènes d’une part, et des personnes nées dans les continents africain et européen d’autre part” (80). Yet, as Rifelj remarks, “according to the Larousse *Dictionnaire universel*, Creole women “are especially remarkable for their hair, which is of an incomparable black [...]” (“Créole” quot. in Rifelj 238). This is why when Raymon spends the night with Noun and dreams of being with Indiana, « sa créole échevelée » could be either of them (Sand 41). Rifelj concludes: “Hair thus serves to blur the distinction between races. Indiana, with her beautiful black hair, certainly fits the conventional description of a Creole. In fact, Sand uses the word for both Indiana and Noun, although the latter is not of European origin. Noun, too, had beautiful black hair” (238). This is proven by the fact that both women are called « créole » because they are born on the Île Bourbon. Yet, some researchers suggest that the novel contains many textual hints that Noun is a woman of color.³³ The scene where this is the most obvious is driven the narrative of Noun’s hair, a woman who is at this point dead.

Indiana, who is unaware of Noun’s previous romantic involvement with Raymon, announces to the maid that M. de Ramière is in love with her. Unable to cope with the heartache and pessimistic about the destiny of her unborn child, Noun drowns herself. A costly ring found on Noun’s finger and Raymon’s strange behavior makes Indiana suspicious. She decides to do the unimaginable:

³³ For more on race, *métissage*, and colonial construction of *Indiana*, read Pratima Prasad, “Éspace Colonial et Vérité Historique dans *Indiana*,” 2003, 78–82.

Tout à coup il lui vint une de ces idées bizarres, incomplètes, que les êtres inquiets et malheureux sont seuls capables de rencontrer. Elle risqua tout son sort sur une épreuve délicate et singulière contre laquelle Raymon ne pouvait être en garde. Elle avait à peine préparé ce mystérieux moyen, qu'elle entendit les pas de Raymon dans l'escalier dérobé. (Sand 107)

Indiana decides to confront Raymon and to find out the truth about his liaison with Noun. This idea comes to her suddenly: she hardly has time to prepare. Indiana cuts off hair from Noun's head and plans to use it to reveal the truth, to which "Raymon ne pouvait être en garde" (107). The scene that follows Raymon's entrance into Indiana's bedroom parallels the previous one with Noun: yet again the man confuses the two women. In order to shock Raymon, Indiana "avait entouré sa tête d'un foulard des Indes, noué négligemment à la manière des créoles; c'était la coiffure ordinaire de Noun" (108).³⁴ She wraps the *madras* that her servant wore daily, the traditional headdress of Creole women of La Réunion and the Antilles, over her head to produce a dramatic effect of the return of the dead woman and conceal her own hair. Additionally, and only by chance, she wears the same cloak that Noun wore, when Raymon confused them before. Conscious of the effect her clothing produces on Raymon, she stands there, her back to him, to provide the illusion that "[...] en se retournant elle ne lui offrit les traits livides d'une femme noyée" (108).

Eventually Indiana, cold and serious, turns to Raymon, and he notices she holds something in her hands: "Madame Delmare tenait quelque chose qu'elle avait l'air d'étaler devant lui avec une badine affectation de gravité. Il se pencha, et vit une masse de cheveux noirs irrégulièrement longs qui semblaient avoir été coupés à la hâte et qu'Indiana rassemblait et lissait dans ses mains" (108). As of now, he only sees the hair, so he cannot recognize to whom it belongs. It is cut irregularly,

³⁴ By calling *foulard des Indes* or *madras* a hairdo and not a headdress, Sand accentuates the social status of Noun: a servant who can either have her hair loose, when no one sees it, or wrapped in a kerchief when in public. Indiana's hair, contrary to Noun's, is always done "rang[és] de perles tressées dans ses cheveux" or "orné [...] de camélias naturels" (Rifelj 239; Sand 24, 39).

in haste: she did not have time to prepare well, and we are left to believe that Indiana cut the hair herself. Sand leaves out the details, yet even the idea of Indiana cutting the strands off the dead body of her maid, in a rush, can make readers shudder.

Quickly and without a second thought, Raymon, who has already ruined one woman's life and can lightheartedly ruin the life of another, assumes that the hair belongs to Indiana and that she had cut it for him, to demonstrate her love and to satisfy his desire. Indiana plays along: "Vous me demandiez hier, lui dit-elle avec une espèce de sourire, si je vous en ferais bien le sacrifice" (108). Reminding us of a similar hair sacrifice in Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le noir*, Rifelj links women's hair sacrifices to "the long history of serfs and slaves, [as well as] the nun's ceremony of cutting a lock of hair" (209).³⁵ Since Raymon sees it both as a sacrifice and as a token of love, Indiana's hair is "a sign that he will be free to possess her when he likes [...] A fetish, it will replace the hair of the real woman, which until now he was only able to "effleur[er avec] ses levres" (239). This clue is even more important: Noun did not sacrifice her hair, nor did she give it as a token – Indiana uses it in her own game! Even though Madame Delmare's tactic is successful, later, she will have to pay for touching the dead person's hair and disrespecting it.

Raymon begs Indiana: "Donne-les-moi donc; je ne veux pas les regretter à ton front, ces cheveux que j'admiraïs chaque jour, et que maintenant je pourrai chaque jour baiser en liberté;

³⁵ The idea of a sacrifice in this culminating scene, echoes with borderline colonial interaction between Mme de Rênal and Julien in Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le noir*: "After she becomes his mistress, her hair turns into a weapon in their war for control over each other. She wants to give him a lock, to show she is his servant. He refuses it, but she drops a whole side of her hair down to him after he climbs back down the ladder from her room. The following day, she arranges her hair so as to exhibit the extent of her "sacrifice" and calls him *mon maître* (Stendhal 403). But the pendulum soon swings back: the next day, she arranges her hair to hide the cut. Critics have often discussed the master-servant/slave relationship between Julien and Mathilde." (Rifelj 209)

donne-les-moi pour qu'ils ne me quittent jamais..." (Sand 108).³⁶ His discourse echoes his previous promises to love her in the same way he loves her hair. In owning her hair, he can own her, with or without her permission, like a master owns a servant. But when he touches it, the truth shocks him:

Mais, en les prenant, en rassemblant dans sa main cette riche chevelure dont quelques tresses tombaient jusqu'à terre, Raymon crut y trouver quelque chose de sec et de rude que ses doigts n'avaient jamais remarqué sur les bandeaux du front d'Indiana. Il éprouva aussi je ne sais quel frisson nerveux en les sentant froids et lourds comme s'ils eussent été coupés depuis longtemps, en s'apercevant qu'ils avaient déjà perdu leur moiteur parfumée et leur chaleur vitale. Et puis, il les regarda de près, et leur chercha en vain ce reflet bleu qui les faisait ressembler à l'aile azurée du corbeau : ceux-là étaient d'un noir nègre, d'une nature indienne d'une pesanteur morte....(108-109)

His eyes have deceived him, only in feeling the hair with his hands; Raymon can find out its true owner. Prior to this, Sand does not comment on racial differences between Indiana and Noun and only uses *Créole*. Sand opposes hair that "ressemble [...] à l'aile azurée du corbeau," a tint of blue-black raven color only a light-skinned person's hair can have to in contrast with dry and rough strands "d'un noir nègre" of someone of African descent (109).

Hair narrative reveals that the origin of this hair is not a person, who has already been detached from it, but an object: "Il porta [ses yeux] involontairement sur une cassette d'ébène entrouverte, d'où quelques mèches des mêmes cheveux s'échappaient encore" (109). Rifelj explains the meaning of the box: "The ebony case is of course like a casket, its color evoking both death and Noun's hair and skin color. Noun's hair is in stark contrast to Indiana's alive and uncut, which is revealed when Raymon pulls off her kerchief. Hers has the attribute of sexual abandon

³⁶ This possessive urge once again resonates with of the trope of sexual obsession over women's hair: like Lancelot's desires to possess Guenièvre's hair, Raymon now wants to own Indiana's together with her whole self.

(full and falling down)” (240). In her footnotes Rifelj also adds that: “the description of Noun’s hair after her death [...] show that it has lost its connection to beauty. One could argue [...] in this case, sexual desire has been destroyed because the hair is no longer attached to the dead body, and the link between hair and sexuality itself has been cut” (277). Yet, she is not just dead; her dead body, represented by her hair, is used to acquire a certain power. Therefore, I argue that the death of her hair and its usage as an object represent her “social death,” as at this point, she is signified by only two objects: a ring and her curls (Paterson 60).³⁷ Indiana’s usage of Noun’s hair after her death represents how she was treated during her life: like a commodity who is only as good as she or a part of her can be functional. Noun’s hair is a double of Noun’s dead body. Even after her death she continues serving her mistress who forgives her lover for being the cause of Noun’s death.

Indiana’s vengeance and cruelty combined with Raymon’s touching the dead Noun’s hair, kills the love he had for Madame Delmare: “[il] ne l’aimait plus” (Sand 109). This is the only time, it seems, he has real, human pity for Noun:

Pauvre Noun! pauvre fille infortunée! c'est envers elle que j'ai eu des torts, et non envers vous; c'est elle qui avait le droit de se venger, et qui ne l'a pas fait. Elle s'est tuée, afin de me laisser l'avenir. Elle a sacrifié sa vie à mon repos. Ce n'est pas vous, madame, qui en eussiez fait autant ! ... Donnez-les-moi, ces cheveux, ils sont à moi, ils m'appartiennent ; c'est le seul bien qui me reste de la seule femme qui m'ait vraiment aimé... .(109)

Perhaps, he only wants this hair as his own as at this moment, while he is weak; it is the only way that he can get back at Indiana. Instead of “a sentimental love token, a gift from – of – Indiana, [he

³⁷ For more on Paterson’s concept of social death and its connection to hair and slavery, see Chapter Three.

can have] a relic of the other woman, the dead woman. It can now serve its commemorative function and reawaken her memory” (Rifelj 240). Once again hair narrative demonstrates the objectification of Noun, as her hair continues to serve after her death.³⁸ This scene clarifies the racial distinctions between the women: in portraying Noun, Sand moves from *indienne* and *créole* to *nègre*. When Noun’s identity is revealed, she is dead and silent. She is a subaltern, who, rephrasing Gayatri Spivak cannot speak and does not have agency.³⁹ Her hair acts as her agent, uncovering the truth of her death, yet it does not give her a voice – Raymon and Indiana speak for her, as colonizers would. Additionally, Sand’s hair narrative is colonial because Indiana, even if she has to pay for her cruelty towards Noun’s hair and body is, in the end, exonerated.

As Raymon rejects Indiana’s love, now it is her turn to be distressed (and mirror Noun): “Madame Delmare ne répondit rien. Immobile, pâle, avec ses cheveux épars et ses yeux fixes, elle fit pitié à Raymon” (110). *Cheveux épars* signify intense drama and sexual desire, and with this trope Sand hints that the carnal climax of this overly dramatic scene approaches: “Le désespoir de madame Delmare réveilla le désir avec l'orgueil dans le cœur de son amant. En la voyant si effrayée de perdre son amour, si humble devant lui, si résignée à accepter ses lois pour l'avenir comme des justifications du passé, il se rappela dans quelles intentions il avait trompé la vigilance de Ralph, et comprit tous les avantages de sa position” (110). Quickly recovering the shock of his exposure, Raymon calculates how to use it to his advantage, and attempts to force himself on Indiana. The scene is interrupted by the *deus ex machina* news of the arrival of Madame Delmare’s husband.

³⁸ Rifelj in *Coiffure* cites Gaston Bachelard’s “Ophelia complex” to discuss Noun’s association with Ophelia and the floating hair of a drowned woman as a “vehicle of her memory”; as “the means of resuscitating her” (19, 232). For more on *Indiana* and Ophelia imagery, see Rijelj, 240-241.

³⁹ Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" McGill University. McGill University. <http://www.mcgill.ca/files/crclawdiscourse/Can_the_subaltern_speak.pdf>.

Readers never find out what happens to Noun's hair. Was it burnt? buried? kept by Indiana or Raymon? This underlines once again the colonial subtext of hair narrative in *Indiana*. The only thing that we find out later is that Indiana paid the price for mistreating Noun's hair. When the Delmares returned to the Île Bourbon, she starts writing in a journal which falls into the hands of her husband. Enraged, "sans pouvoir articuler une parole, il la saisit par les cheveux, la renversa, et la frappa au front du talon de sa botte" (164). This extreme violence is probably encouraged by the hair story he read in her diary. It may also resemble the way she grabbed Noun's hair before committing her own violent act and cutting it off. This way she once again mirrors Noun and all the brutality her maid experienced from her and Raymon. "Saisir par les cheveux," resonates with a famous French expression, "saisir l'occasion par les/aux cheveux," which is similar to "take the bull by its horns."⁴⁰ In this sense, when her husband grabs her by the hair, he uses the opportunity to take revenge for her adultery. In parallel with this, Sand describes that Raymon also "saisit [...] l'occasion aux cheveux" when before even Noun's death his advances with Madame Delmare were successful (72). The usage of this expression foreshadows Indiana's destiny as associated with her hair.

Within the scope of the novel, she eventually pays her hair debt to Noun, when after her escape to France from a violent husband, she falls ill after she finds out that Raymon has married.

⁴⁰ Trésor de la Langue Française on-line connects this expression to the myth of Occasion, a goddess, "qu'on représente sous la forme d'une femme nue, chauve par derrière, avec une longue tresse de cheveux par devant, un pied en l'air, et l'autre sur une roue, tenant un rasoir d'une main, et de l'autre une voile tendue au vent" ("Occasion: définition"). Sometimes, "l'Occasion vous contraint à la saisir en vous présentant sa mèche de cheveux devant la main, et de façon si opportune que ce serait sottise pure de ne pas s'y accrocher à pleins doigts; car, lâchée, elle ne revient point."("Occasion: définition"). Some expressions associated with *l'occasion* : "L'occasion est chauve. Prendre, attraper, saisir l'occasion aux/par les cheveux" ("Occasion: définition").

She ends up losing her hair to a nurse's scissors and only notices it when she needs to get dressed to meet, as she thinks, Raymon, but in reality it is Ralph, who came to save her: "Mais, quand elle voulut se coiffer, elle chercha en vain sa longue et magnifique chevelure; durant sa maladie, elle était tombée sous les ciseaux de l'infirmière. Elle s'en aperçut alors pour la première fois, tant ses fortes préoccupations l'avaient distraite des petites choses" (180). Her hair, which used to be such a great preoccupation of hers, she now considers trivial. Perhaps, her act of curling it and moving on from it signifies that she is can potentially heal from the heartache and find her new love. This short hair symbolizes her new self, who will recognize Ralph's devotion and give her a chance for true love and simple happiness, deprived of drama and the mores of the French metropolitan society.

Intense and rich, hair narrative in *Indiana* calls for a postcolonial reading because of the subject matter, but curtails it. Noun's voice and story are shunned and quickly forgotten. Sand follows the standard of racial writing of nineteenth-century French literature, and therefore, her hair narrative does not recognize racial politics. Yet, the discourse of race is nevertheless present. Thus, Sand's hair narrative stands apart from the narratives of the male writers, who either used hair for rhetorical mirroring or for objectifying descriptions. Still, Sand's usages of hair drive the female characters and give them a means to express themselves, especially if they are white. In the chapters that follow I will focus on postcolonial and feminist hair narratives, which recognize racial and identity politics and allow characters' hair to tell a story, thus becoming their voice and life testimony.

As I have demonstrated in this chapter, it is a touch of the hand that initiates a hair narrative., however in a postcolonial context hair narrative makes a protagonist an active participant and grants her a voice, thus helping readers move beyond the purely descriptive

attributes that hair has as a body part and transforms it into a vehicle for storytelling. Because of the comparative nature of my study, the example is from a Canadian Anglophone play, which demonstrates perfectly the basic principles of hair narrative.

“If they don’t tell you the hair will,” says Novelette, the hairdresser from Troy Anthony’s 2005 play *Da Kink in My Hair* (6). She clarifies: “If you want to know about a woman, a black woman that is. Touch her hair. Cause our hair carries our journey. Cause that’s where we carry all our hopes, all our dream, our hurt, our disappointments they all in our hair” (5). As the stage directions indicate, when Novelette buries her fingers into her clients’ hair, a griot appears on stage and, as if in a trance, the clients start telling their stories, audible only to Novelette. It is as if the hairdresser gets to the roots not only of their hair, but also of their problems. Hair speaks to her, sends her messages: “Some of the things it tells me makes me want to laugh, makes me want to cry. And some of the things it tells me I don’t even want to know” (6). Some people read palm lines, Novelette reads hair. By fixing her clients’ hair, she attempts to repair their lives just a little.

In this play the connection between hair and narrative is apparent: touching the hair initiates a story, and in this sense, it is connected to the rhetorical imagery of combing hair from the Middle Ages. Yet, African, African – American and Caribbean women writers go much further than their literary predecessors: often, they devote a very special place to detailed descriptions of hair and hair styling, which are not necessarily as palpable as in this play. For writers like Fabienne Kanor, Toni Morrison, Gisèle Pineau, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Rokhaya Diallo, hair storytelling becomes a vehicle for social and racial activism. In their writing hair does not call forth a character that talks, but works rather as a hidden sub-narrative, through which the authors indirectly discuss power, race, identity and gender politics.

CHAPTER TWO TWISTED RELATIONSHIPS IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELLOVED* AND FABIENNE KANOR'S *D'EAUX DOUCES*

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Fabienne Kanor's *D'eaux douces* (2004) help readers explore the deeper meanings of mother-daughter conflicts by portraying disturbingly twisted and traumatizing relationships between women who take care of their own and each other's hair. Hair narrative in these novels shows that mother-daughter relationships are power relations that are not simply conflictual, but rather power plays, that can easily lead to death. And like in any combat, the mothers use weapons to help them win. Authoritative mothers believe that pressure and control can influence and, potentially, advance their daughters' lives. However, as we will discover, the tyranny that Sethe and Maman impose on their daughters' hair, only exposes their own vulnerabilities and inability to control their lives. Unable to cope with their own living situations under oppressive and racist conditions, the mothers seek control over the only thing that is available to them: their daughters' hair. Under these circumstances daughters and their hair become both a source and a target of their mothers' power, which they execute using the weapons they have at hand: a brush and a hot comb.

In both novels, the mothers' possessive and controlling fixation on her daughters' hair creates a bond of interdependency between mother and daughter. The mother-daughter relationship in *Beloved* is burdened by infanticide. In the post-Civil War United States, Sethe, a run-away slave, killed her elder daughter as a baby and attempted to kill her sons and younger daughter in her overpowering desire to protect them from slavery. Years after the infanticide, Sethe and Denver, the daughter who survived, welcome two visitors: Paul D, a former slave whom Sethe knew from Sweet Home, her old plantation in Kentucky, and Beloved, a helpless young woman who happens by their house. With two new people in the house, the stories of the untold past,

which seemed to have been buried with the body of the slaughtered child, come alive and disturb the relationship that Sethe and Denver have established. As Sethe *rememories* her past and recognizes her dead daughter in Beloved, the mother attempts to bond with her and seek forgiveness for having killed her. Denver becomes an outsider. Yet eventually, as she starts taking care of her mother and the household, she manages to reestablish herself as a grown-up woman.

Rememory is a word Morrison fuses together: *remember* with *memory*. As Marianne Hirsch, who explores maternity and rememory in *Beloved*, explains, “rememory is neither memory nor forgetting, but memory combined with (the threat of) repetition; it is neither noun nor verb, but both combined. Rememory is Morrison's attempt to re-conceive the memory of slavery, finding a way to re-member, and to do so *differently*, what an entire culture has been trying to repress” (96). As I will demonstrate in this chapter, rememorial experiences of the mother and the daughter pass through their hair: it permits them to access past experiences of their female ancestors.

If in *Beloved* hair narrative focuses on the mother-daughter bond, in *D'eaux douces*, hair represents the absence of this bond. The novel takes place in France, where Frida, a daughter of a Martinican couple, undergoes the misfortunes and joys of being an Antillian woman in the *metropole*. Two brutal events start and end the novel: Frida kills her lover Éric in the beginning; by the end she commits suicide. In between, she tries to gather her thoughts and tell her story. It comes in fragments: the pendulum of narration swings back and forth between her childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood, her mother's and father's lives, France and Martinique; between racial tensions on the university campus in the present and the arrival of captured Africans as slaves to the Antilles in the past. Frida experiences enslavement and slave trade in dreams, visions, and flashbacks. Frida rememories the past of her people, but she cannot uncover the story of her family. Unable to confront her mother and father about their silences and lies, Frida loses her mind. By

metaphorically avenging her mother, she kills her lover. She ends it all with four bullets from a revolver. With this she ends not only her and her lover's lives, but breaches the vicious cycle of colonization.

In this novel hair narrative allows us explore the Frida-Maman relationship as an interaction between a colonizer and a colonized, in which the procedures of altering a daughter's "grain [du] cheveu," *grain of hair*, becomes the mother's fight to please the colonizer (41). The daughter's hair that the mother chemically relaxes and straightens every Sunday becomes Martinique's domestic product: a sacrifice from daughter-colony for mother-*métropole*. Using hair narrative to shape a story of an irreparable gap between the mother and the daughter, Kanor explains the role Maman plays in her daughter's journey to insanity and the way the mother actively participates in Frida's alienation and her eventual self-destruction. Deprived of control over her own destiny, the mother projects her dissatisfaction with her family and inability to have real intimacy with her daughters onto their hair.⁴¹ Eventually Frida stops relaxing her hair and starts wearing her hair naturally, but she never gets back that time she spent with her mother hating herself and her hair. In straightening Frida's hair and attempting to change the "cheveux grainés," Maman hopes to make her daughter 'whiter' and her life better than her own (35).⁴²

At first glance both Sethe and Maman seem loving and caring, but their possessive and controlling relationships with their daughters expose the cruelty caused by their brutal past. In these novels hair narrative recounts stories of relationships that are supposed to be safe, but turn

⁴¹ Frida's sister Brigitte, who is married and lives in Burkina Faso, does not have a well-developed story line. Accounts of Brigitte's hair experiences are absent; that is why I will focus only on Frida's hair story.

⁴² "grainy hair" (my translation). I translate *grain* as pepper grain, not as pepper corn because, according to Mervyn Alleyne *cheveux grainés* originate from *grain poivre*, which in Anglo-Caribbean linguistic tradition pepper grain.

out disturbingly twisted and traumatizing, especially for the daughters. Both Denver and Frida have dreams, which feature their mothers brushing their daughters' hair. The dreams turn into nightmares and the mothers become beasts that want to destroy their daughters. As we shall see, in both novels the mothers' understanding of love and care is distorted. A slave in Kentucky, in Sethe's case, and a victim of colonization and an immigrant, in Maman's case, each mother copes the best she can with the traumatic experiences she has had and wants to make sure that her daughter(s) are either free from or otherwise prepared for them. Using examples from the novels, I will demonstrate how the casual and at the same time intimate rituals of daily life, such as hair braiding, can become a mother's weapon to wield power over her daughter. I will argue that the double oppression that mothers experience in their lives leads them to impose the same double oppression over their daughters and to exercise their domination by controlling their hair.

Adrienne Rich describes motherhood as "liv[ing] in the bondage of patriarchal systems," that demands that mothers teach their daughters how to survive within this system (251). As Black mothers are doubly oppressed due to the color of their skin and their gender, they, when raising their daughters within the context of white patriarchy, "face a troubling dilemma [: to] ensure their daughters' physical survival, they must teach their daughters to fit into systems of oppression" (Hill Collins 53). In order to claim some agency for themselves, mothers try to prepare their daughters for the hardships and humiliation that they will no doubt face because of the color of their skin and texture of their hair.

But why is hair so powerful in mother-daughter relationships? Psychologists who examine the trauma that African-American women face explain:

How an African American mother feels about herself may be reflected in her attitudes and care not only of her own hair but also in her attitudes

toward and care of her daughter's hair. They may even be generalized and reflect her attitudes and feelings about her daughter altogether. This relationship may lay the groundwork for long-standing, deeply rooted feelings in African American daughters about their hair, sexuality, self-image, femininity, racial identity, personal value, and adequacy. (Greene et al. 174)

Hair as a reflection of a woman's inner world tells us about her, her life, her family, and the way she feels about herself and her family. Moreover, hair reflects the way a woman interacts with the world around her. The oppressive conditions of the society Black mothers live in define their response to these conditions. As they "have little control over events and circumstances that have great import on their lives [,] the need to exercise control over some aspects of one's destiny may be displaced onto hair because it can be controlled in ways that other aspects of one's life cannot" (Greene et al. 175-176). Indeed, unlike skin color, or height, or weight, or facial features, hair "is somewhat malleable thus easier to alter or control" (Synnott quot. in Greene et al. 175). As mothers have little to no authority over their own lives, they try to supervise their children and gain power over the daughters, who may potentially be as oppressed as the mother is. For example: "A mother can spend several hours working on her daughter's hair and see visible, tangible results. In this instance she may feel that she has direct positive impact on something in a world where so many of her actions and efforts, as an African - American and as a woman, are met with resistance and result in failure" (Greene et al. 175). Powerless as some mothers may be and feel, they can still exercise some authority over their children. The sensation of a productive change that hair care provides allows them to experience at least some power and gain agency, and in this their actions have an effect on another person.

Patricia Hill Collins explains what mothers want to achieve: "African-American women see their work as both contributing to their children's survival and instilling values that will

encourage their children to reject their “place” and strive for more” (200). Mothers use hair and time devoted to hair care to educate and prepare their daughters for the life within the racist systems of the United States and France. Yet as we shall find out from the novels, the mothers’ traumatic past leads them to abuse the power they have over their daughters’ hair: they obsessively control their daughters and attempt to possess their daughters’ bodies and lives in order to create an unbreakable bond of dependency. Sethe is a slave mistreated by her masters, and Maman is an emigrant who lives in the country of the colonizer; she is repressed and is equally objectified by both Black and White men. Doubly oppressed mothers subjugate their daughters, who also become doubly oppressed: by the patriarchy and by their mothers. As daughters grow up, they resist this possessive bid for control, trying to break the bond and free themselves.

Mother-daughter relationships in *Beloved* explore the bond that exists between Black women and trauma, which women pass on from generation to generation through this relationship. This connection is revealed after Beloved, a ghost child who haunted the house before Paul D’s arrival, reenters 124 Bluestone Road in a human form.⁴³ As she observes Sethe’s preoccupation with Denver’s tangled hair and her resistance to having it combed, Beloved persuades Sethe to tell her her story by asking: “Your woman never fix up your hair?” and gets the key to Sethe’s past (72). At first Sethe hesitates: “If she did, I do not remember” (72). Yet after describing the situation, in which her mother and she lived as slaves, she asserts: “She never fixed my hair nor nothing” (72). The process of combing her daughter’s hair and the question about her own hair triggers, or as Morrison writes, “stirs her rememory” and even after she gives Beloved an answer; she cannot stop thinking of her mother (222). She relives her childhood.

⁴³ Bluestone Road is the street where Sethe and Denver live.

Hirsch explains that “in *Beloved*, time is neither linear nor cyclical; memory and forgetting are replaced by the strange third option Morrison calls rememory: repetition + memory, not simply a recollection of the past but its return, its re-presentation, its re-incarnation, and thereby the re-vision of memory itself” (107). Sethe’s dead daughter *is* rememory; she is “the past that persists to be present” (106). She links Sethe to that past, and with Denver’s hair in her hands, Sethe re-visions her mother, Denver and Beloved’s maternal ancestor. As if in a trance, she recounts that her mother once showed Sethe her slave-branding tattoo and, when Sethe asked her to mark her, too, she slapped the daughter’s face. She did not comprehend her mother’s reaction then, but as Sethe holds her youngest daughter’s hair in her hands and looks at a young woman who may have been her other daughter, she understands that her mother did not have time to spend with her when she was little, because she was a field slave:

I didn’t see her but a few times out in the fields and once when she was working indigo. By the time I woke up in the morning, she was in line. If the moon was bright they worked by its light. Sunday she slept like a stick. She must of nursed me two or three weeks— that’s the way the others did. Then she went back in rice and I sucked from another woman whose job it was. (72)

This is the reason her mother never had a chance to “fix up [Sethe’s] hair” (72). She understands why her mother slapped her: like Sethe, in relation to Denver, her mother never wanted a life of slavery for her child, or at least not the brutal one the mother had experienced. Sethe’s mother was hanged when Sethe was still very young, and for the first time Sethe, the daughter, truly understands her mother’s unbearable life as a slave from Africa. These rememories, the things she always knew about her mother but thought she had forgotten, rush back to her. She remembers that Nan, a woman who took care of her, told her that her mother did not keep her other children,

because they resulted from multiple rapes by the ship's crew that her mother suffered during the Middle Passage. Hair, in this passage, tightens up the generational bond among African women and their descendants and mediates Sethe's rememorial act. She stops combing Denver's hair, cleans the comb, tosses the hair from the comb into the fire, and drops the comb as she remembers Nan's stories about the slave ship and the children her mother "threw away" (74).

The rememory is so intense that Sethe is present and absent at the same time: the two girls seated in front of her are "little and far away" (74). Hirsch insists that with rememory "the past again becomes present but its presence does not re-engage, it does not kill. It can be survived" (107). Revisiting the memories of her mother's brutal life under slavery, Sethe once again becomes convinced that she will do all she can to protect her children: "her best thing she was" (296). Sethe was beaten, violated, and humiliated, but her children are unsoiled; therefore they are her "best thing" (296). Fixing up Denver's hair is Sethe's manifesto of freedom and survival of her kin: she will continue fixing her daughter's hair to make sure that she never becomes a slave, whose body can be bought, sold, and mutilated for the pleasure of Whites.

Sethe's coping mechanisms are connected not only to disciplining Denver's hair, but her own hair as well. The first time Sethe's hair is described is when Paul D reappears at her house: "Halle's girl — the one with iron eyes and backbone to match. He had never seen her hair in Kentucky. And though her face was eighteen years older than when last he saw her, it was softer now. Because of the hair" (10).⁴⁴ For him, seeing her hair means an invitation: to look at and, perhaps, to touch. Sethe's life force is in her hair, and she wants Paul D to reawaken her. Paul D

⁴⁴ Halle is Sethe's 'husband' and the father of all of her children. He's a devoted son who is able to buy his mother, Baby Suggs, her freedom by hiring himself out as a laborer. After witnessing Sethe's violation at the hand of schoolteacher and his sons, he goes insane and eventually disappears, making Sethe rethink their relationship.

desired Sethe in Sweet Home, and now seeing her hair reignites his desire: “Her back was to him and he could see all the hair he wanted without the distraction of her face” (18). For him her loose hair also symbolizes having family and being at home, and the end of slavery: her hair is a promise that the harrowing time of his life is over. That is why he mentions that the sight of her hair makes him trust her enough to step inside her home (11). For her, to wear her hair loose means freedom to open herself to feelings.

In the morning after making love to Paul D, Sethe’s “hair [is] a mess” (30). This indicates that as a rule she combed and braided it, thus keeping her hair under control, but in relation to Paul D, Sethe lets go of that control. It does not matter if it is a mess, because a man with whom she has just slept looks at her and sees her. In the beginning, her loose hair symbolizes her sexual freedom and desire. Closer to the end of the novel, she completely stops taking care of her hair for a different reason. As she works desperately to please Beloved and attempts to atone for having killed her, pleading for her daughter to understand the reasons for this violent act, “Sethe no longer combed her hair or splashed her face with cold water” (295). The state of Sethe’s hair indicates full capitulation to her resurrected daughter.

At the end of the novel, Beloved is described through the eyes of the town women, who see her for the first (and last) time and are stunned by her beauty: “Thunder-black and glistening, she stood on long straight legs, her belly big and tight. Vines of hair twisted all over her head.” (308). Beloved’s unruly head stands for her demeanor: the daughter “ate up her [mother’s] life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it” exactly as creeping parasitic plants do (295). *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines a *vine* as “a weak-stemmed plant that derives its support

from climbing, twining, or creeping along a surface” (“Vine”).⁴⁵ In order to survive, certain parasitic vines are known to attach their tendrils to a host plant and take its resources. They suck out the juices of these host plants and like Beloved “grow taller” on them (295). Beloved with her vines of hair, *the devil-child*, as the town women call her, represents a parasitic plant that “chew[ed] and swallow[ed]” her mother to get back at her for “chewing and swallowing” her in the past (251, 252). “Chewing and swallowing” is a recurrent theme of Beloved’s monologue *I AM BELOVED and she is mine*, which she repeats four times, the last time hinting that Sethe “chews and swallows” her (252). Denver reiterates the same idea in her own monologue: “Watch out for her; she can give you dreams / She chews and swallows” (255) describing her fear of her mother. As Beloved chewed and swallowed Sethe, she has become her, a mother, who has power to give or to take life. Her ‘pregnancy’ is a proof of that. Sethe on the other hand is completely helpless and vulnerable, like a child. The town’s women describe Sethe as “worn down, speckled, dying, spinning, changing shapes and generally bedeviled” (300).

After Beloved’s exorcism and departure, Sethe’s life is fully eaten up and she starts dying. Paul D finds her in bed, humming a tune, “her hair, like the dark delicate roots of the good plants, spreads and curves on the pillow” (319). Sethe’s hair represents her whole self and her state of being. This is a second time we see Sethe’s hair through Paul D’s eyes, but this time the hair that symbolizes her life force is dead. Hair narrative intertwined with plant narrative portrays Beloved as a parasitic plant that takes over her mother, a *good plant* (319). When Paul D visits Sethe, she hums while “fingering a long clump of her hair” (320). The words of this tune revisit her past:

⁴⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary* is standard for providing definitions for academic research, but its definition of “vine” avoids mentioning that vines need support of other plants and surfaces in order to develop, and they depend on that support. It is for this reason that I choose this definition of “vine” from *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*.

“high Johnny, wide Johnny. Sweet William bend down low [...] Jackweed raise up high [. . .] Lambswool over my shoulder, buttercup and clover fly” (319-320). It is Sethe’s rememorial chant. She associates herself with the flowers she names in her song: sweet william is the flower she mentions to have wanted in her hair for her ‘wedding’ with Halle. An important wedding flower, it is a symbol of the groom. The flower’s head is “bent down low”: Halle is gone and he is not coming back to her (319). Coincidentally, this tune also brings her back the memory of her children: “I made that song up . . . I made it up and sang it to my children. Nobody knows that song but me and my children” (207). It is the song that Beloved hummed before Sethe fully recognized who she really was (Morgan 11). Twisting her own hair and carrying that tune Sethe reconnects with her children whose heads she has caressed, but also mistreated.

Out of four children Sethe has two boys and two girls; her daughters suffer the most from their mother’s brutality. When Beloved was killed, Howard and Buglar, the sons, ran away in fear. Denver, the youngest daughter, lives and continues to suffer until the day she leaves her mother. Ostracized by other children because of the mother’s crime, Denver is very lonely and lives her life dreaming of her sister’s return. Furthermore, Sethe presses her to comb her hair every day. It is through hair that we discover the real cause of tension and struggle between Denver and her mother.

The mother-daughter power struggle first becomes obvious when Paul D appears at the house. Feeling upset about this new-old friend of her mother’s who threatens her exclusive bond with Sethe, Denver does not make the outing when the three go to the carnival, a pleasure either for her mother or for Paul D. She does not dress up, yet she “rebraid[s] her hair” (56). Not rebraiding her hair would signify the daughter’s revolt: by taking care of her hair and not of her clothing, Denver resists passively. By the time Beloved arrives, it is obvious that the tension

between Sethe and Denver over the daughter's hair is not about hair: it is about power. The daughter is so scared of her mother that she has nightmares in which Sethe cuts off Denver's head while she is combing her hair.

Denver's internal monologue, *BELOVED is my sister*, reveals her fear of her mother. She is scared that "maybe it's still in her the thing that makes it all right to kill her children" (243). In this dream-like revelation she confesses that she relives the trauma she experienced as a child every night: "She cuts my head off every night. Her pretty eyes looking at me like I was a stranger. Not mean or anything, but like I was somebody she found and felt sorry for. Like she didn't want to do it, but she had to and it wasn't going to hurt" (243).⁴⁶ This monologue exposes Denver's anxiety when her mother comes to tuck her in bed. She has this nightmare because she witnessed Sethe cutting off Beloved's head with a handsaw, and she probably remembers, unconsciously, her mother trying to smash her [Denver's] head against the wall of the shed. She is scared of her mother's command over her life: she fears Sethe's omnipotence and her power to destroy her children.

The handsaw, which Sethe used to kill her older daughter, and the comb, which she uses to comb her other daughter's hair, symbolize the weapons the mother uses to deal with her misery. When she needs to calm down and gain control of her life, she intuitively brushes her hair. When she needs to deal with white men who come for her children, she uses a saw. Both have teeth, and both are accessible and easy to use.

⁴⁶ Sethe's 'pretty eyes' and looking at Denver like she is 'a stranger' bring back Denver's birth and the song Amy Denver, the white woman who helped Sethe when she ran away from Sweet Home, sang to soothe Sethe called *Lady Button Eyes*. I will explore the link between the song and Denver's dream later in this chapter.

If for Sethe decapitation and hair brushing are coping mechanisms, for Denver they are the weapons that hurt. The thing that terrifies Denver the most is her mother's ability to pretend that cutting off a child's head is *not* going to hurt: "That it was just a thing grown-up people do – like pull a splinter out of your hand; touch the corner of a towel in your eye if you get a cinder in it" (243). Denver is also sure that her mother will execute her decapitation masterfully: "I know she'll be good at it, careful. That when she cuts it off it'll be done right; it won't hurt" (244). Yet it hurts a lot, because, in Denver's subconscious, hair brushing with a comb and beheading with a handsaw blend to create a haunting image of her head detached from her body.

At a certain point she freezes with fear, and for a while she cannot move, thinking her head has been cut off: "After she does it I lie there for a minute with just my head" (244). Denver dreams of a job half-done: her head is cut off, yet it is not detached. This is how Beloved's head was when Sethe killed her. As Denver's dreams are tightly linked to Beloved's decapitation in the past and are repetitive, they are rememory. It brings back the visions of her sister's dead body that she revisits and reimagines. When Sethe killed Beloved, the mother "held her [daughter's] face so her head wouldn't fall off" (177). In Denver's nightmare, Sethe also holds Denver's head when she combs it to minimize the pain: "Then she carries it [Denver's head] downstairs to braid my hair. I try not to cry but it hurts so much to comb it. When she finishes the combing and starts the braiding, I get sleepy. So I want to go to sleep but I know that if I do, I won't wake up. So I have to stay awake while she finishes my hair" (244). Even though Sethe does not attempt to cut off Denver's head, the daughter is disturbed enough by the past traumatic experience to imagine that her mother cuts her head off over, and over, and over again each time she comes to see her before sleep.

Reality, dreaming, and rememory are interlaced in Denver's monologue: she claims that cutting off her head "won't hurt," whereas combing her hair "hurts so much" (244). When Sethe

decapitated Beloved and attempted to kill Denver and her brothers, the mother, according to her own words, tried to “put [her] babies where they’d be safe” (193). Beloved was dead and couldn’t experience pain, particularly the horror of slavery, anymore: thus she was ‘safe.’ Denver lived; and it hurts to be alive. Hair brushing is a symbolic representation of this. The pain that Denver endures every time that Sethe brushes her hair reminds her that death does not hurt as much as life does, that it is better to die than to live a life of a slave, in which anyone can “dirty” her (296). Due to the unspeakable trauma that the mother suffered as a slave,⁴⁷ pain is the only way she knows to show her love for her children.⁴⁸

As braiding and killing are subconsciously combined in Denver’s mind, her way to resist, besides avoiding the torturous routines, is trying to stay awake. The last time Sethe tried to kill her, Denver was probably either asleep or self-unaware because she was a baby, and her mother almost succeeded. According to Denver’s dream, the scariest part is waiting for Sethe “to come in and do it. Not when she does it, but when I wait for her to” (244). As she grows up, she gets more and more subconsciously scared that this can happen again when she falls asleep: so she tries to stay awake. In reality Sethe would take care of Denver’s hair every night. Combed and braided before bedtime, hair gets less tangled during sleep. Braiding helps Denver relax and get sleepy. This is a mother’s gesture of care and tenderness, but Denver is terrified of Sethe because of her power to kill that she only sees violence in her actions.

⁴⁷ She is traumatized not only by the fact that Schoolteacher compared her to a cow, but that when she was breastfeeding and saved her milk for Beloved and also was pregnant with Denver, the White boys *took* it from her. Still pregnant, she had her back mutilated. She still has a tree that “grows there” (Morrison 19).

⁴⁸ As Morrow notes: “Black children learned early in life that the comb hurt and got tangled in curls. So painful was this experience to black boys and girls, they avoided getting their hair combed whenever possible; they were satisfied to let the hair stay matted forever. The eagerness to avoid this necessary grooming was passed on from generation to generation of children” (49).

The nightmares and the murder of Beloved are linked to another event: Sethe meeting Amy Denver. This encounter is crucial for Denver's life because it is a story of her birth. Even though she only knows about Amy through her mother's stories, they have a link, which manifests itself in Denver's dreams. When pregnant, Sethe ran away from Sweet Home, and encountered Amy Denver, a white girl, who healed her and helped her with childbirth. As she does her "repair work" on Sethe's flayed back, Amy sings "Lady Button Eyes," a lullaby her mother taught her (95). The song is actually a poem written by Eugene Field in 1898.⁴⁹ Out of five stanzas of the poem, Morrison uses three: first, second, and fourth.⁵⁰ Lady Button Eyes is a character that invites multiple interpretations. In the poem, she is a spirit that comes to soothe a child to sleep. In the novel, this character has a deeper meaning. In the second stanza, Lady Button Eyes represents Beloved, a ghost-child, who returns "through the muck and mist and gloom / To our quiet cozy home" (95). In the first and the third stanza Lady Button Eyes symbolizes Sethe, a mother who comes to tuck her child in bed. It is this image that links all three events, Denver's birth, seeing Beloved's death, and dreaming of losing her head every night.

The first stanza describes a motherly spirit, who lulls her child to sleep:

When the busy day is done
And my weary little one
Rocketh gently to and fro;
[...] Then from yonder misty skies
Cometh Lady Button Eyes. (95)

⁴⁹ Eugene Field, "Lady Button Eyes." *Love Songs of Childhood*. New York: Scribner's Sons, 1898, 61-63.

⁵⁰ Jody Morgan, who studies musicality and songs in *Beloved* concludes that "Amy sings only stanzas one, two, and four of the five stanza poem, leaving the numbers 124. 124 is the address of the home Sethe is traveling towards. 124 is also where she will ultimately kill her third child, the three missing from the address and the song. The third stanza, appropriately enough, is about a ghost" (9). Teresa N. Washington, as she explores Yoruban roots in *Beloved*, also underlines "the hidden number three [is] the unifying spiritual member," that can make 124 complete. It is the house that waits for Beloved, number 3, to return (9).

This stanza resembles the part of Denver's description of her nightmare when Sethe comes before bedtime, "when the busy day is done," to the "weary little one," tired Denver (95). It foreshadows Denver's nightmares when she imagines that Sethe comes at night before bed to cut off her head: "She cuts off my head every night" and "The scary part is waiting for her to come and do it" (243, 244).

The third stanza resembles the part of Denver's nightmare: she describes how Sethe braids her hair after brushing it and how it makes her sleepy:

Layeth she her hands upon
My dear weary little one,
And those white hands overspread
Like a veil the curly head,
Seem to fondle and caress
Every little silken tress. (96)

Amy Denver knows this song from her mother: "That's my mama's song. She taught me it" (95). She probably sang it to Amy as she was braiding her hair. It is not surprising that Amy sings of "white hands" (95). Her mother was a White woman. This is why her child, with "silken tress" is also White (96). The last line of the stanza is racially coded. If Amy or her mother were black, the song's lyrics could mention black hands, in which case "the curly head" could signify any hair, frizzy Black hair, too (96). The hands in the song that are "overspread like a veil the curly head" symbolize protection (96). Brushing and hair braiding in this passage are associated with a caress and a loving touch. It does not matter what kind of hair the child has, for the mother, it is "silken" (96). The mood of Amy's song is tender and soothing, as Lady Button Eyes lulls the child to sleep:

Then she smooths the eyelids down
Over those two eyes of brown
In such soothing tender wise
Cometh Lady Button Eyes. (96)

For Amy it is only natural to sing this song after she does her “repair work” on Sethe’s mutilated body: she wants her to relax and try to sleep (95). She finishes by braiding her hair and Sethe falls asleep.

The song and Amy Denver’s ‘work’ are linked to Denver’s dream. Denver mentions: “when she [Sethe] finishes the combing and starts braiding, I get sleepy. I want to go to sleep but I know if I do I won’t wake up. So I have to stay awake while she finishes my hair, then I can sleep” (244). Denver cannot fall asleep if she wants to stay alive.

The narrative aspect of the song is not the only connection between Lady Button Eyes and Sethe. The unifying element is the eyes. Morrison does not say that Sethe has eyes like buttons or ever directly explains who Lady Button Eyes is, but she describes Sethe’s eyes in detail when she writes the scene in the shed: “But the worst ones [eyes] were those of the nigger woman who looked like she didn’t have any. Since the whites in them had disappeared and since they were as black as her skin, she looked blind” (177). Sethe is overcome with fear and adrenaline, and as she kills them to “put [her] babies where they’d be safe” (193). She transforms into something else: someone caring, but menacing spirit who makes her children “sleep” – Lady Button Eyes. When Denver narrates her dream, she recollects this image of her mother and describes her eyes as: “looking at me like I was a stranger. Not mean or anything, but like I was somebody she found and felt sorry for” (243). The song she remembers from her mother’s story and the murder of her

sister distort the mother's image: Denver envisions her not as a human, but as a powerful creature who does not recognize her own daughter, for whom she is a "stranger" (243).

Knowing that her mother is capable of murder, Denver confesses: "I spend all of my outside self loving Ma'am so she wouldn't kill me, loving her even when she braided my hair at night" (245). She tries to suppress her fears by loving her mother regardless of her fear. One can imagine that as Sethe reaches out for the comb-saw, Denver pretends that if she lets her braid her hair, her mother will not kill her; if she does not cry when it hurts, she can stay alive. She tries her best to stay alive even if means fearing her mother and the hair braiding routines.

Fear reawakens in Denver when she sees Sethe doing Beloved's hair. Denver is afraid that her mother can kill her sister again. In the polyphonic exchange, when the three voices, Sethe's, Denver's and Beloved's interweave, making it unclear at times, who is 'speaking,' Denver's voice is pronounced. Readers can hear her address Beloved, begging: "Watch out for her; she can give you dreams. / She chews and swallows. / Don't fall asleep when she braids your hair" (255). However, as we already know, later in this mother-daughter relationship Sethe is the one who gets *swallowed* by Beloved.

By the end of the novel, Sethe-Beloved's obsessive relationship excludes Denver. Incapable either of participating in their parasitic bond or accepting her mother's capitulation to Beloved, Denver, therefore, decides to step out of the house and gain control over her own life. This is her only way to survive given that her home life has turned into a living nightmare. Morrison does not mention who does Denver's hair when she starts working, but judging by her mother's habits, the reader is led to believe that Denver starts braiding her hair herself. When Paul D sees her prior to his visit to Sethe, Morrison does not describe her physically. According to Stamp, the former slave who saved her from her mother in the shed, "she turning out fine" and, to

Paul D, she has “grown” (313, 314). The reader is left to imagine the rest. Denver still visits Sethe after she leaves the house. She comes during the day, and Sethe does not mention her daughter’s hair anymore: “She comes in the daytime. She is still with me, my Denver” (320). The roles in the mother/daughter power play shift: if Beloved turns into Sethe’s ‘mother’ by devouring her, Denver, becomes the ‘mother’ by nurturing her and her sister, leaving them food and in forgiving them. It is because of Denver that Sethe and Beloved have food, provided by neighbors. Additionally, Denver’s positive effect on the neighbors prepared the townswomen’s arrival to exorcise Beloved and save Sethe. Denver does not leave the house to avoid the pain, but rather to save herself and her mother.

Morrison comes to the conclusion that the only nonviolent way to resolve the mother-daughter power struggle in *Beloved* is for Sethe, Denver, and, to a certain extent, Beloved to part ways, be it in life or in death. Fabienne Kanor comes to a similar conclusion when she explores the mother-daughter relationship in her novel *D’eaux douces*. A contemporary novel set in the beginning of the twenty-first century demonstrates that similar to the post-Civil War United States, hair mediates the mother-daughter relationship in present-day France.

D’eaux douces is a first-person narrative told in the daughter’s voice. Like Sethe, the mother in this novel, whom the daughter calls simply Maman, is convinced that hair, one of the most important parts of a woman’s life, is inseparable from suffering. Yet unlike Sethe who tries to interact with her daughters outside of their hair wars, talks to them and attempts to explain herself and her life, Maman believes that straightening her daughters’ hair with a hot comb is the only way to have a relationship with them.

From the start it is obvious that there is a breach between Frida and Maman. The daughter narrates: “Je suis née d'un fantasme dont je suis le portrait craché” (8). Her Maman came to France

in search of happiness, following the man she loved; yet her dreams got smashed. Raped by her boss, betrayed by her husband and then by her French lover, she suffers disappointment and becomes discouraged. She would like to “refaire sa vie” but it is too late (107). She also wanted a son François with a skin “crème espoir,” a reincarnation of her French dream, but she had Frida who is “noir malheur,” and the daughter is a constant reminder of Maman’s unfulfilled ambitions (105).

It does not come as a surprise that Maman is a “prisonnière de sa trop bonne éducation” (87). Maman’s own mother only taught her rules of being *good*: “Pas sa faute, c’est sa propre mère qui le lui a appris, lui a transmis les règles d’hygiène pour être une bonne épouse, une bonne mère, une bonne à tout faire” (12-13). Like her own mother, Maman is good wife and mother, but also a *bonne* - a servant to her family. She is a cook, a cleaning lady, a hairstylist, and she works in a hospital where she takes care of the elderly, the job she took the day after her rape.

She became emotionally unavailable after it: secrets and silence are the moral foundation of “la loi maternelle,” the family law that restricts sharing any intimacy (71). Frida’s home resembles a convent founded by Maman, where she is a “mère supérieure” (87). At the same time, the mother is also the prisoner, both of her establishment and her own complexes. Frida complains that her mother never tells her about crossing the ocean, or how she met her father, or their caress. It is as if her mother gave a vow: “Jamais [...] aller plus loin, toujours refus[er] de s’aventurer dans ce passé” (86). She teaches her daughters only “l’élémentaire,” the basics of hair and skin care and the importance of virginity, and never “le reste” – the mother’s past and her intimacy with Frida’s father (63, 42). As a result of this withholding, Frida feels like she has no past, no history:

Mère, petite mère! Montre-moi les photos du bateau! Dis-moi ton amour, l’impatience de l’attente, ces mois d’esérance passés à compter les vagues dans ce

grand paquebot français qui fendait l'eau des cœurs ! Et ce jour enfin où père et toi vous vous êtes retrouvés. [...] Explique-moi, bordel de mère, comment tu as fait pour ne plus te rappeler? (85-86)

Frida wants to know her family's past, not *la grande Histoire-France*, not the unrealistic success story of her feminine looks or a marriage to a White man (104). In depriving her daughter the insight into the family history and her own past and feeding her instead the national, 'colonial' discourse of hair and body care, Maman contributes to Frida's eventual insanity and suicide.⁵¹ Frida insults her mother calling her 'bordel de mère,' who keeps her mouth *cousu*, stitched, and her memories *absentes* (86).⁵² Frida is enraged, she accuses her mother of cutting off not only the memories, but with them even a slightest sense of desire: "Mère castratrice, coupeuse de désirs, avare en caresses et en compliments" (86). Frida is castrated: in amputating her memory, Maman cut off the two main pleasures Frida wants to experience: desire to remember and to have pleasure when having sex.⁵³

Somehow Maman's logic dictates that if the daughter learns about the past and finds out that sex can bring pleasure, Frida will forever be doomed and her mother's 'honorable' efforts to "batt[re] comme une folle afin que la déveine passât sans me [Frida] voir" will fail. (109). As mother describes, 'la déveine' is a double-sided misfortune: being a *négresse* with *grain* in her hair and being an object of a *négre's* desire. The first one is a constant battle with nature, that demanding regular sacrifices: time, effort, and pain. And to protect her from falling in love with a

⁵¹ Frida replaces the unknown family past with the past of the slave boat and the arrival of the enslaved to the Caribbean shores. The sexual experiences she gains with Black men give her this grand narrative of the history of her people. The rememory of slave ships and slavery play a crucial role in the murder of Eric and her suicide.

⁵² *Bordel de mère* is a play upon words of *bordel de merde*, which can be translated as goddammit, for God's sake, for fuck's sake.

⁵³ Frida is said to have "neige dans ses yeux après l'amour;" she is frigid. (45)

Black man, the mother scares Frida early on in life, teaching that a Black man is not just a man, but a *nègre*: “« est nègre l'homme capable de coquer dix femmes à la minute. De fabriquer des mensonges cent fois plus gros que lui. De te voler ta vertu sans prendre de plaisir » (79). Even more so, besides being a cheater, *nègre* is a beast: “nègre [est] le dorlis, le chien savane” (79). A *dorlis*, is a spirit, a “husband for the night” in Antillean folklore, who imposes sexual intercourse on women, violates them, and turns them into prostitutes.

Understandably, if this is the future the mother does not want for her child, Maman has to reinvent *la loi maternelle* and somehow break the silence. She starts by preaching two fundamental rules: “Il faut souffrir pour être belle” et “Méfie-toi du nègre” (71, 28, 83). These two lessons are closely related: in the colonial context of this mother-daughter relationship *belle* means ‘white.’ Maman ‘whitens’ Frida’s hair to marry her off to a White male. Additionally, Frida must be a virgin to be married off successfully. Staying away from *nègres* is the mother’s euphemism for ‘staying a virgin.’ This manifests Maman’s deep alienation: a Black woman who hides behind a White mask of colonial power. She straightens her daughter’s hair ‘white’ in order to hide her from her fate of *négresse*. To do that successfully the mother needs to transform her daughter’s appearance so that *la déveine* cannot recognize her.

Ceremonial ‘grain changing,’ hair straightening, accompanied by the no-less-ceremonial preaching of *loup-garous*, *dorlis*, *chiens savans* – Black men with an insatiable sexual hunger for different women – makes Maman hopeful of giving Frida “l’avenir meilleur” (51). In denying Frida her right to choose her way of styling her hair and living her life, Maman mourns her past and a marriage to Frida’s father, who himself is “un renard, [...] un vieux loup-garou des villes” (47). He cheated on her and left the family. Instead of sharing with Frida her disappointment, she

silently continues the Sunday ritual: the only means of communication with her daughter that she mastered.

One of Frida's strongest memories of her mother is vexed, as they link her to the time when Maman straightens her hair: "Des années à voir suer sa mère, démêler furieusement les cheveux de ses filles, pester contre cette brousse qui jouait, avec les dents du peigne, à faire driling driling" (105). *Driling* – that's the sound of the brush « playing » on the hair; it is the sound of hair changing, burning, and becoming unnaturally straight like plastic guitar strings. *Driling* is the only sound that accompanies those Sundays: Maman and Frida do not speak. Ironically, hair care, the most intimate moment a mother can have with a daughter, is the most emotionally sterile time Maman and Frida spend together.

"Cheveux grainés" is a Creole expression used to describe Frida's hair, or, as Maman puts it, "grainés à ne plus savoir quoi en faire" (35, 86). In less derogatory terms, *cheveux grainés* can be read as kinky hair that is so tightly coiled it resembles knots or pepper grains.⁵⁴ It is a type of hair « *qui fait des zéros, zéros, zéros sur la tête, est le signe d'une origine ou d'une identité nègre* » (Mulot 227). Regardless of what her mother says, Frida is convinced that the only thing Maman knows well is how to treat the *grain* of her daughter's hair as a curse that she must lift.

Kanor uses *cheveux crépus*, standard French for kinky hair, only once when she makes a general statement about the fight between a Black woman and her hair: "Frida se prépare au combat: la victoire de l'homme sur la nature, de la négresse sur ses cheveux crépus. Démêler, graisser, assouplir, diviser... Le geste est précis, séculaire. Aucun faux pas n'est permis" (50). When it comes to describing her own hair, Frida says *cheveux grainés*, an expression anchored in Martinique and used widely on the island.

⁵⁴ The more familiar term is pepper corns.

Grain represents the structure of hair. When discussing hair as a racial indicator, Juliette Sméralda, a Guadeloupian sociologist, notes the following in *Peau noire, cheveu crépu. L'histoire d'une aliénation* (2004): “La structure du cheveu, elle est déterminée par la longueur et la forme du follicule capillaire, une caractéristique génétique qui est réglée par les hormones et dépend de l’âge et de la « race »” (136). She uses the word *grain* to specify: “Les cheveux négroïdes (ulotriches), crépus, avec cinq variantes: frisés, crépus, très crépus, en grains de poivre, spirales” (136). In this description, the curls of *cheveux grainés* are able to get so tight that they imitate knots or grains of pepper. Interestingly, in American English there is an expression like *pepper-grain hair* or *pepper head* that according to the *Urban Dictionary* is an “archaic derogatory term used to describe females (probably African American) with poor grooming habits. Little balls of lint, dust, [or] detritus become snarled or entangled in the woman's unwashed hair” and cause a pepper-grain effect (“Pepper+hair”). Yet this definition does not capture how Fabienne Kanor utilizes *cheveux grainés* in the novel. She mentions neither trashiness nor tackiness, nor poor hygiene. According to the context, it is more likely to connote the hair as a product of *métissage*, a process of creating a new identity through cultural mixing.

Mervyn Alleyne discusses hair in Caribbean culture: “As far as phenotypical features are concerned, the hair perceived as of *nègre* is called *cheveux jerks* (*jeks*=scouring pad), *grain poivre* (pepper grain), *boulon*, *tête prinnin* [...] All of these terms are highly pejorative,” but in a different sense than the way the *Urban Dictionary* explains (171). Alleyne’s examples operate within the “good”/ “bad” racial binary, associated with hair: Black hair is “bad” as opposed to White hair, which is “good.”⁵⁵

⁵⁵ This is not pertinent only to the Caribbean. Chris Rock explores this racial dynamic in American society in his documentary *Good Hair* (2009).

A more racially neutral definition comes a forum named "Waouh t'as de beaux cheveux t'es métisse?..." from a website called *Belle Exotique* and sheds some light on "grainy" hair. One of the participants writes: "les chivé grenen (cheveux grainés) désigne les cheveux crépus dont les boucles sont très serrées, soit un 4C selon la classification)" (13). The 4C classification stands for hair that is tightly coiled.⁵⁶ This explains the effect of pepper grain. One cannot see the curl but notices small round balls on the head.

It is this type of hair that Frida has and Maman wants to straighten. The process of hot-comb hair straightening and hair relaxing is informed by the idea of alienation – a concept coined by Franz Fanon in *Peau noire masques blancs* (1952) and then advanced and linked to hair by Juliette Sméralda. Fanon characterizes the Martinican identity the following way: "Aux Antilles, le jeune Noir, qui à l'école ne cesse de répéter « nos pères, les Gaulois », s'identifie à l'explorateur, au civilisateur, au Blanc qui apporte la vérité aux sauvages, une vérité toute blanche. Il y a identification, c'est-à-dire que le jeune Noir adopte subjectivement une attitude de Blanc" (120). Fanon suggests that Martinicans unconsciously associate themselves with their European colonizers rather than with African slaves and thus alienate themselves from their African roots. Their alienation manifests itself in behavior, speech and appearance. Lighter skin is preferable to darker skin; straight hair is better than kinky hair. Imposed by colonization, these standards take psychological root within individuals and lead to internalized racism, which "refers to the acceptance by a marginalized racial population, of the negative societal beliefs and stereotypes about themselves" (Williams & Williams-Morris quot. in Neville 166). The rejection of the self leads to the desire to change, not to be Black. One becomes alienated from one's own identity and

⁵⁶ See Andre Walker hair typing system in the Introduction.

turns to his or her body to seek change in life. Hair is easier to transform than skin, so it is the point of departure for appearance alterations.

While discussing alienation and examining the origins of hair alterations, Sméralda describes kinky hair straightening as one of the alloplastic methods⁵⁷ of social control and adaptation: “La pratique alloplastique que constitue le défrisage s'insère plus largement au lot des pratiques dont la finalité est d'exercer « un contrôle social [sur] l'apparence des individus » dans la société globale, par le biais des normes et des valeurs dominantes en usage” (71). It is a widely known fact that both women and men of color suffer through hair relaxation and straightening many times in their lifetime, however currently women are under more serious societal pressure for hair alterations than men.⁵⁸

When Frida's mother straightens her daughter's hair, she *de-grain-s* it hoping to remove the seed of kinky hair from her head and to plant another one, the “grain du cheveu lisse” (29). She envisions that straight hair as a promise: “la promesse d'un avenir meilleur,” even if it is the illusion “d'un paradis perdu, jamais vu, jamais connu” (51). “Paradis” in this context means an illusory France, Maman's dream for which she crossed the ocean but was prevented from realizing. She hopes she can control both her own and Frida's life in the *métropole* by keeping her own and her daughter's hair straight.

Maman only focuses on Frida's hair as a source of “noir malheur,” the Black misfortune that is saturated in the daughter's skin and rooted in her hair (105). By relaxing Frida's hair, the mother effectuates the social control of her daughter's appearance, seeks to change her hair's *grain*,

⁵⁷ As Sméralda explains, alloplastic practices of appearance alterations are rooted in modeling hair and skin of the racial group that one does not belong to (71).

⁵⁸ Men's famous hair testimonials and hair stories discussing hair relaxers and alloplastic practices belong to Malcolm X, Chuck Berry, James Brown, Michael Jackson, Snoop Dog, Prince, Al Sharpton, etc.

and fight the *négresse* inside of her. Hair narrative of *grain* alterations allows us to consider this mother-daughter bond as a colonial space. Like a colonizer who protects the colonial territory and treasures but defends ‘civilized’ values, language and culture, the mother executes identity control. As a little girl, Frida, a *belle* maiden with good manners and sleek, straight hair is Maman’s gross domestic product, a sacrifice from a colony to the *metropole*.⁵⁹ In exchange her daughter should “faire tomber un Blanc.” Although Maman’s intentions seem controlling, objectifying, and cruel, they are good in nature: she attempts to protect her daughter from inevitable French racism and prepare her to live among White people. She wants Frida to assimilate, have a chance at upward mobility in French society, find a job and a husband, and have a family. Instead of discussing it openly and sincerely, instead of being vulnerable and explaining her motives, however, Maman brutally and silently straightens her daughter hair, assuming that one day she will understand. Frida does not: “Maman, [...] a su se battre contre les cheveux et a négligé le reste” (105). In her colonial fight to please colonizers, so one of them would like her daughter, the mother forfeits the intimate bond she could have had with Frida. “Le reste” is both the untold family history and, at the same time, intimacy, affection, and warmth of the mother-daughter relationship. Instead, Frida and Maman are hostile and cold towards each other. Adult Frida does not relax her hair, she wears her

⁵⁹ Annually, the black hair care industry contributes billions of euros to France’s economy. This is true for the American economy as well. Yet, because black hair in a shadow market, it is difficult to make an exact estimate for both French and American economies. They differ in a type of products African-American and Afro-French women use, and in hair care and styles they demand. In France, dying hair, extensions, and microbraiding are in high demand. Whereas in the U.S. weaves and locs, aka dreadlocks, are more popular. Also in the U.S. hair should be “bigger and more glamorous.” Yet, in both countries the White standards of beauty are still reinforced (see Introduction). In this sense, controlling the appearance of the citizens is a political and economic affair. Reinforcement of “white” beauty standards is profitable for the economies of France and the U.S., even in the postcolonial space. This way, these countries are still making money off the colonial past and enslavement of the people of African descent. I would like to thank Sylviane Greensword for her input on this matter.

cheveux grainés proudly and refuses to be colonized again. Maman considers her hair “deplorable,” and wonders when Frida will accept “d’être une femme” (125). *Femme*, in the mother tongue, means an obedient girl with straight hair.

Rememories of *driling* Sundays and the smell of her changing hair combined with the sporadic and troublesome visions of distorted bodies of enslaved African people estrange Frida from Maman even more. If they ever had a chance for a close relationship, it is gone when Frida begins to identify her mother with the monsters Maman used to scare her.

Once when Frida was still a child, during hair braiding, she decided to “déterrer son secret et le confier à sa mère” (90). She told her that the mother’s brother-in-law, Tonton Gaston molested her. Maman immediately forced her into a virginity test, which the mother administered, ignoring the daughter’s crying and pleading. Maman finished by praying to God, “d’avoir su si bien veiller sur sa fille” (91). Frida then learnt that no time, not even hair time, especially not hair time, is “le moment de passer aux aveux,” that it is better to “rester à la surface des choses” when Maman tries to get in Frida’s hair, both literally and figuratively (50, 49). So when the mother asks adult Frida questions about her life, her daughter does not respond. She is scared to tell her mother about her abortion or her love affair with a *nègre* when the mother has a hot iron in her one hand and her daughter’s hair in the other. In fact, Frida refers to her mother’s hands as “les pattes” paws! The most intimate pastime these women have is also the most dangerous one. Frida describes it as an “étape barbare du défrisage”– torture:

Maman penchée comme une madame la bouchère au-dessus de sa première [fille], le fer noir et brûlant entre les pattes. « Il faut souffrir pour être belle », c'est ce qu'elle répète, mère, convaincue que c'est en me lissant les cheveux que j'échapperai à mon sort de négresse. Combien de dimanches passés à attendre que le fer chauffe et passe du noir au rouge? (28-29)

Like Denver, who sees her mother who comes to brush her hair at night as a menacing figure who attempts to kill her, Frida, when it comes to hair care, is terrified of Maman, too. ‘Plonger le fer’ conveys a semantic field related to livestock and slave branding. During the time of the Triangular Trade, fire-heated marks on the bodies of enslaved people represented ownership. Frida’s comparison of her mother to a butcher, who has burning heat in her hands, intensifies the metaphor of a colonial mother who is dangerous.

Pattes is an ambiguous term: on the one hand, it has an animalistic connotation, while on the other, it is associated with assault (29). If one person tries to feel up or grope another person, in French the victim would say “Bas des pattes!” to stop the perpetrator. In this sense, when Frida describes her mother’s hands as *pattes*, and she experiences *défrisage* as abuse, the violation of her body that she cannot stop. It is obvious that Maman’s *pattes* are not soft, like cat’s paws, but dangerous and deadly as a wolf’s. Frida depicts her mother as a beast who has *pattes* only when she describes hair-straightening rituals.

Through this animalistic imagery the novel uncovers who is the real *loup-garou*, who is responsible, willingly or unwillingly, for Frida’s crime and death. The monstrous “grand méchant loup” in Frida’s life is Maman (86). Frida never says it directly, but she has a nightmare in which the connection becomes obvious. Hair narrative allows us to access this truth. Frida dreams that she is a little girl again and her mother brushes her hair. The dream starts as soothingly as Denver’s dream: the mother tenderly frees her hair from hair elastics, brushes it and, instead of burning and straightening it, massages her heavy hair:

Et d'enlever les élastiques qui emprisonnent mes cheveux, de me faire asseoir sur un coussin, de préparer tout le nécessaire : un peigne afro, un tube de vaseline, une serviette de toilette et un sac plastique. Elle caresse ma tignasse, en fait plusieurs boulettes rien qu'avec sa main droite. De l'autre, me masse le cuir chevelu, dans le

sens contraire aux aiguilles d'une montre. Pour éviter les grumeaux, elle veille à bien manipuler la vaseline, l'étale, la fait fondre, presque revenir, sur mon crane. (177-178)

This is how a mother should treat her daughter's hair: with caresses and respect for her and their heritage. In her dream, instead of the usual 'weapon,' Maman uses an afro-comb and Vaseline. She fondles her hair and makes her tufts. In contrast to the hot-iron scene, which is violent and cruel, this one, at first, demonstrates the care Frida longs for from her mother. As her fantasy continues, her mother sings a sweet song, "une chansonnette sueur qui fait chaud au cœur et calme la douleur de ma tête grainée" (178). Frida feels that her mother loves her and accepts her, even with her *cheveux grainés*.

However, her dream takes a dark turn: "C'est au deuxième couplet que les doigts de ma mère se tâtent. Ciseaux ou couteau, lequel des deux est le plus efficace? Et si elle se contentait du marteau, celui qui lui sert à massacrer les bêtes? Si elle se décidait à frapper? Un coup, deux coups, cinq coups sur ma tête" (178). The dream turns into a nightmare. The mother turns into her usual butcher identity, ready to strike, choosing between a knife, scissors or a hammer with which to kill her daughter, as if she were livestock. Reality blends with fairy tale: in her dream Frida turns into a Red Riding-Hood figure and her mother into the Wolf:

Frida gémit.
«Maman, que vous avez de longues mains, que vos ongles sont affûtés, que votre voix a changé!
- Il faut souffrir pour être belle, mon enfant!
- Maman-anananan ! ! ! ! Que vos gestes sont brusques, que votre peigne blesse, que votre sourire est étrange ! »
Silence. Mère va frapper. Maman veut me tuer. Trop tard. (178)

Mother has to postpone her murder until later, and somehow Frida knows that she will try again, perhaps another Sunday. In this scene Maman has *mains* instead of *pattes*, and yet she is still a

dangerous wild animal ready to kill her offspring. Mother's 'holy' formula, "Il faut souffrir pour être belle" turns sacrament into murder. Like Denver, in her dream Frida believes that her mother wants to kill her. This scene makes it clear that the mother who forgets how to caress her child and touch her with love is a *loup-garou*, a mother by day and a devouring (were)wolf on Sundays.

Although Frida perceives her as a (were)wolf, I will argue that Maman is a metaphorical *soukougnan*, a person who changes appearance after making a pact with the devil, who "en troquant sa peau pour celle d'une bête [...] abusent des gens de bien. [C]'est en brûlant les peaux qui sèchent que les bonnes gens se débarrassent des méchants » (37).⁶⁰ Hélène Migerel, a specialist of Caribbean religion, folklore, and mythology, in *La Sorcellerie des Autres* (1987) links *soukougnan* to colonial trauma:

Femme qui, après avoir fait tomber sa peau au moyen d'incantations maléfiques, prend son envol la nuit, suçant indifféremment femmes, hommes et bovins. [...] Le soucougnan dans l'enfer de la solitude et du besoin incessant de la vie de l'autre, aspire à la plénitude corporelle et sensuelle comme pour s'éloigner de lui-même, de ce moi qu'il éprouve comme un vide. (176)

A woman who is looking for freedom and wants to fly away, escape her reality, but at the same time craves others so much, ends up sucking their blood to gain their power – this does sound like Maman. Migerel adds that *soukougnan*'s transformation manifests her displacement and "la quête des origines dans une relation de haine" (177). It is for this reason that "le soucougnan demeure par excellence le leurre d'une liberté qui se termine dans la régression et le désespoir [...Il] est l'incarnation suprême du malaise d'un groupe humain que la culture européenne a déraciné et condamné à l'impuissance " (177) To give the final brush strokes to the portrait of a *soukougnan* and to explain this supernatural reincarnation, Curtius links the myth to a dysfunctional Antillean

⁶⁰ Alternative spelling: *soucougnan* or *soucouyant*.

family structure, in which a young female suffers from “l'absence des pères et la victimisation ” which result in “la détermination des femmes face à cette irresponsabilité masculine” (114). The result of male absence leads to a woman’s victimization. Her passive-aggressive reactions to the familial situation reveal her powerlessness. Thus, in order to become stronger she uses the forces of the weaker people around her (possibly her children) to gain her strength. This is the case of Maman:

Certaines fois, la mère de Frida se lâche. Ayant accompli tout ce qu'elle devait faire, libère l'Antillaise qui dort en elle, la fait passer entre les boutons de sa blouse. C'est d'abord un rire, sauvage et rêche, capable d'ouvrir grandes les fenêtres, de piétiner les frontières, d'entrer dans les cœurs. C'est également un geste, un bras qui se lève pour attraper la vie, un pied qui refuse de marcher à l'endroit, qui se déclare prêt à voler. Un regard qui défie le temps. Un corps qui se déplace sans but précis. Certaines fois, sa mère est rêve, une femme volante qui a perdu sa peau. (71)

In contrast to Maman’s usual persona who is *blanche* like the blouse she wears to work, in this passage we see the mother shed her French ‘Whiteness’ and claim her Blackness (11). Reversing the colonial context, she unleashes the Antillean Black woman who, as Frida believes, still sleeps in her, and becomes free of her work obligations – cleaning, cooking, family – and perhaps most importantly, her colonized self. She is ready to fly. An image of a magical woman, who is “une femme volante qui a perdu sa peau” is actually a positive one for Frida. She wishes her mother were that woman. But “cet instant de grâce généralement ne dure pas, annonce un retour en force de la loi maternelle. Du règlement” (71). One can imagine that Maman buttons up her blouse and returns to her usual self: a woman incapable of intimacy either with her husband or with her child.

In this sense *la loi maternelle* is in fact *la loi coloniale*, that Maman imposed on herself after her arrival in France and then on her daughters. What Frida hears as criticism of her appearance is in fact Maman’s internalized hatred: “Souffrir pour être belle, avoir l'air propre, le grain du cheveu lisse” (29). “Il faut souffrir pour être belle,” the first decree of the *loi maternelle-*

coloniale that Frida hears in her head every time she does her hair was not initially invented for her (28). Maman, whose hair Frida describes as “tirés-défrisés, lisses comme le poil d'un manteau synthétique,” as if it were artificial and fabricated, had to abide by the colonial laws of the *métropole*. That is why she makes sure to teach her daughter from early childhood that *cheveux grainés* are not *beaux*. Beauty is in ‘whiteness’ (51).

In the mother’s mind, to subject Frida to hair-straightening procedures is to make the daughter like the mother: a woman with *synthetic*, relaxed hair. Frida remembers « se contempler dans la grande glace de la salle de bains, se demander si c'est bien soi ou alors une autre qui ne tarderait pas à disparaître si on laissait passer trop de dimanches” (29). This girl with *cheveux lisses*, whom she sees in the reflection of a mirror and does not recognize, could have been the perfect daughter for Maman: her mirror image, her double. Real Frida with *cheveux grainés* is scared that she too will turn into a woman who does not recognize herself, who forgot her past and herself, who shed her Black skin to obey the colonizer.

Only once does Frida admit that she wants to shed her skin when her mother confesses that she wanted a boy instead of her. Frida recounts: “Je sens tomber la nuit, en moi. Il est temps de retirer ma peau. Il fait jour, dis-tu ? Nous ne sommes que le matin ? C'est parce que je rêve que je ne le sais pas encore ” (128). Frida mentions that after that confession she and her mother “pleurent et ont le corps qui brûle comme après l’orage,” as if the hurtful truth unclothed the mask of *soukounan* (128). They have one body that burns; they must exorcise the demon they share.

According to Antillean folklore the only way to defeat a *soukounan* is to burn its skin. Unable to confront Maman in real life, Frida compensates for her anger in her dreams: “Parfois aussi, je rêve que je la brûle, en récupère toutes les cendres pour les conserver dans une urne” (103). As if hoping that the mother will not come back, she burns her. Yet in her other dream, in

which she “perd [sa] mère, la cherche et ne la trouve plus,” Frida goes to Maman’s funeral to see her rotten body and realizes: “Je continuerai de [lui] ressembler. Je suis maman en plus pourrie. C’est à cela que je ressemble” (103). This perception is in parallel with the image of their bodies ‘burning’ as one, after Maman’s confession. Frida is in a vicious circle: she wants to love her mother but loving her is becoming her. Their merging in life and resemblance in death represent the familial and communal trauma of the colonial law. At the same time, there is a certain (de)gradation for Frida: in life she is her mother, and in death she is her rotten image.

Furthermore, within the colonial context, burning *soukougnan*’s skin implies the exorcism of the *malheur noir*. It is ironic that Maman a Black woman with a Fanonian “White” mask and “White” hair, who seems to have made a pact with a devil, a colonizer, in to order to *blanchir*, has forgotten that she, as well, used to have kinky hair: “Mère coquette qui ne comprend pas ce qu'elle a fait au bon Dieu pour avoir des filles au cheveu coco-sec. Qui met cela sur le compte de la déveine et prétend que cette déficience capillaire fait partie des mystères inexplicables de l'existence, aucune d'entre nous n'ayant hérité des cheveux longs, souples et raides de sa mere” (50). Maman whose burnt, plastic, *synthetic* hair looks artificial to Frida, blames God for having cursed her with children “au cheveu coco-sec,” dry as matted, fibrous husk that encases a coconut (50).⁶¹ Frida laughs at her mother, imagining that the mystery of her daughters’ kinky hair is inexplicable to Maman: surprisingly enough neither of her daughters has inherited her chemically relaxed hair!

Mother’s emotional absence, especially when she is present physically, next to her, is the most traumatic for Frida. Hungry for at least some intimacy and tenderness, Frida goes to the extreme, sleeps with men, feels nothing, has to have an abortion and cannot make a relationship

⁶¹ Another traditional way of referring to nappy hair in the French Antilles.

work. She also refuses to straighten her hair and keeps it natural. She ends up with Eric, a ‘real’ *loup-garou*, who sleeps around and bears his own colonial trauma of an absent father. She experiences flashbacks to slavery while having sex with him; she *rememories*. And those visions accelerate her descent into madness. In the final revelation, the reader understands that when Frida was eight she saw her father in bed with another woman. When she witnesses Éric cheating on her, she takes out a gun and avenges both her mother and herself. Fully absorbed by the omnipotence of the historical and familial past that merge together, she, in turn, realizes that she has become absorbed by her mother. When she looked in the mirror and saw a girl with straight hair, who did she recognize? That girl was her Maman. Like colonized subjects who have to mimic their colonizers if they want to survive, Frida has to be a mirror to her mother. Her suicide signals her unwillingness to be a part of this vicious circle of mimicry and whitening.

The final page of the novel is not numbered and looks like an administrative document, one that acknowledges Frida’s murder and her suicide. She still talks about her mother who taught her “les bonnes manières ce que chaque négresse doit savoir faire” (207). Be clean, silent, unremarkable. This relates to the title of the novel *D’eaux douces*. It is Éric who used this phrase and called her “fille d’eau douce” (132). *Marin d’eau douce* is a slightly derogatory and humorous term for a would-be sailor who only sails lakes and rivers and never experiences rough waters: a freshwater sailor. *Fille d’eau douce* is the daughter of a mother who tries to keep her safe, away from the rough life, traumatic past, sad truths, and in the end fails miserably and ends up hurting her and, in a way, causing her madness and death. Like a *libellule de terre*, who has never flown and will die on the ground, like a *girafe marine* who will drown in the water, *fille d’eau douce* is a girl who cannot survive, because the ocean waters that separate the daughter from her native Martinique are neither *douces*, nor calm.

CHAPTER THREE

UNDER BAKER'S KISS CURLS: AN INTERTWINED HAIR NARRATIVE IN GISÈLE PINEAU'S *FLEUR DE BARBARIE*

As we have learned in the previous chapter, revealing the mother's colonial obsession over her daughter's body and demonstrating her power to control her hair and mind is one of the functions of hair narrative. One which is closely related is to depict how a woman feels about herself, her race, and her position in society in connection to the way her hair is being treated during her life, from childhood to adulthood. Many grooming decisions she makes affect her being and often result from her desire to perform a certain social role, a role she has learned to play as child or a teenager, perhaps. A woman may choose to fit in or to rebel against that role. Josephine Baker (Figure 5), a twentieth-century American-born French dancer and singer made her way to stardom with the help of Black identity performances and a 'playful' mimicry of racial stereotypes during the inter-war period in France. In her famous *danse sauvage* and *danse des bananes*, performed at the Folies-Bergère, she ridiculed European racial biases and exposed the absurdity of colonizing people of African descent.⁶² Often, her hair and body, which became the products of

⁶² Phyllis Rose in *Jazz Cleopatra* states: "She frequently stimulated racial anxieties, obscuring the boundary between black "female" temptation and "male" danger by throwing this gender division into disarray. The banana skirt, for example, her most famous costume, seemed at times an intentionally absurd signifier of the black male phallic threat that Fanon describes in *Peau noire Masques blancs* : "The white man is convinced that the Negro is a beast; if it is not the length of the penis, then it is the sexual potency that impresses him." As the costume evolved, Baker's phallic signifier became less playful and more menacing. The outfit's incarnation in the 1927 Folies show was "a spangled, had-edged version. It was the fate of those bananas to become ever harder and more threatening with the years, so that at last they look like spikes" (Rose 114). Jules-Rosette observes the following: "The process of fragmentation and reconstruction of identity is a commonplace experience for marginalized minorities. In the case of Josephine Baker, however, this experience is refracted by the prism of performance and the reconstruction of identity and appearance (body, skin tone, and hair) under the public gaze. The theatrical persona wraps around the private person and projects a new identity onto a public stage. The stereotype of the exotic banana dancer as animal-like contrasts with the all-too-human sophistication of a worldly Princess Tam-Tam in Paris. Sidestepping Fanon's modernist imprisonment by colonialist categories of race through her performances, Baker transformed race into a series of costume changes that foreshadowed the desire to be postmodern (65-66).

objectification and commercialism, mesmerized her audience far more than her voice and songs. Through her identity transformations and binary racial and gender aesthetics, she managed to fascinate generations of French women and men and become an icon of both fashion and hairstyling.



Figure 5. Josephine Baker (1925).⁶³
Bryan Hammond and Patrick O'Connor, *Josephine Baker* (1988).

Josephine Baker's identity plays a major part in Gisèle Pineau's *Fleur de Barbarie* (2005), a Bildungsroman centered on an Antillean-born girl named Josette and her search for identity. The novel delves into Tata Michelle's, and later Josette's, fixation with Josephine Baker, which leaves a mark on the girl's identity. Fostered by a white French family at the age of four, Josette returns to Guadeloupe to live with her maternal grandmother, Théodora, at the age of nine. In her "native" land, Josette finds herself torn between her old familiar life in the French village, where, even as

⁶³ Bryan Hammond and Patrick O'Connor, *Josephine Baker*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1988, 120.

an outsider, she feels at “home,” and on Marie-Galante, one of the islands in the archipelago of Guadeloupe, where she was born, but where she feels more alienated than she did in France. As she comes of age on this island, she regularly rebels against her grandmother, questions her mother’s absence from her life, misses Tata Michelle, her French foster-mother, and eventually learns how to write from Margareth Solin, a prominent Caribbean woman-writer.⁶⁴ One of the figures that remains constant throughout her quest for identity and family history is Josephine Baker. Interlacing Josephine Baker and Josette Titus’s hair narratives, Pineau engages with the history of colonial and racial oppression of the French Caribbean and focuses on the causes of alienation of the Antillean Blacks.

Examining hair narrative in this novel helps reveal the roots of Josette’s alienation in which Tata Michelle’s fabricated image of Josephine Baker interlaces with Baker’s own constructed identity and where aesthetics play a crucial part. During her childhood in France, Josette has her hair shaved off and wears Josephine Baker’s iconic Eton crop, very short, slicked down hairstyle, for Mardi Gras. Baker’s look is the only hair model that is available to her, and this disguise, which becomes her second skin until she moves to Guadeloupe, symbolizes her repressed identity. Later in life, after Josette learns how to take care of her hair, Baker’s hairstyle paradoxically reconnects her with her younger self and helps her on the journey of embracing what it means to be herself and to be Black. At eighteen she is bold and triumphant, a reincarnated Josephine Baker and a

⁶⁴ Josette calls Tata Michelle “ma mère adoptive”, and her French family, “ma famille adoptive,” which means that I should use “adoptive mother” and “adoptive family” in English. But if Tata Michelle adopted Josette, the girl would not have returned to Guadeloupe to live with her grandmother (398, 303). Closer to the end of the book we find out that Tata “adopted” twelve children, but none of them stayed with her. Therefore, I think that she fostered those children and that she is Josette’s foster-mother, not adoptive one. Additionally, I suggest that for Josette using *mère adoptive* is more endearing and less distant than saying *mère d’accueil*.

reawakened Joséphine Titus, who is prepared to live her life with or without knowing the disturbing truth of her early childhood.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, her triumph does not last. Even though she goes a long way from a young lost child to a woman who is capable of embracing her past, as an adult, Josette still uses Baker's persona to salvage herself. Similar to how her foster-mother oversimplified the diva's image to shield the child from her troubled past and uncertain future, a grown-up Josette hides behind Baker's kiss curl to protect herself from the bitter truths: she is not Josephine Baker and her mother would not want her even if she were.

Josette's past is a mystery to her, and to the readers as well, up until the very end of the novel, but by confronting the paternal figures in her life, Josette eventually pieces together a heartbreaking and unsettling story: Pâquerette, her mother, was pregnant with her from a man whose name Josette never finds out and was chased from Guadeloupe by her grandmother Théodora. Josette was born in Guadeloupe in 1975 and left the island for the *metropole* together with her mother. While in France, the troubled mother got involved with a pimp who, while she sold herself to make some money, sexually abused Josette. Eventually, the child was placed in the care of *DDASS* and fostered by Tata Michelle.⁶⁶ Josette lived with her foster-family from the age of four until nine. Only after Margareth Solin, who much later turned out to be her great-aunt and the half-sister of Théodora, found the girl and arranged for her transport back to Guadeloupe.

⁶⁵ As many scholars have identified, the protagonist's name has a special meaning in the novel. Some refer to the heroine as Josephine, some as Josette, some as Josette-Joséphine. Because I introduce Josephine Baker's narrative in my research, I will call the protagonist Josette when discussing her childhood and Joséphine (with *é*) when referring to her as an adult after she writes her first novel. Closer to the middle of the novel she says: "Jamais Josette" (165). This is the turning point after which she becomes Joséphine Titus. Overall, to distinguish the protagonist from Josephine (without *é*) Baker, I will refer to the main character as Josette.

⁶⁶ Direction départementale d'action sanitaire et sociale - Department of Health and Social Security.

Tata is very disturbed by the story of Josette's sexual abuse. What kind of future can an abandoned and molested child have? The foster-mother finds a solution within Baker's life story: "née dans la boue et la misère[,et] s['est] transform[ée] en étoile" becomes one of Tata's litanies (Pineau 27, 28). She repeats her version of the entertainer's biography and makes Josette dress up as her Black icon. The foster-mother believes that this will give Josette's self-esteem a boost and fill her future with hope. Instead, it produces the girl's false beliefs and disorients her even more.

Josette is confused by Tata's admiration of *la Baker* and her nostalgia for the time when her icon was in her prime.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, as she is the only Black person the girl "knows," Josephine Baker's metaphorical presence soothes Josette's heart, which is broken because of her absent mother and creates an imaginary bridge connecting France and the Antilles. Searching for a mother substitute among women on two continents, Josette embraces the Josephine her foster-mother has seen in her and, later, following Margareth Solin's example, becomes a writer. The protagonist's first book, *Sous le signe de Joséphine*, is an attempt to create some sort of family story, her own past, and free herself from the dependency on her biological mother's image. Yet, Josette, I will argue, never liberates herself from Josephine Baker's shadow: as a grown-up she wears *accroche-cœurs*, the kiss curls hairstyle (Figure 6), a lock of hair curling onto the face and usually plastered down, the singer's signature look. Moreover, she makes Joséphine, the name Tata gave her after the adoption, her own, and puts that name on the cover of her work: Joséphine Titus. Combining her birth family name with the name that Tata forced her to take when she was a child, the protagonist attempts to restart her life and invent herself anew.

⁶⁷ The French called Josephine Baker "*la Baker*" (the Baker). Together with *Vénus d'ébène* and *Panthère noire*, these are the most famous nicknames that Josephine Baker had. Even though her most memorable performances from the 1920s – 1930s, she performed until the day she died in 1975. This is an important year for the novel because this is the year that Josette is born. Tata Michelle uses this information to convince her foster-daughter that she is Baker's reincarnation.



Figure 6. Josephine Baker's kiss curls, *les accroche-cœurs* (*Vanity Fair* 1927).⁶⁸
Bryan Hammond and Patrick O'Connor, *Josephine Baker* (1988).

The protagonist's relationship to her identity is the driving force of the novel. From the ages of four until nine, all she knows is the French countryside near the Sarthe, her French foster-family, and the discomfort of being the only Black person in school and in town. Tata Michelle fuels Josette's turmoil when she introduces the girl to the iconic Josephine Baker. I will argue that the presence of such a grand figure as *la Baker*, a prominent entertainer with a contradictory biography and controversial performances, her body, hair, costume, songs, and life, aggravates Josette's alienation. Years later she will have discovered how to channel her inner Baker, but before then, the child has to deal with the absurdity and humiliation of Tata Michelle's colonization of her body and mind through the image of *Vénus d'ébène*.

Before Josephine Baker, the Black Venus, *Vénus d'ébène*, there was only one other famous "sexualized savage," the so-called Hottentot-Venus (Figure 7). According to Hill Collins "Her

⁶⁸ Bryan Hammond and Patrick O'Connor, *Josephine Baker*, 55, 109, 121, 129.

display formed one of the original icons for Black female sexuality” (Hill Collins 147). The Hottentot Venus was “An indentured South African Khoikhoi woman, Baartman [(1789-1815)] was exhibited as a curiosity, albeit also under the alibi of ethnographic specimen, first in England [...] and then in Paris” (Henderson 83).⁶⁹ Due to such a display, “The figure of Sarah Bartmann was reduced to her sexual parts. The audience which had paid to see her buttocks and had fantasized about the uniqueness of her genitalia when she was alive could, after her death and dissection, examine both” (Gilman quot. in Hill Collins 148). Therefore, “Bartmann symbolized Blacks as a ‘race.’ Her display also served to buttress notions of European nations as ‘civilized’ as opposed to the backward colonies that were incapable of development” (Fausto-Sterling quot. in Hill Collins 148).



Figure 7. Sarah Baartman by Christopher Crupper Rumford (1811).

“The cupid says: Take care of your Hearts!!” The note at the bottom of the page reads:

“Love and Beauty – Sartjee the Hottentot Venus.”

Image courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

⁶⁹ Also spelled Bartmann, and her first name is spelled as Sartjee or Saartjie, often shortened to “Sarah.”

What is clear from Baartman's depiction (Figure 3) is that Josephine Baker, too, was publicly displayed and sexualized in Paris during her lifetime. However, Henderson argues that "The cultural codes which these two women transmitted, however, were vastly different" (Henderson 83). Baartman's body, which "functioned as pure display" was ridiculed and grotesquely sexualized and objectified to the extent that her body was preserved and displayed after her death (83).⁷⁰ The Baker body, on the other hand, functioned differently:

as a desirably erotic and aesthetic commodity. Baker's sexualized femininity and elite sophistication as the Black Venus thus modified – reversed even – the century-old, proto-colonial image of the Venus Hottentot in the French imaginary, infusing the public, sexualized, and commodified black body with a seductive aura of the modern. (83-84)

The biggest distinction between the two Venuses is "measured most profoundly in rigor and sophistication of performance:' where Baartman's 'ethnographic spectacle' represented an essentialist notion of primitivism, Baker's performance symbolized the *savoir-faire* of the actor playing the role of the primitivized" (84). This is especially important when one considers how Tata Michelle expects Josette to perform Baker, but in the end, I will argue, Josette can only achieve a grotesque flat primitive representation, which is derived from the diva's style and talent. In a way the young girl, like Baartman, does an essentialist demonstration of what Tata perceives as *la Baker*. She will only be able to achieve a more sophisticated portrayal of *la Baker* when she grows up and decides to put on the banana belt again for Mardi Gras in Guadeloupe.

Tata Michelle became a fan of Baker because her mother, Mémé Georgette is Baker's "fanatique;" so, it is clear the foster-mother admired her idol long before she fostered Josette (264).

⁷⁰ According to Henderson, her remains were stored in Musée de l'Homme in Paris until their repatriation to her native South Africa in 2002 (83).

The girl remembered that Tata had “[un] vieil âne [...] qu'elle avait prénomme Bouillon, car elle lui trouvait une manifeste parente avec Jo Bouillon, un des maris de la Baker” (Pineau 22). On a few occasions, Josette recalls that her foster-mother “épluchait ses patates [...] fredonnait une chanson de sa vieille Joséphine” (49). It is also probable that she fostered a Black girl because she loved Baker and wanted to have a miniature copy of her for herself. The novel is a first-person narrative telling Josette’s version of the story, so one can only guess at Tata Michelle’s motivations.

Reading between the lines of Josette’s account, however, we find that a racially biased Tata thinks that all Black people know one another. She assumes that Josette will understand right away who Josephine Baker is and will know how to be her “naturally.” It does not matter that Baker is African-American and Josette is Guadeloupean. They both arrived in France, Josette was born the year Baker died, they are both Black, so for Tata Michelle this makes Josette and Josephine the same. It is also possible that in addition to skin color, she chose Josette because her name sounded like Joséphine and could be a sign that she is a reincarnated *Vénus d’ébène*. The foster-mother lives vicariously through Josette: if she cannot play with the real Baker, at least she can with her replica. Consciously or not, she thereby achieves her own colonial dream of conquering the Black body and believes her own fabrication.

Tata starts Josette’s transformation slowly. First, she changes Josette’s name: “Un matin, après une nuit de réflexion et d'insomnie, Tata Michelle me demanda si j'acceptais qu'on me rebaptise Joséphine, prénom qui n'était, au fond, pas si éloigné de Josette. Et puis, à ses dires, pour d'obscurés raisons, il valait mieux” (27). One of these ambiguous pretexts implies that Tata’s mother, Mémé Georgette, may get confused. For example, if Tata calls for Josette, Georgette may hear the name, jump up, and cause a scene. This is a very feeble excuse, which probably works for

gullible Josette. Yet, it is soon enough replaced by the real one: according to Tata, *la Baker* only became famous because she had her name, the name that opens the doors, *Joséphine*.⁷¹ The French foster-mother lulls Josette with promises of a glorious life if she agrees to take on this name:

[...] Joséphine ... Ah ! Joséphine ! C'est le genre de prénom éternel, ça c'est la classe... Moi, je suis rien, tu vois bien. Mais, je peux te jurer que tu seras une étoile aussi, ma petite Joséphine. Une grande danseuse, une chanteuse internationale ... T'es plus noire qu'elle, faut pas se coller des œillères, mais la chance est de ton côté et je le lis dans tes yeux, aussi sûr que deux et deux font quatre, aussi vrai qu'il y a une lune et un soleil qui se pointent à tour de rôle dans le ciel. (28-29)

The antithesis created by Tata's juxtaposing her position, "je suis rien" with Josette's "tu seras une étoile" unmasks Tata's desire to live vicariously through *la Baker* # 2 and gives her the sense of accomplishing something in the world (28). She creates her own Baker and makes her dependent on the judgement and reassurance only she can provide. In reality, Tata is not *rien*, she is someone: a farmer, a daughter, a provider, a foster-mother for twelve children. It is Josette who does not know who she is, her past, and where she comes from. She is literally no one. And when Tata prophesizes by stating "tu seras une étoile," she robs Josette of a chance to be someone in the present. She is an innocent child who needs love, care, and protection, yet Tata makes her foster-daughter chase the dream of becoming a star, a dream that is not even her own. This delusion follows Josette through her journey: it makes her insatiable for fame and glory, causes her to

⁷¹ Interestingly, the star would often change her name. Freda Josephine McDonald was born in 1906 and changed her name officially to Josephine Baker in 1921 after her second marriage to a railway porter named William Baker (Jules-Rosette 287). Baker's son claims that it does not matter since "Josephine was never called Freda" (Baker and Chase 17). Additionally, Napoleon's Bonaparte first wife's name was also Joséphine, and she was born in Martinique, where she has been an object of hatred since the nineteenth century. When Josette explains to Margareth Solin that Tata called her Joséphine, the writer interrupts her to remark: "Ça me fait penser à cette garce d'imperatrice" (Pineau 130). This is not directly related to the contents of the novel, nevertheless this fact intensifies the colonial context of Tata Michelle's assertion that Josette should change her name to Joséphine.

pretend she is someone else, reincarnated Baker, and prevents her from accepting her real self, her past, and her present for what they are.

It is also unfortunate that Josette's skin is darker than Baker's: the light-skinned singer was famously known for whitening her skin with milk and lemon juice (Jules-Rosette 63).⁷² Pineau leaves this fact to the reader's imagination, but one can assume that if Josette were to stay at the Sarthe, the foster-mother might start bleaching the girl's skin. Tata Michelle does not go as far, but she addresses her foster-daughter as "ma petite Joséphine," allowing her to be only one thing: a miniature image of Josephine Baker (Pineau 28). When pondering her experience in the Sarthe, Josette confides: "Tata Michelle était une vieille folle et moi je n'étais rien d'autre que le jouet de son délire, une poupée entre ses mains" (69). The dolls of Josephine Baker (Figure 8) were on sale in France in the twenties and thirties. Tata Michelle comes from a very poor family, which as one can suppose, could not afford toys or dolls. Based on this supposition, I will argue that Tata always wanted a doll, perhaps even a Bakerdoll, but it was too expensive.⁷³ Perhaps then, she compensates with Josette for her childhood disappointment in not having this toy.

⁷² Baker's parents, Carrie McDonald and Eddie Carson, were both Black, the mother being half Apalachee Indian. Lynn Haney, one of Baker's biographers, believes that Josephine "never forgot the feeling of desertion engendered by Eddie's departure [...] and when she became famous [...] invented fantasy daddies to fill the vacancy [...] There were alternately a 'white boy who went to school with Mama,' a 'Spanish dancer,' a 'Jewish tailor,' or a 'Creole from New Orleans,' depending on her mood, her need and her audience" (Haney 9). Moreover, the writer mentions that Baker often claimed that her mother was African (9). It is perhaps because of these stories that Baker started to be rumored to be racially mixed and to have had a white father. The back cover to *Josephine: The Hungry Heart*, a biography written by Baker's adopted son, Jean-Claude Baker, claims that Josephine "never knew her father[...], always claimed to be of mixed racial heritage [,and] hated being black" (Baker and Chase). In addition, her son "think[s] that Josephine's father was white – so [does] Josephine, so [does] her family" (16). This is an important inconsistency, because, as many biographers concur, Baker's life was a mystified collection of well-calculated and cleverly-created inconsistencies that she came up with and used as the situation demanded.

⁷³ Bakerdoll is a brand name for a Josephine Baker doll.



Figure 8. A German tobacco card of Josephine Baker, holding Bakerdoll.
Image courtesy of Linda Wulfestieg.

And how do girls play with their dolls? They dress them and braid their hair. Tata strives to do the same with Josette, but fails to fulfill her dream, at least partially. There is no way that she can braid Josette’s hair! Tata Michelle thought that in fostering a child who looks like *Vénus d’ébène*, she adopts someone whose hair is just like Baker’s: straight and sleek. She simply does not know how to tame Josette’s *cheveux crépus* and turn it into Baker’s brilliantined Eton crop.⁷⁴ Commonly known as “flapper,” this was her signature look, which in the 1920s represented a “modern Black woman.”⁷⁵

In Baker’s era choosing to process one’s hair helped to signify a break with ‘country’ and older ways, because it involved being serviced by another person, engaging a chemical process, and reconstructing the self in order to play a public role, usually within white society.^[76] What was at stake in hairstyle was Baker’s

⁷⁴ For more on *cheveux crépus* and *cheveux grainés*, see Chapter Two.

⁷⁵ A flapper “in the 1920s [is] a fashionable young woman, especially one showing independent behaviour” (Definition of “Flapper” - English Dictionary).

⁷⁶ Malcolm X reiterated this same idea in his autobiography from 1965. He describes “how ‘country’ [he] appeared” before he has his hair “conked,” chemically relaxed: “[...] my head caught fire. I gritted my teeth and tried to pull the sides of the kitchen table together. The comb felt as if it was raking my skin off [...] My eyes watered, my nose was running” (52, 62-63). He remembers the pain of this transformation and the burn of the relaxer in his hair. He also recalls

public identity as a modernized American woman, which was layered over the Africanist dancing she performed. (Francis 150)

Hair straightening and sleeking it down helped Baker create her new identity: a Black American star in Paris. In fact, Josephine Baker not only reconstructed herself: she made her look a trademark by endorsing quite a few hair creams and brilliantines, like Pluko hairdressing pomade, in addition to skin lightening products, like Valaze cream (Register 95, Jules-Rosette 148).



Miss Josephine Baker is the delectable comedienne of the "In Burlesque" Company, the most pretentious and costly musical comedy ever produced by the people of our group. This company is now making a world tour under the personal direction of the famous Broadway producer, Mr. H. C. Whitney.

BEAUTIFUL Josephine Baker
Tells how You can make YOUR Hair Straight, Soft and Beautiful, too

Miss Josephine Baker says: "I was so delighted with the way the improved Pluko Hair Dressing smoothed out and straightened my hair, and made it easy to dress any way I wished, that I kept right on using it. In just a little while my hair began to grow. Now I have an abundance of straight, glossy hair, and it is all due to the use of the Improved Pluko Hair Dressing."

The experience of Miss Baker and thousands of other men and women of our group proves that YOU can make your hair just as long, straight and glossy as you wish, if you will follow their example and use the Improved Pluko Hair Dressing.

This delicately fragrances, soft, fine textured preparation melts at the temperature of the scalp, and goes deep into the pores, nourishing and invigorating the hair roots and making the hair straight, smooth, glossy and easy to dress any way you wish.

IMPROVED
Pluko
"Always the Finest
Hair Dressing, Now
the Easiest to Use"



Snow White 50¢
Amber 25¢

If your dealer can't supply you with the Improved Pluko Hair Dressing, send us his name along with the price of the Pluko you want, and we will send it to you through him, thus saving you the cost of postage.

PREPARED ONLY BY The Pluko Co., MEMPHIS, TENN.

Figure 9. Pluko advertisement.

The Pittsburgh Courier, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 23 Oct 1926, Sat, page 2.

that the "first view in the mirror blott[ed] out the hurting" and that he was feeling "simply lost in admiration of [his] hair now looking 'white'" (63). Reflecting on this experience later in life, he talks of self-degradation and shame of Black people and regrets relaxing his hair when he was younger.

Regeister mentions that “by 1926, Baker was such a popular icon that the advertising industry recruited her to endorse products – products designed to enhance racially oriented sex appeal for those seeking identification with Baker. Her endorsement of Pluko hair dressing reads (Figure 5): “Beautiful Josephine Baker tells you how you can make your hair straight, soft and beautiful, too,” a line that ‘conveyed this sex symbol’s approval of Eurocentric standard of beauty, in a culture that preferred straight hair’” (Regeister 95).

Furthermore, she issued her own line of skin and hair products, Bakerskin and Bakeroil targeted for *la peau brune* and Bakerfix for hair. the latter copied C. J. Walker’s hair pomade (Jules-Rosette 148).⁷⁷



Figure 10. Bakerfix advertisement.⁷⁸
Bryan Hammond and Patrick O'Connor. *Josephine Baker*. (1988)

⁷⁷ Madame Walker is the first female self-made millionaire in the US, who in the 1900s contributed to the development of “a group of hair preparations and products and a system of beauty culture much needed by black women of her day. [...] She introduced the pressing creams, greases and oils the beauty world knows today. [...] They perfected the use of hot iron on curly hair” (Morrow 65, 66). Walker’s hair pomade, the one Bakerfix copied, is the predecessor of modern-day hair relaxers.

⁷⁸ Bryan Hammond and Patrick O'Connor. *Josephine Baker*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1988, 74.

Baker products were very popular in Paris and in the 1920s with a little bit of Bakerfix women in Europe, both White and Black, could achieve freedom (Rose 100, Haney 81). The Bakerfix advertisement (Figure 10) featured bare-chested Josephine Baker wearing a skirt made of Bakerfix tubes, dancing on a man's head, while, probably, plastering his hair with her feet. The bottom of the ad reads: "Fixe merveilleusement la chevelure pour la journée et lui donne sans la graisser un brillant incomparable."

Baker herself expresses this idea in a famous sentiment, published at the back cover of her biography "J'étais l'idole sauvage dont Paris avait besoin. [...] J'ai représenté la liberté de me couper les cheveux, de me promener nue, d'envoyer tous les carcans au diable, y compris le corset" (Pessis).⁷⁹ Josephine's cropped, sleek hair smoothed down her skull, together with the performances, bewildered and puzzled the spectators: "Her hair [...] looked as if it had been plastered down on her head with caviar. [...] People wondered [i]s that real hair or has it been painted on? (Rose 19). Another account of the same performance states: "Her black hair, slicked down with grease, shone like a bowl of caviar" (Haney 59). The visual comparison of her hair to black caviar implies luxury and sensual indulgence. Not everyone finds black caviar tasty, but in France it is usually associated with extravagance and hedonistic taste. Caviar is an expensive delicacy; visually, so was Josephine.

⁷⁹ As she was gaining fame and wanted to depart from her primal image, she started wearing blond wigs and bleaching her hair. "In December 1932 she sang a signature tune entitled "Si j'étais blanche!" (If I Were White!) [...] In this number, Baker wore a blonde wig, and she had lightened her skin with milk and lemon juice. The song opens with the line: "Je voudrais être blanche / Pour moi quel bonheur / Si mes seins et mes hanches / Changeaient de couleur!" (Jules-Rosette 64). Some critics were shocked and revolted by this ironic white-face performance, which they considered a parody that destroyed Josephine's authenticity as a primal performer. [...] Other of Baker's biographers interpret the song as a reference to the 1920s fad of suntanning for beauty and health among Europeans, with ironic references to the transcoding of racial images" (63).

If in the twenties Baker's cropped hair meant *liberté*, for Josette in the eighties – bondage and shame! Tata was not prepared for the fact that children of African descent have nappy hair, and she does not know what Bakerfix, or relaxers are. Still, she has scissors and can chop hair. Josette remembers: “J'avais les cheveux hirsutes. Tata Michelle n'avait jamais su coiffer ma tignasse crépue et la laissait en jachère entre deux coupes”(69). Unaware of how to take care of her foster-daughter's hair and being ignorant about natural hair of people of African descent, she either kept Josette's hair disheveled or shaved it off.⁸⁰ She subconsciously knew that it was wrong to shave the girl's head, because Josette hated her “haircuts,” and Tata probably felt guilty. To justify herself she told and retold her version of Baker's life story and showed Josette her pictures on the record covers, where the star wore her hair shortly cropped.

Tata cheats: she speaks of Baker with admiration, but her opinions of Baker's hair and face are degrading: “Alors, est-ce que je mens! Regarde-la bien ! Alors, elle est pas gracieuse notre Joséphine avec sa raie sur le côté et ses cheveux de rien du tout. Ose dire qu'elle est moche ! Dis que c'est pas un vrai soleil!...” (69). She does not go as far as using racial slur – Baker is her icon – but by calling her hair “rien du tout,” and implying that “La Baker [...] en avait pas plus sur le caillou et ça l'a pas empêchée de mettre tous les hommes qu'elle voulait dans son lit, » Tata insults her icon and reiterated the stereotypes of sexualized Black women's bodies (69).

Instead of giving Josette freedom to choose a hairstyle or attempting to educate herself about Black hair care, Tata convinces her foster-daughter that her shaved head, which does not

⁸⁰ This hair narrative of a White woman who does not know how to deal with the hair of a Black girl echoes the similar story illustrated in Kanor's *D'eaux douces*, in which a Black mother, who has troubles taking care of her daughter's natural hair, straightens it, hoping to ‘whiten’ her Black identity. In doing so she succumbs to patriarchal pressure and at the same time fulfills her ‘colonial’ duty to metropolitan France.

even closely resemble Baker's Eton crop, is totally acceptable: "Je t'assure, Joséphine, faut pas jalouser les femmes qui se dandinent du croupion avec des cheveux qui ondulent jusqu'au bas du dos. La beauté vient pas des cheveux, tu peux en être certaine. Elle vient de l'intérieur, la beauté" (69). Tata's idea that beauty doesn't come from hair but from within could have comforted Josette and given her confidence to fight against the mockery and racial attacks at school. And it does in its own way. Josette, when called *noiraude* by a classmate, imagines that she is "une reine toute-puissante," the idea that stems from the fact Baker herself was a queen: "the queen of the colonies" and, of course, of jazz (Pineau 54; Regester 102).⁸¹ When she meets her mother, she hears Tata's voice, like a record playing perpetually and telling her to have "de la classe" (32). Yet Tata's advice is problematic, because it comes from a place of white privilege and colonial fantasy.⁸² Yes, the French woman grew up poor, and she might have been more conscious of how race affects Josette's insecurities. Still, she is blissfully ignorant of the aftermath of her "hair care:" if Josephine Baker could deal with racism, so can Josette. Consequently, it becomes clear that Tata is not very well informed of Josephine Baker's path to stardom and that she distorts facts to capture Josette's imagination.

⁸¹ In the 1930s, "when she was appointed "the queen on the colonies" for the French Colonial Exposition, her appointment elicited protests from those living in the French colonies. Her detractors charged that "Josephine was from Harlem, which is not a French possession; that she wasn't able to speak French; that her hair was not like that of the French Africans since she had it straightened" (*Chicago Defender* quot. in Regester 102). As Regester comments, "such a controversy had intense implications on African American audiences [... as] now they were forced to contend with their own ambiguities regarding construction of blackness" (102). In this newspaper excerpt alone not only Baker's ambiguous nationality (neither American nor French, both American and French) but even her blackness were considered "questionable" (102).

⁸² This idea resonates with Maman's conviction expressed to Frida "faut souffrir pour être belle" (28). Both women use the idea of beautiful hair to colonize their daughter, but in a different way: Maman uses *belle* as a euphemism for straight hair and fair skin complexion of a French woman. She makes Frida suffer to please 'the colonizer.' Tata executes beauty control as a colonizer, and it is she who decides what makes her foster-daughter beautiful.

The French woman only sees the singer's beautiful, smiling face on the record covers and believes in the Black Cinderella story that Baker and her agents created. As the French and the American press have been a source of information and myth creators of Josephine Baker's life and iconic status both in France and the U.S., Tata knew only the story that was delivered to the public. Josephine Baker's life has always been, and even remains until today, a fable and a fantasy with biographical details that vary from source to source and images that change from photo to photo. But only new research shows this. In the eighties, Tata Michelle absorbed the story she was fed in the magazines and filled Josette's head with dream-like stories of Josephine Baker, hoping that they would inspire the young girl:

A l'entendre, la grande Joséphine qui m'avait précédée dansait et chantait mieux que personne. Elle était née dans la boue et la misère, là-bas chez les sauvages, aux Amériques, à Saint Louis du Missouri. A dix-neuf ans, juste vêtue d'une ceinture de bananes, sortie tout droit de la brousse, elle était partie à la conquête de Paris. Elle était montée, montée, jusqu'à se hisser dans le ciel des artistes et se transformer en étoile. N'enfilait plus que des robes de Cendrillon au bal, de la soie de diva des Mille et Une Nuits, des manteaux de fourrure, des capes de lumière cousues de pierres précieuses. On la couvrait de perles rares, d'or et de diamants. (27-28)

This fairytale-like representation of Josephine Baker's life is simplistic and shallow, but this is all Tata has access to. Although she is correct that Josephine "was born out of wedlock, dirt poor, in a disease-ridden slum," according to *Naked at the Feast*, one of the most famous biographies of Josephine Baker, both of her parents were performers; father, a drummer, mother, an amateur theatrical actress (Haney 7, 4). They even "worked up a song-and-dance routine they performed in bars and vaudevilles, [...] sometimes carrying Baby Josephine onstage for the finale" (9). So, Baker did not live among "sauvages," and she started her career long before she came to Paris

(Pineau 27).⁸³ In fact, “Josephine was lucky in one respect [:] St. Louis was musically rich, and from the beginning, she was at the heart of it” (Haney 7). What would Tata have said if she had known that Baker was thirteen when she married for the first time, and fifteen, for the second (25, 32). The dresses, diamonds, fur, and silk came from hard work, a spark of genius, and a lot of luck.

Closer to the middle of the novel, when grown-up Josette comes back to the Sarthe with a filming crew to shoot a documentary about herself and her life in France, the readers find out that it was Tata Michelle’s mother, Mémé Georgette, who was a “fanatique d’une grande dame comme Joséphine Baker” (264). She probably read about Baker in newspapers, perhaps listened to her songs, perhaps, later saw her on TV, and potentially this fandom was endorsed by her daughter, Michelle. During the trip the three women take to the Château des Milandes, Baker’s former residence in the Périgord which currently houses her museum, Georgette, in an emotional speech she gives to a reporter, compares both her daughter and foster-granddaughter to Josephine Baker: Josette as her “fille spiritique” and “sa brave Michelle” as a foster-mother “qui a recueilli des orphelins sur les quatre continents” (263). She mentions Baker’s honors, the castle, and other details of her biography, that the reader hasn’t encountered previously. In a way, Michelle also lived *sous le signe de Joséphine* as did Josette. And Georgette is the cause. It becomes clear that both Tata and Mémé knew enough about Baker and, in all likelihood, told Josette more than she

⁸³ As one finds out in another installment of Josette’s remembering of Tata’s Baker story, the reader finds out what Tata meant by *sauvages*: “Joséphine Baker, la Panthère noire, était née dans la boue, là-bas, à Saint Louis du Missouri, en 1906. En Amérique, chez les sauvages qui faisaient la guerre aux nègres en ce temps-là, même s'ils ne pouvaient s'empêcher de danser sur leur musique” (91). This passage clarifies that Tata actually condemned the 1917 East St. Louis race riots, during which the Black neighborhoods were ravaged, and Josephine saw the people fleeing their burning neighborhoods and cross the bridge over the Mississippi River, where she and her family lived (Haney 21-22). “Though Josephine was not involved in the massacre, the event took on a symbolic significance for her [: she] became convinced that she was a black Joan of Arc, anointed by God to save her people from oppression” (Haney 21). Later on in life, being unable to “save” them, she would renounce her American citizenship. This is the distance she needed.

could remember. The child was able to retain only snippets of the entertainer's life and shared with the readers the ones that influenced her destiny the most. Significantly, in her adult life, while writing her novel, the protagonist never consults any of Baker's biographies, because she claims that she "connaît la vie de Baker sur le bout des doigts," and continues replaying in her memory the same 'facts' she heard from Tata, like the greatest hits of *la Baker* (91).

Instead of inspiring Josette by telling about Baker's work for the French Resistance during World War II, for which the singer was awarded the *Médaille de la Résistance*, or about her performances that exposed the hypocritical racial biases towards the colonized and the enslaved,⁸⁴ Tata fixates on Baker's appearance and tries to convince her foster-daughter that the right name and shaved head will do the trick and turn her into "la nouvelle Baker" (31). Paradoxically, she does not teach Josette either to dance or to sing: "Pour l'instant, tu chantes faux, mais tu danses pas si mal que ça," Tata assures. (32) Convinced that in training her correctly, Tata accompanies hair shaving rituals with Baker's songs: "Allez ! On l'écoute, notre reine. Je mets *le Ram-pam-pam* et on va danser et chanter" (69). At first, Josette simply wants to escape, but once she starts listening to the music and then to Baker's voice, something magical happens:

À ces moments-là, j'avais envie de fuir loin de la ferme et des grands ciseaux de Tata. Mais soudain, une musique endiablée emplissait la salle commune. Les notes jaillissaient, grimpaient aux murs, se suspendaient au lustre, bondissaient sur les meubles, éclataient comme des feux d'artifice. Du bout du pied, Mémé Georgette se mettait à battre la mesure. Et bientôt, la voix nasillarde d'un chanteur montait au plafond. (70)

The house, enchanted by the music, awakens. The notes spring, climb, jump, leap, and explode. The rhythm of *Ram-pam-pam* mesmerizes the women: Josette is fully carried away by the spectacle of music coming alive, Tata Michelle "remu[e] du popotin," Mémé Georgette taps along

⁸⁴ See the beginning of the Chapter.

to the rhythm (70). The lyrics of the song supply a deeper understanding of the pre-shaving ceremony: Tata Michelle uses it as a weapon, Josette being the main target:

Avec le Ram-pam-pam ...
Le petit Ram-pam-pam.
On peut facilement,
Créer l'enchantement.
Avec le Ram-pam-pam .
Le petit Ram-pam-pam .
Ce pauvre Cupidon
Devient doux comme un mouton ... (70)

The *Ram-pam-pam* is the sound imitating the rhythm or the beat of a drum, so magical that it can tame Cupid, the mischievous and unpredictable god of love and erotic desire, and turn him into a gentle sheep. Although the actual idiom is *doux comme un agneau*, gentle as a lamb, in the song *mouton*, sheep, rhymes with *Cupidon*. For Pineau this rhyme and refrain represent a chance to comment on racism at Josette's school and home. The young girl is both a black sheep, an outsider, and a 'Black sheep,' or as her classmates call her "[le] mouton noir tondu d'Afrique" (69). On the one hand, *ram-pam-pam* is the repetitive sound of pulsating voice of Josephine Baker that Tata uses to tranquilize Josette, and to shear her hair off, as if she were a sheep.⁸⁵ On the other, the idea of treating the daughter like an animal also reiterates hair narrative in Kanor's *D'eaux douces*, in which during the Sunday rituals Frida's hair "fai[t] driling driling" and straightens under the pressure of a comb and a hot iron (Kanor 105). Frida's hair narrative resonates with Josette's, so

⁸⁵ In reference to hair, *mouton* also gets a secondary meaning here, as a racial slur for hair of people of African descent is woolly. When African Slaves arrived at the American and Caribbean shores, they didn't have any tools to take care of their hair. As they were marked as inferior both because they were enslaved, and due to the color of their skin and the texture of their hair, "out of desperation for a tool to replace the African combs, the slaves began using a sheep fleece carding tool to untangle their hair" (Byrd and Tharps 12).

it is difficult not to associate Josette's memories of *ram-pam-pam* with the snipping noise Tata's scissors cutting the poor girl's hair off.

After singing and dancing, which Josette enjoys, Tata picks up the scissors and Josette "pass[e] à la tonsure" (71). Before listening to the song, Josette wants to "fuir [...] des grands ciseaux de Tata" but listening to the *Ram-pam-pam* turns Josette into a submissive and docile "sheep" who forgets hardships when dancing, believes in her foster-mother's stories, and submits to the torturous head shearing (70).⁸⁶ In other contexts, tonsure is "a ceremony of initiation in which hair is clipped from the head as part of the ritual marking one's entrance into a new stage of religious development or activity" ("Tonsure"). This is Josette's initiation into Tata's Josephine Baker cult. Accompanied with music, quasi-religious preaching, and secrecy, as no one else in school knows who Baker is, Josette's tonsure is indeed a sacred ritual. Although this initiation invites her into the glorious world of *Vénus d'ébène*, it colonizes the girl and interrupts her identity performance, just as did the head shearing of the slaves in Africa and the Caribbean.

Orlando Patterson in *Slavery and Social Death* (1982) points out that "the slaves have their hair cut all the time and are never allowed to let it grow" (Breton quot. in Patterson 60).⁸⁷ A more common obligation associated with head shaving is mourning the dead, which allows the scholar to conclude that "the shorn head of the slave was one aspect of a stark symbolic statement: the man who was enslaved was in permanent condition of liminality and must forever mourn his own social death" (60). Josette's *cheveux hirsutes*, disheveled hair, as she calls its condition in between the tonsure, is a sign of mourning: not for the dead, but for herself (Pineau 69). Weirdly, it is the

⁸⁶ The phrase "des grands ciseaux de Tata" makes it hard not to think about Frida's dream when Maman turns into a wolf and uses scissors, or the wolf's teeth, to strike her (Pineau 70, Kanor 178).

⁸⁷ Orlando Patterson comments on the notes of Raymond Breton who visited the Antilles in the seventeenth century.

only time her hair is in its natural state, *en jachère*, like an uncultivated land on which plants and weeds grow freely. If only she knew how to use this fallow land as an opportunity to gain individuality and authority over her life! She is a simply a child in a foreign land, where no one looks like her or can help her express herself.

Patterson connects slavery to race relations and specifies that among the White masters and the Black slaves, it is not “so much color differences as differences in hair type that become critical as a mark of servility in the Americas” (61). When Josette grows up, she will refer to her tonsure as “se réduire la boule à zero,” shaved to skin level with no hair left (Pineau 190). *Se réduire* suggests that the ritual made her feel reduced to nothing. Wiped out by tonsure and Tata’s conviction that she is the reincarnation of *Venus d’ébène*, Josette’s own identity is concealed under Josephine Baker’s persona. She ‘serves’ Tata Michelle’s cult by performing her own little *Joséphine* Baker. Within this context, Tata’s antithesis “je suis rien [...] tu seras une étoile” reinstates Tata’s colonial ambition and reverberates with Aimé Césaire’s famous equation: “colonisation = chosification” (Pineau 28, Césaire 23). Through the concept of thingification, the English translation of *chosification*, Césaire explains the commodification of the colonized: the colonizers transform the oppressed into objects, things, functioning solely to please the oppressors and meet their needs. Only in reducing Josette to *rien* can Tata Michelle mold her into her own *étoile*.

Yet, can a little girl with no life experience ‘perform’ *la Baker*, such a chameleon, whose “multifaceted persona transcends historical epochs” and whose photos “often appear completely different from one another as she crisscrossed racial and gender lines?” (Jules-Rosette 243, 148). It is widely known that Baker’s photographic representations were so dissimilar that that one could have an impression that they did not even depict the same person; “eyes, nose, and lips appear

larger or smaller, and there are radical variations in skin tone” (148). Yet there was no discrepancy in “the essential early Baker [–] a racialized sexual stereotype conveyed by the stroke of pen on a cartoon postcard” (148).⁸⁸

Somehow, Tata Michelle does not distinguish between a grown-up diva, who plays with her body the way she wants and shares her bed with whomever she desires, and a child, abandoned and placed in her, Tata’s, care. The woman continues playing with her Bakerdoll, and after she gives her a name and metaphorically ‘braids’ her hair, it is time to dress her up. Which look to choose? Baker the diva with long, often blond hair wearing a crown, a silk gown, and wrapped in fur? Too expensive. Baker the activist of the Civil Rights movement? Or the French Resistance agent? Too empowering – what if Josette starts a revolt?! Intoxicated by her colonial power, she tries to turn a young girl into a sexualized and racialized “savage,” represented by Baker’s banana skirt.



Figure 11. The banana belt (1927).⁸⁹
Bryan Hammond and Patrick O'Connor. *Josephine Baker*. (1988)

⁸⁸ Iconized by a famous Paul Colin’s poster advertising Josephine Baker and *La Revue Nègre*, a troupe of musicians and performers who introduced jazz culture to the French public at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris in 1925, together with a collection of lithographs entitled *Le Tumulte Noir* (1927), and the photos taken at Folies-Bergère will forever freeze *la Baker* in memory as her objectified and sexualized “archetypal primal image,” the look that fascinates Tata the most (Jules-Rosette 22).

⁸⁹ Bryan Hammond and Patrick O'Connor. *Josephine Baker*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1988, 57.

This is how Josette should look in Tata imagination: primal and sexual (Figure 11), except that Josette is only a child who has to learn how to perform the Baker that Tata loves. Tata's choice of narrowing *la Baker* only to her primal nude 'banana' image complicates Josette's attempts to understand herself:

Elle m'avait déguisée en Joséphine Baker pour la fête du Mardi gras. J'étais vêtue d'un tricot blanc, d'un collant rose et d'une ceinture de bananes. Elle avait cousu mon costume toute seule, juste en regardant la pochette d'un disque de Joséphine. Elle avait plaqué mes cheveux sur ma tête et sur mon front avec du blanc d'œuf, pour que je ressemble encore plus à la vraie. Elle m'avait prise en photo devant l'école. Elle avait même collé la photo dans son album de fan de Joséphine Baker. [...] Les enfants s'étaient moqués de moi pendant trois mois, à cause de la ceinture de bananes. (Pineau 90)

Does Josette really resemble "la vraie" Josephine? (90) The choice of a white sweater, that Tata has hand-knitted for the occasion is not random. Baker was often photographed in white clothes and perhaps on the record Tata has she wears a white gown, too. As for the pink tights, in the 1980s European children wore opaque knitted light-brown tights, which were also quite thick. Mardi Gras is usually in February, so they should also provide warmth. The family is poor, so it might be a pair Tata has already, or something cheap she bought.⁹⁰ Together with the banana belt, hand-crafted of plastic bananas, the whole look is absurd and humiliating for Josette. Her hair, plastered to her skull and smoothed with egg-white, looks nothing like a bowl of black epicurean caviar. In Tata's imagination everyone should be in awe of Josette's 'spectacular' outfit, but obviously, the kids at school bully her because of this look, and Tata dismisses the idea that Josette is not the *Panthère noire*, but a Black sheep dressed in banana belt.

⁹⁰ One is left to wonder if black or brown tights were available in France then: if so, probably only for the adults and not for children.

At least she did not make her do the *danse des bananes* in public. When Josephine Baker performed it at the Folies-Bergère, she appeared on stage “wearing nothing but a little skirt of plush bananas. It was the outfit she would be identified with virtually for the rest of her life, a witty thing in itself and wittier still when Baker started dancing and set the bananas in jiggling motion, like perky good natured phalluses” (Rose 97). Is this how Tata Michelle imagined Josette? Sticking her buttocks out and jiggling the bananas on her belt? When examining Baker’s early erotically charged performances, many scholars mention the importance of nudity and the public gaze. Charlene B. Regester expresses the idea that this combination together with the hype organized by the mainstream press is responsible for the fact that Baker, the person, started to be associated with Baker, the performer (94). In the 1920s women “could achieve both economic success and popular appeal by performing nude” (94). Therefore, Baker’s “use of her body [is] a site of exploring notions of femininity [as a means of] reexamining [...] social mores, defying the masculine privilege, and promoting a new-found sense of personal liberation” (94). Regester goes even further by suggesting that: “In a society in which males objectified women, Baker’s nude appearance allowed spectators to explore their own notion regarding desirability and sexuality. At the same time, these performances forced spectators to challenge their own sexual inhibitions and, through identification with the star, vicariously experience a newfound freedom” (94). This way Baker “catered to white fantasies about race,” which implies that Baker chose to be objectified and rendered as “an object of the gaze” (Dudziak quot. in Regester 94).

If Baker performs to tease, to explore how far she can go sexually, Josette, in Baker’s costume, caters to the delusional fantasies of Tata Michelle who does not realize to what extent her colonial and sexual fantasies aggravate Josette’s emotional fragility. And she should be thankful that Tata Michelle does not strip her of her clothes and make her do the banana dance.

Strangely, the foster-mother never teaches Josette to dance and thinks that all of them, Mémé, Tata, and Josette dance very well just by “remu[ant] le popotin” (Pineau 70). Years later, in Guadeloupe, in order to establish some fake mother/daughter intimacy the only way she can, she dances with Margareth Solin to B.B. King and to her astonishment the writer criticizes her ironically: « Tu n’as pas le rythme ! Tu dances comme un pied, Jo ! J’espère que tu le sais ? » (173). Tata would not have approved: the reincarnation of Josephine Baker cannot have two left feet. In fact, performing *Vénus d’ébène* has such an effect on Josette’s life, that, I will argue, she never truly recovers from the idea that she is not actually the spiritual daughter of *la Baker*.

Upon her return to Guadeloupe at nine, she is not fully sure who she is and where her roots are. Confused, misplaced, and lost somewhere between the ‘birthmother’ Guadeloupe and ‘foster-mother’ France, called *noiraude* in the Sarthe and *barbare* in Marie-Galante, little Josette is an outsider anywhere she goes (26, 76). In addition, she is unable to find a tender grandmother/granddaughter rapport with her maternal relative. Théodora carries a significant emotional burden caused by the secret surrounding her birth and aggravated by the death of her husband in the sea a few years earlier, and an emotionally tense relationship with her daughter Pâquerette, Josette’s mother. When she became pregnant from a never-identified male, the grandmother chased her away from the island and never intended to forgive her or allow her daughter and granddaughter to come back. Margareth Solin, who turns out to be Josette’s great-aunt and a half-sister of Théodora, found Josette in France and instructs Pâquerette to send her daughter back to Marie-Galante. Was it better for Josette to stay in the Sarthe or return to a suffering and unfriendly grandmother? It is difficult to say. The girl’s adjustment to the new life takes time and effort, as the grandmother is both distant and demanding. They live their separate lives: Josette cannot relate to her maternal relative, and Théodora reciprocates.

Nonetheless, something positive does happen: another way of taking care of hair becomes available to Josette. Théodora, an Afro-Caribbean, starts teaching her granddaughter the basics of haircare. Once the girl arrives in her new home, as a welcome, the grandmother, who cannot believe the miserable state of her head, detangles her hair and braids it quickly. Josette is elated, as finally someone knows how to deal with her tangled and uncultivated mane: “Elle me déclara que j’étais une fille. Je devais m’en convaincre. Une fille s’occupait de ses cheveux, les coiffait, les graissait, les attachait. « Ici, à Marie-Galante, les filles prennent soin de leurs cheveux, Josette. » J’étais aux anges” (72). With this the matriarch not only teaches her granddaughter a lesson about Black hair care, but actually introduces her to gender and identity performance unknown to her prior.

Contrary to Tata Michelle, who taught that “beauté vient pas des cheveux,” Théodora communicates the reverse: beauty and femininity originate in hair, and to be a woman, a Black woman, and “devenir une Marie-Galantaise,” little Josette needs to start performing a new role, and not Tata’s “Josephine Baker” (69, 203). While the granddaughter is ecstatic, she cannot meet all the requirements proposed by Théodora. She cannot speak *à la guadeloupéenne*, because she rolls her *r* like the French do, which makes Théodora cringe. When the child swims in the sea for the first time, she gets carried away, sings her *Ram-pam-pam* and gets too far into the water. Outraged, Théodora calls her *folle* (68). When the grandmother takes her to church for the first time, the girl does not know how to behave and, according to Théodora, brings her shame. After that incident the grandmother concludes: “un seul mot vient à mon esprit à ton sujet: BARBARE !..” (75). Josette, a future writer, does not waste time and looks up the word she has never heard before, even in France:

L'après-midi même, je cherchai le mot dans le Petit Larousse ... «BARBARE adj. et n. (gr. *barbaros*, étranger). 1. D'une grande cruauté, inhumain. *Coutume barbare*. 2. ANTIQ. Étranger, pour les Grecs et les Romains (v. partie n. pr.) ... adj. 1. Contraire à l'usage ou au bon gout. *Musique barbare*. 2. Contraire aux normes de la langue, aux habitudes de ses usagers. *Terme barbare*. (75-76)

Théodora could have used any other word to reprimand her granddaughter but instead she employs a colonial term, which not only alludes to her as a colonizer, but also demonstrates that Josette once again is in a colonial relationship with a domineering woman. The girl will remember always that the grandmother called her *barbare* and will retain all the meaning in memory: a stranger, a barbarian, a savage. She will try to justify her misbehavior, cruelty to Théodora and transgressions with this title. Even after they start to “viv[r] en bonne intelligence” and Théodora no longer calls her *barbare*, after Josette’s hair grows long and both of them are proud of her braids, after she practically stops rolling her *r* and learns how to speak creole, and finally, at fifteen, when she adapts to her life in Guadeloupe, she will not forget having been named *barbare* (149).

But most importantly Josette will remember another “savage” – Josephine Baker: « Elle avait été une barbare, elle aussi. Pourtant, elle s’en était sortie, avec son Ram-pam-pam, ses maris à tête d’âne, tous ses animaux sauvages, son guépard, son serpent Kiki, ses singes, ses oiseaux » (91). Even if it has been a few years and she is separated by the ocean from her Tata and childhood, somehow Josephine Baker is always with her. The title of her first novel, *Sous le signe de Joséphine*, restates it perfectly. With the news of the passing of Pépé Marcel, the husband of Mémé Georgette and the father of Tata Michelle, Josette remembers the familiar warmth of Josephine Baker and being disguised as her. Mourning his death makes her feel nostalgic, and this feeling reignites her search for her non-existent physical home, which Josette ultimately finds in writing: “Écrire. Récolter les souvenirs qui affluaient et se présentaient à moi en désordre et par

brassées. Écrire mon existence auprès de Pépé, de Tata et de Mémé, sous le signe de Joséphine. Écrire pour soulager ma peine et redonner vie au passé. Écrire pour les sentir vivants à mes côtés. » (175). To write is to remember, and if not *be* at home, at least *feel* at home. This sentiment invites the *grande* Josephine Baker back into Josette's life: "C'était mon histoire qui dansait le charleston sur les deux cents pages de mon nouveau cahier" (184). Between the time she starts writing the novel and moves to Pointe-à-Pitre to go to high school, she gradually appropriates the name Tata gave her and eventually claims the name Joséphine for herself.⁹¹

This decision to reassert her old/new name and acknowledge Josephine Baker's never fading presence in her life is reintroduced by the Mardi Gras parade, the event that mirrors her French past. Reminiscent of the carnival she attended as a child, the girl recalls wearing her Josephine Baker costume and describes herself in her novel as if from the outside:

La honte marquait son visage. La honte et la haine pour cette Joséphine Baker dont Tata était toquée. La haine et le dégoût pour cet œuf envoyé chercher dans le poulailler. Tata en avait séparé religieusement le blanc du jaune. Ce n'était pas une blague. Elle l'avait fait. Elle lui avait tartiné les cheveux de blanc d'œuf. Tata était aux anges et Mémé disait que c'était bien réussi, ma foi, copie conforme de l'originale. Pour faire plaisir à sa Tata Michelle, Joséphine avait posé pour la photo souvenir. Elle portait un tricot de corps blanc, un collant rose et une ceinture de bananes en plastique [...] Elle avait des accroche-cœurs et du noir sur les yeux et du vrai rouge à lèvres sur la bouche. (185-186)

The description is in the third person, which implies that Josette allows herself as a writer to have some narrative distance from her life. This psychological alienation and disturbing split give her an opportunity to describe the shame and hatred she experienced that day, of which she has not spoken previously. The shame and hatred she experienced are palpable. This occurrence was

⁹¹ Only one person will call her Josette until the end of the novel, Théodora. Margareth will always call her Jo, and the protagonist from now on will only refer to herself as Joséphine. I will do the same and will only change to Josette when evoking her childhood and adolescence (until she is fifteen).

traumatizing, but it happened.⁹² Her feelings, *la honte* and *la haine*, are in juxtaposition with what she was supposed to feel, “un honneur pour la petite Joséphine,” as her foster-grandfather puts it (186). She did not feel proud or grateful then, but now these memories make her realize something significant: maybe for the first time, she recognizes and articulates the depth of *petite Joséphine*’s suffering together with the enormous love and gratitude she has for Tata for making her feel loved, even in a costume of Josephine Baker. As Josette relives this experience and, as always, wants to enjoy a mother’s affection, she rebecomes Joséphine – a little girl who once was loved. A bright idea comes to her head as she is working on that part of her novel: if the sadness of the past cannot be undone, in the present she can have a rematch. And what better occasion than Mardi Gras can allow this to happen?

Her classmates, caring for Guadeloupe’s local produce and farmers, advocate celebrating the banana tree during the parade: “la Guadeloupe était le pays de la banane. Il fallait soutenir les planteurs, mettre la banane à l’honneur” (186). And once she links the memory of the (dis)honoring incident to what the Guadeloupeans, including herself, consider an honor, she knows just the right thing to suggest: “faire courir les lycéennes ceinturées de bananes en plastique[!]” (187). No one objects, boys agree because this is an homage to the farmers; and it is decided: “des centaines de Joséphine Baker débouleraient dans les rues de Pointe-à-Pitre et de Basse-Terre” (187).

Surpassing shame and hatred, transforming them to honor her new home, identity, and also her past, “la petite Joséphine de la Sarthe pr[end] sa revanche le jour du Mardi gras” and redoes the old Mardi Gras episode (188). This time she makes the costume herself: “Je voulais

⁹² As one learns closer to the end of the novel, Tata dresses her as Baker and tries to convince her that she is Baker’s spiritual daughter in order to undo the sexual and psychological trauma of her mother’s boyfriend raping her as a toddler.

recommencer [...] Je ressortais maintenant la ceinture de bananes tel un trophée, un butin de guerre, un trésor de pacotille” (188). She is ready: to fight the mockery of the French students at school, their racist jokes, the unknown past, and her loneliness, but most importantly she is eager to face her deadliest enemy: little frightened Josette. And when she faces herself, she is not alone, Josephine is with her:

On pouvait naître dans la boue d'un ghetto pourri du Missouri et devenir une châtelaine du Périgord. On pouvait ne pas avoir connu son père, ce n'était pas grave. Fallait juste faire avec. On pouvait avoir été abandonnée par sa mère, ça n'empêchait pas de se bâtir des châteaux en Espagne et de croire aux cendrillons du genre de Joséphine Baker. On pouvait pleurer la nuit, poursuivie par des fantômes sans visage, il y avait toujours un lendemain [...] On pouvait se faire appeler Joséphine même si on vous avait baptisé Josette. (188-189)

Full of strong and positive energy, her narrative interlaces with Josephine Baker's story, and creates a strong manifesto for life. She mentions her when she talks about the ghetto and Missouri, whereas the next sentence about the father could be attributed to both of them. She then talks about her absent mother and Tata Michelle's stories of Josephine Baker, which help her live on.⁹³ As for “fantômes sans visages,” closer to the middle of the novel in the exact same words Joséphine will be referring to the pimp who sexually abused her before she was turned over to the social services. If only for herself, she recommits to her old/new name.

At the end of her manifesto, she then, for the first time, introduces her own thoughts on hair, and they apply both to her and to Baker: “On pouvait avoir les cheveux durs et grenés comme la paille de fer qui servait à récurer le fond des chaudrons, ça ne voulait pas dire qu'on était perdu pour l'humanité. On pouvait se réduire la boule à zéro, les cheveux finissaient par repousser...”

⁹³ Josephine Baker's mother supported her daughter until her dying day. She followed her daughter to France when in 1937, Baker she had renounced her American citizenship, thoroughly disgusted by the blatant and official racism against blacks and became a citizen of France.

(189).⁹⁴ *Grené* is creole for tightly coiled hair, and this is the word the protagonist obviously learned in Guadeloupe, whereas “steel wool” sounds like a racist joke someone in France could have made. Perhaps, at some point Tata compared little Josette’s hair to the wire sponges she used to clean the pots. In her manifesto, Josette, who is transitioning into Joséphine, overcomes this racist remark and claims that no matter the hair or its treatment, it grows back, and life goes on.

With this thought in her head, she stops by the hairdresser’s and in twenty minutes removes “des années d’effort et de patience de Théodora,” her grown “grainy” healthy hair from her head. This is her official rebirth as both Joséphine and Josephine Baker:

J’étais la reine du carnaval des lycéens. J’étais Joséphine Baker, la Venus d’ébène. Trois cents Joséphine défileraient le lendemain derrière mon char. Trois cents filles aux cheveux gominés comme ceux de la Miss qui fit trembler Paris. Trois cents ceintures de bananes lâchées au rythme des tambours. Trois cents paires de jambes courant, sautant et dansant dans les rues de Pointe-à-Pitre. Et nous allions assiéger la ville, telle une armée de Barbares. Et tenir jusqu’à l’aube. (189)

The revenge is hers! No mockery, no embarrassment, no shame. It took only three hundred boys and girls, “aussi noirs que moi, sinon plus ...” to support the cause, and make her feel like a queen (65). This triumphant moment is truly remarkable: now officially Joséphine, she is proud, finally her path to identity starts to make sense: she feels loved and supported, and she takes it all in. But what in the 1980s filled the French family’s hearts with *honneur*, made her Guadeloupean grandmother “avoir honte” (190). Regardless of the fact that her carnival crew won the prize, Théodora cannot recover from what she saw on TV: her granddaughter “remu[ant] les reins, les jambes à l’air, avec cette ceinture de bananes grotesque qui donne à penser que les nègres sont des sauvages descendus des singes” (190).

⁹⁴ *Grené* is another spelling of *grainé*. For more on *cheveux grainés*, see Chapter Two.

What the grandmother describes is similar to some of the criticism that Josephine Baker received (and still receives) for her “banana ballet, [which] is a product of the Empire” (Francis 150). What some saw as “commodification of [Baker’s] natural talent,” and others as “raw material,” in the banana dance, “she’s meant to be a fantastical creature, a bunch of bananas animated as a beautiful dancing girl, transformed by colonialist fantasy” (151). For the French in the 1930s, “Baker represented colonial commerce and abundance of raw materials. Like the bananas, Baker had become a transnational commodity. She was an advertisement come to life” (151). It is only logical then, that the kids from Joséphine’s class choose the banana as a symbol of colonialism and pay tribute to the freedom from colonization by celebrating it the way Josephine Baker did. They do it unconsciously; the reader does not know if Joséphine explained *la Baker* to them. Or perhaps they have heard about her. Still, the army of Baker “barbarians” get the point right: “La Guadeloupe n’est pas à vendre,” and the disguise helps them get the point across (Pineau 183). However, the grandmother is less concerned with “l’indécence de ma tenue Joséphine” and more with “ma nouvelle coiffure” (191). The Big Chop, as African-American women call chopping off chemically treated hair to let the new hair grow, usually marks a fresh start and a departure from the toxic past, metaphorically speaking. It marks Joséphine’s parting with her grandmother, who continues calling her Josette and refuses to understand her granddaughter’s reasons for cutting off her hair. They are both waiting impatiently for Josette-Joséphine’s departure back to France, which has already been planned with Margareth’s financial help and moral support.

Tata Michelle is obviously *fière* of her Joséphine’s success. She has achieved her goal: the letter from the Sarthe, that she receives, is filled with love and adoration. Tata calls her *belle* for the first time and promises that her arrival in Paris, that is planned for her nineteenth birthday, will be as glorious as Baker’s (196). Now that the protagonist has finally found herself, her voice and

identity, it seems that she can be free from the past and stop wearing masks. Tata's colonization of her body and hair is justified and it is clear that the disguise is a shelter that gave her comfort and courage to live on. It delivers her more protection than her own maternal grandmother's haircare ever could provide. The protagonist chooses to shave her head to demonstrate that her gender performance is her choice. This way she once and for all breaks with Guadeloupean beauty standards and chooses her own way: she will from now on wear Baker's kiss curls. The novel could have ended here, if Joséphine were not obsessed with one and one person only: her mother Pâquerette. This hook will never let her go, it will act as her motivation and as the hiatus in her more or less successful career as a writer. Never letting go of her absent mother will eventually negate all the agency she gained due to the powerful identity and gender performance during the Guadeloupean Mardi Gras.

After years of living in France, writing, often visiting Tata Michelle, finding a man who sincerely cares for her, she still continues to hope that her birth mother will show up one day and love her. She cannot be and, I believe, refuses to be happy without Pâquerette in her life. In reality she writes her book for one reader and one reader only: her mother. And Joséphine expects her mother to read about her life without Joséphine. Up until the very end of the novel, she waits for her mother to appear out of thin air. If the first half of the novel is filled with hope and a path for identification and identity, then the second part, it seems, Josette's slowly fades into depression and madness. Even after she finds out that it was Théodora who chased her mother from the island and Tata Michelle who shielded her from the traumatic sexual memories, Joséphine cannot find peace and let her mother go.

When Theodora shows her the Barbie—perhaps the most famous blonde doll—that her mom used to play with, Joséphine keeps thinking how she is not Barbie, “la poupée blonde de sa

mère,” but *barbare*, a savage girl who’s hair is “désolation” (291, 71). The image of this doll, reminding her of her absent mother, will haunt her every living day and poison her relationships with friends and loved ones (291). This reiterates the most important idea of the novel: Josette has always been, and probably will always be someone’s doll, a toy people play with.

Josette is a doll her mother never “played “ with: “J’étais une Barbare qui tenait de mettre à sac son havre de paix. Barbare et non pas Barbie, sa poupée blonde adorée. J’étais son déshonneur et son remords. J’étais la plaie noire de son existence” (312). A sex toy for her mother’s pimp, she was his “poupée éventrée,” “son jouet” (213, 257). She is a Josephine Baker figurine for Tata and Mémé, an unwanted puppet, incapable of functioning without guidance, for Théodora. For Margareth, especially before her arrival to Guadeloupe, the girl is a “le paquet,” which Pâquerette needs to deliver (374). For the filming crew, who keeps telling her where to go and what to do, she is an exotic and bizarre Other, a weird girl whose White family is crazy about Baker and who believes that she is her reincarnation. Even for David, her boyfriend, Joséphine is a desirable and strangely distant doll, who, when looking at him, as if she is not animate “gard[e] les yeux ouverts pour les remplir du réel” (296). He plays along, even names her *ma Panthère noire*, only to make her happy. This is not his fault: she carries *la Baker* like armour, and it has become her second skin.

Hair narrative is an indispensable element of showing that Joséphine feeds off Baker as a means of emotional support, but also hides in her shadow. But, on the days when she is depressed, she starts being bitter about it: “Une panthère avec des accroche-cœurs. Une petite sœur créole de Pinocchio, marionnette d’ébène [...qui peut] se mentir à elle-même sans que son nez ne s’allonge. [...] La pathétique Joséphine qui devrait sourire, et peut-être même reprendre les couplets de *Ram-Pam-Pam*” (299). A marionette is an even stronger metaphor than a doll in this context.

Marionettes are guided by someone else and are given lines to pronounce. They do not have their own voice, someone else talks through them, and they just open their mouths. Joséphine is a colonized doll, who cannot find her voice, even in writing; a sad marionette in Tata's House of *la Baker*. Even when she gains authority over her life for an instant, she eventually loses it because she never comes to terms with her mother's absence.

Baker's shield gives Joséphine a chance to be both strong and weak: strong, because *Venus d'ébène* is a powerful figure, and by playing her, even if by just wearing her hair like hers, gives Joséphine her strength. On the other hand, the shield weakens the young woman because it allows her to hide from the pain of her mother not wanting to know her or of her. In not claiming her own identity, she is never truly her own. Until the end of the novel she will be a doll in somebody else's hand, a doll who wants to be independent but does not know how to achieve it. Unfortunately, neither money, nor love, nor recognition, nor literary success will ever be able to substitute for her mother's attention. I believe that in a certain way, shielding herself under Baker's kiss curls is Josette's way of protecting her own psyche from the harsh truth she cannot face: because her mother does not love her, Josette cannot love herself either, and thus cannot love anybody else.

As a reader, one feels sympathy for the protagonist, yet her inability to seek psychological help and liberate herself from her mother's absence is frustrating. During Joséphine's reading, a critic tries to open her eyes to the reality of her alienation from her Afro-Caribbean roots: "Vous vous glorifiez d'avoir été montrée comme un animal de foire par vos parents adoptifs. Si je ne m'abuse, vous n'étiez à leurs yeux qu'une poupée exotique vêtue d'une ceinture de bananes, une triste réplique de Joséphine Baker" (300). He accuses her of not discussing the problems of the Antilles: slavery, wars, misery, drugs, prostitution, etc. To him her novel is "un conte enfantin [qui] plaît au public français," a caricature (301). She defends herself but it is obvious that the

critic hits the spot that hurts. She starts feeling worthless and gets depressed: “Tout ce qu’elle représentait n’était que simulacre et futilités au spectacle des nègres noirs pendus aux branches des arbres, corps pourrissants, ballottés par le vent, les *Strange Fruit* chantés par Lady Day?”⁹⁵ Interestingly, Josette, either as a child or a grown-up, never really stops being alienated, she never becomes *engagée*, never discusses colonialism, slavery, or racism. She always plays it safe, like a *bonne sauvage*, a noble wild uncivilized person who can do no harm to a White colonizer.

Unfortunately, because she has been performing the glossy cover of *la Baker* and her hair instead of her bravery, insolence, and audacity, she is unfulfilled. As she comes to her boyfriend’s exhibition, where he beautifully portrays her as a woman with words for hair, she still waits for her mother, who might finally appear. The ending is depressing as it is clear that Joséphine will never be happy until she loves herself exactly as she is. But judging by the fact that she is shielded behind another woman’s persona, this is never going to happen.

The huge painting that her boyfriend drew for her is both beautiful and meaningful:

Une femme couleur anthracite.
Créature dont la tête était coiffée de lettres bleues mêlées les unes aux autres. Des centaines de lettres qui, au hasard des rencontres, composaient des mots. Des mots tressés serrés dans sa chevelure.
Des mots qui partaient en mèches folles.
À ses pieds, des fleurs nées de la boue. (405)

Because she writes and because he loves her hair, which he perhaps has never seen in its natural state, he imagines it. Her hair tells him a story: she has a hairstyle made of words! The tresses tangle and form the letters, which, in their turn, make up the words. And those words weave into cornrows braided tightly into her hair, which end on wild strands. We do not know which words

⁹⁵ Reference to Billie Holiday’s *Strange Fruit*. The lyrics describe the dead bodies of lynched African-Americans hanging from the trees, like the strange fruit these trees never grew.

her hair composes on her head, but it is obvious that David thinks that it is beautiful. At the feet of the woman, the flowers “are born” from the dirt, which is at the same time a reference to Baker, who is “née dans la boue et la misère,” and to Josette-Joséphine: she is a barbaric flower, who can blossom and love (27). All she needs is to see it for herself. Hopefully, she can see how beautiful her story is even if through the eyes of her lover.

Words growing on the head of a woman, the strands forming letters, and braids, sentences this is such a wonderful demonstration for hair narrative, that visually explains how hair always tells a story.

CHAPTER FOUR FROM NARRATIVE TO LOCALITY: HAIR AS A CREATIVE SPACE IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *AMERICANAH* AND BEYOND

In the novels that I have examined in the previous chapters, hair plays the role of a subtext, which when read and examined thoroughly allows a deeper understanding of social, political, and cultural issues. Yet, there is another way to use hair to tell a story which is less subtle: a direct hair storytelling such as in Trey Anthony's *Da Kink in My Hair*, which I discussed at the end of Chapter One. In this play hair has a voice and tells the story of the woman it belongs to. The direct usage of hair as a narrative device allows the playwright to demonstrate its power and the magic of hair, while at the same time expressing her political and social engagement.

Such direct usage of hair, which is quite common in playwriting, is uncommon among novelists.⁹⁶ Yet, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie finds a way to use hair more directly in order to make her political stance heard and known. While in the novels that I have discussed previously, hair often stands for a replacement of intimacy, an alienation, and even trauma; in *Americanah* (2013) hair represents empowerment and inspiration. For Ifemelu, a Nigerian woman who lives in the United States, the blog, a lot of which deals with race and hair, becomes her virtual safe space

⁹⁶ A famous example is George Wolfe's *The Colored Museum* (debuted off-Broadway in 1986) sketch called "Exhibit 6: The Hairpiece." A bald African – American woman prepares to go out and chooses what hair to wear for a lunch: a natural Afro, or a head of sleek relaxed hair. Each wig speaks, they argue, demonstrating the alienation and identity confusion of the protagonists: "Every time the Nigger went and changed his ideology, she would change her hair to fit the occasion" (Wolfe 00:01:45). More notable illustrations include Eva Doumbia's *Moi et mon cheveu* (2011), Angel Styles *Hair* (2018), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's fairytale "Hair" (2007), which was published in *The Guardian* in 2007, as a part of their rubric "Fairy Tales Fit for the 21st Century." In it a young girl, a daughter of a man, who lost all of his money over a game of cards, has to cut off her relaxed hair and allow it to grow naturally. She loves the transformation, and in return, as if to thank her, her hair talks to her: "she heard the voice. It came from her hair. It was her hair. It gives the daughter ideas about how to save her family. It is obvious that the moral of the tale is that once you stop focusing on artificial, unnecessary stuff, embrace who you are, and focus on what really matters, you will understand things more clearly, and can find the solution. It reiterates the idea of the great power the natural hair possesses" (Adichie 2007).

where she can be herself and be at home. In this sense, Adichie uses hair narrative like the other women-writers that I explore in this dissertation and discusses hair in its connection to the mother-daughter relationship, gender and racial politics, alienation, and identity crisis; but unlike others she eventually transforms hair narrative into a space that I will call *hair locality*.

Ifemelu, a Nigerian woman, who has lived in the U.S. for thirteen years and has a scholarship at Princeton University, decides to return to her native land. As the story unfolds, readers learn about Ifemelu's American experience, her ups and downs, and possible motivations for the return home. Using hair as a metaphor for a Nigerian woman's existence as a foreigner in the U.S., Adichie directs readers' attention to the everyday life of an African woman in the U.S. She highlights many racial problems, such as the under-representation of Black women in fashion magazines, the need to deny their natural hair in order to get a better job, and the silence that still envelops interracial relationships. But most importantly she depicts hair as an element unifying Non-American and American Black women.⁹⁷

Hair narrative in *Americanah* starts with Ifemelu's entrance into a hair salon. As Aisha, the hairdresser, "pull[s] a tiny-toothed comb through a section of her hair" hurting her and mentioning that her hair is "hard" Ifemelu defends her choice not to relax her hair and grabs the combs out of Aisha's hands (49). The readers learn much later in the novel that hair relaxing was traumatic for the protagonist, yet the hair hurt goes all the way back to her childhood. Ifemelu

had grown up in the shadow of her mother's hair. It was black-black, so thick it 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. (49).

⁹⁷ In the novel Adichie uses abbreviations for these terms, AB – American Black, NAB – Non-American Black, mostly as adjectives such as in "my NAB country," or as nouns as in "a cool AB with tons of money" (448, 410).

The daughter adored her mother's hair and waited for hers to become straight and magnificent, too: "Through the years of childhood, Ifemelu would often look in the mirror and pull at her own hair, separate the coils, will it to become like her mother's, but it remained bristly and grew reluctantly; braiders said it cut them like a knife" (49).⁹⁸ From early childhood, Ifemelu had been taught that natural hair needed to be permed in order to be beautiful. Yet it was not the state of her hair that traumatized her.

The year she turned ten, her mother came home from work "looking different:" "Where is the big scissors?" she asked, and when Ifemelu brought it to her, she raised it to her head and, handful by handful, chopped off all her hair. Ifemelu stared, stunned. The hair lay on the floor like dead grass" (49-50). Afterward, she collected all the Catholic objects they had in the house and burned them. Ifemelu then "began to cry, because she sensed that something had happened, [and that] the woman who was bald and blank, was not her mother, could not be her mother" (49-50). This scene parallels a passage from *D'eaux douces*, in which Frida does not recognize herself in the mirror after her mother relaxes her hair. This happens, I argue, because she now looks more like her mother than herself, so she sees her mother in the mirror, and she does not like that. Mirroring between the mother and the daughter is another motif of mother-daughter relationships that hair narrative reveals. In *Americanah* it suggests that Ifemelu, who does want to look like her mother, will have to cut off her hair, too, and the thought terrifies her. It is as if the mother chopped off not her own, but her daughter's hair, as if their bodies are one. Even though Ifemelu sees her

⁹⁸ This idea of hair inheritance is parallel to Maman from *D'eaux douces* not understanding why her daughters did not inherit her sleek and straight relaxed hair (Kanor 50).

mother as a stranger, the effect is equally shocking as if it were she herself whom she did not recognize.⁹⁹

Her mother switched religious denominations and was bordering on insanity for a few months until she converted to a different sect and found the one that did not drive her completely mad. Eventually the mother grows her hair back, but as we have learned from examinations of hair narrative, traumatic childhood experiences linked to hair usually take another spin and reawaken the trauma when the girl, who experienced it, grows up. The way the protagonist reacts to the rebirth of the childhood trauma, defines her as a grown-up.¹⁰⁰ This happens to Ifemelu. After finishing her B.A. in Communication Studies, she needs to get her first official job in the U.S.¹⁰¹ But besides creating a résumé, which would demonstrate her best qualities, she has to, according to her own words, take on a “new adventure,” relax her hair, a procedure she went through “all the time in Nigeria,” under the mother’s and her aunt’s attentive and caring eyes, but has never undergone before in the U.S.: “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” (251, 250).

The desire to find a job is the only reason she would consider relaxing her hair, which implies that this is not “an act of self-hatred.” In other words, “Ifemelu does not relax her hair for romantic purposes, since her decision is neither oriented to satisfy Curt, her American [White]

⁹⁹ Seeing a mother as a stranger is a motif that I explore in Chapter Two when discussing Morrison’s *Beloved* and the relationship between Denver and Sethe.

¹⁰⁰ Joséphine from *Fleur de Barbarie* reenacts the tonsure, she was subjected to as a child and in reliving it, establishes her authority over her life and identity. Frida from *D’eaux douces* rebels against her mother and never relaxes her hair as an adult, regardless of Maman’s hurtful comments.

¹⁰¹ She only worked as a babysitter before and had a hard time finding a job.

boyfriend at the time, nor related to issues of low self-esteem and the questioning of her own beauty” (Cruz-Gutierrez 19). It was the advice from her counselor, Ruth, “a caramel-skinned African-American woman”:

When she told Ruth about the interview in Baltimore, Ruth said, “My only advice? Lose the braids and straighten your hair. Nobody says this kind of stuff but it matters. We want you to get that job.” Aunty Uju had said something similar in the past, and she had laughed then. Now she knew enough not to laugh. “Thank you,” she said to Ruth. (Adichie 248, 250)

She did not laugh this time because she has experienced racism and knows that not getting a job because of locs, braids, or an Afro, is highly possible.

The first time Ifemelu did it herself, in her bathroom, she was cautious so as to not damage her skull. It is because of that, the respect she had for her head, that “the relaxer did not take” (251). Like Malcolm X, whose hair relaxing confessions mentioned in Chapter Three, she wants to fit in and lose the “country” (X 52). Like him, she is shocked to see herself in the mirror after she underwent the chemical process in the salon: “The verve was gone. She did not recognize herself” (251). She hears the hairdresser say: “Wow, girl, you’ve got the white-girl swing!” (251). When she was a child, she had lived “in the shadow of her mother’s hair” and had not recognized her hair in her mother’s. Now as an adult whose hair is relaxed, like her mother’s perhaps, she should recognize her mother. But Ifemelu still cannot find either her mother or herself. Together with her roots, she has lost her identity! Consequently, Ifemelu “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” (251).

Like young Josette from *Fleur de Barbarie* who mourned her shaved hair as a sign of her lost identity, Ifemelu grieves her natural mane for the same reason.¹⁰² As she “breezed through the job interview,” Ifemelu kept wondering if “the woman would have felt the same way had she walked into that office wearing her thick, kinky, God-given halo of hair, the Afro” (253). Here hair narrative delves into Ifemelu’s relationship with God, which is not very clear. When she describes her mother’s religious delusions, she exclaims: “Relaxed hair offended Him. Dancing offended Him” (50). Yet when she talks about her newly grown natural hair, she treats it as God’s miracle: “her thick, kinky, God-given halo of hair, the Afro,” so the reader has the impression that Ifemelu is religious (51, 253). When she first writes about her newly grown hair, it feels like miracle to her, and perhaps this is why her declaration has a religious feel to it: “Posting on the website was like giving testimony in church; the echoing roar of approval revived her” (264). One might wish Adichie would make a narrative arc linking Ifemelu’s religious beliefs and hair, perhaps explaining how she felt about God after the hair-chopping trauma, but she does not do that. Readers are left to wonder if the mother’s denomination swapping made Ifemelu agnostic, or, perhaps, not. Responding to the hairdresser’s comment about her hair being “hard to comb,” Ifemelu proclaims: “I like my hair the way God made it” (15). It also echoes her comment on the hair website she visited before starting her own blog. Ifemelu writes in the website that “there is nothing more beautiful than what God gave me” (264). Some people go to church for the sense of community. As we shall see, hair and talking about it is Ifemelu’s ‘church,’ as it gives her access to the community she needs so much.

¹⁰² For more on hair shaving and social death, see Chapter Three.

Clearly, hair relaxing is Ifemelu's initiation to the American corporate culture and to being an "AB," American Black. Her hair is a sacrifice that she offers in order to become one of its citizens. Hair relaxing is Ifemelu's rite of passage to finding her place in the U.S. Yet it is not the place she expected.

Soon after she gets the job, her hair, due to chemical damage starts falling off. Her friend convinces her to do the so-called Big Chop: a process of cutting off relaxed or permed hair to (re)start the natural hair journey.¹⁰³ Ifemelu is convinced it will work: "Ifemelu found a pair of scissors. Wambui cut her hair, leaving only two inches, the new growth since her last relaxer. Ifemelu looked in the mirror. She was all big eyes and big head. At best, she looked like a boy; at worst, like an insect" (258).¹⁰⁴ She is so upset that she calls in sick for a few days. After hair relaxing experience, Ifemelu feels that something "organic died," so she starts the mourning process when her hair changes from kinky to straight. Commenting on the rituals associated with the death of a beloved person and cutting off the hair, Turner states, "In as much as both sorts of biological relationships are cut off by death, cutting off the hair, conceived as the extension of the biological energy of the self into social space, is the symbolically appropriate response to the death

¹⁰³ The 2018 movie *Nappily Ever After* depicts the main character taking the Big Chop after a serious break up. On the night after her birthday, while drunk, she buzzes her hair off. The morning after the Big Chop, she is horrified to see it fully gone from the head, laying on the floor. The terror gradually goes away: she starts a new life, which began with her new hair growth. Sanaa Lathan, the actress playing the main character, shaved off her real hair on camera, which, according to her own words was "a fresh start" (00:01:12). Moreover, it was not the first time that she portrayed a protagonist going through a hair crisis. In the 2006 movie *Something New* she played an African-American woman who was asked by her White lover to take out her weave so he could see her 'naked.' After an emotional dramatic argument with that man and soul-searching, Lathan's character takes out the weave.

¹⁰⁴ Cruz-Gutierrez points out that Ifemelu's natural hair journey "can be read as Adichie's autobiographical representation" ((National Public Radio 2014 quot. in Cruz-Gutierrez 20)). Cruz-Gutierrez explains that "Shortly after migrating to the U.S., she [Adichie] had a bad experience relaxing her hair [...after which] she stopped using relaxers. And it took her a while to accept [her] hair" (*Ibid*).

of a spouse as well as a child” (Turner 489). Judging from how she applied the relaxer for the first time, how she wore her hair only natural for a very long time, readers know that Ifemelu loved her natural hair, pampered and took care of it, and consequently relaxing it was the opposite of care: it was a murder. Therefore, her Big Chop is her way of mourning her former hair and allowing a healing process to start.¹⁰⁵

Even though hair narrative here speaks of loss of gender identity, and even human identity, eventually, as the new hair starts to emerge Ifemelu embraces her natural hair, ditches the baseball cap she has worn for a few days and likes her short Afro. Celebrating her new Nigerian-American identity and hairstyle, “on an unremarkable day in early spring [...] she looked in the mirror, sank her fingers into her hair, dense and spongy and glorious, and could not imagine it any other way. That simply, she fell in love with her hair” (264). She finally recognizes the woman she sees in the mirror as her and accepts herself fully.

Similar to the novels that I have examined previously, hair narrative in Adichie’s *Americanah* is initially shaped by the idea of alienation and racism. However, her main character finds a way to embrace and defeat these obstacles by using her hair as a source of inspiration. As a foreigner, she discovers that in the United States there exists a “racial realism” that defines the living experience of Black people.¹⁰⁶ In one of her blog entries, Ifemelu states: “I did not think of

¹⁰⁵ In *Fleur de Barbarie* when a fifteen-year old Josette shaves her hair off before Mardi Gras, it is her Big Chop moment as it helps her reclaim her Josephine Baker identity, but this time she chooses to do so; she rebecomes Joséphine, her fresh start.

¹⁰⁶ This is true not only for people of African descent but for immigrants, in general. They need to become something else if they want to fit in and make a life in the U.S. Tony Morrison’s describes “the cultural mechanics of becoming American” in *The Origins of Others* (2017): “A citizen of Italy or Russia immigrates to the United States. She keeps much or some of the language and customs of her home country. But if she wishes to be American – to be known as such and to actually belong – she must become a thing unimaginable in her home country: she must become white. It may be comfortable for her or uncomfortable, but it lasts and has advantages as well as certain freedoms” (Morrison 48-49). Adichie calls it racial tribalism, implying that there is a

myself as black and I only became black when I came to America” (Adichie 359).¹⁰⁷ She feels the pressure to perform this American Blackness even though she does not fully understand what being “Black” means. As someone with a degree from Princeton, she would like to raise the questions of racism and discuss the fact that American Blacks and Non-American Blacks have different experiences, but first she needs to find the right medium and a platform for that. She makes people uncomfortable when she tries to raise some racial problems at the parties she attends with her White boyfriend; in the African hair salon she visits neither hair braiders nor customers want to engage in controversial conversations. Ifemelu would like to discuss her natural hair journey with the hairdresser, but the latter does not care. She is preoccupied with Ifemelu’s “hard” hair, because it is not easy to comb and braid (48). The protagonist understands that a hair salon is a place to discuss hair and beauty-related matters, not a place for activism.

Mariama African Hair Braiding salon serves as a frame for Ifemelu’s life in America. The scenes in the salon provide evidence for the idea that African coiffure is mutually shared by the four African women present: the braiders, Mariama, the owner, and her sister Halima, are from Mali; Aisha, who does Ifemelu’s hair, is Senegalese; and the main character, Ifemelu, is Nigerian. All four are fellow immigrants, who, in the context of a hair salon, manage to be productive in sharing their common identity - hair. Hair and Africa, shared localities, help establish relationships between the women.

division in American society, and that everyone should be affiliated with one or the other tribe: Black or White, and perform accordingly (Adichie 2013, 227).

¹⁰⁷ Adichie is a famous contemporary feminist and activist, so it is not surprising that this statement, very existential as well as philosophical, echoes the legendary opening line of the chapter on a woman’s childhood from Simone de Beauvoir’s *Le deuxième sexe* (V.2): “On ne naît pas femme: on le devient” (13). Reinterpreted through the prism of race, it can be paraphrased as “One is not born, but rather becomes Black,” thus situating both gender and race in the same realm of social and political constructs that allow one group to overpower the other.

When Ifemelu comes to the salon, where she has been before, she sees a typical American neighborhood. The salon is stuck between a Chinese restaurant and a convenience store:

It would look, she was sure, like all the other African hair braiding salons she had known: they were in the part of the city that had graffiti, dank buildings, and no white people. [...] The conversations were loud and swift, in French or Wolof or Malinke, and when they spoke English to customers, it was broken, curious, as though they had not quite eased into the language itself before taking on a slangy Americanism. (10-11)

Even before seeing the salon, she is familiar with it from her last visits, but also from the visits of the other salons: they all look alike; before entering it, she knows what to expect. There is a certain familiarity and recognition that she experiences before meeting the hair braiders. The salon is a space located at the crossroads of four distinct cultures, three of which are African; the braiders understand perfectly well what kind of style Ifemelu wants. Upon entering, one of the salon workers, Halima, gives 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” (13). The braiders feel a certain kind of “native” solidarity with the protagonist, and she knows very well how to talk to them and how to negotiate the price for the hair service.

When Ifemelu looks around, she remembers the Nigerian salons of her childhood where “different ranks of imperial femaleness were best understood” (93). The Lagos salon hairdressers “sized up each customer, eyes swinging from head to shoes, to decide how much attention she was worth” (93). They could estimate how much a client is worthy of attention judging by her hair, accessories, and clothes. *Mariama*’s salon is more democratic in this sense, and the braiders treat their clients with equal indifference. The only customers who are treated in a particular manner are the Americans. When *Mariama*’s African-American customer complains about the cornrow that is too tight, Ifemelu notices that:

[Mariama] thought her customer was a troublemaker, and there was nothing wrong with the cornrow, but this was a part of her new American self, this fervor of customer service, this shiny falseness of surfaces, and she had accepted it, embraced it. When the customer left, she might shrug out of that self and say something to Halima and to Aisha about Americans, how spoiled and childish and entitled they were, but when the next customer came, she would become, again, a faultless version of her American self. (231-232)

In this way, the hairdressers from Mariama's salon in Trenton, New Jersey rank the customers, too, yet their judgement is based on the nationality of the client: Americans are treated better and with more respect than Africans.

Regardless, Ifemelu mentally supports Mariama and her braiders, and feels like she shares a common experience with them. They are not just African; they are foreigners that get similar remarks from the locals, like "You're hot? But you're from Africa!" or "Burkina Faso? Your country in Latin America?" (13, 18). They identify with one another, as they are all othered by the Americans. But as much as Ifemelu relates to them, she is different, and she wants to accentuate her distinction: she is a scholar, she does not use relaxers in her hair, and, unlike other African women, she does want to go back home.

In contrast, Aisha, a Senegalese woman who does her kinky twist, is very rustic, indeed rough:¹⁰⁸

a true market woman, immune to the cosmetic niceties of American customer service. Ifemelu imagined her working in a market in Dakar, like the braiders in Lagos who would blow their noses and wipe their hands on their wrappers, roughly jerk their customers' heads to position them better, complain about how full or how hard or how short the hair was, shout out to passing women, while all the time conversing too loudly and braiding too tightly. (15-16)

¹⁰⁸ A medium kinky twist is a braid design that Ifemelu wanted (Adichie 2013, 12).

Feeling superior, Ifemelu initially keeps her distance from Aisha, who seems too unsophisticated to her. At the beginning of the braiding session Ifemelu behaves like an “Americanah,” pronounced with “the fourth syllable extended,” a title she and her friends gave to a Nigerian girl, whom they knew (78). The girl had once returned home from “a short trip to America with odd affectations, pretending she no longer understood Yoruba, adding a slurred *r* to every English word she spoke” (78). Adichie’s protagonist is arrogant and pretends to know better than to pay attention to her hairdresser and believes “that they would say only what they needed to say during the six hours it would take to braid her hair” (19). Yet her behavior changes toward the end of the six-hour hair braiding. Aisha’s simple question “How you get your papers?” melts Ifemelu’s heart: “Suddenly, Ifemelu’s irritation dissolved, and in its place, a gossamer sense of kinship grew, because Aisha would not have asked if she were not an African, and in this new bond, she saw yet another augury of her return home” (450-451). Kinship, familiarity, fabrication of the environment that resembles home is key to understanding Ifemelu’s reactions and experiences in the salon: she and the braider are part of an African diaspora.

People who live in a new country, “who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guestworkers and other moving groups,” as Arjun Appadurai calls them, end up recreating their home (Appadurai 1990, 297). And how can we know or sense “home”? How, as immigrants, do we protect what is left of our “local” identity and (re)produce it while living abroad? Appadurai uses the term “locality” to describe

a complex phenomenological quality, constituted by a series of links between the sense of social immediacy, the technologies of interactivity, and the relativity of contexts. This phenomenological quality, which expresses itself in certain kinds of agency, sociality, and reproducibility, is the main predicate of locality. (Appadurai 1996, 178)

He explains that, for example, neighborhoods are not locality, but “the actually existing social forms in which locality, as a dimension or value, is variably realized. Neighborhoods, in this usage, are situated communities characterized by their actuality, whether spatial or virtual, and their potential for social reproduction” (Appadurai 1996, 178-179). This means that locality is neither a place nor a space, not a direct reproduction of a place, and not even local people who live in this place. Locality pertains to how we sense what is local about the place. It is “primarily relational and contextual rather than [...] scalar or spatial” (178). People who have survived the difficult and often harsh reality of displacement often have to compromise “between what they could imagine [their life can be abroad] and what [the real] social life will permit” (54). Since the homeland and their sense of “local” is beyond their reach, it gets (re)invented, existing only in their imagination: it can be fantastic and one-sided representations that fuel the new ethnic groups.¹⁰⁹ Appadurai suggests that in order to survive the detachment from “home,” “moving groups” need to recover and reorganize themselves, to find a unifying element and a sense of community – locality (Appadurai 1990, 297). In order to reproduce what is “local” to them, people, like actors, need to perform certain rituals and ceremonies.

Appadurai calls people who fulfill these duties “local actors who properly belong to a situated community of kin, neighbors, friends, and enemies” (Appadurai 1996, 179). They are the ones who execute the productive function of locality through the rites of passage:

¹⁰⁹ Personally, this makes me think of Brighton Beach in New York City, a place where Russia and the Soviet Union get reimaged to a degree, I do not even recognize it as a reproduction of my homeland. For more on communities, the sense of a nation, and immigration, see Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983).

Ceremonies of naming and tonsure, scarification and segregation, circumcision and deprivation are complex social techniques for the inscription of locality onto bodies. Looked at slightly differently, they are ways to embody locality as well as to locate bodies in socially and spatially defined communities. [...] Such rites are not simply mechanical techniques for social aggregation but social techniques for the production of "natives." (179)

“Local actors,” hairdressers and braiders, for example, produce the new community’s “natives” that they and their group can ‘read’ and accept as their own. As mentioned in the Introduction, a human body, according to Turner, is “the symbolic stage upon which the drama of socialization is enacted, and bodily adornment (in all its culturally multifarious forms, from body-painting to clothing and from feather head-dresses to cosmetics) becomes the language through which it is expressed” (Turner, 486). This positions hair as a signifier of the community. In both cases, both Appadurai and Turner perceive rites of passage as a lived experience, a way for a society or community to mark its constituents, which are “relational and contextual” rather than events, occurrences, or acts. In this sense, hair is a locality, which needs to be (re)produced in order to (re)create “local subjects” – people who share the same sense of the local, like members of a community or a diaspora, for example (Appadurai 1996, 179).

Hair salons are a perfect example of the inscription of locality onto the bodies of people. They thrive on the need of the relocated population for a contact with the homeland, as well as locate bodies in socially and spatially defined communities. And as we have learned from Ifemelu’s experience, she does have a sense of home during her six hours of hair braiding. As we can see in the novel, the hair salon experience makes Ifemelu somewhat uncomfortable: there, she can be African, but mentally she is constrained and cannot fully express her ideas about hair within this space. She needs a community to share her experience and a medium through which she can channel it. Hair becomes her way of achieving the communality she desires.

Her blog is eminently linked to her hair, as it is its loss along with a breach in her romantic relationship that make her rethink the importance of hair. Her blog is born out of necessity to fill in the lacuna of loneliness both in her personal and her social life. Adichie uses a hair narrative arc to recount Ifemelu's journey from the Big Chop to the blog. Wishing to check out the website of the natural hair community on her boyfriend's laptop, Ifemelu accidentally finds out he is potentially cheating on her. Having cheated on him in return, she creates her blog while trying to heal from the break-up. The betrayal together with the hair salon create a backdrop for Ifemelu's blog—a space that exists both within the text of the novel and separately from it. In creating this independent site within a novel, typed in a different font, Adichie pushes the boundaries of hair narrative turning it into *hair locality*, a creative virtual space that exists both inside and outside of the novel, in which hair has a leading role.¹¹⁰

Byrd and Tharps believe that “in the early years of the twenty-first century, the Internet proved itself to be the greatest contribution to Black hair culture since the hot comb” (Byrd and Tharps 177). It gave “Black people, and women in particular, [...] the means to be in [...] direct, informative, daily conversation with each other about this loaded topic [...] Now in the same way that women of all races would talk publicly about their weight, Black people were having public conversations about their hair” (177-178). By 2013, the year when *Americanah* was published in the U.S.:

there were thousands of blogs about Black hair. Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube also had countless pages and channels dedicated to discussing its significance, care, and versatility. On these sites were articles; photos; videos and podcasts about products; step-by-step how-tos on creating styles; and essays, opinion boards, and think pieces on issues that natural hair women have grappled with on the job and in their personal lives. (182)

¹¹⁰ The blog posts are scattered around the novel. Often, they are linked to the content of the chapters and the narration, at times not, adding to the fragmentary nature of the novel.

These websites were more about expression and creativity, and self-acceptance, rather than political statements (183). It is this kind of website that Ifemelu initially consults. HappilyKinkyNappy.com is a bright and happy place,

message boards full of posts, thumbnail photos of black women blinking at the top. They had long trailing dreadlocks, small Afros, big Afros, twists, braids, massive raucous curls and coils. They called relaxers “creamy crack.” They were done with pretending that their hair was what it was not, done with running from the rain and flinching from sweat. They complimented each other’s photos and ended comments with “hugs.” (Adichie 2012, 264)

The website helps Ifemelu with her natural hair journey and heals her. After Ifemelu embraces her Afro and comes to work wearing her hair with pride, her colleagues are puzzled: “You look different,” her co-workers said, all of them a little tentative. “Does it mean anything? Like, something political?” (Adichie 2013, 262). The website does not provide a platform where she could address her indignation towards her colleagues’ ignorance. She keeps wanting more, writing emails to her friends, searching for a community where she can truly express herself, and not just though hair, but via discussing it as a “race metaphor” (367). The same friend who chopped off her relaxed hair, suggests that she needs to start a blog, where she can be “digging, questioning, unearthing,” and it’s clear that “[Ifemelu] longed for other listeners, and she longed to hear the stories of others. How many other people chose silence? How many other people had become black in America? How many had felt as though their world was wrapped in gauze?” (366). Having broken-up with her boyfriend, she needs a fresh start personally and socially. Her blog is born like her hair after the ‘Big Chop,’ “new [and] unfamiliar” (366).

She breaks the polite silence and makes the first post about hair in her blog *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*, which very quickly gets a thousand visitors a month. The answer she suppressed in giving to her coworkers, springs out of her in her first blog post: “I have natural kinky hair. Worn in cornrows, Afros, braids. No, it’s not political. No, I am not an artist or poet or singer. Not an earth mother either. I just don’t want relaxers in my hair— there are enough sources of cancer in my life as it is” (368). Ifemelu would not be able to respond the same way in real life. Her first posts about natural Black hair starts with a simple question: “So is it me or is that the perfect metaphor for race in America right there? Hair” (Adichie 2013, 367). She discusses Michelle Obama’s hair accentuating the fact that her White Girlfriend is fully unaware of the fact that Mrs. Obama, like some other Black women, “has a weave” (367). She is sure that Barack Obama “would certainly lose the independent vote” if Michelle “decided to go natural and appeared on TV with lots of woolly hair, or tight spirally curls” (368). Ifemelu condemns makeover TV shows and fashion magazines for promoting natural hair as ugly and straight hair as pretty. She updates the post later, because a reader inquires about her hair regimen. It is not just political, after all. Non-African and African Black women comment and contribute, thus designing a virtual community for everyone who has “Black” hair.

Yet, one cannot help but wonder: whom does she address in this first post? She explains the First Lady’s weaves, the visual misrepresentation and manipulations of AB and NAB hair, the meaning of “natural,” the different textures of hair on women’s heads. The tone is sarcastic, but at the same time educational. Black women do not need this kind of information, they know it. She

sounds like she wants to share with her “sisters,” but one suspects that this post is directed at White girlfriends (and possibly boyfriends, yet she keeps her post very female oriented).¹¹¹

The blog is a success: it gets a lot of visitors, comments, and reposts. She, in return, feels accomplished and satisfied. She acquires not only a community, but also “support:” “That word [support] made the blog even more apart from her, a separate thing that could thrive or not, sometimes without her and sometimes with her” (375). The money starts rolling in, then a few companies suggested advertising. Obviously, she gets hateful messages, but she can shake them off. Finally, she receives a request to “lead [an] annual diversity workshop” at a local university (376). Her first diversity talk titled “How to Talk about Race with Colleagues of Other Races” attracted a solely white audience. She wonders: “But who [...] would they be talking to, since they were all white? Perhaps the janitor was black” (377). Her thought, in part, suggests an answer to my question about the target audience of her first posts: primarily white. This talk is another way for her to respond to that political-hair comment her co-workers made.

Eventually, she starts making a distinction between the people who attend her workshops and those who read her blog: “The point of diversity workshops, or multicultural talks, was not to inspire any real change but to leave people feeling good about themselves. They did not want the content of her ideas; they merely wanted the gesture of her presence. They had not read her blog,

¹¹¹ The theme, the irony, and the tone of this post makes me think of *Dear White People*, a 2014 movie which later became a show on Netflix. Samantha White, who is portrayed by Tessa Thompson, causes a stir among the students of an imaginary American university, by creating a radio show, *Dear White People*. In one of her broadcasts she says: “Dear White People, stop touching my hair. Does this look like a petting zoo to you?” responding to a notorious gesture of curiosity and disrespect towards nappy and kinky hair (00:00:27 - 30). As a response to the touching, in the summer of 2013 #TeamUnruly, a group and a blog founded by Antonia Opiah, “held an interactive public art exhibit where three Black women held signs that read ‘You Can Touch My Hair’” (Opiah). The short movie made about the experience “takes a glimpse into this fascination and how black women, who are often its subjects, feel about it” (Opiah).

but they had heard that she was a “leading blogger” about race” (378). So, she develops two separate voices:

As she gave more talks at companies and schools, she began to say what they wanted to hear, none of which she would ever write on her blog, because she knew that the people who read her blog were not the same people who attended her diversity workshops. During her talks, she said: “America has made great progress for which we should be very proud. In her blog she wrote: *Racism should never have happened and so you don’t get a cookie for reducing it.* (378)

As she becomes braver, the blog become more critical and more ‘her.’ She questions if race is an invention, explains the differences between the suppression and suffering of AB and NAB (403), criticizes people who claim that they are color-blind, delves into the issues that interracial couples face (374, 403, 404). In the post titled “To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: In America, You Are Black, Baby,” she addresses her fellow Africans and voices her most profound idea: “when you [Non-American Black] make your choice to come to American, you become black” (273). She calls American society “the Society of Former Negroes” and declares: “America doesn’t care. So, what if you weren’t “black” in your country?” (273). This could be her most powerful post. Even though she talks directly to NAB, she actually clearly explains to American people of all colors that not everyone with dark skin is “Black” in the American understanding of this word.¹¹² Ifemelu clarifies that people from Jamaica, Ghana, or Trinidad do not have the same set of cultural anxieties as African-Americans: they do not get offended “when such words as “watermelon” or “tar baby” are used in jokes,” not accustomed to “nod[ding] back when a black person nods,” “describ[ing] women [as] “STRONG,” because women in Africa and the Caribbean are strong regardless of their color, and assuming that “strong-minded women [are] SCARY” (273, 274).¹¹³

¹¹² In the Introduction I explained the problematic usage of that word.

¹¹³ Uppercase letters are used in the original text.

Ifemelu is sarcastic, but her rancor and blatant honesty cannot be silenced any longer. She speaks from experience and she is truthful:

When you watch television and hear that a “racist slur” was used, you must immediately become offended. Even though you are thinking “But why won’t they tell me exactly what was said?” Even though you would like to be able to decide for yourself how offended to be, or whether to be offended at all, you must nevertheless be very offended. (274)

She teaches her fellow NAB how to perform “Blackness” in the most American understanding of this idea, and how to survive interactions with both White and Black people in the U.S. She is bitter, even though, according to her, ironically, as a Black person, one is not supposed to be bitter when talking about race and racism, or to complain. One should “be forgiving” (275). She cannot do either, so her blog is her way to resist, to criticize, and accuse.

Ultimately, the blog “become[s]” her. This makes her feel especially vulnerable because she receives threats and has to mask herself under a pseudonym, the Blogger. She calms herself down with a short post, inviting “zipped-up Negroes” “who don’t talk about Life Experiences” to “unzip” themselves (380). Addressing her readers, but concurrently herself, she promises: “This is a safe space” (380).

Hill Collins affirms that “safe spaces help Black women resist the dominant ideology promulgated not only outside Black civil society but within African-American institutions” (Hill Collins 111). Such spaces “are not only safe – they form prime locations for resisting objectification as the Other” (111). A hair salon should be such a place, but judging from Ifemelu’s experience, it is either a place of trauma, where “something organic [...] should not have died,” or indifference, where hairdressers make fake compliments and only say what needs to be said (Adichie 2013, 251, 19). Ifemelu craves exchange and participation, which, in the context of the

novel, means that “although hair salons have traditionally been considered cultural institutions where hair care conflates with cultural exchange between Black women, [...] social networks and their participatory cultural strategies have the potential to complement and even substitute hair salons in certain aspects” (Cruz-Gutierrez 22). The safe space “for real conversation about important subject[s]” that she cannot find in the hair salon, she finds and creates online (Cruz-Gutierrez 5).

Ifemelu’s search for a meaningful space where she can speak freely perhaps is her moment of Americanization, which does not mean getting Americanized but discovering oneself. Her blog becomes that virtual haven where she can be herself: a Nigerian, an African, a foreigner, an immigrant, a scholar, an activist, and a proud Black woman. The online community of Non-African and African Black women is her home.¹¹⁴ Used as an extension of herself in the communal space, Ifemelu’s hair bridges the hair braiding tradition observed by African and African-American Black women and provides multivalent readings of their personal and communal women’s practices, like visiting a hair salon or relaxing one’s hair. As shown in the novel, these experiences are different for African and Non-African Black women, yet as readers learn from Ifemelu’s blog their hair is what joins them to each other.

At the end of the novel she returns to Nigeria and her blog becomes less political. She explains: “Race doesn’t really work here. I feel like I got off the plane in Lagos and stopped being black.” (586). Whether Ifemelu continues to write about hair or not, it is clear that after her American experience hair becomes much more meaningful to her. Ifemelu starts her blog as “a space of dialogue on natural hair, especially when she updates the entry and asks her readers to

¹¹⁴ She buys a house with the money she made on her blog, so it is her home both virtually and physically.

contribute with information about transitioning regimens and opinions,” and turned it into a platform “promoting creativity, self-definition,” and representation (Cruz-Gutierrez 24, 25). Polyvocality, which is characteristic of any blog, here transcends the narrative dimension of hair and turns into locality. Hair narrative loses its subtlety and nuances and becomes hair locality: its own space within a text.¹¹⁵

Hair as a locality denominator in *Americanah* becomes obvious when one compares the novel’s covers from around the world. Book covers are crucial in targeting potential readers and can be misleading if they disregard the message of a book.¹¹⁶ A novel’s visibility depends on the right cover, which should communicate the correct genre, give some hints on the plot (without giving all away), establish a connection with the protagonist, and set the tone (Morr). The visualization of the novel via cover can attract potential readers, who can relate to it, perhaps, or just be interested enough to buy it; or repel them. A collection of various *Americanah* covers can be found on Adichie’s website; some of them are more attractive than others, while some are boring, yet others are more political. A lot of them pay tribute to the protagonist’s hair, some are

¹¹⁵ It is also important to note that Ifemelu and her blog extend beyond the literary realm into the “real” virtual space. There is an actual blog <https://raceteenthorvariousobservations.wordpress.com> whose author is Ifemelu and this blog explores *Americanah* and race. Additionally, Adichie herself has a tab “Ifemelu’s blog” on her website chimamanda.com, which is a continuation of Ifemelu’s blog from the novel. In it, she shares her life in Lagos, Nigeria. It starts where the book left off, Obinze “Ceiling,” her Nigerian ex-boyfriend, returning into her life.

¹¹⁶ In 2009 Australian writer Justine Larbalestier won a battle against Bloomsbury publishing house who whitewashed the cover of her book *Liar* (2009). In short, “The novel is about a short-haired black girl called Micah, but the advance reading copies sent out by Bloomsbury Children's Books used a photograph of a long-haired white girl on its jacket, prompting a wave of criticism” (Flood). The cover was efficiently replaced, but the incident proves the importance of book covers in promoting books accurately, in particular when it comes to writing dealing with diversity and race.

more interested in showing that she is an immigrant. The covers can tell us about the selected countries' racial politics as well.

The American (Figure 12), Russian (Figure 12), and Italian (Figure 14) covers of the novel focus on Ifemelu's braids but represent them from different angles. The American publisher, it seems, tried to attract a diverse population of readers, as the braids are formed by three different colors of strands. One can assume that the protagonist could be mixed race or else is at the intersection of her hair story.

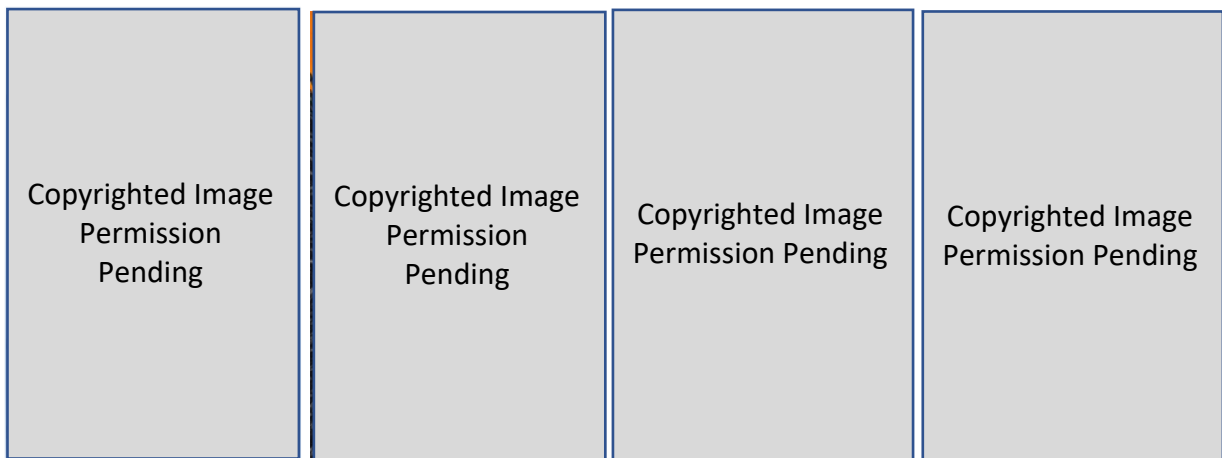


Figure 12. USA

Figure 13. Russia

Figure 14. Denmark

Figure 15. Italy

<https://www.chimamanda.com/book/americanah/>

Contrary to the Russian cover, which places the protagonist next to the Statue of Liberty, it is unclear where the narration takes place on the American cover.¹¹⁷ One cannot help but suppose that the title should be a sufficient hint. Russian and Italian covers also feature braids and hair. The Italian one showcases the diversity of the hair, thus suggesting the protagonist's ethnic

¹¹⁷ Ifemelu lives in New Jersey, not New York. But for the Russian publisher the Statue of Liberty represents the idea of the U.S. as a whole.

background. The natural hair movement has been very influential in Italy and the cover demonstrates it. The Russian cover focuses on Ifemelu's braids which look as if they are separated from her head and also are uneven. I wonder if the Russian illustrator consulted any people of African descent or images of box braids before making this illustration. There are very few Black people in Russia, so no one will notice. This cover definitely targets mostly monoethnic Russian readers.¹¹⁸

The cover from Denmark (Figure 14), which looks like one of the pictures from the Italian cover, disregards Ifemelu's hair story completely, and focuses on her face, sensualizing the features of an African woman, with a languishing look, sensual open mouth, plump lips. She wears artificial eyelashes and make-up. I find this cover problematic not only because the woman's hair is 'cut off' by the frame, which has been an issue with some fashion magazines lately, but mostly because of the sexualized representation of African women.¹¹⁹ One might wonder if the message of this cover is that Black women are desirable, and the book will show you in what way?! It is my assumption, but it looks like, apart from the Italian cover (Figure 15), the rest (Figures 12, 13, and 14) target White audiences.

The British cover (Figure 16) is part of the Adichie collection, which features four novels. All four covers are inspired by Nigerian wax fabric patterns. Separately, the cover for *Americanah* is not very expressive, but within the collection it is quite pleasing. The only possible flaw with

¹¹⁸ As a translator, I applaud the Russian title. It reads as "Amerikankha." *Amerikanka*, is Russian for an American woman. So, the replacement of "k" by "kh" makes it sound familiar to a Russian ear, yet foreign enough to intrigue the reader, hinting that the book is not just about the U.S. I have not yet read the Russian translation and will be interested to see how the translator managed to render the vocabulary linked to hair: "nappy," kinky," etc. into Russian.

¹¹⁹ In the Introduction, I speak about Lupita Nyong'o's hair being edited for *Grazia's* front cover. In 2017 Solange Knowles's hair was edited off in the *ES* magazine cover. She responded with a song called "Don't Touch My Hair."

this cover is that the original cover for the Spanish edition that I show below (Figure 22) was replaced with the British cover. It is uncertain why the Spanish cover is part of a collection as well.



Figure 16. U.K.

Figure 17. Portugal

Figure 18. Serbia

Figure 19. Croatia

<https://www.chimamanda.com/book/americanah/>

The Portuguese (Figure 17) and Serbian (Figure 18) covers are the most political of all, accentuating that the woman on the cover is an immigrant. On both we see the protagonist, wearing a traditional African head scarf and adornment. Adichie is often featured wearing such a headdress, so this representation is not unexpected. Yet, the message the covers transmit is different. On the cover of the Portuguese translation, a woman's silhouette is placed on the side and is drawn against the background of the American flag, thus attempting to highlight the storyline of an African immigrant in the U.S. The fact that we cannot really see the face of the woman in detail, hints that it can be anyone, not necessarily Ifemelu. And that her study is bigger than just her own.

The Serbian cover emphasizes the Nigerian origins of the protagonist. The woman in the head scarf occupies the center of the cover is fully disguised in a flag featuring Nigeria's green-and-white national colors. Yet, as one notices the stars and the stripes on this flag, it becomes obvious that her figure is wrapped in the American flag whose colors have been replaced by those on the Nigerian flag. I find this image very powerful. The mere act of covering oneself in a flag stands for the idea of a national identity. The protagonists wrapped in and concealed under what

seems to be an amalgam of the American and the Nigerian flags is a reflection of Ifemelu’s double identity and her temporary alienation from her African roots, as well as her discussion of the differences between AB and NAB. Overall, it captures the title, the theme, and the tone very well.

The cover of the Croatian translation (Figure 19) is similar to the protagonist’s representation on the Portuguese one: Ifemelu wears a headscarf (Figure 17). But instead of a small silhouette on the side, the protagonist’s portrait is featured in the center and we can clearly see her face. Drawn against the backdrop of an undefinable American city skyline (she lives both in Philadelphia and New Jersey), her gaze is lowered – she looks proud yet sad.

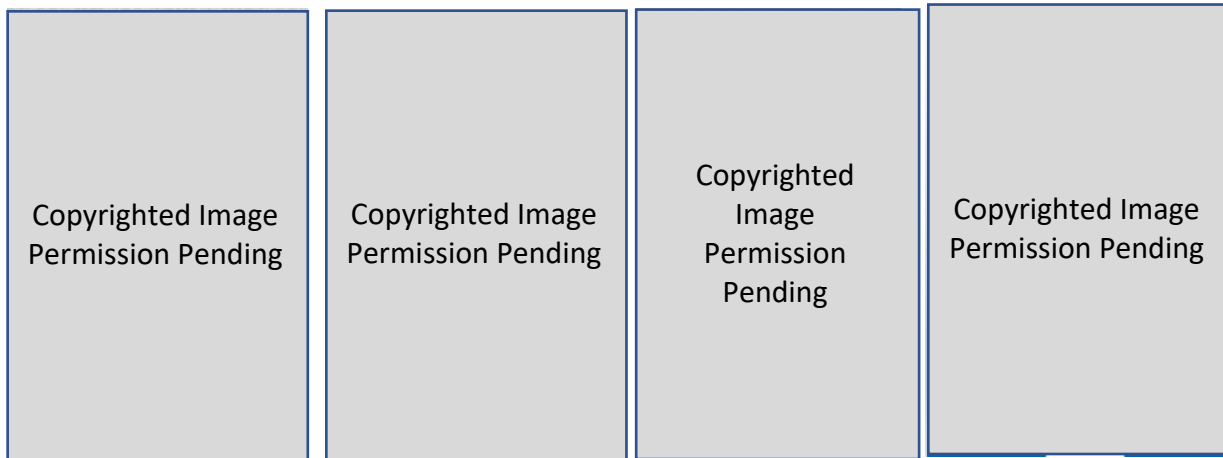


Figure 20. Nigeria

Figure 21. Kenya

Figure 22. Spain

Figure 23. France

<https://www.chimamanda.com/book/americanah/>

The last four covers put emphasize Ifemelu’s natural hair journey after the Big Chop and her Afro, thus drawing the viewer’s attention to the core of the protagonist’s hair choice which prompted her blog. The Nigerian cover (Figure 20) is a drawing of an African woman placed in a circle and set against the background of African tribal masks which serve a decorative function but may also represent at once Ifemelu’s blog readers, the Nigerian community, following her American adventures, and her African roots. The circle in which she is placed also looks like a

tribal mask. In Africa, hair is linked to vegetation and plants, so the flower in Ifemelu's hair signifies the new growth, the fresh start, and her hair's blossoming in its natural state. The human figure drawn on the woman's face is a creative rendition of Nigerian/African tribal paint, as it roughly follows the same structure and pattern: the ornament is drawn above the eyebrows, over the bridge of the nose, and goes as low as the lips and the chin, and often to the sides, on the cheeks. At the same time, it is also an allusion to 'the White man' and Western society.¹²⁰ The colors of the title represent the American flag, and the red matches the color in Ifemelu's hair flower.

The Kenyan cover (Figure 21) spotlights a hair tool, which, depending on who looks at it, may be read both as an Afro pick or an African comb.¹²¹ The Kenyan readers, judging from how uneven and worn out the teeth of the comb are, are likely to think that this is an African tool, whose handle is traditionally decorated with carved motifs or precious metals. The comb on the cover is adorned with a woman's head. Her hair is tightly made into a low bun. Ifemelu might have looked like this when she applied for the job, but deep inside, and this is what the comb symbolizes, she stayed true to her origins. At the bottom of the page one sees heads with various hairdos that make a pattern.¹²²

The Spanish cover (Figure 22) depicts a woman pensively pulling on a strand of her natural hair. It looks like a still from a film. Besides the cover from Denmark (Figure 14), this is the only other photograph. The woman's emotions are hidden; some of her face is cut off by the frame, so

¹²⁰ I would like to thank Annette Umoru, a former student and a friend, for her invaluable feedback and thoughtful comments on this cover.

¹²¹ Morrow explains in *400 years without the comb* the link between the two. It is obvious that the Afro pick is "the original tool of Black hair culture [which imitates] the ancient hand-carved African comb" (Byrd and Tharps 65). Starting from the sixties, the Afro pick "was the only tool deemed necessary for upkeep," and thus became a symbol of the natural hair movement (65).

¹²² The inscription "Kwani?" which means "so what?" in Sheng is a stamp of approval from *Kwani?*, a leading African literary magazine based in Kenya.

it is unclear who she is looking at or what she is thinking about. The French cover (Figure 23) also showcases an Afro; it is centered, but the woman has no identifiable facial features, which allows the viewer's eyes to focus on her full head of hair, which contrary to the Nigerian cover is not a perfect halo, but looks more like real-life hair with coiled strands 'flying' around the head. Folio covers of Adichie's novel always demonstrate different African hairstyles for natural hair, so, it is not surprising that an Afro was chosen for this cover.

As we can see from the analysis of the covers, the publishers also try to use hair locality to market the book for the right audience. The majority of the novel's covers focus either on Ifemelu's hair or at least on her head, thus allowing readers to take a glance into Ifemelu's world even before they open the book.

It will be interesting to compare the linguistic differences between the American, British, and Nigerian versions. There may well be, because Adichie speaks British English, yet she has been living in the U.S. for a while now. Sources indicate that her popularity in Europe, especially in France, surpasses her recognition in North America, especially in France.¹²³ She became an inspiration for Rokhaya Diallo, who, in fact, created a perfect example of hair locality.

According to her own website, Diallo is "officiellement journaliste, auteure, réalisatrice, activiste et conférencière" (Diallo 2017). A daughter of Senegalese immigrants, Diallo never felt like she fit in, so she "made the world embrace who [she is]" (Diallo 2017). She is the author of multiple books on racism, diversity, and feminism in France. Her voice is different from Adichie's, but the blog *Rok My World* that she writes both in English and French tackles the issues Ifemelu

¹²³ This may change if the film adaptation of the novel materializes, and Lupita Nyong'o plays Ifemelu. The rumors around this topic have been spreading for a few years, but there is still no film.

attacks in her blog. One of the sections, “Rok My Hair,” where she discusses hair-related issues, laid the foundation for the creation of a book, which united the French of African descent around their shared locality – hair.

Like the French cover of the *Americanah* translation, the front of Diallo’s *Afro!* (2015) presents a woman wearing, well, an Afro. She is happy and smiling; it is Diallo herself. At the first glance, the book looks like an imitation of other Black beauty celebration albums, which contain beautiful photos that honor people of African descent, famous and not. Because of the underrepresentation of Black people in fashion magazines, these albums have been quintessential to the promotion of Black beauty and pride. Apart from skin, such books accentuate hair as a primary source of celebration.¹²⁴ Diallo’s book is closer to the message in Michael July’s *Afro: A Celebration of Natural Hair* (2013), which features pictures of Black people, mostly from the U.S., and is the short answer to the question the author of the book asks: Why did you go natural? In a way, it is a collection of hair stories interlaced with photos of people who are “happy to be nappy.”¹²⁵ The visuals overpower the text, but the book succeeds in normalizing natural hair and communicating its ‘goodness’ and beauty.

¹²⁴ Some examples of such albums include Ben Arogundale’s *Black Beauty: A History and a Celebration* (2000), Michael Cunningham and George Alexander’s *Queens: Portraits of Black Women and their Fabulous Hair* (2005), Katell Pouliquen’s *Afro: Une Célébration* (2012), which discusses the history and culture of Africans and people of African descent through hair and hair history. Bill Duke’s *Dark Girls* (2014), which tackles colorism as a contemporary issue that is as powerful as misrepresentation and racism. Beverly Bond’s *Black Girls Rock!: Owing Our Magic. Rocking Our Truth* (2018) features women as a source of beauty, which is logical because the fashion magazines are mostly geared towards women, and these books attempt to repair the damage of misrepresentation and to inspire a change.

¹²⁵ Originally, a children’s book by bell hooks (1999), it has become one of the slogans of the natural hair movement in the U.S. as well as all over the globe.

Afro! also features portraits of French people who have textured hair. It brings together people of all genders and ages, men, women, and children, of diverse origins and many walks of life. The title page of the book repeats the title and features an Afro pick with a fist on the handle. As we saw previously, the shape of the handle is of particular significance since it “can be distinguished according to the tribe, as each has its own myths, proverbs, symbols and spirits which are revered in the community[;] as a verbal art, the medium of communication of people...and serve[s] as philosophical guides to action” (Adwoa Antiri quot. in Tulloch 128). Furthermore, “This iconic comb represents the ethos of the civil rights movement, with the power of the clenched fist and the peace sign in the centre” (Ashton).¹²⁶ Currently, the clenched fist represents different things: Black Power, Black Pride, ‘Black is beautiful,’ protection of human rights, Nappy hair as well as the “Black lives matter” movement. It is probably because of its varied associations that the fist does not lose its importance. Above all, the Afro pick handle symbolizes Black culture, identity, unity, and diversity of hair.

The Afro comb sets the tone in *Afro!*: the expression of natural hair in all of its possible diversity. The gallery of 110 portraits include many familiar faces, such as actress Aïssa Maïga, singers Imany and Inna Modja, rapper Youssoupha, sociologist Juliette Sméralda, the novelist and the blogger Fatou N'Diaye, stage director and writer Eva Doumbia, as well as the Ministers Christiane Taubira and George Pau-Langevin. Their portraits capture them walking down the streets of Paris, at their work place, or at home. Deprived of glamour, the photographs seize how

¹²⁶ The clenched fist or the Black Power Salute is a signature symbol of the Black Power Party and of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (Tulloch 133). It became personalized and expressed on the world stage during 1968 Mexico City Olympics when Black American sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos, who won a gold and a bronze medal respectively, took a personal stand and, as the American flag was raised and the national anthem played, “the men thrust one arm each above their heads in a black-leather-gloved fist salute” (133). They explained it as “a human rights stand” (Smith quot. in Tulloch 135).

natural and comfortable they are in their skin and hair. This one is different from the other coffee table books, as it contextualizes the stories of the people portrayed with the help of literary and theoretical texts.

One of the most powerful and less known writings is an excerpt from “capillary cabaret” in *Moi et mon cheveu*, in which a character named Tété, a possible allusion to *tête*, mocks the extremist zealots of the natural hair movement, usually young women and girls, for looking down upon other women who do not want to go natural, reprimanding them, often going to the extremes and spreading hatred. Tété calls them *Nappex* and describes them as:

une jeune fille noire entre 16 et 25 ans, très branchée blogosphère, forum beauté et stars, en somme une fille normale [qui] devient subitement convaincue que l’emploi de produits chimiques sur sa tignasse est un signe de la domination du Blanc sur le Noir, et que par conséquent, il faut le combattre à tout prix. (Dolumbia 271)

Tété banishes the moralizing tone and judgmental behavior of the natural hair movement. The tone of this piece is in direct opposition to Diallo’s and Adichie’s writing, yet this is the voice of a woman who wants the freedom to choose what hair she wants, and it has now become a part of the Black hair discourse as well.

Along with the texts by scholars Maboula Soumahono and Virginie Sassoon, Diallo uses her own and personal articles on hair, as well as. The readers of *Afro!* are exposed to different genres of creative production, all of it linked to hair. There is an excerpt from the movie *La Ligne de couleur*, which contains a letter from a mother to her daughter, in which she expresses love for the girl’s hair and calls it her treasure. Another page demonstrates an excerpt from a comic book called *Mouton* (2012) that was created by Lebanese illustrator and author Zeina Abirached, which shows one girl’s way of dealing with the “sheep” she has for hair (Diallo 281). Diallo added songs

in French and English, namely Erykah Badu's *Afro*, Nina Simone's *Four Women*, and India Arie's *I am not my Hair*. The famous Malcolm X's testimonial on relaxing his conk is also included.¹²⁷ And, obviously, several passages from the French version of *Americanah*, which seems to have inspired Diallo's activism and feminist writing, are featured in *Afro!*.

By interlacing hair narratives of literary pieces with hair stories of real people and visualizing these narrations with the portraits, Diallo achieves a wonderful contextualized representation of hair in its relation to each person and the texts inside the book, which also extends into the real world, thus portraying hair in a sense of locality, as it is explained by Appadurai and initiated by Adichie in *Americanah*.

¹²⁷ See the Introduction and Chapter 3 for more information.

CONCLUSION

Why does hair matter? This is the question worth asking and answering. If people had or used to have hair, they might think that they already know enough about it. Yet, as this study clearly shows, when hair is examined through the prism of racial and identity politics, they also might realize that they, in fact, know nothing about hair. As they start to really delve into hair narrative, it becomes obvious that the racial prejudices which were cultivated in the past with the discoveries of new continents, colonies, and peoples are deeply rooted in our society and psyche. The racial hurt is deep, the damage is serious, and it will not go away easily.

One particular thing that I noticed since I began researching hair narrative, is that many women I met from Africa and the Caribbean are not as sensitive about or opposed to conversations about their hair and hair in general. In my experience, they discuss it willingly, share their stories easily, usually fascinated by the fact that a Russian might be interested in their hair. It is another story with African-American women, who may shun any conversation, feeling like I am examining them out of objectifying curiosity. One of my best friends who is African-American wears her hair relaxed, in a weave, natural. Previously, I was amazed by how many hairstyles were available to her. Eventually, as my research developed and my interest in the topic developed, I learned that even between friends hair can be a sensitive subject.

I like telling people about hair narrative: no matter the ethnic background, they always get involved and want to tell a story, if not their own, then somebody else's. A hair story is a way of connecting and relating. A hair story, however, is different from a hair narrative. A hair story or testimonial is a personal account of people's relationship with their hair. They may love, hate, have trouble maintaining it, or be worried about losing their hair. Their (grand)mothers/(grand)fathers, sisters/brother, hairdressers/neighbors might have always/never braided their hair; it might or

might not hurt. They cut, color, shave off their hair or, perhaps, pull grey strands out of it. Some people lose their hair and never get it back. Often, it can be a personal tragedy. Some women say that after pregnancy their hair loses its texture and gloss. Other women can damage their hair and only the Big Chop can repair it. There are many hair stories and each of them deserves to be told. The minute a writer wants to use her, his, or someone else's personal hair story and demonstrate that it is not personal, but rather a political or a social commentary, is when hair narrative is created.

Hair narrative allows readers to dig into many issues of our life; enumerating them all is a task difficult to fulfill. On the one hand, hair is trivial. It is "just dead stuff, strands of keratin pushed out of our skin by glands and other weird gross things that are part of our bodies" (Lowe 1). Yet, once we really thinking and noticing, it becomes overwhelming how important it is and how much people interact with each other by means of hair. Hair as a secondary sex characteristic gets as much attention as the sex organs themselves, but because it is visible and easily malleable (contrary to the organs and skin color); it is regulated, often to extreme, if not ridiculous measures.

Literary hair strands, another, and perhaps more lyrical, way to call hair narrative, invite deeper explorations of the ways society interweaves with individuality and molds human nature. And conversely, it reveals how our daily lives and interactions, within a family or among strangers, shape the world around us. When Pineau describes writing, she uses both *tricoter* and *broder*. Traditionally, women's activities, knitting, embroidery, and braiding belong to the semantic field of writing, because like braiders, the writers need to twist the narrative strands, at times cut them off, often tie them up. I have studied only women's narratives thus far, but hair narrative may well reveal deeper issues in men's writing, as it does in women's.

Hair is inherently linked to storytelling. It is a way of passing the time while sitting through hours of hairdressing. African griots are not only professional storytellers, but usually skillful

hairdressers. In Anthony's *Da Kink in my Hair*, before the hair starts narrating, a griot appears to initiate the audience's entrance to the realm of storytelling. Modern day hairdressers are not just storytellers, they are caretakers and soul menders. The care they give to one's hair is often equivalent to the care a mother provides for her child. And as we have seen in *Beloved*, *D'eaux douces*, and *Fleur de Barbarie*, some mothers are more vicious toward their daughters' hair than any stranger would be. As my research clearly shows, one of the primary functions of hair narrative is to uncover mother/daughter interactions.

In discussing representations of motherhood in French women's writing, Katharine A. Jensen argues that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries "because the daughter was to be raised to become like her nurturing mother, she belonged even more to her mother than did a son. [Thus] the most valuable object through which an ambitious woman could fulfill her wish to be recognized within her social milieu as an individual – as unique – was her daughter" (338). In the twenty-first century, women still abide by the norms for the patriarchy but for Black mothers who bring up their children often in poverty and under racial oppression, "for many even the poorest Black women," motherhood is both an ambition and "a symbol of hope" (Hill Collins 214). Explaining mothering choices among the African-American population of the U.S., Hill Collins points out that "Given the harshness of [the] mother's environment, her children offer hope. They are all she has" (214). She concludes that "mothering is an empowering experience for many African-American women" (214). This is not the same for the daughters. Morrison's *Sethe*, even after killing *Beloved*, continues with her life knowing she did the right thing and "put [her] babies where they'd be safe," which gave her false hope that slavery would never touch their lives (193). *Sethe* continuously repeats that the children are "her best thing" (296). She was only able to run away from Sweet Home and survive because she was bringing milk to one daughter and was pregnant

with the other. Yet, her urge to make her children belong only to her is a repetition of slavery. People cannot own their children – this is the lesson Morrison teaches us in *Beloved*. Still, I argue that Sethe, even if controversial, is one of the most powerful and empowered mother figures in American literature; and it is her love of her children and endless devotion to them that makes her so impressive. Sethe’s and Maman’s mothering is distinctive: Sethe bears her children in slavery and battles both for their spiritual and physical survival until she loses hope and tries to end their lives so they will not be enslaved; Maman from *D’eaux douces*, whose ancestors were also enslaved people, deals with the historic heritage of colonial trauma and needs to ensure her daughter’s endurance within this system of oppression.

Kanor’s Maman expected so much from her “new” life in France that she becomes severely disenchanted when her dreams crash. And her daughter, the product of this life, feels like a failure. Adrienne Rich explains that under racial and gender oppression mothers can “feel both responsible and powerless [and] carry [her] own guilt and self-hatred over into their daughters’ experiences. [...] [They] identif[y] intensely with [their] daughter[s], but through weakness, not through strength” (244). Frida is her mother’s double: Maman feels ashamed of being Black, so should Frida; the mother relaxes her hair to feel “whiter,” and so should her daughter. Frida’s body is colonized by her mother and prepared for her survival in the *metropole*. This is Maman’s parenting endeavor: to help her daughter live the life she never had but always wanted, to ensure her future, as the mother has no hope for her own life anymore.

A daughter’s hair as a colonial product is another motif that hair narrative discloses inside the mother/daughter bond. Examining the hair narrative in *Fleur de Barbarie* helps reveal the roots of Josette’s alienation in which Baker’s constructed identity and aesthetics play a crucial part. Interlacing Josephine Baker and Josette Titus’s hair narratives, Pineau engages with the history of

colonial and racial oppression in the French Caribbean and focuses on the causes of alienation of the Antillean Blacks without directly discussing either history or politics. In *D'eaux douces*, hair narrative exposes the story of the mother's possessive and controlling fixation with her daughters' hair, which creates a bond of interdependency between mother and daughter. In both novels the hair narrative delves into the stories mothers who succumb to patriarchal and racial pressures and fulfill their "colonial" duty to Metropolitan France. The daughters' hair, manipulated to the mother's liking, becomes Guadeloupe and Martinique's domestic products: sacrifices from daughter-colonies to mother-France.

Colonialism and slavery leave deep generational marks, and in all three novels, hair narrative represents motherhood as a traumatic bondage both for the mother and the daughter. Sethe remembers a mother who never did her hair because she was a field slave, and such luxury as taking care of her own child was not available to her. Maman, repressed by French patriarchy cannot breach the cycle of colonization and continues straightening her daughter's hair to look "White." Tata Michelle acts as a colonizer who exercises her power over Josette-Joséphine's body without realizing how damaging it is for the girl's psyche.

Frida and Denver are terrified of their mothers and perceive them as monsters. Denver remembers the scene in the shed when her mother sawed through her sister's neck before the slaver owners came. Denver's dream acts as a protection, a warning; so each time Sethe wants to braid or brush her hair, Denver is scared that she will be killed too. For Denver, her mother represents Lady Button-Eyes, a fairy who comes at night to put children to sleep/death. Frida is terrified of both her mother and what she represents: colonial power to change her daughter and make her in her own image. In her dream she sees her mother as a wolf: one who not only hurts her hair but is also a threat to her whole self. Josette-Joséphine is not scared of her mother per se,

but Pâquerette, who sold herself for money during her first hungry months in France, turned a blind eye to the fact that her pimp was molesting her two-year old daughter. I strongly believe that this is the reason why she does not want to see her daughter: the mother would have to face the truth that besides abandoning her daughter, she committed another monstrous thing, which traumatized the little girl for life.

The mother/daughter relationship in *Americanah* is not as prominent as is the other novels in this study. Yet, hair narrative invites us to delve into Ifemelu's desire to mirror her mother. When the mother shears her head, Ifemelu is shocked, because now, in order to imitate her mother, she would have to chop off her hair as well. Years later, after the Big Chop she is disturbed and disgusted by the bald woman reflected in the mirror. She does not recognize herself, but I think that it is her mother that she sees and this is why she so disturbed: her mother was verging on madness the day she cut her hair short. The memory of her mother's violent hair cutting and/or the loss of the self that inevitably comes when the hair is cut off so drastically, makes Ifemelu physically sick. Yet, as if following African traditional mourning rituals, Ifemelu recovers in a few days.

Another important trope that hair narrative exposes is the connection between hair and plants. As hair grows on heads, it is associated with head grass early on and by many peoples of the world. All four writers find a clever way to hint at the connection between growing plants and hair. In *Beloved*, the hair/plant metaphor explores the parasitic bond between Sethe and Beloved, the latter feeding on her mother's strength. When Beloved leaves, Sethe's hair is portrayed as roots pulled out of the ground. Kanor describes Frida's hair as having *grain du cheveu*, a Martinican-based expression, linking not only the texture of the hair but also its living power, and opposes *cheveux crépus* to *cheveux lisses*, relaxed hair that is "dead." Josette-Joséphine's hair is *en jachère*

in between the cuts. This is an allusion to Josette's identity and innocence: she is like an uncultivated land, where any plant grows freely. When Ifemelu's mother cuts her hair off, the daughter notices that her hair "lay on the floor like dead grass" (Adichie 49-50). The state of her hair viewed by her daughter as cut plants indicate the mother's metaphorical death and transition into a new religious persona.

Furthermore, hair goes hand in hand with music and songs. Amy Denver sings about Lady-Button Eye as she fixes Sethe's back. The song reappears when Sethe combs Denver's hair. Frida's hair does *driling-driling*, as if the hot comb plays on the hair like fingers on guitar strings. In Frida's dream, before turning into the dreadful Wolf, the mother sings a *chansonnette sueur*, literally a sweat song a lullaby, which relaxes Frida and makes her believe in Maman's goodness. Young Josette's life is accompanied by Josephine Baker's songs. The famous *Ram-pam-pam*, an innocent song about Cupid and love, is used to calm the girl's mind and make her obey Tata's scissors, which cut the protagonist's hair without mercy.

Americanah does not provide an example of interconnection between music and hair, yet it takes hair narrative to another level—locality. In opening up discussions about hair and creating a participatory environment around hair, Ifemelu embarks on a new path as a woman and an activist. The blog is initiated by hair, which take her from the realm of hair story, to narrative, to locality— a dimension that unites people's experiences of hair.

Beloved and *D'eaux douces* are gruesome in tone and equally disturbing. But they end differently. *Beloved* closes with the hope that the wrongdoings of slavery will not be repeated. Sethe's life, regardless of the trauma she causes and embodies, chooses life. By contrast, *D'eaux douces*, ends pessimistically. Frida kills her lover and herself because there is no other way for her to be free from colonialism, colonizing and a colonized mother. She rejects slavery, humiliation,

objectification that the slave trade imposed on the people of her island, and the madness that comes with her realization of this morbid truth. We are only left to imagine what her mother's reaction to Frida's suicide may be. She would be devastated and would probably accuse *la déveine* that found her daughter, because she wore *cheveux grainés* against Maman's will.

Fleur de Barbarie does not end with the protagonist's physical death. Yet, I am convinced that Joséphine is dead inside. Somehow, the agency that she gains from confronting her grandmother and choosing to perform Baker does not stick. She returns to the state of a little girl who does not know who she is and continues to wear Baker's persona as her shield from traumatic experiences. She will never find her voice and embrace her story as long as she keeps hiding under Baker's kiss curls. The ending of this novel and the character's stagnation are the most disappointing among the novels that I researched for this dissertation.

Americanah, in a way, is the novel with the happiest ending. Joséphine lacks what Ifemelu has: bravery and boldness. Contrary to the expectation of readers and atypical of an immigrant, Ifemelu is content to return home. It is unclear if she continues to write about hair or not when she returns home; yet, hair is her enabler, her initiation into a sense of home, which remains the same regardless of where she decides to live. Once she find her own "home," she carries it with her wherever she goes.

As hair narrative becomes a prominent part of women's writing, it use it to undo the harm, to ease the hurt, to reclaim the stereotypes, and to debunk the colonial myths, even if partially. On many levels, hair is a test of where women stand as writers. Their profound understanding of the functions of hair narrative and the topics it emphasizes and recounts, invite women writers to craft the narratives that invite a deeper exploration of their own and other people's lives.

Future Projects

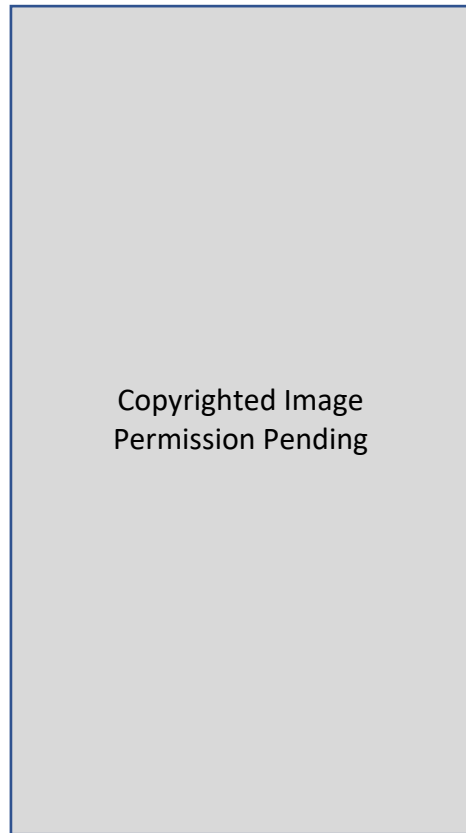


Figure 27. Lorna Simpson's *Counting* (1991)
© Lorna Simpson

Lorna Simpson is an African-American photographer and multimedia artist who “uses the figure to examine the ways in which gender and culture shape the interactions, relationships and experiences of our lives in contemporary America” (“Bio”). She “questions memory and representation [...] in her moving juxtaposition of text and image” (“Bio”). We can easily conclude that Simpson expresses in images what the women writers articulate through hair narrative.

In terms of future projects, I would like to develop a hair language to discuss visual images of headdresses and hairstyles and determine how hair affects our perception (something that I attempted to do in Chapter Four with the different book covers of *Americanah*). On larger scale, I would like explore hair narrative in other literary and cultural traditions (for example, Middle

Eastern, Asian, Slavic, and Hispanic) and focus on writers such as Leila Sebbar, Marjane Satrapi, Linda Lê, Jamaica Kincaid, and Julia de Burgos. I would expand my research to theatrical plays in order to include the performatory functions of hair narrative. The corpus would potentially include the following plays: Trey Anthony's *Da Kink in my Hair*, Eva Doumbia's *Moi et mon cheveu*, George C. Wolfe's *The Colored Museum*, and Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. I would like to extend my research to include men's literature, and explore the differences in usage and the functions of hair narrative.

For the last five years, I have collected Anglophone and Francophone children's picture books that concern hair. I would like to explore several books side by side and identify commonalities and differences in the upbringing of the children around the world by means of hair and identity. This project would allow me to combine my cultural and pedagogical interests. For example, ideally, a university is an environment in which we all benefit and grow from contact with one another. Learning flourishes when all participants in university life are treated with equal respect and dignity. As language educators strive to gear the classroom experience towards promoting world cultures, supporting community collaboration, nurturing creativity and curiosity, and celebrating open-mindedness and diversity, they often notice that commonly used textbooks often lack the representation of diversity, which is reflected through limited vocabulary and visuals. This becomes quite problematic when the students of first- and second-year French classes are asked to describe themselves and others. This is an issue where my research and pedagogical skills join to create a solution to this problem

In my next project I would illustrate how the topic of "Describing someone's appearance" in the French classroom is limited to certain ethnic groups, and analyze the vocabulary and the visuals associated with this topic in first- and second-year French textbooks (and their ancillaries)

to determine the extent to which cultural diversity is represented. The comparative analyses of the vocabulary and exercises linked to the topic of “Describing someone’s personality and appearance,” which usually goes hand in hand with the former topic, in textbooks such as *Mais Oui*, *Chez Nous*, *Contacts*, *En Avant*, *Portails*, and some others, would allow the presenter to see to what extent contemporary French textbooks provide vocabulary to help students of diverse backgrounds describe themselves. The main question of the study would be the following: when students are asked to describe themselves or other people, can they do this with ease just by using the course materials and understand that their appearance and ethnic diversity is a part of the textbook and therefore the curriculum? The answer to that important question would differ from textbook to textbook, but on the whole, the data presented would demonstrate that there is a way through which the French textbooks and curriculum can aim towards more diversity and inclusion. Additionally, I would like to determine whether the usage of *cheveux crépus* would make students participate more willingly in describing of the self and others.

On a personal note, this research has helped me understand race and racial prejudices, speak of race more comfortably, and teach my students how to be respectful of others while feeling secure with their identities. I feel that this ongoing research is my Americanization, my initiation into American life.

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