

Going Natural: Reading Black Women's Hair in *Americanah* as a Sociopolitical Narrative to Battle American Misogynoir

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Abstract

America is founded on several different forms of oppression--two most notably being white supremacy and patriarchy. As white supremacy affects people of color and patriarchy affects women, Black women can suffer both forms of oppression, which many Black feminist scholars have deemed as "misogynoir." Coined by Black feminist Moya Bailey, misogynoir is defined as "anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience." One specific form of misogynoir is hair discrimination, which affects Black women personally and professionally. *Americanah*, written by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, is a novel that uses the trope of Black women's hair not only to bring awareness to anti-Black, sexist society, but also to fight against the actual sociopolitical hierarchy seeking to disenfranchise Black women. This paper explores Adichie's illustration of Black women's hair about perming, workplace discrimination, "the big chop," going natural, and finding a community. Additionally, this paper argues about the different kinds of spaces Black women and their hair must exist in society, from anti-Black workplaces to Africana womanist hair salons. The paper, also, argues that Adichie uses the novel itself as an act of resistance against America's system of anti-Black misogyny, misogynoir.

Keywords:

Misogyny, misogynoir, hierarchy, patriarchy, discrimination, intersectionality

America is built on systems of oppression that disenfranchise different communities in different ways. Patriarchy, for instance, can oppress women, and white supremacy can oppress people of color, while women of color—specifically Black women—can suffer from both oppressive systems. For this reason, intersectionality, the concept of different identities connecting and coinciding with one another, is highly important when studying race and gender. Including intersectionality in discussions of race, gender, and class calls attention to the ways Black women have historically been excluded from these conversations (i.e. White women exclude Black women from feminist movements because of their race and Black men exclude Black women from Black liberation movements because of their gender). Because of these exclusionary systems within their own communities, Black women experience a special and specific type of oppression, often referred to as *misogynoir*. Coined by Black feminist scholar Moya Bailey, *misogynoir* is defined as “anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience” (Bailey and Trudy 762). For her, defining *misogynoir* is important as it is about “noting both a historical anti-Black misogyny and a problematic intraracial gender dynamic that has wider implications in popular culture” (Bailey and Trudy 762). *Misogynoir* is important to study in context of popular culture because “Black women and girls are being treated in a uniquely terrible way because of how societal ideas about race and gender intersect” (Bailey and Trudy 763). One specific form of *misogynoir* is natural hair discrimination, which continually impacts Black women as seen in historical and popular representations. Black women’s beauty has been subjected to offensive stereotypes and continues as the basis of exclusion and discrimination in a variety of both personal and professional contexts.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* focuses on these forms of exclusion and discrimination. Adichie uses the journey of Black women’s hair to highlight the fight against America’s misogynoir-filled mentality that creates a racist and sexist sociopolitical hierarchy aimed to discriminate against Black women. As the story progresses, the reader see that the story of Ifemelu’s hair parallels the narrative accompanying America’s social and political hierarchy.

Numerous Black feminists have written scholarship about Black women’s place in America’s dual oppressive system. Likewise, they have addressed hair not only being a target of anti-Black misogyny, but also a symbol for Black women’s liberation. Kelly Macías, for instance, writes about “the experiences of Black women, whose lives not only continue to be ravaged by direct and indirect violence by people of all colors but who also struggle to navigate the intersecting identities of race and gender” (Macías 2). The experience Macías describes in her article is similar to the experience Adichie’s main character, Ifemelu, endures. Adichie’s novel concentrates on Ifemelu, a Nigerian woman, who immigrates to the U.S. and learns what it means to be Black in America. She has never had to think about what being a Black woman means while living in Nigeria. She soon understands, however, that Black women can be subjected to both white supremacy and patriarchy—two oppressive systems that target people of color and women respectively. Ifemelu’s narrative speaks to both oppressive forces, white supremacy and patriarchy, and warns the reader about the deadly combination of both. This intersectional consideration contributes to conversations about Black women’s place in American society by seeking to diminish the exclusiveness of white feminism. Kimberlé Crenshaw states if one begins to

explain the “identity as woman or person of color as an either/or proposition, . . . [one] relegate[s] the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling” (Crenshaw 1242). If the reader succumbs to the either/or proposition, the reader can see the very root of misogynoir. The representation of hair in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* reflects the overall political and social hierarchy in America that several of the Black feminist scholars discuss in their own work.

Adichie illustrates the daily examples of misogynoir becoming institutionalized in *Americanah* by beginning the frame narrative of Black women’s hair with Ifemelu going to a hair salon to get her hair braided before moving back to Nigeria. The salon is noticeably out of her way. The story beginning with Ifemelu heading to a hair salon is significant because most of the narrative, in the present time, takes place with her at the hair salon. Currently, she lives in Princeton, but “she did not like that she had to go to Trenton to braid her hair. It was unreasonable to expect a braiding salon in Princeton . . . and yet as she waited at Princeton Junction station for the train, on an afternoon ablaze with heat, she wondered why there *was* no place where she could braid her hair” (Adichie 4). Adichie uses Ifemelu traveling outside of her own town to get her hair braided to begin the discourse about Black women’s hair and a Black woman’s experience in America in general. Just like braiding hair salons in Princeton, the concern for Black women’s stories and experiences are often non-existent. Princeton, a predominantly white location, shows no proof of concern with providing Black women hair services. The lack of Black haircare in Princeton is completely reflective of a larger issue of White America not having concern for several issues directly affecting Black

women—thus perpetuating a mentality that Black women’s issues are non-existent.

Using Macías’ piece, “‘Sisters in the Collective Struggle’: Sounds of Silence and Reflections on the Unspoken Assault on Black Females in Modern America” to understand the invisibility factor of Black women is critical to grasp how Ifemelu’s experiences are ignored. Social psychology research, according to Macías, shows that when racism is examined, Black men are the main targets of investigation, and the research, also, shows that some feel race is more important than gender in the marginalization that women experience. If a woman faces a form of prejudice or discrimination, it is usually because she is Black and not because she is a woman, but “such a limited view does not reflect reality nor does it allow for understanding the intersections of multiple dimensions of identity like race *and* gender that Black women experience” (Macías 2). Similar to the non-existent hair salon in Princeton, Black women are invisible, or “persistent stereotypical labels allow for others to fail to identify them as individuals and to ignore their voices” (2). Ignoring Black women’s voices, either intentionally or by persistent stereotypes, not only encourages misogynoir in America, but also is a form of misogynoir itself.

The use of hair in *Americanah* symbolizes American Black women’s overall experience being ignored and significantly excluded; however, using Black women’s hair to address sexism is an act of intersectional feminism. Ifemelu’s experiences emphasize the importance of intersectionality because she faces the exact same problems that Black women face. Crenshaw states, “Contemporary feminist and antiracist discourses have failed to consider intersectional identities such as women of color” (Crenshaw 1243). Crenshaw’s consideration of “how the

experiences of women of color are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism, and how these experiences tend not to be represented within the discourses of either feminism or antiracism” (1243) provides a theoretical framework for understanding Ifemelu’s identity as a Black woman in America.

After Ifemelu immigrates to America, she undergoes a process of Americanization, or assimilation into American culture, to be considered “American.” The reader’s first image of Americanization is shown inside the hair salon. Aisha, the hair stylist, asks Ifemelu, upon seeing her natural kinky hair, “Why you don’t have relaxer?” (Adichie 15). Ifemelu tries explaining to Aisha that she likes her natural hair and how to comb it, but she finds herself “slipping into the coaxing tone of the proselytizer that she used whenever she was trying to convince other black women about the merits of wearing their hair natural” (15). One would think that this discussion between Ifemelu and Aisha is simply about her hair, and while it is, a greater context to the conversation establishes the reality of misogynoir in America.

Aisha, and several other women, feel the need to relax their hair because they have been conditioned to relax their hair due to Americanization and Eurocentric beauty standards. Ifemelu discovers the same beauty standards, “straight hair, which is more aligned with Western beauty ideals, [that continue] to be privileged over natural styles—especially dreadlocks” (837) that Thompson explains in “Black Women, Beauty, and Hair As A Matter of Being.” The history of discrimination against Black women’s hair in Thompson’s piece is similar to the narrative of Black women’s hair in *Americanah*. Thompson argues that “the Eurocentric beauty standard of straight, long and flowing hair has a sociocultural

[effect] on Black women’s notions of physical attractiveness, but also on courtship, self-esteem, and identity” (832). The Eurocentric beauty standards prevalent in American culture do affect Ifemelu’s self-esteem and identity of being a Black woman in America. These beauty standards, while not explicit racist acts, are examples of the social hierarchies built into American culture that oppress Black women.

After Aunt Uju receives her medical license exam results, issues specific to Black women are highlighted when Ifemelu has to consider hair relaxer. Aunt Uju is proud that she has passed her exam and tells Ifemelu, “I have to take my braids out for my interviews and relax my hair. Kemi told me that I shouldn’t wear braids to the interview. If you have braids, they will think you are unprofessional” (Adichie 146). Ifemelu asks Aunt Uju “so there are no doctors with braided hair in America?” and Aunt Uju replies, “I have told you what they told me. You are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do if you want to succeed” (146). This advice is the first example of the exclusiveness of American professionalism. Aunt Uju’s use of pronouns to explain the gravity of the situation is significant because she speaks as if she is referencing a specific person when saying “you” and “they,” but in reality, she speaks about America’s racist and sexist culture as a whole. Adichie’s rhetorical choice to use secondary and tertiary pronouns emphasizes how America alienates people because of their race and gender. Aunt Uju states in order for Ifemelu to be successful in America, she must get rid of her braids and relax her hair, which involves straightening her hair with chemicals so that it is straight and hanging like white women’s hair. Seeing Black women’s natural hair as unprofessional in businesses and workplaces is a common perception entirely founded on racist reasoning that

sees white women's hair as the standard of beauty. Unlike dying one's hair an unnatural hair color, Black women wearing their natural hair is ironically seen as unnatural. In America, Black women with relaxed hair are seen as women with "natural looking" hair because America associates professional and natural looking hair with straight hanging hair—not kinky curls natural to Black women. But because "skin color and hair are so intertwined that it is hard to separate the two when examining the forces that shape Black people's lives," (Thompson 833), it would be racist to inform someone that their natural hair must be a certain way for a workplace. Targeting Black women's natural hair is an example of misogynoir being used systematically. Additionally, this discrimination is an intersectional feminist issue that Crenshaw describes as it targets both race and gender simultaneously. In "Decolonizing My Hair, Unshackling My Curls: An Autoethnography on What Makes My Natural Hair Journey a Black Feminist Statement," Carollette Norwood writes about her personal journey of going natural and rejecting chemically straightened hair, while also speaking about the history of misogynoir against Black women's hair. She explains that "the linear classification that moves from light to dark and from straight to tightly coiled hair reflects a racialized hierarchy, where features most akin to the European aesthetic are more valued, more revered, more compensated and just *mo better*" (Norwood 72). The belief, which was underscored by the legacy of slavery, that women of color are intellectually, politically, economically, or biologically inferior to white people manifests itself into

beauty standards, creating a racist-sexist mentality that women of color are not only inferior to white people, but less attractive as well.

The workplace has become a highly politicized place by judging the professionalism of a person's hair via Eurocentric beauty standards. Norwood further explains that this beauty standard is not only internalized among communities of color themselves, but also "that internalized racism and colorism are propagated and reinforced by institutional bigotry and discrimination" (74). Norwood gives an example of how "institutional discrimination against Black women's hair in the workplace has been upheld by several landmark cases" (74) by citing *Rogers v. American Airlines*¹, which was a court case about grooming policies and braids being a permissible hairstyle to ban. Similar to several real life cases of workplace discrimination that Black women face, Ifemelu soon learns that "the use of corn rows, braids and dreadlocks" are considered "matted and unkempt" and thus "demonstrate[s] the ugly continuity of this kind of institutionalized objectification and humanization of Black people's hair" (74). The workplace discrimination against Black women's hair becomes a significant issue because Black women are at risk of being fired, or not even hired in the first place, for wearing their natural hair. Additionally, the universal consensus that for Black women to be successful in America, to get a job and to keep one, she needs to chemically alter her natural hair which not only perpetuates the racist standard that straight, hanging hair—which most Black women do not naturally have—is not only more attractive, but more

¹ *Rogers v. American Airlines* is a court case in which Renee Rogers, a flight attendant, sued American Airlines, her employer, after they demanded that she not wear her hair in cornrows, but in a bun. Rogers argued that the ban violated her rights under the

Thirteenth Amendment under Title VII—equal employment opportunity—of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Court ruled that this did not fall under Title VII since braids were an "easily changeable characteristic" and was not specifically tied to race.

professional. Such consensus directly insinuates that a Black woman in her natural form is unprofessional and that she should conform to America's beauty standard—which says whiteness is best.

Ifemelu experiences her own need to conform to America's beauty standards when her boyfriend, Curt, gets her an interview for a job. Auntie Uju tells Ifemelu, "Lose the braids and straighten your hair. Nobody says this kind of stuff but it matters. We want you to get that job" (Adichie 250). Having already spent some time living in America and experiencing different forms of misogyny, Ifemelu knows that Auntie Uju and Ruth are right in saying that she will not be taken professionally unless she relaxes her hair. The scene where she buys and relaxes her hair is a part of the novel's extended metaphor for Black women experiencing misogyny in America. Relaxers "had grown in their range, boxes and boxes in the "ethnic hair" section of the drugstore, faces of smiling black women with impossibly straight and shiny hair...the smell reminded her of chemistry lab in secondary school" (250). After the relaxer does not take and her hair remains kinky, Ifemelu goes to a professional hairdresser. She "felt only a slight burning, at first, but as the hairdresser rinsed out the relaxer, Ifemelu's head bent backwards against a plastic sink, needles of stinging pain shot up from different parts of her scalp, down to different parts of her body, back up to her head" (251). The hairdresser tells her, "Just a little burn...but look how pretty it is. Wow, girl, you've got the white-girl swing" (251). Seeing herself in the mirror, "[Ifemelu] did not recognize herself...the smell of burning, of something organic dying which should not have died" (251). The scene describes a process Black women must undergo in America in order to be seen as professional; however, it also describes the overall political structure within

America that disproportionately affects Black women. Originally, Ifemelu deals with this misogyny by accepting the racist and sexist changes America demands to ensure her economic stability. As an immigrant suffering from financial setbacks while in America, and because "Black hair in its natural state is often negatively marked for its difference" (Thompson 840), Ifemelu needs the interview to go well so she can get the job, even if it means harming herself so that she will appear more American—or whiter.

Even though Ifemelu's boyfriend, Curt, is white and living in America, he does not understand the systematic misogyny that forces her to relax her hair. He fails to understand America's oppressive force that compels Black women to relax their hair because hair discrimination is not an issue he has had to endure. Curt has probably never been denied a job or seen as unprofessional because of his natural hair. He asks Ifemelu, after seeing her relaxed hair, "Why do you have to do this? Your hair was gorgeous braided." Ifemelu tells him, "My full and cool hair would work if I were interviewing to be a backup singer in a jazz band, but I need to look professional for this interview, and professional means straight is best but if it's going to be curly then it has to be the white kind of curly, loose curls, or, at worst, spiral curls but never kinky." Curt replies, "It's so fucking *wrong* that you have to do this" (Adichie 252). He says this to Ifemelu as if she does not already know that this is wrong and an example of American misogyny—Ifemelu changing her natural form in order for white Americans to feel more comfortable in the workplace. Adichie uses the American workplace as an example of the sociopolitical hierarchy that Black women and their hair must operate in. The workplace is like America because while it provides spaces for Black women, the

spaces do not respect Black women in the same regards it respects white people and men. Because America does not view Black women's hair as professional, Black women are automatically excluded from the standard of American beauty and professionalism.

Furthermore, the scene between Ifemelu and Curt again shows the invisibility factor that Macías describes in her text. Curt is an example of the ignorance and conflict that Black women must endure in America. Curt enjoys Ifemelu's natural braided hair and even protests for her to keep it, but he does not understand that there is a system of institutionalized misogyny that prevents Ifemelu from wearing her braided natural hair in the workplace. Because Curt is a white man, he has not faced workplace discrimination because of his hair, but even his display of disbelief that Ifemelu has to chemically alter her hair to get a job illustrates how he, and the rest of white and male America, is oblivious of the experiences of Black women.

The workplace discrimination is further depicted when Ifemelu is physically suffering in order to get a job. While sleeping "at night, she struggled to find a comfortable position on her pillow. Two days later, there were scabs on her scalp. Three days later, they oozed pus" (Adichie 252). Even though Ifemelu was in pain and Curt wanted her to see a doctor, she could not do anything about her hair until she successfully got the job; a "after she breezed through the job interview, and the woman shook [Ifemelu's] . . . hand and said she would be a 'wonderful fit' in the company, she wondered if the woman would have felt the same way had she walked into that office wearing her thick, kinky, God-given halo of hair, the Afro" (252). Undergoing a process of Americanization, Ifemelu probably knows she would not have gotten the job with her Afro because it would have been

too revealing of her Black womanhood, and the afro would have been a striking difference from the obviously Eurocentric standard in which the company operates. By chemically altering her hair, Ifemelu portrays the unfortunate process of Black women having to compromise their health, beauty, and essence in order to make white Americans feel more comfortable, even if doing so physically and emotionally hurts them.

Eventually, Ifemelu's forced relaxed hair—the symbol for misogyny—begins to fall out, indicating how damaging American misogyny is to Black women. Wambui, Ifemelu's friend from the African Students Association, tells her to go natural: "It's the chemicals. . . Do you know what's in a relaxer? That stuff can kill you. You need to cut your hair and go natural. . . Relaxing your hair is like being in prison. You're caged in. Your hair rules you. . . You're always battling to make your hair do what it wasn't meant to do. If you go natural and take good care of your hair, it won't fall off like it's doing now" (Adichie 257-258). The process of going natural is described as a method for breaking free from America's oppressive system that constrains Black women to conform to the social hierarchy. This scene where Wambui talks about hair as if it is a living and breathing Black woman illustrates how the relaxer is not only a reinforcement of America's standard of beauty, but also a mechanism and metaphor for the sociopolitical hierarchy that oppresses Black women. This act to "go natural" is not only an act to correct damaged hair and celebrate Black beauty, but is also an example of the restorative justice Bailey and Trudy argue to battle misogyny in America. Trudy says that Bailey has helped her "center in on issues important to Black women for internal and external healing in the continuous push for justice" (Bailey and Trudy 766). Going natural, restoring the

health of Black women's hair, and internalizing a love for their natural hair exemplify a form of justice that not only heals Black women, but also combats the very misogynoir oppressing Black women. By going natural, Ifemelu not only heals her hair—damaged by an anti-Black and sexist system—but she also heals herself internally; moreover, Ifemelu resists the white supremacist-patriarchy demanding that she relax her hair.

Ifemelu eventually does decide to go natural when she cuts her hair into a small Afro, performing a restorative practice to both her relaxed hair and anti-Black misogynistic oppression. She is so affected by the American standards of beauty that she does not see the beauty in her own natural Afro. She says, "I look so ugly I'm scared of myself" (Adichie 258). She is afraid to go out anywhere, to leave her house, because her hair is not American "natural" anymore—straight, hanging hair—and it makes her feel incredibly insecure. But, when she does finally have the courage to go to work with her Afro, all of her co-workers have something to say about her Afro: "You look different...Does it mean anything? Like, something political? [...] Why did you cut your hair, hon? Are you a lesbian?" (262). Not only do her co-workers politicize her short hair, but, they connect it to sexuality. Her co-workers attempt to assign a deeper meaning to her hair, but this is not necessary. Because straight, hanging hair is engrained in American culture so intensely, anything not straight-hanging is either unnatural or must have some deep political meaning. One would understand the political significance of Afro by looking back at the Black Arts Movement. The politicization of Black women's hair stems from the Black Arts/Black Power movement of the 1960s and 70s. Going natural becomes politicized because "black nationalist, proletariat, anti-elitist movement

likened the chemical processing of naturally coily hair to self-denial and self-hate, a continuation of the slave-era hierarchy that positioned whites at the top and blacks at the bottom." Because of this rejection of chemically altering one's hair for white Americans, "the Afro hairstyle became the chief signifier of the self-identification and political orientation of the Black Arts/Black Power movement" (Iromuanya 167). That notwithstanding, Norwood explains how "the politics of hair is intersectional in nature, not only with regard to race and gender but also sexuality" (77). In the "Black heterosexual community, femininity is associated with hair length more than hair texture. If hair is too long—be it curly or coily, work in big Afro, dreaded or braided—feminine qualities are retained. If short and textured, specifically if very curly, sexuality is read as "butch" or "dyke"" (Norwood 77). Ifemelu's co-workers fail to understand why she cuts her hair. The gendering, sexualizing, and politicizing of Ifemelu's decision to go natural with short hair is only a product of the racist-sexist and heteronormative mentality in which "femininity is not only merely associated with long hair...but with White women" (Thompson 850).

Because Black women in American are expected to conform to America's Eurocentric beauty and professional standards, "it is not enough for Black women to simply wear their hair any way they please without their styling choice being called into question" (Thompson 851).

The journey of Black women's hair can be severely emotional, especially when they accept that long, flowing hair is the standard of beauty. Ifemelu realizes that, and snaps out of it. She finds a community she identifies with, one which celebrates natural hair by combating against the misogynoir mentality. The online community is called

happilykinkynappy.com. On the screen, she sees photos of Black women with “long trailing dreadlocks, small Afros, big Afros, twists, braids, massive raucous curls and coils. They call relaxers “creamy crack,” and sculpted for themselves a virtual world where their coily, kinky, nappy, woolly hair was normal.” Ifemelu describes it as “this *movement* of black women” (Adichie 262-263). Ifemelu finds a community of people who have suffered exactly what she has been suffering since she immigrated to America. Adichie continues the extended metaphor of the hair being a symbol of Black women in America. Not only is going natural and finding the online community a way for Ifemelu to correct her damaged hair and love her natural hair, but going natural is also used to illustrate the overall oppressive force of misogynoir in America. By discontinuing their use of relaxers, and loving their natural hair, these Black women are going against the American sense of beauty and professionalism, directly combating America’s social and political hierarchy of misogynoir. In the end, Ifemelu “looked into the mirror, sank her fingers into her hair, dense and spongy and glorious, and could not imagine it any other way. That simply, she fell in love with her hair” (264). The online communities that Black women have created for themselves encourages inclusion and a sense of belonging, even though America excludes them.

Similar to the online communities that Black women have created, hair salons such as the one Ifemelu visits in the beginning of the novel are another form of safe spaces for Black women’s hair. In the hair salon, Ifemelu speaks with African women, understands their perspective living in America, while still being tied to their homeland. Even when Ifemelu and Aisha have disagreements on how one should do one’s hair, the salon still becomes a safe place for Black women to engage in an oral

tradition and speak about their careers, love life, families, or hardships.

Even though the hair salon is a space for Black women, it can still be disrupted by white women, such as Kelsey, who comes into the salon. She asks for “box braids, medium size” (Adichie 230), but Ifemelu later identifies them as “cornrow[s]” (231), thus prompting a conversation about cultural appropriation—specifically how Kelsey, a white woman, can adopt a hairstyle that is predominantly worn by Black women, rename it box braids, and not be seen as unprofessional. Not only can this be seen as an example of the invisibility factor that Macías discusses in her study of the assault on Black women in America, but also Kelsey’s intrusion and claim over the Black hairstyle is an example of the erasure and plagiarism that Bailey and Trudy discuss in their article, “On Misogynoir: Citation, Erasure, and Plagiarism.” Bailey and Trudy explain a situation in which Katy Perry, a white popstar, “tweeted in defense of comedienne Leslie Jones, describing the leaking of nude photos of Jones a ‘misogynoir crime’ . . . however, many Black women Twitter users wanted to make sure that Perry didn’t get all the credit for using the word [Bailey] . . . created” (Bailey & Trudy 764). Similar to how it is important to note that “the creator of the term was almost erased” (764), it is important to note that Kelsey seeks to erase the legacy and tradition of Black women’s hairstyles by renaming it. Kelsey disrupts a designated space for Black women further when she asks, “But you couldn’t even have this business back in your country, right? Isn’t it wonderful that you get to come to the U.S. and now your kids can have a better life?” (Adichie 232). Her questioning the hair salon braiders alleged inability to have a hair salon in Africa is nothing more than a racist assumption, an assumption based on the stereotype that countries like Nigeria—or

any countries in Africa for that matter—do not have the resources that countries like America have. Additionally, Kelsey has an exceptionalist perspective by insinuating that Mariama, the owner of the hair braiding salon, is better off in America than she is in Nigeria. Because she is a white woman, Kelsey's view comes from her failure to acknowledge that America is not perfect, and she may be blind to other people's experiences such as Black women who are immigrants from African countries. Kelsey notices Ifemelu reading, but Ifemelu "did not want to start a conversation. Especially not with Kelsey. She recognized in Kelsey the nationalism of liberal Americans who copiously criticized America but did not like you to do so; they expected you to be silent and grateful, and always reminded you of how much better than wherever you had come from America was" (232-233). Ifemelu and Kelsey later disagree about their readings of a book about "modern Africa." Kelsey gives her argument of the book, as if she is an educator on all things Africa, explaining how to her, *Things Fall Apart* is a quaint novel, but *A Bend in the River* "made [her] truly understand how modern Africa works," (233). She says, "It's just so honest, the most honest book I've ever read about Africa" (233). Kelsey's ignorance of Africa is not only illustrated by her asking questions about Nigeria and pretending to know what "modern Africa" is like, even though she has not been there. Ifemelu fighting back against Kelsey's ignorance shows how the hair braiding salon can become a place of Africana womanism, ". . . an outgrowth of an African cultural schema that focuses on the matchless reality, difficulties, demands, and aspirations of women of African descent" (Mbilishaka 384). Even though Ifemelu and Aisha have disagreements about hair styling and their experiences living in America, they both recognize Kelsey's subtle racism. Their

reflection is mutual within a space for Black women—the African hair braiding salon. Mbilishaka recommends that in order "to respect the shared meaning and experiences of Black women, health researchers and practitioners should align methodologies and theory development with the cultural narratives articulated about hair, and utilize Black hair care spaces" (384). Mbilishaka furthermore states that while "Africana womanism articulates the significance of a range of themes from an Afrocentric and anti-sexist perspective, this article extends the themes associated with self-definition through enlivening existing community-centered mental health interventions embedded in the authentic bonds of sisterhood and nurturing in the Black hair salon setting" (384). Ifemelu, taking an Africana womanist approach, diffuses Kelsey's misogynoir against Mariama and the other employees even though Ifemelu and the employees had significant differences. They all share the understanding of being a Black woman in America. The Black space returns to conversations about hair, but Kelsey's racism still exists when Mariama asks her if she wants to use hair for her cornrows, and Kelsey replies, "Oh my God. So that's how it's done. I used to think African-American women with braided hair had such full hair!" (234). In doing so, she confirms she has absolutely no place to deem herself knowledgeable about "modern Africa" when she does not even know a typical process that Black women use at hair braiding salons.

Misogynoir and discrimination of Black women's hair infiltrates popular culture by using visual media to set whiteness as the standard for women's beauty. Because "the *authentic* natural Black aesthetic is often denied the right to exist" (Thompson 846), misogynoir is easily replicated by "racializing Black beauty congealed into a corporeal...and also a

psychic reality (846). This regulated Black beauty is completely evident in the media Americans consume. Curt and Ifemelu discuss this when Curt says *Essence* is “kind of racially skewed” because “only black women [are] featured” (Adichie 364). Ifemelu takes it upon herself to show how there are only “three black women in maybe two thousand pages of women’s magazines” (365). Ifemelu tells Curt how one magazine “tells you about the best conditioners—for straight, wavy, and curly. No kinky. See what they mean by curly? My hair could never do that” (365). Ifemelu even later writes an article about hair as a metaphor for race, describing “makeover shows on TV, [and] how the black woman has natural hair (coarse, coily, kinky, or curly) in the ugly ‘before’ picture, and in the pretty ‘after’ picture, somebody’s taken a hot piece of metal and singed her hair straight” (367). Adichie essentially explains how “Black women are bombarded with images that have normalized long, straight hair” (Thompson 847). America normalizes the idea that Black women must straighten their hair to be beautiful because it is closest to whiteness. This normalization is a misogynoir mentality.

Throughout *Americanah*, Ifemelu represents Black women’s struggle to gain complete autonomy over their natural hair in America because of Eurocentric beauty standards. Ifemelu battles America’s system of misogynoir—a system that regulates, politicizes, and dictates her natural hair. Adichie’s imagery and symbolism of the natural hair journey illustrates a specific form of misogynoir, but also a more complicated form of oppression that translates into politics, education, health, marriage, and workplaces. Furthermore, Adichie’s narrative of Black women chemically altering their hair, shaving it, going natural, and finding natural hair communities affirms both the Black hair

movement and the complex experience of Black women living in the U.S. Just like how “All black hair needs and deserves to be loved and appreciated by everyone,” Black women deserve the same respect and love (Doggett). In order for America to progress and for Black women to not only have a seat at the table, but a voice as well, narratives of misogynoir must be told like Adichie has done. The first step to dismantling a system that excludes Black women from spaces of authority and recognition is to allow their voices to be heard, whether it be day-to-day misogynoir like hair discrimination or the bigger sociopolitical hierarchies. Black women’s hair discrimination is just one agenda on the list for ending America misogynoir.

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