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To cite this article: Maya Hislop (2020): “I Love This Country, but Sometimes I Not Sure Where I Am”: Black Immigrant Women, Sexual Violence, and Afropessimistic Justice in *New York v. Strauss-Kahn* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*, Law & Literature, DOI: 10.1080/1535685X.2019.1688546

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1535685X.2019.1688546>



Published online: 04 Feb 2020.



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“I Love This Country, but Sometimes I Not Sure Where I Am”: Black Immigrant Women, Sexual Violence, and Afropessimistic Justice in *New York v. Strauss-Kahn* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*

Maya Hislop 

Abstract, I argue that when a high-profile legal case of sexual violence, *New York v. Strauss-Kahn*, and a novel centering on black immigrant women as the victims of a sexual assault, *Americanah*, are juxtaposed, we see that black immigrant women manufacture their own approaches towards justice. I call these approaches to justice “Afropessimistic justice.” Using Jared Sexton’s broad definition of Afropessimism as a black suspicion of hope, the women’s approaches can be read as Afropessimistic because they have the potential to both heal *and* harm themselves. The question becomes: is the self-harm worth the possibility of justice? Aside from a healing/harming justice frame, both cases feature black immigrant women for whom taking back control over their own narratives of assault is a key part of each justice project. And what’s especially striking about this project is that the survivors of assault are selective about the new modes of technology that they and their allies choose to enact these alternative forms of justice, to regain control over the narrative of their assaults. The blogosphere and televised news are the specific justice-making spaces under examination in this article. Black immigrant women use a combination of new and old technologies to craft, supplement legal justice and/or define justice for themselves. Black immigrant women in particular use these technologies to take back control over the narratives of their assaults. The internet and/or mediated spaces function and/or malfunction for immigrant women of color in particular ways. Most importantly, this article demonstrates how these digital/televised spaces provide paradoxical avenues of justice for the survivors. The novel and the legal case respectively illuminate the

Keywords, Sexual violence, black women, immigration, Strauss-Kahn, Nafissatou Diallo, *Americanah*, Adichie

advantages and disadvantages of two modalities: television and the black blog. For Nafissatou Diallo and the protagonist of *Americanah*, Ifemelu, television and the black blog are platforms that function as safeguards against the compounded trauma that the legal system can pose. At the same time that TV and the black blog provide hope of justice, they raise new forms of harm for black immigrant women who have survived sexual violence. These recent technologies therefore offer paradoxical brands of justice for black immigrant women in the 21st century.

INTRODUCTION

When examining the disparity between the 2017 #MeToo movement and hashtag begun by the white actress, Alyssa Milano, and Me Too, a movement begun by the black activist, Tarana Burke in 2006 through a critical race lens, the internet seems to have served as a relatively positive force. It was the internet that helped connect survivors to one another while also making apparent how the needs of some survivors, namely black women, were being neglected in the name of gender solidarity.¹ However, as Safiya Noble asserts in her recent book, *Algorithms of Oppression*, the internet is not always a force for good, “On the internet and in our everyday uses of technology, discrimination is also embedded in computer code and, increasingly, in artificial intelligence technologies that we are reliant on, by choice or not.”² The internet is therefore not always a secure resource for any member of a marginalized group. Despite this obstacle, I argue that there is evidence to suggest that black immigrant women, literary and real, are using digital platforms to build strategies for gaining and/or replacing legal justice for sexually violent crimes committed against them. Unfortunately, these platforms can end up betraying their users at some point. The juxtaposition of *New York v. Strauss-Kahn*,³ a high-profile case of the sexual violation of an immigrant woman of color and *Americanah*,⁴ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s novel about a young immigrant woman of color protagonist as the victim of a traumatic sexual experience demonstrates the potential as well as the pitfalls of digital platforms as avenues towards social justice. Rather than merely outline the negative and positive aspects of these platforms, I argue that these technologies help these women to advance a theory of Afropessimistic justice—the framework for a host of strategies and maneuvers—to achieve paradoxical justice for themselves: a brand of justice that both heals and harms victims of sexual violence.

Paradoxical justice is a term I use to refer to the kind of justice that both Diallo and Ifemelu create for themselves, one that functions as both a salve for and salt in the wound of their respective traumas. In her controversial, celebrated criticism of Beyoncé’s album, *Lemonade*, “Moving Beyond Pain,” bell hooks

makes a comment about violence reminiscent of second wave feminism (in which hooks would probably be loathe to be included), “Contrary to misguided notions of gender equality, women do not and will not seize power and create self-love and self-esteem through violent acts. Female violence is no more liberatory than male violence ... Violence does not create positive change.”⁵ Here, hooks declares, with great certainty, the markers of healing (the markers of “moving beyond pain”): self-love and self-esteem. But who is to say that this is what healing looks like for everyone? Can healing be violent and if so, how? Paradoxical justice is a term I use to refer to the strategies that emerge from an analysis of literature and real sexual assault cases at which black women are the center. To gain justice for the crimes committed against them, the black women at the center of these cases often enlist strategies, tools, and ideologies that cause them harm. This harm can be emotional, physical, and/or psychological. Sometimes, the harm that this causes is not necessarily desired: the women are surprised that self-harm turns out to be a consequence of their respective justice-seeking projects. At other times, the self-harm is intentional: the women know that they are causing themselves and/or their loved ones harm but decide that this harm is a necessary risk for the glorious reward of justice that they hope will follow. Without operating in these terms, Saidiyah V. Hartman explores a collection of these kinds of maneuvers in her seminal work *Scenes of Subjection*⁶ which looks specifically at the ways common law and slave law functioned to erase black subjectivity as well as the ways that black subjectivity found liberation—sometimes fatal as in the case of *Celia, the slave v. the State of Missouri*—despite this erasure.⁷ I extend Hartman’s work temporally, geographically, and theoretically: in this paper, paradoxical justice strategies are highlighted in new contexts: the contexts of the 21st century global novel, the high-profile criminal and civil legal case, and the specific strategies that black immigrant women (feel they) must employ to gain the form of justice that they desire.

Before turning to my analysis of Diallo and her ABC News interview, I will briefly summarize the salient points of *Americanah* and the civil case, *Diallo v. Strauss-Kahn*.⁸

A Brief Introduction to Nafissatou Diallo and Ifemelu

On May 14, 2011, Dominique Strauss-Kahn attacked Nafissatou Diallo, a 32-year-old Guinean maid who entered his room at the Sofitel Hotel to clean it. A Grand Jury quickly indicted Strauss-Kahn who was charged with so many counts of assault that he faced up to seventy-three years in prison. However, the New York Defense Attorney, Clarence A. Vance, officially dismissed the case in August, mere months later, upon determining that Diallo would not be a reliable witness.⁹ In five interviews with the DA, Diallo admitted to lying to the Grand

Jury about details of the Strauss-Kahn assault and an assault from her past. When considered within the context of the history of immigration in the United States, Diallo's lie about her assault can be interpreted as the survival strategy of a black, immigrant woman. Many immigrant women of color have interfaced with the U.S. immigration system and are therefore familiar with its structural inequalities. Aside from the blatant human rights violations committed by Immigration Customs and Enforcement (ICE) agents, the contemporary immigration system often functions—and has, largely, always functioned—in ways that are inherently nationalist, classist, sexist, and racist. For example, the processes by which someone with an engineering or computer science degree can gain permanent residency are far easier than the processes for someone seeking asylum from domestic violence.¹⁰ According to the Migration Policy Institute, more than 1 million people are granted non-immigrant work or education visas per year while only 30,000 refugees are resettled per year since Donald Trump took office.¹¹ Diallo's lies corroborate these numbers, proving that, upon encountering the U.S. immigration system, the most vulnerable populations quickly learn that it is a system that can and must be manipulated.

Diallo manipulated the immigration system so that she may escape intimate violence in her home country of Guinea. However, the system does not view intimate violence as a strong enough reason to seek refuge. U.S. Immigration deems "political" violence a worthy reason to flee one's own country. So, to gain entry into the United States, Diallo lies about the kind of violence she endured. This is the lie most central to Vance's "Motion to Dismiss." Diallo states on her asylum application, in her interviews with the DA, and in her grand jury testimony at Strauss-Kahn's indictment that she was gang raped by a group of soldiers in Guinea, an act of violence, she claimed, that was precipitated by her then husband's involvement with political dissidents. In one interview with Vance's office, Diallo told the DA that she put the story of this rape on her application for asylum which was filed at least seven years prior to the assault. However, in a subsequent interview, Diallo claimed that this story was untrue. The DA therefore decided that the lie about this previous rape created enough reasonable doubt in the victim (as the only other witness to Strauss-Kahn's crime) to weaken the criminal case completely. And, yet again, in additional interviews, Diallo stated that she was raped, but that she had changed one small detail for her asylum application. She was not raped by soldiers. She later stated that she was raped by a group of men when closing the restaurant where she worked in Conakry, Guinea. It makes sense that Diallo shifted her story from being about a group of civilian men to being a story about a group of soldiers for the asylum application. The latter allowed her to qualify for asylum whereas the former did not. One of the categories that qualifies a candidate for asylum is if you identify as a victim of "political violence." Diallo, allegedly,

argued that she needed to repatriate to another country because she feared that these soldiers would return and, this time, target her young daughter.¹² Due to the asylum system's prioritization of political violence over "non-political" violence, Diallo felt compelled to lie. One of the spaces in which Diallo tells the true story of being raped by a group of civilian men is in her ABC News interview.

The ABC News interview is at the center of this analysis because it is evidence of one kind of technology that immigrant women of color use to either supplement and/or replace legal justice. The novel, *Americanah*, by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explores another kind of technology: the black blog.¹³ The Nigerian-living-in-America protagonist of *Americanah*, Ifemelu, begins a blog long after she has a traumatic sexual experience as an indirect result of her immigrant status. I argue that like Diallo's use of the televised interview, the blog is a direct response to the emotional assault. Unlike Diallo, Ifemelu does not use her blog as a strategy for garnering public support around her case for legal justice. Due to the fact that Ifemelu's experience is not within the legal definition of "assault," she does not report the act to anyone. Instead of reporting the assault, I argue that Ifemelu uses her blog to control time, create community, and express her feelings around the issues of race and immigration. Ifemelu's blog is titled *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*. She uses *Raceteenth* to express ideas about race and identity in the United States from the perspective of someone born elsewhere. Though Ifemelu never discusses her assault in the blog, it is less through the content and more so through the production process that Ifemelu is able to enact a form of dual healing/harm. Adichie refuses to let this assertion of control as a form of freedom go unquestioned as is made clear when Ifemelu shuts the blog down not long before permanently relocating to Lagos, Nigeria in the last quarter of the novel. The blog offers a paradoxical form of justice and thusly enters the realm of Afropessimistic justice.

Nafissatou Diallo and the Pros and Cons of Television

Diallo's interview with Robin Roberts of Good Morning America airs on ABC on July 25, 2011. Prior to her interview with Roberts, Diallo, as permitted by rape shield laws, maintained her anonymity.¹⁴ Though her name was known to journalists, officials involved with the case, and anyone following the case in local newspapers, Diallo's face was not widely known and she made no public statements.¹⁵ In fact, the only reason that Diallo feels compelled to, as she says in the interview, "show herself" is to combat the lies that are being spread about her in the media. The number one news outlet that was spreading lies about Diallo was the *New York Post*. And these were not just any lies. The *Post* made multiple

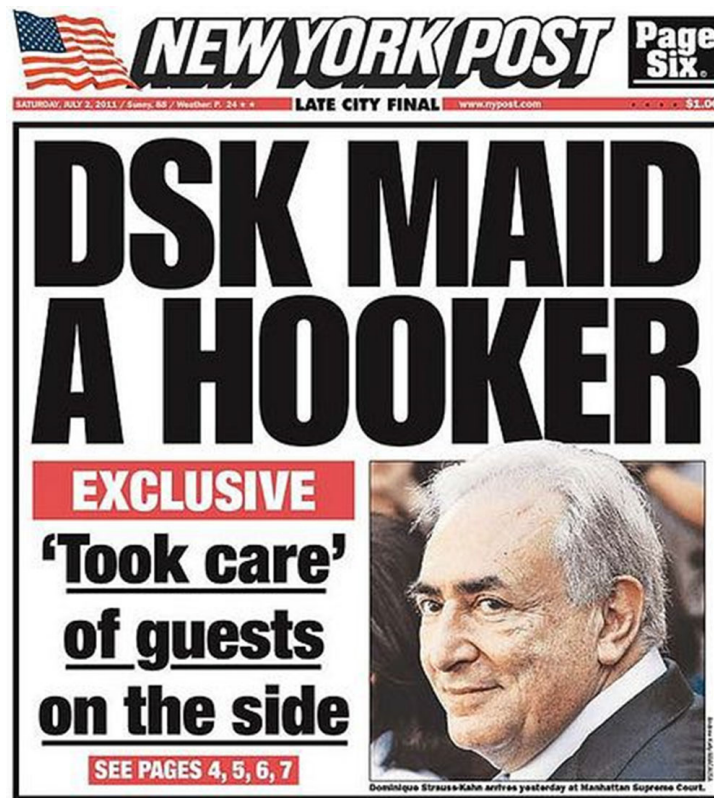


Figure 1.

baseless claims that Diallo was a prostitute (Figure 1).¹⁶ The first issue of the newspaper to claim that Diallo regularly received money from hotel guests for sexual favors was the July 2, 2011 issue which followed immediately after a letter was leaked to the press from the New York DA to Strauss-Kahn's lawyers expressing their doubt in their case.

The DA's letter and the subsequent "Motion to Dismiss" filed on August 22, 2011 explain that this doubt was not general, but was, in fact, a very specific doubt that they had in Diallo's reliability as a witness. Once the prosecution admitted that they found fault with Diallo, the *Post* responded with an extreme racist, sexist accusation. By her account, the sex worker accusation is what propelled Diallo into television, into a visual and sonic space where she could speak for herself and tell her side of the story to a national audience. So what was Diallo's side of the story? And how did the form of the televised news interview offer the paradoxical form of justice, a form of justice both healing and harmful?

Diallo and her defense attorney, the late and former District Attorney for Kings County, NY, Kenneth P. Thompson, chose the televised news interview. Why? There are two very important elements of television that work both for and against Diallo: visual and sonic. The visual and sonic aspects of Diallo's ABC News interview act as both openings through and boundaries against which immigrant women of color who experience sexual violence can tell their stories.



Figure 2.

Early on in the interview, Roberts asks Diallo why she has decided to come forward now and Diallo responds, “I never want to be in public. Now, I have to be in public. I have to show myself. I have to tell the truth ... I hear people call me many names.”¹⁷ On the surface, Diallo is lamenting the fact that she must expose herself to the public and explaining that she is only doing so as a means of protecting herself from the “many names” that “people” are calling her. In this brief moment, however, Diallo makes a subtextual connection between the visual and misogynoirist¹⁸ myths around black female sexuality. When Diallo says “I have to show myself,” she, consciously or not, implies that her visage (how she is dressed, what kind of makeup she is wearing, the styling of her hair) functions as a part of the evidence, part of the proof she can use to demonstrate that her status as an innocent victim is more real than the misogynoirist lie that she is a hooker and therefore complicit in her own assault (Figure 2).¹⁹

Diallo wears a peach-colored, half-sleeve length cardigan over a white, scoop neck peasant top. Her hair is straightened and pressed into a neat, shoulder-length bob, and she wears little to no makeup. Not pictured here are the long, black wide-legged slacks that Diallo wears with sensible shoes. Diallo uses dress, hair styling, and makeup to supplement her counter narrative as an innocent victim of assault rather than a rumored prostitute. It is worth noting that it is difficult to ascertain with great certainty whether or not Diallo's dress and hair styling were of her choosing. It seems likely that she chose her hair style because there are courtroom sketches that depict Diallo with the same relaxed bob that we see her wear in her interview (Figure 2). But what about her dress? Perhaps the ABC News production team chose her wardrobe. It is also possible that her defense team instructed her on what to wear. We may not know all of the answers behind Diallo's decisions. But, the details of her dress tell us that the format of the televised news interview allows for visuals to be one of the aspects that the interviewee and/or her allies manipulate to their advantage.

Visuals are an especially useful weapon for immigrant women of color as they can use dress, hair styling, and makeup as the building blocks of a counter narrative. Diallo builds a narrative that runs counter to the negatively stereotypical narratives that her body (its race, gender, and national origin) communicates for her. Many black feminist scholars have alluded to the myriad ways that black women continue to endure the legacy of enslavement. bell hooks makes an especially relevant assertion in *Ain't I a Woman* about the role of television in perpetuating the legacy of enslavement for black women, "One has only to look at American television twenty-four hours a day for an entire week to learn the way in which black women are perceived in American society—the predominant image is that of the "fallen" woman, the whore, the slut, the prostitute."²⁰ Of course a visual medium would be the culprit in perpetuating stereotypes about black women as always already sexually accessible, but Diallo reveals the usefulness of television as a means of presenting counternarratives to those misogynoirist labels. The *Post* narrative projects misogynoirist stereotypes onto Diallo: the sexualities of black women have been criminalized in one way or another for centuries, but the label of "prostitute" has proven especially salient in the contexts of post-Reconstruction and twentieth century America. To combat myths around their hypersexuality and prove their worthiness as citizens, black free women used conservative dress and hair styling as early as the 1880s if not earlier. In her book *Righteous Discontent*, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham terms this realm of accommodationist strategizing "the politics of respectability" in specific reference to black church women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²¹ This visual strategizing, however, is a mobile theoretical frame for understanding Diallo's ABC News interview because of how her dress attempts to communicate that she is aligned with white, middle class values: her body is modestly covered,

she wears muted colors, the clothing is simple and does not appear to be overly expensive. Where Higginbotham's frame begins to stretch is when we consider that Diallo is not only using these strategies to combat the myths that her black and femme body speak, but also the myths that her identity as an immigrant speak with and/or without her knowledge. And Diallo is not only an immigrant, but she is also a refugee which means that she is in a particular class of immigrants. There are ways that class and dress intersect that make the visual element of television a disadvantageous medium for a survivor of sexual violence who is attempting to get justice for that assault.

The edited version of Diallo's interview with ABC News was published on YouTube on July 25, 2011. The YouTube comment space is overwhelmingly popular as storage for some of the worst hate speech on the internet, but, in this case, the comments offer additional evidence of the ways that Diallo's image is being received/perceived. Any negative responses that focused on how Diallo look or criticize her appearance are strong indications that one of the negative aspects of the television interview is that it exposes the survivor's image to ridicule. Diallo's intention was to set the record straight about a racist and sexist rumor that she is a hooker. However, Diallo ran the risk of exposing herself to even more damaging rumors as the YouTube comments under her aired interview with Robin Roberts evince. Commenters repeat all kinds of conspiracy theories about Diallo. The majority of those commenting believe that Diallo is falsely accusing Strauss-Kahn to get money. Very few of them comment on Diallo's appearance which is very unusual for a YouTube comment, especially a comment on a video featuring a woman which almost always contains a shockingly crude slew of insults on that woman's appearance.²² What's more surprising is that there is little to no overt racism in the comments though there is a great deal of misogyny. The few comments on Diallo's appearance did not translate into the demise of her case and therefore, based on this small sampling of audience reactions, it does not seem that the visual is an enormous limitation of television for the immigrant woman of color seeking justice for her sexual violation. In fact, what these comments may highlight is that black women are already exposed and hypervisible even before they "show themselves" as Diallo does. Additionally, perhaps Diallo's dress, hair styling, and make-up are successful in that they do not perpetuate the rumor that Diallo is a hooker. However, for some reason, these same cues are unsuccessful at convincing the viewer that Diallo is not a liar.

The tool of audio in the televised news interview is just as if not more powerful than the visual for immigrant women of color. The average viewer likely sees Diallo as a black woman or a woman of ambiguous racial/ethnic origins. However, sonically, Diallo comes across as an immigrant woman of color because she speaks with accented English.²³ Diallo's first language is Fulani, a dialect spoken across twenty African countries, including her original home of Guinea.

But she opts to speak in English rather than use a translator.²⁴ Diallo's accented English works both for and against her efforts to write a counter narrative, to portray herself as a sympathetic victim of sexual violence rather than the lying prostitute from the *Post*. There is no reality to these narratives. No one actually sounds and/or looks like a liar any more than one actually sounds and/or looks like an innocent. However, visuals and sonics function together in the televised news interview format to paint interviewees with the broadest of brushes. Her accent slots her into the stock categories which television can easily communicate: immigrant, maid, victim, etc. The segment that ABC News aired on Diallo and her case is less than four minutes long, a limited amount of time to transmit the most basic facts of her case while telling the story from a particular perspective. Even in this limited time, the sonics of Diallo's voice speak vibrantly to her perspective as an immigrant woman of color. In the unedited interview, Diallo is hyper conscious of her accent from the very outset when she responds to Roberts asking her why she chose to come forward now, "I decide to come—Sorry, my English you know is difficult for me. I don't speak that much, but I'm gonna try."²⁵ Diallo's apology to Roberts (and, presumably, the viewer) about her perceived lack of facility with the English language is a moment in which she is both agent and subject of the mainstream narrative about her and the self-made counter narrative by and about her. The sonics of her voice in this moment begin quite soft and shy while ending with a tone of effort and determination when she says, "I'm gonna try." Throughout the interview, Diallo slides along this spectrum in terms of vocal and tonal registers. The softness and demureness act as affirmations of her counter narrative because she comes across as an innocent victim of an act of sexual violence perpetrated by a man much more powerful and more wealthy than she. When she speaks at a higher, softer pitch, she sounds somewhat frightened, shy, and sad. However, the sonics of "victim" can also betray Diallo's counter narrative, sliding back into affirming the *Post*'s narrative of Diallo as a liar and a criminal which raises serious questions around citizenship and the American myth of the "good immigrant."

In the book *Impossible Subjects*²⁶ and another critical text, *Immigrant Acts*,²⁷ Mae M. Ngai and Lisa Lowe respectively touch on this need that immigrants have to mold themselves—according a long history of fluctuating U.S. immigration policies—into subjects that look like, sound like, and/or behave like those deserving of (a legal pathway to) citizenship. In short, Ngai and Lowe establish and critique the trope of the "good immigrant." Ngai and Lowe are also adamant to point out that this image of deservingness has always been racialized. Supreme court cases such as *Ozawa v. United States* (1922) and *United States v. Thind* (1923) are good examples of how the "good immigrant" as white immigrant trope came to life. Due to a law that only those of white or Aryan descent could be citizens, two Asian men, a Japanese man and an Indian Sikh man respectively, attempted to petition

the government for citizenship on the grounds that they were white. In these cases whiteness became coterminous with a person who could be easily assimilated into the dominant culture. Though both Thind and Ozawa make the case for their whiteness on ancestral and/or phenotypical grounds, they also raise their character traits and/or patriotism as the basis for their citizenship: we are “good” immigrants and therefore citizens. Thind uses his time served in the U.S. army during World War I and Ozawa leans heavily on his “industriousness” as qualifying him as a man who will fit seamlessly into the American citizenry.²⁸

Despite today's lack of officially racist immigration policies that cordon American citizenry off from the racialized other, like Ozawa and Thind, Diallo still leans on certain aspects of her character to portray herself as “good”: in the interview she emphasizes that she is a hard worker, a mother, someone who loves her job, who pays her taxes, and who is not deserving of ill treatment.²⁹ The self-narrative that Diallo builds around “hard worker,” however, is also wrapped up in a self-narrative as “uneducated.” The sonics of her voice put her into the camps of both “good” and “bad” immigrant simultaneously. Early on in the interview, Diallo declares, “I’m so glad to have this job especially without education...”³⁰ This statement shows that Diallo is a “good” immigrant, one who is grateful for the gift of employment that the United States has bestowed upon her. But her lack of education can easily cause her to slip into the territory of “bad” immigrant as a statement that she makes about reporting the assault to her supervisor later on in the interview implies, “I don’t know what to do, I feel so—I say, “Jessica—” but I was so afraid to lose my job. I don’t know the law, I don’t know if someone do this to you, what do you have to do? I don’t know nothing about that in that job I don’t know because I never had that happen there.”³¹ This is a crucial moment in the interview. By declaring the things that she does not know, Diallo fits into both the false dichotomy of “good” and “bad.” Her lack of knowledge makes her a “good” immigrant figure, one who is not granted as much time and access to knowledge and/or education but perseveres despite these obstacles. However, Diallo’s insisting and repetition of the phrase “I don’t know” also puts her at risk of being perceived as a “bad” immigrant, one who is not taking advantage of all of the resources and opportunities that the United States presumably provides (such as education) and is therefore not suitable to be a part of the country. The phrase, “I don’t know the law” puts Diallo in an especially risky position to be victim blamed. She could be perceived as someone whose lack of knowledge about the country in which she lives is her own fault, someone whose assault is her own fault.

The sonics and content of Diallo’s speech both emphasize and contradict this reading of her statement because she says “I don’t know the law” with a great deal of force, pausing a beat before moving on to explain what else she does not know. This forcefulness qualifies her as a part of a strong American woman archetype, one who will not passively accept her victimization but will stand up

in defiance of it. However, her blackness and her gender can easily convert strength into anger, determination into bitchy-ness. As Andrew Taslitz writes about black women in the courtroom, they are caught in a “catch-22”: if they are too outspoken and strong-willed, the jury will read them as angry black women, but if they are too meek and passive the jury will read them as uneducated failures, deserving of their misfortunes.³² There is no way for Diallo to use her voice to satisfy all of the various spoken and unspoken requirements around her identity and therefore the limits of the televised news interview are also the same as the openings and/or liberative spaces that immigrant women of color create for themselves in the medium. She is attempting to use the platform as a mode through which to express her story of the crime committed against her. The visual and sonic aspects are extremely important for Diallo and other immigrant women of color in the ways that they allow those women to have more tools at their disposal with which to combat misogynoirist myths about them.

Those same advantageous elements of the television format can backfire, placing immigrant women of color back into the very “bad immigrant” archetype that they are trying to avoid. Diallo’s weaponization of the good and bad immigrant types throughout her interview are vital pieces of her Afropessimistic justice strategy. No matter what she does, Diallo is doomed as the aspects of her personality, visage, and voice can be manufactured to suit her opponent’s narrative. Aware of this, Diallo makes decisions that could hurt her case, such as going on television and risking being perceived as a money-hungry liar, such as allowing the public to see and hear her story about a sexual violation that occurred in her home country, such as admitting to lying on her application for asylum. Diallo engages with Afropessimistic justice as she accepts the harm that could result from her self-exposure. For her, the potential reward—justice for her assault: the imprisonment of her assailant and monetary compensation for the damages he perpetrated upon her mind, body, life, and professional—is worth the risk of being seen as a hooker, a liar, and a greedy bitch. After all, her blackness, femme-presentation, and immigrant status already set those stereotypes into the minds of a public brainwashed by white supremacy.

The author of *Americanah*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, elucidates afropessimistic justice because of how distinct her protagonist’s attraction to/rejection of the law is from Nafisaatou Diallo’s approach. In *Americanah*, the protagonist Ifemelu uses an entirely different platform than Diallo from which to indirectly express her thoughts and feelings around a traumatic sexual experience. Though Ifemelu is not assaulted according to the legal definitions of “sexual assault,” the tennis coach inflicts a trauma upon her and her subsequent creation of a blog is an attempt to, indirectly, work through that trauma, to alleviate the psychic wounds that surround the trauma. Throughout this section, I will refer to the act

that the tennis coach commits as a “sexual trauma.” What then are the advantages and disadvantages of the black blog space as Adichie, lays them out?

Ifemelu, the Black Blog, and Control

Soon after her 1993 arrival from Nigeria to the United States to attend college, Ifemelu falls on very hard financial times.³³ The sexual trauma that occurs as a result of this financial difficulty makes it impossible to separate Ifemelu's financial difficulty from her identity as a black female immigrant. The international student visa, also known as the F-1 visa, does not allow its recipients to work off campus. International students can work on campus, but, as Ifemelu's Aunt Uju says, “... work-study is rubbish, it pays nothing, and you have to be able to cover your rent and the balance of your tuition.”³⁴ Ifemelu defers to her aunt and tries endlessly to find a off-campus employment. Despite having access to the informal knowledge networks and resources of Aunt Uju—whose friend allows Ifemelu to use her social security card—and her high school friend, Ginika, who moved to the U.S. as a teenager, Ifemelu is unable to find work for months. No matter how many times she applies to be a waitress, a babysitter or an at-home caregiver, none of them lead to employment through which she can support herself. Ifemelu's unemployment is especially frustrating because she has no idea why she is not finding work, “...at each interview, she smiled warmly and shook hands firmly, all the things that were suggested in a book she had read about interviewing for American jobs. Yet there was no job. Was it her foreign accent? Her lack of experience? But her African friends all had jobs, and college students got jobs all the time with no experience.”³⁵ The two questions that Ifemelu asks herself demonstrate her sheer confusion at her total lack of job prospects. What is so crushing for Ifemelu to accept is that there is no reason for her not to have a job, at least no reason that she can imagine. Importantly, Ifemelu does not put her concerns in structural and/or systemic terms—and yet to do so would not be a stretch. Most of her experiences of unemployment could be markedly improved if she were a citizen. As a citizen, Ifemelu would have more control over her options. She applies to jobs like waitressing, home aid work, and babysitting precisely because these jobs pay in cash, making it more difficult for businesses who hire undocumented workers to be tracked and/or punished. She could also be deported for breaking the terms of her visa. There is a severe domino effect between Ifemelu's emotional state, her unemployment, and her citizenship status. As a nonimmigrant, she has little to no control over her ability to get a job which leaves her feeling anxious and depressed. Ifemelu's financial and visa-related circumstances set the stage for the sexual trauma that she experiences with the tennis coach in the middle of the novel.

The first time that Ifemelu meets the tennis coach is when she travels to Ardmore, Pennsylvania in response to an ad in a local Pennsylvania newspaper,

*“Female personal assistant for busy sports coach in Ardmore, communication and interpersonal skills required.”*³⁶ During her meeting with him, the coach never explains the work that Ifemelu would do aside from requiring someone to “help him relax.” But the way that the ad emphasizes that the assistant be female is a strong indication that the coach expects some kind of sexual contact. This is never stated explicitly in their meeting. After that first meeting, she decides that he is “not a kind man” and leaves. But she continues to experience the emotional fallout of joblessness, reaching her absolute limit when her roommate’s dog eats her bacon. Ifemelu would typically find the dog’s action funny were it not for her great desperation to hold onto every last shred of food that she buys.³⁷ It is also yet another moment over which Ifemelu has no control thusly motivating her to call the tennis coach again. Though she is still uncertain about what kind of work the tennis coach wants her to perform, she prepares for the possibility that it is sexual, “Whatever happened, she would approach it looking her best, she would make it clear to him that there were boundaries she would not cross. She would say, from the beginning, “If you expect sex, then I can’t help you.” Or perhaps she would say it more delicately, more suggestively. “I’m not comfortable going too far.” She might be imagining too much; he might just want a massage.”³⁸ Here, Ifemelu is attempting to assert control over a situation in which she has none, even going so far as to script her own performance in her mind. Ifemelu asserts control over her own language, what she will say and the demands that she will make. But the actual trauma does not occur precisely as Ifemelu imagines and she certainly cannot prepare herself for the absolute loss of control, bodily control in particular, that transpires.³⁹

I will elaborate upon the legal ambiguity of what the tennis coach does to Ifemelu, but before I do so I will explain the literal ambiguity of the scene in which the trauma occurs. I assert that Adichie wants to make it extremely difficult for the reader to determine the consensual nature of this pivotal scene between Ifemelu and the tennis coach. Legality aside, it is most certainly an emotionally and physically traumatic experience for Ifemelu. The trauma becomes especially clear when considering Pamela Haag’s distinction between desire and consent. The blurred lines between desire and consent in this scene is articulated in two instances: during the encounter and afterwards. When Ifemelu is in the bathroom cleaning up afterwards, she dissociates from her body, “her fingers felt sticky; they no longer belonged to her.”⁴⁰ During the encounter itself, Adichie gives the reader access to Ifemelu’s thoughts which raises the important distinction between consent and desire once again, “She took off her shoes and climbed into his bed. She did not want to be here, did not want his active finger between her legs, did not want his sigh-moans in her ear, and yet she felt her body rousing to a sickening wetness. Afterwards, she lay still, coiled and deadened. He had not forced her. She had come here on her own.”⁴¹ Ifemelu’s internal

monologue repeatedly declares what “she did not want” to happen as it is happening; though she did not desire the tennis coach to touch her body in the ways that she describes, she is nevertheless, technically, consenting to that touch. Aside from the content, Adichie uses the formal divide between the narration of our protagonist’s thoughts and her actions to reflect this divide between her mind and body. She loses a connection to her body as it becomes the domain of a paradox: at the same time that she does not desire the tennis coach, her body responds to his touch. In addition to this mental and physical disparity and the utter loss of control, what makes the traumatic experience so especially devastating is that Ifemelu does not have language to capture what happens to her. Ifemelu’s silence is nearly textbook, aligning with what many scholars of trauma studies and affect have theorized as the unspeakable nature of trauma; going further, Sabine Sielke explains in her book *Reading Rape* why rape is especially unrepresentable, “...rape cannot be visualized because the experience is, physically as well as psychologically, inner. In this sense, rape is by definition imagined; it can exist only as experience and as memory...”⁴² Sielke’s assertion about the imagined quality of sexual violence and legal studies come together for Ifemelu as she implies that the absence of clear coercion compounded by the trauma itself make it very difficult for her to “report” it to anyone, “She wishes she had told Ginika about the tennis coach, taken the train to Ginika’s apartment on that day, but now it was too late, her self-loathing had hardened inside her. She would never be able to form the sentences to tell her story.”⁴³ There are a myriad reasons why Ifemelu feels that what happened to her is unspeakable, but one of the most pressing is that the encounter lies simultaneously outside the realm of her expectations of herself and outside the realm of law.

Though legal statutes around rape and sexual assault are, at best, fragile attempts at placing stark boundaries around human interactions which are often extremely complex and ambiguous, it is helpful to look at the law in Ifemelu’s case to clearly outline the legal ambiguity of her trauma. According to Pennsylvania state law (as well as most state and federal laws), Ifemelu is not assaulted. Pennsylvania specifically defines sexual assault as an act of “forcible compulsion” which is defined as, ““compulsion by use of physical, intellectual, moral, emotional or psychological force, either express or implied. The term includes but is not limited to compulsion resulting in another person’s death, whether the death occurred before, during or after sexual intercourse.”⁴⁴ The tennis coach does not use any force, as the narrator corroborates, “He had not forced her.”⁴⁵ But, like most rape laws, this legal statute uses a narrow definition of force, one that is limited to the kinds of force that an individual exerts over another individual. The tennis coach does not use any kind of force to make Ifemelu perform a sexual act because the encounter is transactional. Ifemelu understands that she will receive money once she has performed enough “human

contact” to help him “relax.” Of course, to receive money for an act does not in and of itself put the performance of sex work outside the bounds of assault. This is not just a problem that the law has with thinking about sex work and consent, it is a problem that society has as renowned radical feminist Andrea Dworkin articulates, “A whore by nature cannot be forced to whore—only revealed through circumstance to be the whore she is. The point is her nature, which is a whore’s nature.”⁴⁶ Misogyny within the law prevents Ifemelu from accessing clear language to describe what has happened to her. Additionally, the limits of criminal law make it difficult to think about terms like “force” “coercion” and “consent” within a structural and/or systemic frame. Aside from the exchange of money and the absence of “force,” there are also other details that exclude Ifemelu’s encounter with the tennis coach from the consideration of legal action. Ifemelu meets with the tennis coach once and then returns a second time which means that she had time to think about his proposal despite maintaining uncertainty of its sexual nature when she, perhaps naively or optimistically thinks, “he might just want a massage.” In addition to the premeditation of her return to his office, Ifemelu has several opportunities to leave the room once she is there. But she stays and even considers leaving multiple times, “She should leave now ... She should leave.”⁴⁷ Because she considers leaving and actively “chooses” not to, there is no evidence—none that would stand up to a grand jury anyway—that Ifemelu does not consent to her encounter with the tennis coach.

You can only see assault as absolutely devoid of legal issues if you examine it in isolation from the context, but Adichie makes it difficult for readers to have such disregard for the factors surrounding Ifemelu’s presence in the tennis coach’s office. Is Ifemelu forced to be there? Yes. In a convoluted way, Ifemelu is forced to be there. The forces of impoverishment and desperation which are inflicted upon her by unfair employment restrictions for people on temporary visas coerce Ifemelu to go to the tennis coach’s office for a second time. In addition to losing control over her body, the sexual encounter with the tennis coach brings our attention to the kinds of sexual acts that lie outside of the legal definition of “assault.” Those encounters that lie within the parameters of the legal system are often defined by individual coercion rather than by systemic coercion. For this reason, many legal studies scholars argue for revised definitions of sexual assault. Michael Buchhandler-Raphael and Hannah Brenner, for example, argue that consent-based definitions of rape and sexual assault are inadequate and that power-based definitions would be more holistic, placing less burden on the victims to prove the lack of consent.⁴⁸ In Ifemelu’s case, though consent is difficult to trace given the larger external forces putting Ifemelu in that room, power is much more obvious. Ifemelu notes the imbalance of power when she gives up on the idea of leaving, “There was, in his expression and tone, a complete assuredness; she felt defeated. How sordid it all was, that she was here

with a stranger who already knew she would stay. He knew she would stay because she had come. She was already here, already tainted.”⁴⁹ The “complete assuredness” of the tennis coach’s tone demonstrates that he knows he has total control over the situation. Or, at the very least, Ifemelu perceives him as having control and perceives herself as having none. Though the narrator does not put things in these exact terms, according to the power dynamics that have been established by the exchange of money, by their races, their genders, their citizenship statuses, and their social statuses, the tennis coach does have all of the control. He has money, something that she needs. To get the thing that she needs, Ifemelu must do something that she does not desire to do but which she seems prepared to consent to doing. It is this issue of control as well as her inability to articulate her feelings around the encounter which makes the encounter so especially traumatizing.

Pace and control are interlinked for Ifemelu even before the scene of the trauma. As an unemployed, black, Nigerian woman living on a student visa, she constantly describes the pace of her life as out of her control (she cannot pay the rent on time, she cannot walk around campus with the confidence of her peers, she cannot determine her life in the direction that she wants, etc.) and therefore slow. What happens in the encounter with the tennis coach is that this lack of control becomes localized in the body as depicted by the way each character is described. The narration tracks an imbalance of pace between Ifemelu and the tennis coach, “When she arrived at his house, his manner was *brusque* ... She wished he had done things a little more *slowly* ... “I can’t have sex with you,” she repeated. “Oh no, I don’t expect you to,” he said too *quickly*” (emphasis added).⁵⁰ Though one cannot equate the slowness from her period of joblessness with the slowness exhibited here, it is important that the negativity around “slowness” from her period of joblessness has now become something that Ifemelu desires when confronted with the tennis coach’s rapidity. It is in fact not so much the pace itself that is important as it is that the pace of each person involved in this exchange is out of sync with the other. In his brusque quickness, the tennis coach betrays that this is an activity to which he is accustomed, giving the entire thing an air of normalcy that makes Ifemelu uncomfortable. When she “wished he had done things a little more slowly,” what Ifemelu is craving there is the same kind of balance she might expect from her previous consensual sexual experiences.⁵¹ Adichie uses this inequality in pacing to signal that something is coercive about this exchange that cannot be set aright, something is coercive about the activity of sex work for someone who consents to it out of deprivation and desperation rather than out of both desire and consent. This imbalance of speeds echoes the power imbalance that exists between Ifemelu and the tennis coach not only because of their financial transaction, but also because of their identities and how those are always already playing out in the room.⁵² Speed and control

continue to be somewhat coterminous signifiers in the scene of assault as Ifemelu feels less in control of situations when the speed of that situation is not the one that she desires. Slow is not always what Ifemelu wants, but it is worth unpacking how Ifemelu's blog creation is a perfect example of a reversal of this traumatizing power dynamic. Ifemelu's blog, *Raceteenth*, functions to counteract the trauma that is incurred upon her not only by the tennis coach, but also by the structural flaws of an immigration system that put her in the tennis coach's office to begin with. I argue that Ifemelu uses the blog to create a space over which she has absolute control, to turn away from self-loathing and towards self-love, and to fill a void of silence with language that expresses the social conditions that enabled her assault and/or the assault itself.

Years after her experience with the tennis coach, Ifemelu creates her blog, *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*. It is important how slowly and with control she arrives at blogging as a form of expression to counter the lack of control that the assault incurred. During the years between the assault and the blog, Ifemelu gets a job as a babysitter for a wealthy, white family in the suburbs of Pennsylvania. Kimberly is the mother of the children and her brother, Curt, becomes Ifemelu's boyfriend. Curt gets Ifemelu a well-paying job at a public relations office in Baltimore where they move and live together. Through this job, Ifemelu gets her green card and her life is therefore much more financially and emotionally stable. Despite this stability, through her new job and interracial relationship, our protagonist is thrust into a host of situations in which she experiences microaggressions, largely aimed at her racial and ethnic identities. White co-workers ask if her hair is a political statement when she decides to go natural, her white boyfriend's friends treat her with awe while putting her at a distance, men make comments when she and Curt walk around holding hands, and other such racialized interactions. As it happens for so many black immigrants from majority black countries, such moments initiate an awakening of sorts in Ifemelu to her blackness as she now navigates the American world as a black woman. One of the ways she chooses to cope with this awakening is by going through what is known as "the big chop," cutting out her relaxer in her hair and "going natural." When she has trouble understanding how to care for her natural hair, a friend suggests that she try a website called happilykinkynappy.com. Ifemelu not only finds a community there in the sense that she can read through the posts of other women, but also in the sense that she can share her own story.

Jamilah's words made me remember that there is nothing more beautiful than what God gave me. Others wrote responses, posting thumbs-up signs, telling her how much they liked the

photo she had put up. She had never talked about God so much. Posting on the website was like giving testimony in church; the echoing roar of approval revived her. 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.”⁵³

In italics is the post that Ifemelu writes about Jamilah, another member of the natural hair forum whose story inspired our protagonist to express her own self-love. Ifemelu likens posting on the forum to “giving testimony in church” thusly entering two black American institutions at once: the staid and historic black American church and the more emerging, contemporary online natural hair movement. Not only is the internet a space through which Ifemelu can, in her own time, heal, learning to love the body which, in her own estimation, betrayed her with the tennis coach years ago, but also a space through which she expresses herself as a black woman. This is the first evidence that the black blog provides Ifemelu with something that heals the wound of self-loathing that the tennis coach inflicted upon her. After her assault, Ifemelu feels such shame and disappointment in herself that she thinks, “She would never be able to form the sentences to tell her story.”⁵⁴ But Ifemelu’s absolutist belief in her silence around her assault is only partially true. The natural hair online community sets Ifemelu off on a journey to becoming a very successful black blogger. The power that she gains from this work does a great deal to reverse a lot of the pain that the tennis coach and, indirectly, a flawed immigration system inflicted upon her. However, this power ends up backfiring on Ifemelu when the blog grows so much that it is no longer entirely under her control.

The novel confronts the limits of the blog form after *Raceteenth* becomes a success. The blog becomes so successful, in fact, that it allows Ifemelu to quit her cushy job at a public relations firm and work on the blog full time. *Raceteenth* garners a large enough following that Ifemelu is able to use the blog as a launch pad for public speaking engagements on diversity at universities and corporate retreats. The blog therefore presents its limits only in its success as Ifemelu describes the blog as a monster once it has gone beyond her control,

The blog had unveiled itself and shed its milk teeth; by turns, it surprised her, pleased her, left her behind... Now that she was asked to speak at roundtables and panels... always identified simply as The Blogger, she felt subsumed by her blog... at night... her growing discomforts crawled out from the crevices, and the blog’s many readers became, in her mind, a judgemental

angry mob waiting for her, biding their time until they could attack her, unmask her.⁵⁵

The vivid, horrific, and embodied description of the blog, its readers and its attending anxieties as “crawling out from the crevices” and as a “judgemental angry mob” underscores the intimacy between the blog, Ifemelu’s body, and the illusion of control. Before its success, to have control over the blog functioned as a synecdoche for Ifemelu having control over herself. With success, Ifemelu’s body becomes more public and thusly no longer within her control. She fears that her readers will reveal her as a fraud, as less well-versed in the topics of race, class, culture, and nationality than she performs to be. This loss of control was by no means inevitable nor is it inherent to the blog as a form. The blog form, in fact, protects Ifemelu because the platform allows her to maintain a great deal of anonymity; she never identifies herself by name, national origin or image. Ifemelu continues to protect these aspects of her identity when the blog becomes successful, but she must create safeguards that she did not have to instate previously.⁵⁶ The final area of disadvantage that blogging presents for immigrant women of color who are seeking supplements to and/or replacements of legal justice is that the blog can eventually start to reinforce and/or mimic the negative emotional impacts of the original trauma.

CONCLUSION

Television and the black blog present advantages and disadvantages for black immigrant women of color who have experienced sexual trauma. The pros and cons of each technological mode of expression vary depending on what kind of trauma they experience and the amount of control that they are able to exert over that technology. My argument increases our awareness of the dual healing/harm aspects of these technologies. Nafissatou Diallo redefines justice for herself by implying that control over the narrative may, in itself, be a kind of justice. However, she also exposes herself and makes herself more vulnerable to the same classist, racist, and sexist attacks she is subject to when she maintained her anonymity. Diallo also had little to no control over the production of her interview with “Good Morning, America,” therefore, though she attempts to combat what it means for an immigrant woman of color to access justice for an assault, the televised interview is at a disadvantage as a mode of expression that could help a black immigrant woman not only express her story, but also supplement her quest for legal justice. Diallo seeks Afropessimistic justice, a form of justice that is not necessarily the fantasy that is projected onto legal justice: one in which the culprit is appropriately and proportionately punished for all wrongdoing. Afropessimistic justice is a form of restorative justice, one that places the

needs of the survivor/victim at the center while also abandoning the notion that the law can offer fairness, equality, hope and/or healing. Our fictional protagonist, Ifemelu, takes Afropessimistic justice one step further by not only abandoning a certain view of legal justice, but also abandoning the law altogether. The protagonist of Adichie's novel not only abandons the law, but, in fact, finds it nearly impossible as an avenue through which to give voice to her assault. That is to say, impossible, except for the way that she is able to transfer the post-traumatic stress onto her blog. However, the Afropessimism of Ifemelu's own approach to justice lies in the seeming failure of the black blog to offer the total healing that she needs. Though she is certainly in a better mental state when she shuts down *Raceteenth*, the way that the blog turns on her demonstrates that it helped her to communicate something about her assault, but, ultimately, did not offer healing. Ifemelu no longer finds the blog she creates in America to be a useful source of healing from trauma once she begins to lose control over it. Better said, when Ifemelu no longer identifies with her audience and perceives them as her superiors, the blog begins to vacuum her self-worth and replicate the emotional damage incurred by the sexual trauma she experienced rather than act as a space of encouragement, validation, and sharing.

There is no way for any mode of technology to provide all of the needs—emotional, physical, and metaphysical—of black immigrant women who are survivors of sexual violence/trauma to supplement and/or substitute legal justice. The purpose of this article is not necessarily to suggest that these modes are either liberative or restrictive, either restorative or damaging. Rather, the purpose is to engage with the deep complexities of healing for women who experience sexual assault/violence. Especially for black women. We watch Anita Hill give her testimony, we watch Nafissatou Diallo's voice break on ABC News, we watch Ifemelu mute in the immediate aftermath of her encounter with the tennis coach, and we, as an audience, want nothing more than for these black women to find some sort of comfort, some sort of solace, to receive the justice that they so deserve. An Afropessimistic justice frame reminds us not to oversimplify these women, not to oversimplify the healing process, and, most importantly not to oversimplify justice. All of these women, when given some level of control—an extremely mediated level—over the process of seeking justice and/or healing, opted for routes that harmed *and* healed, that broke them at the very same time that it empowered them. More than an indictment and/or appraisal of the specific modes of technology under examination, I am urging us to recognize that these technologies help women (or perhaps, better said, these women force these technologies to function for them) in marginalized communities realize the potential for Afropessimistic approaches to justice and the power of advocating for themselves while remaining ever vigilant, ever critical, and ever pessimistic.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

1. @Alyssa_Milano, "If You've Been Sexually Harassed or Assaulted Write 'Me Too' as a Reply to This Tweet." *Twitter*, October 15, 2017, 4:21 p.m., https://twitter.com/Alyssa_Milano/status/919659438700670976.
2. Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: NYU Press, 2018), 1.
3. Supreme Court of the State of New York, *The People of New York v. Dominique Strauss-Kahn*, 2011.
4. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah*. 1st ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013. Print.
5. bell hooks, "Moving Beyond Pain." *Bell Hooks Institute Berea College Blog*. May 9, 2016. <http://www.bellhooksinstitute.com/blog/2016/5/9/moving-beyond-pain>, 4.
6. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997).
7. In *Celia, the Slave v. State of Missouri*, the master of Celia serially rapes her for years. She warns him that if he does it again, she will kill him. He enters her cabin to assault her and she beats him to death in self-defense and then burns the body. Celia's defense argue that her rape justifies her actions, but the court deems the master's sexual assault as non-criminal because they do not impinge upon the slave's existence. Celia is sentenced to be hanged and dies. This is an indirect example of paradoxical justice: knowing that she risked death, Celia still decided to seek justice. Presumably, she could have run away or committed suicide. Though Celia had no wholly healing options, she was willing to risk harm for the very low yet enticing possibility of justice as reward.
8. Because the case reached a monetary settlement (for an undisclosed amount), the files around the civil case, *Nafissatou Diallo v. Dominique Strauss-Kahn*, are closed which means that I do not have access to testimony or any in-court proceedings. There is, however, evidence from news publications that covered the case as well as one open source document: the civil case filing which Diallo's defense attorney, Ken Thompson, filed on August 8, 2011.
9. Cyrus R. Vance, "The People of the State of New York Against Dominique Strauss-Kahn (Indictment No. 02525/2011): Recommendation for Dismissal." Document Cloud. Archived.
10. Class is an enormous determinant in U.S. immigration proceedings as the cases at the center of this article exemplify. Ifemelu is in the United States on a student visa to attend university in Pennsylvania and, though she faces her fair share of troubles, she has an enormous amount of privilege over Nafissatou Diallo who is in the country as a refugee. That being said, there are also ways in which Diallo's status grants her greater leeway. There are numerous complexities and depths to be explored concerning class and immigration status that this article cannot delve into given time and space restrictions.
11. Even before Trump's presidency, the number of refugees permitted entry into the U.S. has been on a steady decline since 2009. However, it is worth noting that the number of refugees resettled is now the lowest it has been since the Refugee Act of 1980 (National Immigration Forum).
12. I say allegedly because it is not possible to know for sure what exactly Diallo wrote on her asylum application. Though we do not have direct access to Diallo's application, we have some knowledge of what she wrote on it because the New York DA makes some allusions to the application in their motion to dismiss the case.
13. In her article, "Black Bloggers and Their Varied Publics: The Everyday Politics of Black Discourse Online," Catherine Knight Steele coins the term "black blog" to refer to "enclave spaces to explore black representation in art and media, black feminism, and class consciousness." Knight establishes additional terminology around the kind of "publics" that the black blog creates/invites. Steele, Catherine Knight. "Black Bloggers and Their Varied Publics: The Everyday Politics of Black Discourse Online." *Television & New*

- Media 19, no. 2 (2018): 112-27. doi: 10.1177/1527476417709535.
14. Rape shield laws are intended to protect victims from having any information relating to their past sexual behavior, but can sometimes be broadly interpreted as protecting a victim's identity/anonymity if they choose to do so. Feminist movements worked hard to get rape shield laws established in the United States in the late 1970s and early 80s, but had a great amount of difficulty forcing states and prosecutors to actually implement them. See more about rape shield laws and their roots in *Rape Law Reform: A Grassroots Revolution and Its Impact* (1992) by Cassia Spohn and Julie Horney.
15. Diallo's image had been captured by courtroom sketch artists and published on various news shows, but she had not appeared publicly before July 25. It is worth noting that Diallo takes the witness stand at Strauss-Kahn's Grand Jury trial and the jury swiftly indicted him. Lawyers and other witnesses attributed Diallo's effectiveness and affectiveness as a public speaker with the swiftness of the jury's decision. Others attributed the heft of physical evidence as Diallo's rape kit corroborated her story as well as the verified DNA evidence that Strauss-Kahn left at the scene. All of this trust that Diallo built when on trial basically disappeared when she admitted to the DA that she lied about several details of the assault itself as well as previous assaults she had mentioned.
16. Brad Hamilton, "Dominique Strauss-Kahn 'Refused to Pay' hooker Maid for Sex." *New York Post*, 3 July 2011. Accessed 19 May 2018. Web. The *Post* story opens the case up to the contemporary debate around sexual violence and sex work. Debates around sex work are extremely complex-on the left, an argument between those who are pro-legalization and those who are pro-decriminalization rages on-but, at its foundation, the discourse on sex work and sexual violence has always been mired in misogyny, as Andrea Dworkin articulates in her book, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, "One does not violate something by using it for what it is: neither rape nor prostitution is an abuse of the female because in both the female is fulfilling her natural function; that is why rape is absurd and incomprehensible as an abusive phenomenon in the male system, and so is prostitution, which is held to be voluntary even when the prostitute is hit, threatened, drugged, or locked in ... A whore cannot be raped, only used" (151). Assumptions around sex workers and consent are proven by the fact that the *Post*'s "hooker" accusation is just one of the hundreds such accusations that have occurred throughout history: what happened to Diallo has happened in a number of other high-profile rape cases: a woman accuses a man (or multiple men) of rape, the accused respond by saying that they could not have raped the woman because he/they paid her. This presumption that those who are paid for sex cannot be assaulted/raped, that somehow payment erases one's right to bodily agency and/or consent, the *Post* puts Diallo in the uncomfortable and impossible position of having to prove her modesty so as to push herself as far away from the negative, cartoonish associations with the word "hooker."
17. ABCNews. "DSK Accuser Nafissatou Diallo: Full Interview." 18 August 2011. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/video/dominique-strauss-kahn-accuser-nafissatou-diallo-complete-interview-14336006> (00:03:03).
18. The term "misogynoir" was created by the black feminist writer, Moya Bailey, to refer to the combination of anti-black racism and sexism that black women experience. For more details on the term see Bailey, Moya. "They aren't talking about me ..." *Crunk Feminist Collective*, 14 March 2010. Web. <http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2010/03/14/they-arent-talking-about-me/>
19. These images are screengrabs from the edited version of the ABC News interview that appeared on the YouTube page of the news corporation. ABCNews, "Dominique Strauss-Kahn's Accuser, Nafissatou Diallo, Speaks Out to 'GMA's' Robin Roberts," YouTube video, 3:37, 25 July 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ixc8rmcNr9A&t=1s>
20. bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman* (Boston, MA: South End Press, c1981), 52.
21. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, and ACLS Humanities E-Book. *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Harvard University Press, 1993), 14. Higginbotham writes extensively about the various manifestations of the politics of respectability amongst black women of the church, but I am attending to its uses specifically in terms of combatting myths around black

- female sexuality, "They felt certain that "respectable" behavior in public would earn their people a measure of esteem from white America, and hence they strove to win the black lower class's psychological allegiance to temperance, industriousness, thrift, refined manners, and Victorian sexual morals" (14). Victorian sexual morals are not precisely the expectations that the *Post* "hooker" headline captures, but they are consistent with an assumption of deviancy which the sexual conservatism of black women in the Reconstruction period use to defy notions that they are hypersexual. Many scholars have responded to and/or extended Higginbotham's theory of respectability politics since the inception of the term, but I still find the original content and context useful even when used in the distinct content and context of a twenty-first century assault of an immigrant woman of color.
22. The few comments that do mention Diallo's looks are somewhat innocuous in that they do not relate significantly to how her characterization as unreliable and a sex worker led to the actual demise of her case. However, one comment from user, Laser Nite, does link Diallo's appearance and sound to her unreliability: "If you pause the video a number of times and catch her micro-expression reactions, she looks like a liar, she sounds like a liar, she feels like a liar." The comment that "she looks like a liar" calls into question what racist assumptions may be underlying the notion that liars have a certain look. Does she look like a liar because she is black? The user appears to be male and therefore could be linking Diallo's lying to her gender, a common connection made in all of the comments. But the user's attention to "micro-expression reactions" speaks to the notion that the average viewer was acting as judge and jury when watching Diallo's interview, using minute details to determine her honesty. Appearance and truth-telling are therefore inextricably linked and help viewers build a context against which Diallo's story either aligns with or fails to align with their own worldview. There is no evidence to suggest that ABC News and/or YouTube moderated this comment space and eliminated hate speech, but it is possible.
 23. "Immigrant" is a loaded term and one that does not speak very specifically to people's lived experiences as those who leave their home countries to settle, work, and/or live in other countries. Diallo is a refugee, but I am asserting that viewers of her interview read her voice and accent as those of an immigrant, as a person who was not born in the country in which she lives.
 24. The absence of a translator for the ABC News interview is significant because a translator was present each time the DA's office interviewed Diallo. Diallo, in fact, cites mistranslation as the reason why the DA believes her to be lying about certain key facts in the case. This experience with mistranslation may have influenced Diallo's desire not to use one for the ABC News interview, but this is not certain.
 25. ABCNews, "DSK Accuser Nafissatou Diallo: Full Interview," 00:01:44. I read both the edited and unedited interview. Diallo had no way of knowing which parts of her interview would make it to air. I therefore read both versions as informing us about the ways in which she (and her defense team) are manipulating and/or being manipulated by the form of the televised news interview to combat misogynoirist myths. These myths work to deny Diallo access to being seen as the victim of a crime.
 26. Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004). Print. *Politics and Society in Twentieth-Century America*.
 27. Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press), 1996. Print.
 28. As much as immigrants are put in a position in which they must prove their "goodness," they are, contrarily, put in a position in which they must distance themselves from the "bad." In a sense, what Ozawa, Thind and many immigrants had to do and continue to have to do is prove to the United States that they will not be a burden on the country, that they will not extract the U.S. of all of its resources without contributing to a nation-building project. This need to portray themselves as figures of contribution rather than extraction is especially true for those who enter the U.S. on F-1, J-1, and H-1 (and H-1B) visas because these are the visas for those who will study and/or work in the U.S., usually in fields such as engineering, computer science, and/or the medical profession. The burden on them to prove that they will not be a burden is built into their application-forms often include spaces that

- ask applicants to promise that they will not try to apply for residency in the U.S.—whereas refugees do not have that same burden despite the fact that the U.S. will almost definitely benefit from their presence as disposable labor.
29. The notion that people from other countries must align themselves with white, middle class values to be perceived as citizens is not specific to immigrants. As mentioned in the visual analysis, black Americans have used the politics of respectability and other strategies to be perceived by the white majority as citizens.
30. ABCNews, “DSK Accuser ...,” 00:05:51.
31. Ibid, 00:28:47.
32. Andrew E. Taslitz, *Rape and the Culture of the Courtroom* (New York: New York University Press, 1999). Print. Critical America, 79.
33. Adichie does not facilitate the tracking of time for the reader in *Americanah*. Events are told in a non-linear fashion, completely out of order. The rare indications of time are the mentionings of real-life political events, such as the 1983 military coup in Nigeria (271) or the election of America’s first black President, Barack Obama, in 2008 (8). Adichie never says which year Ifemelu migrated to the U.S., but she drops clues by mentioning how long Ifemelu has been living there. It is likely that only upon re-reading would one be able to glean that Ifemelu migrated to the U.S. in the 1990s.
34. Adichie, *Americanah*, 107.
35. Ibid., 147.
36. Ibid., 145.
37. There are a number of moments throughout the novel during which Ifemelu highlights her sense of humor or her ability to observe the world from a somewhat cynical yet knowing distance as both a coping mechanism and as a natural part of her personality. These moments in which she finds humor are especially potent because of how they make the tone of her blog seem like an extremely seamless transition from her protagonist voice to her blogger voice. And I would say that this moment in which her roommate’s dog eats her bacon is one such moment because although it is not intentionally funny in the moment, it strikes an unnervingly satisfying balance between humorous and painful which is the exact tone of *Raceteenth*, the blog that Ifemelu creates years after she finishes college.
38. Adichie, *Americanah*, 155.
39. Ibid., 156.
40. Ibid., 191.
- Dissociation is one of several symptoms of Rape Trauma Syndrome (RTS), a much-debated term for the emotional fallout for victims of rape and/or sexual assault. In her essay, “Rape Trauma, the State, and the Art of Tracey Emin” Yxta Maya Murray outlines the debates amongst feminist scholars around this term: some find it a useful way to translate the experience of post-rape trauma to a general and/or legal audience while others argue that it pathologizes rape victims, too narrowly defining their trauma. For more, see Murray, Yxta Maya, “Rape Trauma, the State, and the Art of Tracey Emin,” *California Law Review* 1631, no. 100 (21 March 2012): 1.
41. Adichie, *Americanah*, 190.
42. Sabine Sielke, *Reading Rape: The Rhetoric of Sexual Violence in American Literature and Culture, 1790-1990* (Princeton University Press, 2002), 4.
43. Adichie, *Americanah*, 160.
44. - “Sexual Assault Laws in PA” *Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape*. Website. 18 Pa.C.S.A. § 3101.
45. It is worth noting that there may be a distinction between the narrator and Ifemelu in this instance. We ought to consider the possibility that narrators ought not be trusted to tell the stories of characters’ assaults. What are the advantages and disadvantages of losing the “I” perspective in the instance of scenes of trauma and/or assault?
46. Andrea Dworkin, *Last Days at Hot Slit: The Radical Feminism of Andrea Dworkin*, ed. Johanna Fateman and Amy Scholder (Semiotext(e), 2019), 151.
47. Adichie, *Americanah*, 155.
48. Michael Buchhandler-Raphael, “The Failure of Consent: Re-Conceptualizing Rape as Sexual Abuse of Power.” *Michigan Journal of Gender & Law* 18, no. 147 (2011-12): 151. Hannah Brenner, “Beyond Seduction: Lessons Learned about Rape, Politics, and Power from Dominique Strauss-Kahn and Moshe Katsav.” *Michigan Journal of Gender & Law* 20, no. 2 (2014): 225-90, 227.
49. Adichie, *Americanah*, 189.
50. Ibid., 188-9.
51. Heterosexual sex is a frequent occurrence in the novel and an important part of Ifemelu’s life. Ifemelu is guided by her sexually confident Aunt Uju and Obinze’s feminist mother to be

secure in herself sexually and unashamed of her desire. It seems purposeful that Adichie does not want to declare Ifemelu's sexual confidence as either remarkable or unremarkable, but just a fact. However, it is notable that Ifemelu is so secure in her sexuality because the assault has, seemingly, no negative impact on her subsequent sexual/romantic experiences. She has two sexual and romantic relationships after the assault, neither of which are described as adulterated or uncomfortable. This is just one of many ways that Adichie defies the notion that a victim of sexual assault/violence must necessarily feel the impacts of that experience in every aspect of her life. In other words, the assault manifests for survivors in an extreme

variety of ways. To over determine the effects of an assault on an individual are dangerous because of this variety of the ways trauma expresses itself.

52. Jacques Derrida refers to the "always already" nature of language from a deconstructionist perspective. Many critical race theorists have appropriated the phrase to refer to the always already-ness of existing within a marginalized identity.
53. Adichie, *Americanah*, 215.
54. *Ibid.*, 160.
55. *Ibid.*, 305–8.
56. *Ibid.*, 306–7.

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