

African Hybrids: Exploring Afropolitan identity formation in Taiye Selasi's *Ghana must go* and Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*

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Abstract

This paper discusses the representation of Afropolitan identity formation in Taiye Selasi's debut novel *Ghana must go* (2013), and Chimamanda Adichie's novel *Americanah* (2013). The aim of the paper is to discuss Afropolitan identity formation as presented in the two novels using Selasi's (2005) essay *Who is an Afropolitan?* as a benchmark. Selasi blends the words 'Africa' and 'cosmopolitan' in her essay, which discusses several themes, namely: cultural hybridity, careers, identity formation, self-expression and an African bond as they relate to the Afropolitan. Although we have listed all the major themes above, this paper only focuses on the theme of Afropolitan identity formation. For example, in *Ghana must go* (2013) Kehinde, the twin boy struggles with his identity because of his Scottish heritage which gives him a skin complexion that is neither black nor white and he does not know what nationality to consider himself. In *Americanah* (2013), Dike also struggles with his identity because he expresses in a school essay that he does not know his identity and that his name is difficult to pronounce. The analysis concluded that not only do Afropolitans need to craft an identity on three levels according to Selasi (2005, para. 9) "national, racial, cultural – with subtle tensions in between", but the experience can be traumatic and painful, both emotionally and physically. This paper contributes to knowledge of the world as a global village, but more specifically the international integration of cultures as expressed in literature, not only in the African diaspora, but in Africa as well.

Introduction

Afropolitanism is a term originally coined by Nigerian-Ghanaian writer, dancer, photographer and documentary filmmaker, Taiye Selasi. She defines the term as "not being citizens but Africans of the world" (Selasi, 2005, para. 3). She was born in London, raised in Boston and studied at Yale and Oxford Universities. In Otas (2012), Selasi explains that she coined the term Afropolitanism because while growing up, when asked where she was from she was always lost for words, and even if she did respond, people were never satisfied with the answers she gave. She explains that being Afropolitan is not an exclusive identity because she wrote the essay based on her experience. The response that emanated from her essay led to the writing of her debut novel, *Ghana must go* (2013), in which she captures the identity and roots of the Afropolitan.

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Selasi (2005) states, “you will know us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics and, academic successes. Some of us are ethnic mixes, for example Ghanaian and Canadian, Nigerian and Swiss, others merely cultural mutts: American accent, European affect, African ethos” (para.3). However, scholars such as Gikandi (cited in Wawrzinek & Makokha, 2011, p. 79), defines Afropolitanism from a more cultural perspective where he asserts that “[t]o be afropolitan is to be connected to knowable African communities, nations, and traditions. It is to embrace and celebrate a state of cultural hybridity – to be of Africa and of other worlds at the same time.” While Mbembe (2007) asserts that Afropolitanism is an artistic and specific expressiveness of the world. It is being comfortable anywhere in the world whilst refusing to take an identity of a victim, which does not imply a lack of awareness of the injustice and violence inflicted against Africa and its people. Afropolitanism is rather a political and cultural stance in relation to the nation, race and difference in general.

Afropolitans in terms of cultural hybridity are ethnic mixes who dress differently because they mix the fashion of the two spaces they consider home and added to that they are also multilingual. According to Selasi (2005) apart from being cultural hybrids, Afropolitans are not afraid to express themselves generally or in the careers they choose; which are careers that allow them to express their creativity and identity. Although they also have a strong bond with Africa, as the name ‘Afropolitan’ implies, the focus of this paper is to examine the identity formation of the Afropolitan in *Ghana must go* (2013) and *Americanah* (2013) respectively. Bhabha (as cited in McLeod, 2000), states that the process of identity formation for the migrant “brings with it trauma and anxiety” (p. 220) as the migrant is forever torn between losing his/her home identity and never quite being able to fully assimilate to new cultural expectations.

In her essay, Selasi (2005, para. 9) explains that Afropolitans need to craft an identity on three levels: “national, racial, cultural – with subtle tensions in between”. Most of the characters go through a process of questioning their identity and eventually forming an identity by making peace with who they are. Selasi (2005) further explains that Afropolitans need to define whether they are black or white; African, British or American; which culture they relate to and what that culture means to them. Identity or a lack thereof, is significant in diasporic settings because it affects the individual’s sense of home but can also be a painful and traumatic experience.

Summary of *Ghana must go*

Ghana must go (2013) is a story of a Ghanaian heart surgeon named Kweku Sai and his Nigerian wife Folasadé Sai, (born Savage), who dreamt of becoming a lawyer. They migrated to the United States of America in search of better education and career opportunities. Folasadé has a Scottish heritage because of her Scottish grandmother. In the United States, the couple had four children in the following order; Olukayodé Sai the firstborn son, the twins Taiwo and Kehinde Sai and Folasadé (Sadie) Sai the last born. Kweku Sai is a renowned heart surgeon who works hard to give his family that which he never had. His wife is a housewife who also arranges and sells flowers in addition to taking care of the children. Unfortunately, Kweku Sai is unfairly dismissed from work because a wealthy patient dies in his operating room and the family of the patient refuses to accept his death. Kweku also refuses to accept this dismissal and pretends for eleven months that nothing has happened until his second-born son Kehinde comes to the hospital unannounced while his father is being thrown out by the security guards. This leads to Kweku abandoning his family and returning to Ghana to start afresh. Fola is left with the responsibility of raising the children by herself, which she does successfully because the first born, Olu, becomes a medical doctor. Kehinde becomes a renowned artist, while his twin sister becomes the

editor of a legal magazine. As the novel closes, the last born is still undecided as to her career path. Though the children are academically brilliant, they are not without emotional problems due to being raised by a single mother. Kweku remarries and settles in Ghana where he starts his own practice. Fola moves back to Ghana after all the children leave the house. Years later, Kweku dies of cardiac arrest and this brings the family together again in Ghana for his funeral.

Identity Formation in *Ghana must go*

This section examines the identity formation of four characters, Kweku and Fola's children, who fit the definition of Afropolitanism.

A. Taiwo

Taiwo, the twin girl, struggles with identity issues on three levels; she feels unloved by her mother, has issues with being black and also questions her sexual behaviour.

The twins "were extraordinarily good-looking" (p. 219) without a doubt because of the Scottish blood that ran through their veins. Taiwo inherited her mother's model like figure, which her younger sister desired. Despite her good looks, Taiwo had issues of identity because she felt that she was the unloved daughter. It seemed as if her mother loved Sadie more not just because she was the last born, but because of the birth complications when Sadie was born. This caused a divide between them which became worse when Fola sent the twins to Nigeria to live with her brother, Uncle Femi. This confirmed Taiwo's fears of not being wanted by her mother and led to their estrangement (Selasi, 2013).

The following citation is evidence of the identity issues Taiwo is dealing with. She admits to having grown dreadlocks because she wanted to 'fit in' with the white girls at her 'predominantly white college' (p. 138). She wants to fit in by being able to run in the rain, like the white girls. A black girl will naturally or with extensions not be able to run in the rain because the rain will mess up her hair:

Think about it. Barring Rastafarians, the real ones, religious ones, what kind of black girl grows locks? Black girls who go to predominantly white colleges, that's who. Dreadlocks are black white-girl hair. A Black Power solution to Bluest Eye problem: the desire to have long, swinging, ponytail hair. The braids take too long after a while, the extensions. But you still need a hairstyle for running in rain. Forget the secret benefit from affirmative action; this is the white woman's privilege. Wet hair. Not to give a shit about rain on your blowout. I'm serious." (Selasi, 2013, p. 138)

Interestingly, Selasi (2005) says the Afropolitans have to define themselves as black or white and this depends on who they grow up with, whether it is in the close proximity of other black people or in the close proximity of white people. This explains Taiwo's confusion with regards to race, because although she was raised by black parents, she went to a white school, which has left her feeling or wanting to be white rather than black. Taiwo refers to dreadlocks as 'black white-girl hair' which alludes to the fact that in Western culture, hair is only beautiful if they are long and can be tied in a ponytail which would make it seem like the hair of a white girl. She further adds that being able to run in the rain is a 'white woman's privilege' because she does not have to worry about her hair when it rains but on the contrary a black girl does not have that advantage which confirms Taiwo's dissatisfaction with her identity.

Taiwo also defends her sexual behaviour, when she ends up having an affair with the Dean of the law school who is a married man. Everybody, including her psychotherapist, thinks it is because she has an Electra complex where the girl is in competition with her mother for her father's affection. Others attribute her affair to the fact that she misses her

father, since her lover is an elderly man. Selasi (2013) points out that Taiwo's last sexual encounter was with Kehinde, her brother, when he was forced by their Uncle Femi to have sexual intercourse with her using his finger. Uncle Femi threatened that if he did not do it, his guards would rape her. Taiwo is in this respect a victim of sexual abuse. This paper posits that victims of sexual abuse most of the time end up in inappropriate sexual relationships and Taiwo's relationship to the Dean can be attributed to the sexual abuse she suffered in Nigeria. As such, in her identity formation process, Taiwo battles with the feeling that she was neglected by her mother. She also struggles with her sexuality and being black and the latter forces her to desire to conform to looking like the white girls. The Electra complex is usually considered to be resolved when the girl child starts to identify with the same sex parent or the mother. Thus, if it was the Electra complex, then Taiwo by the end of the story successfully resolves her issues when she has a confrontation with her mother that leads to their reconciliation.

B. Olukayodé

Olukayodé, the eldest son, grapples with their father abandoning them, feeling insecure towards his younger brother and finally his own identity as a man.

Olu has always been the model son who idolised his father. His father dreamt of starting his own practice called Sai and Sons and to help realise this dream he followed in his father's footsteps and became a surgeon (Selasi, 2013). So when his father leaves them he is left with a lot of questions.

The day he was supposed to graduate, Olu instead of attending graduation, travels to Ghana to see his father for the first time after he had abandoned them. Kweku reprimands Olu: "[y]ou can't do that ..." his father said, weakly now, faltering: "Give up when you're hurt. Please. You get that from me. That's what I do, what I've done. But you're different. You're different from me, son" (p. 253). However, Olu always felt that he was just like his father and was proud of it (Selasi, 2013, p. 120).

On a different level Olu feels insecure in his relationship with his wife, Ling, not because of something she did wrong but because he is jealous of his young brother's handsomeness. People always said that "one got the beauty, the other the brains" (p. 218), referring to Kehinde as the beautiful one and Olu, the one with the brains. He is jealous because he has seen Kehinde look at his wife and fears that if they have to compete for Ling's heart, he would lose her because Kehinde is so handsome (Selasi, 2013). This directly impacts Olu's self-image because all his life he has heard of how beautiful Kehinde is which implied that he is not beautiful and this creates insecurity in him because of his suspicions that Kehinde might be attracted to his wife.

Then Ling's father confronts Olu about being just another African man. How could he be sure that his daughter will not be abandoned like many other African men were in the habit of doing?

"You know, I never understood the dysfunctions of Africa. The greed of the leaders, disease, civil war. Still dying of malaria in the twenty-first century, still hacking and raping, cutting genitals off? Young children and nuns slitting throats with machetes, those girls in the Congo, this thing in Sudan? As a young man in China, I assumed it was ignorance. Intellectual incapacity, inferiority perhaps. Needless to say I was wrong, as I've noted. When I came here I saw I was wrong. Fair enough. But the backwardness persists even now, and why is that? When African men are so bright, as we've said. And the women, too, don't get me wrong, I'm not sexist. But why is that place still so backward? I ask. And you know what I think? No respect for the family. The fathers don't honor their children or wives. The Olu I knew, Oluwalekun Abayomi? Had two

bastard children plus three by the wife. A brain without equal but no moral backbone. That's why you have the child soldier, the rape. How can you value another man's daughter, or son, when you don't value your own?" (Selasi, 2013, pp. 119-120)

Dr Wei, Ling's father expresses his stereotypes towards African men and how he has reservations about his daughter's happiness. He plainly tells Olu that, as an African man, he is not different from any other he has encountered. He restates Olu's father's failures by reminding him how his father abandoned his wife and children and that Olu is exactly like his father. This creates fear in Olu because what if he turns out to be like other African men? In addition, Olu wishes that his family had photos or he knew their lineage because his parents never talked about their grandparents or showed them any photos. For Olu, family albums would resemble not just a family history but also an identity he can share with his wife and possibly his children in the future but his parents never kept any albums. This proves Selasi's (2005) point when she states that the "modern adolescent African is tasked to forge a sense of self from wildly disparate sources" (para. 8).

C. Kehinde

This section examines Kehinde, one of the twins, who deals with feelings of inferiority, failure, guilt and issues of identity. Firstly, Kehinde felt guilty for having failed their father. He was haunted by thoughts of whether his father would have stayed with the family if it was Olu instead of him who saw their father for the last time before he abandoned the family. His father's dream had been to start Sai and Sons, a medical practice but unlike Olu, Kehinde did not become a medical doctor and thus felt like he failed his father. Kehinde never liked mathematics and science at school and feels guilty because if he had done so he would have been accepted by his father and brother (Selasi, 2013). This negatively impacted Kehinde because he felt like he was not a real Sai since he never succeeded in mathematics and science like his brother, and thus his father's dream of starting Sai and Sons failed.

Secondly, Kehinde feels guilty because he was forced to have sexual intercourse with his sister, Taiwo, using his finger while they were in Nigeria. Uncle Femi demanded that he has sexual intercourse with his sister, using his finger or else his guards would rape her. He had to protect his sister by doing as he was told or let her be raped by other men. The thought of which he could not bear. This had haunted Kehinde and scarred his relationship with Taiwo because his body responded, and he became sexually aroused. His sister saw his arousal and assumed it was because he was enjoying it (Selasi, 2013). In addition, to Kehinde feeling that he was not a good enough son, this ordeal made him feel like he was not a good enough brother because he had failed to protect his sister.

Finally, Fola had never spoken about her parents and had left Kehinde wondering why he and Taiwo looked different from his other siblings, but Uncle Femi told them about their grandparents while they were in Nigeria and showed them a portrait of his grandmother. Seeing his grandmother awakened feelings of aversion for her because now he understood where they got their looks from. He felt this way because she was the direct cause of his identity crisis. He was neither black nor white, had no past or history he could relate to and thus felt he did not belong to a specific group of people.

In summary, Kehinde experiences what Selasi (2005) explains in her essay, that Afropolitans are "[b]rown-skinned without a bedrock sense of 'blackness,' on the one hand; and often teased by African family members for 'acting white' on the other – the baby-Afropolitan can get what I call 'lost in transnation'" (para. 8).

D. Sadie

Sadie, the last child of the Afropolitan children, battles with her looks, her weight and making a career choice. Firstly, Sadie was born prematurely and thus weighed very low as a baby. Her mother, out of worry, overfed Sadie who grew up disliking her body and her facial features. She wished that she had her sister's looks or could simply be Philae, her white friend. She expresses this when she says that they "are ethnically heterogeneous and culturally homogenous. She doesn't want to be Caucasian. She wants to be Philae." (Selasi, 2013, p. 146)

Secondly, Sadie did not like her body weight and wished she looked like her mother or sister, who both had figures like those of models. This desire leads to her developing an eating disorder called bulimia. The disorder causes her to overeat and then make herself vomit in order to avoid gaining weight. Whether her eating disorder is simply because of her weight is questionable since Sadie also feels that she was not planned and that she is very different from her siblings who are all gifted at something and very beautiful. Sadie however comes to an understanding of her identity towards the end of the story when she meets her father's sister. She is astonished by the resemblance they share, she feels as if looking at herself in a mirror and refers to it as the 'joke of genetics' (Selasi, 2013, p. 264). However, she still wants to be white and beautiful. Sadie's identity crisis is primarily caused by her weight and looks with which she is dissatisfied and wishes that she at least resembled her mother or sister but she resembles her father's sister, which adds to her dissatisfaction. Thus she wishes to be white because the idea of 'white is beautiful' is what is promoted in the society she lives.

Finally, Sadie compares herself to her siblings academically and feels pressured because she thinks that they are more gifted than she is. All she has is a photographic memory and she still does not know what career path she wants to follow. However, in the end she discovers her gift of dancing when she goes to Ghana for her father's funeral (Selasi, 2013) and this gives her a sense of identity and belonging.

Summary of *Americanah*

Americanah (2013) is a love story of two Nigerian teenagers Ifemelu and Obinze who aspire to further their education in America. However, after high school only Ifemelu gets a visa to go to America while Obinze is refused. Obinze ends up going to England with the help of his mother, hoping to go to America from there but his dreams don't work out. He struggles in England because he never gets citizenship or a proper job and is in the end deported to Nigeria. Ifemelu stops writing and calling Obinze after an ordeal of exchanging her body for money out of desperation with a man she did not know. Ifemelu becomes a successful writer who blogs about issues of race in America as well as about life in Lagos. After many years Ifemelu and Obinze meet up in Lagos where they rekindle their love and have to make serious decisions about what they want.

Identity formation in *Americanah*

This section discusses the theme of identity formation through examining two characters presented in the novel, Ifemelu and Dike.

A. Ifemelu

The first example of identity formation as it relates to the Afropolitan is when Ifemelu has to form an identity when she arrives in America because Americans did everything differently from what she was used to. Their speaking sounded as if they constantly used the exclamation mark, they had a lot of shower gels but no sponge in their showers and this in itself made her feel like a foreigner (Adichie, 2013). This is linked to the Afropolitans' cultural hybridity because although it is strange at first, the Afropolitan adopts the same way of life.

The second example of identity formation is when she felt isolated from her parents and friends and found it difficult to adapt to her new environment. In a different scene Ifemelu felt insulted when a student that assisted her on campus, in not so many words, insisted on her English being bad. She had spoken English all her life and had even led the debating society in secondary school. But in the “following weeks, as autumn’s coolness descended, she began to practise an American accent” (Adichie, 2013, p. 134). Ifemelu had been forewarned at the African Students Association that she would want to develop an American accent to avoid people asking her to repeat everything she said. The example above asserts what Selasi (2005) states; that as part of their identity formation, the Afropolitans end up with an American or a British accent.

As her identity formation progressed, Ifemelu stopped faking her American accent because a telemarketer told her that she sounded totally American and she thanked him after which she asked herself why it was an accomplishment to sound American. She knew that if she was in terror or jerked awake at night she would not remember how to use her American accent (Adichie, 2013). She realised that she was not being true to herself and did not mind repeating what she said so that people could understand her. Ifemelu, although a cultural hybrid, decides to remain true to her African identity while in America.

Attending university in America was an enriching experience for Ifemelu because American students were different from African students or to what she was used to in Nigeria, and she concluded that, “Americans were taught, from elementary school, to always say something in class, no matter what. They never said “I don’t know” (p. 134). This habit of Americans affected Ifemelu’s confidence in a positive way because she “spoke up in class, buoyed by the books she read, thrilled that she could disagree with professors and get, in return, not a scolding about being disrespectful but an encouraging nod” (Selasi, 2013, p. 136), all of which she would never have done in Nigeria.

The theme of hair in this novel is strongly linked to identity. The following are examples in the story where hair is linked to identity.

The story began with Ifemelu’s visit to a hairdresser that specialised in braiding African hair. The hairdresser questioned why she had not relaxed her hair to which Ifemelu told her “I like my hair the way God made it” (p. 12). The hairdresser’s question asserts that she had a problem with the texture of Ifemelu’s hair because she would rather braid relaxed hair rather than African hair because apart from the texture being difficult to manage, even the hairdresser had been socialised to believe that relaxed hair, for a black person, is better because it is the closest to being like a white person’s hair.

Others like Auntie Uju and Ginika had conformed to relaxing their hair and thus found it weird that Ifemelu refused to relax hers despite her hair being kinky and difficult to manage. Auntie Uju told her that natural hair was untidy. When Ifemelu had to go for a job interview in America, she was advised to relax her hair if she wanted to get the job and so she did. The hairdresser told her that it was “[j]ust a little burn. Wow, girl, you’ve got the white-girl swing!” (p. 203). This little burn was not so little after all, because it turned into sores and Wambui advised her to cut off her hair and let it grow afresh. The fact that Ifemelu’s success during the interview depended on the texture of her hair attest to the identity the Afropolitan has to craft for themselves, even if against their will, in order to either fit in or make a livelihood. ‘You’ve got the white girl swing’ directly alludes to Ifemelu’s natural hair not being good enough because her hair did not swing like a white girl’s. Thus the measuring standard for beautiful hair is that of a white person.

Ifemelu was relieved when her hair grew back because even though other Africans like Auntie Uju did not want to admit, there were people who admired natural African hair. Once, while she was in the grocery store with her boyfriend, an elderly white woman

said “[y]our hair is so beautiful, can I touch it?” (Adichie, 2013, p. 313) and Ifemelu agreed. After the ordeal of her hair falling out, Ifemelu decides to revert to her original identity of keeping her hair the way God had given it to her and grows back her natural hair. Her decision to grow back her natural hair was not just because of the negative ordeal she had had but also to show that she was satisfied with her hair, because in it was her identity.

At a Nigeropolitan meeting in Nigeria, Ifemelu was quite pleased with what she heard when she eavesdropped on a conversation between two ladies who were complaining about hairdressers in Nigeria who were struggling to comb natural hair “as though it were an alien eruption, as though their own hair was not the same way before it was defeated by chemicals” (Adichie, 2013, p. 407).

Selasi (2005) states that Afropolitan women ‘show off enormous afros’ and it is evident from the examples above how Ifemelu has fought to maintain her afro despite being advised to apply relaxer to her hair in order to soften it. Ifemelu ties her hair to her identity and feels that if God wanted her to have differently textured hair, he would have made her with differently textured hair, thus she will keep the hair she received from God. It is evident that the Afropolitan is challenged with regard to their identity, more specifically, the way they look physically because of the accepted standard of what beauty is supposed to be, they need to craft an identity but also defend it.

B. Dike

Another example of an individual that has to form an identity is Dike; Ifemelu’s cousin. He was born and raised in America but had issues with his identity. Although he was born in America, the ideal for many Africans, it did not exempt him from questioning who he was and where he was from because he was not accepted as an American. His mother, Aunt Uju always spoke Igbo when she was scolding him and thus he did not know whether to like or hate the language. Dike, much to his mother’s dismay, wrote in a school essay that he did not know his identity and that his name was difficult to pronounce. His mother however waved it away as American culture (Adichie, 2013).

Dike also felt like an outcast because he did not fit in at school. One day the computer lab at school was broken into and he was the first suspect. On another occasion, the teacher gave sunscreen to everybody except him because he did not need it, she said. This negatively affected Dike’s self-image because the teacher left him feeling like he was not worthy of receiving sunscreen because he was black which implied that his complexion was not accepted. This proves how the Afropolitan struggles to craft an identity and even in doing so, it is a difficult and emotional experience because until the Afropolitan accept searches for and accepts who they really are, the societies in which they live will craft identities for them by deciding what their complexion or hair texture should be.

Ifemelu reminded Aunt Uju of how when Dike had referred to himself as ‘black folk’ she had told him that he was not black. “You told him what he wasn’t but you didn’t tell him what he was” (p. 380). This is evidence of the identity formation process Selasi (2005) speaks of because as an Afropolitan, Dike is in the process of knowing whether he is black or not, African, American or both.

Conclusion

This paper discussed Afropolitan identity formation as presented in both novels. According to Selasi (2005), the Afropolitan has a daunting task of crafting an identity for themselves because unlike their “parents who can claim one country as home; [they] must define [their] relationship to the places [they] live”. By implication, the Afropolitan’s identity is directly linked to the different places they might consider as home. Although the

Afropolitan might consider different places as home, for example Africa as well as America, they are not always accepted in their adopted spaces and thus they struggle to fit in. There is a lot of movement across continents and thus the Afropolitan is almost left in limbo because they are not just African neither are they American, but a little bit of both. Selasi (2005) further states that some Afropolitans “choose which bits of a national identity (from passport to pronunciation)” they “internalize as central” (para. 8).

The quest for racial identity is evident in the three Afropolitan characters explored in *Ghana must go* (2013), namely Taiwo, Kehinde and Sadie. While the girls are both light in complexion and wish they were white, Kehinde feels that he would have preferred to be either black or just white and not “lost in transnation” as Selasi (2005, para. 8) explains. He would have preferred to be a Scotsman or African, but not a hybrid of the two.

In *Americanah* (2013) it is evident from Ifemelu and Dike's identity formation journeys that it was not easy. Ifemelu moves from wanting to sound like an American back to her Nigerian accent again because she discovers that she is not being true to herself. Dike, even though he has such a difficult time with crafting his identity, in the end finds a sense of belonging in both Africa and America.

In conclusion according to Selasi (2005) the Afropolitan must form an identity along three levels, which is national, racial and cultural and the evidence show that the identity formation that these Afropolitans go through in their personal lives is either indirectly or directly linked to nation, race and culture.

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