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# Forms of Care: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2014), Agency, and Decolonial Feminism

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Article abstract

*This article explores feminist politics in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah and the ways in which it interlinks with forms of care. I tease out the author's engagement with intersectional feminism as well as her blind spots. I situate Adichie's work within the context of postcolonial, popular and decolonial feminism, unpacking the significance of hair and the more general question of agency. I then move to show that the poetics of care developed in the novel ultimately falls short of embracing a decolonial feminist stance due to the relative invisibility of the neo-colonial structures at work in contemporary Nigeria.*

**FORMS OF CARE :  
CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *AMERICANAH* (2014),  
AGENCY, AND DECOLONIAL FEMINISM**

**Résumé**

Cet article explore la politique féministe telle qu'elle est représentée dans le roman *Americanah* de Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, ainsi que la manière dont ce féminisme s'entremêle avec des formes de *care*. Je cerne les contours de l'engagement affiché de l'autrice pour le féminisme intersectionnel, tout en pointant quelques angles morts. Après avoir situé l'œuvre d'Adichie dans le contexte des féminismes postcolonial, populaire et décolonial, j'étudie l'importance des cheveux et la question plus générale de l'agentivité. Dans la dernière partie, je démontre que la poétique du *care* développée dans le roman n'adhère pas totalement au féminisme décolonial en raison de l'invisibilité relative des structures néo-coloniales à l'œuvre au Nigeria pendant la période contemporaine.

Mots-clés : Adichie – *Americanah* – féminisme populaire – féminisme décolonial – formes de *care* – politique.

**Abstract**

*This article explores feminist politics in Chimimanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah and the ways in which it interlinks with forms of care. I tease out the author's engagement with intersectional feminism as well as her blind spots. I situate Adiche's work within the context of postcolonial, popular and decolonial feminism, unpacking the significance of hair and the more general question of agency. I then move to show that the poetics of care developed in the novel ultimately falls short of embracing a decolonial feminist stance due to the relative invisibility of the neo-colonial structures at work in contemporary Nigeria.*

*Keywords : Adichie – Americanah – popular feminism – decolonial feminism, – forms of care – politics.*

Well before she even turned 40, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the Nigerian author who now divides her time between Nigeria and the United States, had already become something of a literary superstar whose influence stretches well beyond the reach of her fiction. To date the author of three novels (*Purple Hibiscus*, 2003 ; *Half of a Yellow Sun*, 2006 ; *Americanah*, 2013), one collection of short stories (*The Thing Around Your Neck*, 2009), and two essays (*We Should All Be Feminists*, 2014, and *Dear Ijeawele, or a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*, 2017), Adichie has also delivered one of the ten most-viewed Ted Talks, « The Dangers of a Single Story » (2009). As the titles of her essays immediately reveal, and as she herself has openly said in numerous interviews and conversations, for Adichie « [f]emale agency is very important » <sup>1</sup>. She has also made it clear that women « can't all be one united voice, and this is why [she] talk[s] about thinking about feminism as "feminisms" » <sup>2</sup>, and she has fully endorsed the idea of « intersectional feminism » <sup>3</sup>. At the same time, she has also elsewhere affirmed her belief in « universal feminism », surprisingly acquiescing in the belief that there is « one tent under which every single person fits » <sup>4</sup>.

One should, perhaps, be wary of attaching too much importance to remarks that a writer can make in the course of interviews or conversations, and it is somewhat tedious, if not petty, to point out potential contradictions therein. For this reason, I will not dwell too much on Adichie's own pronouncements in interviews, but rather will look to her essays and fiction, and in particular her 2014 novel *Americanah*, in order to tease out what I see as a strong engagement with intersectional feminism which also nevertheless contains some blind spots. In order to do this, I would like to investigate, from several feminist standpoints, the various forms of care which Adichie carefully foregrounds in this novel in particular. This analysis will be supported by criticism on popular and decolonial feminism and will intersect with feminist critiques of « matters of care » <sup>5</sup>. This intersection of critical thinking from the Global North and the Global South is deliberate, indeed necessary, given Adichie's straddling of Nigeria, Great Britain and the United States in this novel.

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<sup>1</sup> RIFBJERG (Synne), « Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in Conversation with Synne Rifbjerg, 2014 », in : TUNCA (Daria), ed., *Conversations with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie*. Jackson : University Press of Mississippi, 2020, 236 p. ; p. 88-111 ; p. 109.

<sup>2</sup> OTAS (Belinda), « Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie : Bold and Unflappable », in : TUNCA (D.), ed., *Conversations...*, *op. cit.*, p. 157-164 ; p. 158.

<sup>3</sup> OTAS (B.), « Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie : Bold and Unflappable », *art. cit.*, p. 162.

<sup>4</sup> HALL (Tom), « Interview with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie », in : TUNCA (D.), ed., *Conversations...*, *op. cit.*, p. 165-181 ; p. 179.

<sup>5</sup> PUIG DE LA BELLACASA (Maria), *Matters of Care : Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*. Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 2017, 280 p.

## What Feminisms ?

As Françoise Vergès points out at the very beginning of her essay *Un féminisme décolonial* (2019), the term « feminist » is fraught with a complexity which is at least partly due to the « betrayals » (*trahisons*) of Western feminism and the speed with which the latter became caught up in its desire to carve out a place for itself in a Capitalist world, to such an extent that the once radical potential of the now hackneyed term has been co-opted by the neo-liberal right and even the far right <sup>6</sup>. The term is necessarily even more fraught in an African and African-American context as Audre Lorde was already pointing out back in the 1970s in her groundbreaking talk or essay « The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House » <sup>7</sup>, and as Sylvia Tamale has commented on more recently :

In the neoliberal geopolitical order, the continent of Africa itself is positioned at the assemblage point of multiple structural inequalities and erasures, relative to other continents. Operating simultaneously, the push-pull of multiple forms of power thrust Africa to the bottom via the overlapping hegemonies of race, civilization, markets, nation, gender, White supremacy, sexuality, language, culture and so forth. In sum, Africa « experiences » its subordination intersectionally <sup>8</sup>.

For Tamale, « feminism » in its Euro-American manifestations is limitative and unbending and this line of thinking resonates with the strong case Vergès makes in her essay for a critical decolonial pedagogy. Rejecting postures of universalism in favour of a multidimensional approach to feminism, this approach would incorporate theories and practices forged within anti-racist, anti-capitalist and anti-colonial movements <sup>9</sup>. For her, if feminism remains embedded in a divisive binary of women and men and does not analyse how slavery, colonialism, and imperialism impact on this division, nor how Europe imposes its own conception of the division

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<sup>6</sup> VERGÈS (Françoise), *Un féminisme décolonial*. Paris : La Fabrique éd., 2019, 152 p. ; p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> LORDE (Audre), « The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House », in : ANZALDÚA (Gloria), MORAGA (Cherríe), ed., *This Bridge Called My Back : Writings by Radical Women of Color*. New York : Kitchen Table Press, 1983, 261 p. ; p. 98-101 ; p. 100.

<sup>8</sup> TAMALE (Sylvia), *Decolonization and Afro-Feminism*. Ottawa : Daraja Press, 2020, 420 p. ; p. 67. See also the important work carried out on African women and feminism by Oyèrónké Oyěwùmi : « The White Woman's Burden : African Women in Western Feminist Discourse », in : OYĒWÙMI (O.), ed., *African Women and Feminism : Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood*. Trenton (NJ) ; Asmara : Africa World Press, 2004, 282 p. ; p. 25-43 ; p. 40.

<sup>9</sup> VERGÈS (F.), *Un féminisme décolonial*, op. cit., p. 33-36.

between women and men on the peoples it has colonised, then this feminism is flawed <sup>10</sup>.

Carole Boyce-Davies and Chandra Talpade Mohanty have also, of course, expressed similar positions, the former expounding upon the idea of « migratory subjectivity » and the necessity of considering Black women subjects' refusal to be subjugated : « Black female subjectivity then can be conceived not primarily in terms of domination, subordination or "subalternization," but in terms of slipperiness, elsewhere » <sup>11</sup>. Mohanty's hugely influential « Under Western Eyes » (1984, revised in 2002 <sup>12</sup>) made it clear that « cross-cultural feminist work must be attentive to the micropolitics of context, subjectivity, and struggle, as well as to the macro-politics of global economic and political systems and processes » <sup>13</sup>, and guarded against the continued flourishing of « Eurocentric analytic paradigms » <sup>14</sup>.

Adichie's novel *Americanah* resonates strongly with Boyce-Davies' concerns and does indeed foreground a poetics of « slipperiness » and « elsewhere », even as it is attentive to micro- and macro-politics and the intersection of inequalities and forms of oppression, and her essays certainly emphasize feminist agency and the necessity of stimulating it in both girls and boys. The context in which Adichie makes both her fictional and non-fictional interventions is nevertheless slightly different from the feminist approaches mentioned above. Her work, in particular *Americanah*, is firmly anchored in popular culture which Tricia Rose, paraphrasing Stuart Hall, defines as « not a genre, nor a political position, but rather a terrain of struggle between resistance and incorporation, of politically radical challenges to dominant, repressive ideas » <sup>15</sup>. Akeia A.F. Benard provides an excellent overview of the dynamics which subtend « the fundamental gendered / raced / sexual relationships that were created under colonialism » and addresses the tensions within Black feminist thought

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<sup>10</sup> VERGÈS (F.), *Un féminisme décolonial*, op. cit., p. 31.

<sup>11</sup> BOYCE-DAVIES (Carole), *Black Women, Writing and Identity : Migrations of the Subject*. London ; New York : Routledge, 1994, 240 p. ; p. 36.

<sup>12</sup> MOHANTY (Chandra Talpade), « Under Western Eyes : Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses », *boundary 2*, (Duke University Press), vol. 12-13, vol. 12, n°3 – vol. 13, n°1 (*On Humanism and the University I : The Discourse of Humanism*), Spring-Autumn, 1984, p. 333-358 ; online : <https://doi.org/10.2307/302821> (c. le 07-06-2021).

<sup>13</sup> MOHANTY (C.T.), *Feminism Without Borders : Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham ; London : Duke University Press, 2003, 312 p. ; p. 223.

<sup>14</sup> MOHANTY (C.T.), *Feminism Without Borders...*, op. cit., p. 229.

<sup>15</sup> ROSE (Tricia), « Black Feminism, Popular Culture, and Respectability Politics : Pembroke Center's Annual Elizabeth Munves Sherman '77, P'06, P'09 Lecture in Gender and Sexuality Studies », Pembroke Hall, March 16, 2016, 14'35 ; URL : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=57EW8AElyVU> (c. le 07-06-2021).

which pit a structural analysis against an analysis of individual empowerment :

When it comes to popular culture, is your Black feminism rooted in the processes of decolonizing structures [...] (structural arguments), or is it rooted in individual feelings of personal empowerment and liberation for Black women who are able to see their experiences encapsulated and publicized in a way that speaks to Black feminine power (agency arguments) ? <sup>16</sup>.

More recently still, Brazilian feminist Djamila Ribeiro has pointed out that empowerment cannot be self-centred or a simple transferral of power, and that it must also look at both mechanisms of oppression and resistance. What is most important for Ribeiro is the fact that empowerment implies a collective action developed by individuals in positions of power or decision-making ; in this way, she bridges the gap between the « agency arguments » and the « structural arguments » summarized by Benard <sup>17</sup>. Adichie too, as I will show, bridges this gap, but I will also argue that she ultimately falls short of representing or endorsing a decolonial feminism, notwithstanding her efforts to foreground a poetics of care and her « understanding of the political grammar of colonialism's durable presence, the dispositions it fosters, the indignities it nourishes, the indignations that are responsive to those effects » <sup>18</sup>.

## Forms of care

Rather than analyzing Adichie's essays and fiction exclusively from a broadly « feminist » angle, I would like to unpack the ways in which she develops a poetics of care which resonates with both feminist and decolonial politics. As Joan Tronto points out,

[i]n our present culture there is a great ideological advantage to gain from keeping care from coming into focus. By not noticing how pervasive and central care is to human life, those who are in positions of power and privilege can continue to ignore and to degrade the activities of care and those who give care <sup>19</sup>.

She defines caring thus :

<sup>16</sup> BENARD (Akeia A.F.), « Colonizing Black Female Bodies Within Patriarchal Capitalism : Feminist and Human Rights Perspectives », *Sexualization, Media & Society*, October-December 2016, p. 1-11 ; p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> RIBEIRO (Djamila), *Chroniques sur le féminisme noir*. Traduit par Paula Anacaona. Paris : Éd. Anacaona, 2019, 180 p. ; p. 124-126.

<sup>18</sup> STOLER (Ann Laura), *Duress : Imperial Durabilities in Our Times*. Durham ; London : Duke University Press, 2016, 448 p. ; p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> TRONTO (Joan), *Moral Boundaries : A Political Argument for and Ethic of Care*. New York ; London : Routledge, 1994, 242 p. ; p. 111.

On the most general level, we suggest that caring be viewed as a species activity that include[s] everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our “world” so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world include[s] our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web <sup>20</sup>.

Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, writing some twenty-five years later, takes Tronto’s definition as her point of departure, and introduces a complexity to the debate (notably making it less anthropocentric). She enjoins us to be careful, noting that « thinking in the world involves acknowledging our own involvements in perpetuating dominant values rather than retreating to the sheltered position of an enlightened observer who knows better » <sup>21</sup>. She sees « this collective reenactment of committed knowledge as a form of care » in itself <sup>22</sup>. Adichie touches on all these aspects of caring in her novel *Americanah*, in which a « caring knowledge politics » <sup>23</sup> is apparent in the attention paid not just to the activities of those who give care, but also to certain characters’ own awareness of their perpetuation of dominant capitalist values.

## Care and hair

A considerable part of *Americanah* <sup>24</sup> is devoted to hair, and Adichie’s attention to this resonates with the Irish-Nigerian critic Emma Dabiri’s writing in *Don’t Touch My Hair* (2019) : « Our unique hair texture allows us to be the living embodiments of a complex visual language, the scope of its concerns social, technological, philosophical and spiritual – a visual language that was designed to be transmitted by our features » <sup>25</sup>. In many ways, Adichie’s foregrounding of the hair-braiding salon, the societal constraints placed on Black women (whether African-American or African) in the U.S. and, later, Nigeria, in relation to « appropriate » hairstyles, is not just a political statement, but also an opportunity to emphasize this « complex visual language » and the social connections linked to caring for hair (one’s own, or someone else’s). The parts of this novel which focus on hair participate in the « caring knowledge politics » referred to above, and which I intend to analyze here.

It is significant that it should be the hair-braiding salon from which Ifemelu’s life prior to her return to Nigeria is recounted and that the

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<sup>20</sup> TRONTO (J.), *Moral Boundaries...*, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

<sup>21</sup> PUIG DE LA BELLACASA (M.), *Matters of Care...*, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>22</sup> PUIG DE LA BELLACASA (M.), *Matters of Care...*, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>23</sup> PUIG DE LA BELLACASA (M.), *Matters of Care...*, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>24</sup> ADICHIE (Chimamanda Ngozi), *Americanah*. London : Fourth Estate, 2013, 477 p. (hereafter A).

<sup>25</sup> DABIRI Emma), *Don’t Touch My Hair*. London : Penguin, 2019, 256 p. ; p. 87-88.

diegesis should return so frequently to this space throughout the novel. The braiding itself, Ifemelu's specific instructions (her agency) as to how her hair should be braided, the tension and gender politics in the salon, which accompany what is implicitly presented as Ifemelu's reassessment of her past, all contribute to highlighting the manner in which the many different strands of this story, which straddle the Atlantic, are woven (braided) together.

The salon is firstly described in a generic fashion, as from a hotch-potch of all the salons she has visited Ifemelu imagines the salon and the « Francophone West African » braiders before she even arrives there (A, p. 9). The relative economic poverty is conveyed through the observation of « the room thick with disregard, the paint peeling, the walls plastered with large posters of braided hairstyles and smaller posters that said Quick Tax Refund » (A, p. 9) yet this is immediately offset by the warmth and familiarity of the welcome : « Halima smiled at Ifemelu, a smile that, in its warm knowingness, said welcome to a fellow African » (A, p. 11). Adichie does not in any way romanticise this sense of familiarity, and at many points in the hair salon parts of the novel she underscores the tensions among these women, workers and customers alike. The first instance of this is when Aisha braids Ifemelu's hair too tight despite the latter's protests, only renegeing when the owner reprimands her in French. Ifemelu, reflecting on Aisha's attitude, sees her as « a true market woman, immune to the niceties of American customer service » (A, p. 13). A similar interaction between Mariama and another customer later underscores this point : « This was a part of her new American self, this fervor of customer service, this shiny falseness of surfaces » (A, p. 188). This raises, and goes against the grain of, a significant question which is the way customer service as practiced in the United States is premised on a mere pretense of care, a false and shallow interest in the customer, which Mariama upholds, but Aisha rejects in favour of a more authentic exchange. The potential for authentic exchange is initially thwarted by Ifemelu's snobbery when she tells Aisha she attended Princeton : « Yes, the sort of place that Aisha could only imagine, the sort of place that would never have signs that said Quick Tax Refund » (A, p. 16). At this point, Ifemelu is not even at the first stage of caring, as developed by Tronto, « caring about », which « involves the recognition that care is necessary », and which is also « culturally and individually shaped »<sup>26</sup>. Ifemelu's absence of care or consideration for Aisha's anguish is culturally shaped by her economic success and her interest in Aisha is that of either simple curiosity or as fodder for a blog post she will now never write.

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<sup>26</sup> TRONTO (J.), *Moral Boundaries...*, *op. cit.*, p. 106. Tronto identifies four phases (caring about, taking care of, care-giving, care-receiving), as well as four elements of an ethic of care : attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness (p. 105-108 ; p. 127-137).



However, as the novel progresses and the scene periodically shifts back to Ifemelu's long afternoon in the salon, the politics of care also shift so that the care and attentiveness with which Aisha braids Ifemelu's hair is eventually reciprocated : « Ifemelu's irritation dissolved, and in its place, a gossamer sense of kinship grew », a « new bond » (A, p. 363). Faced with Aisha's distress at her precarious situation as an undocumented worker in the U.S. unable to return home for her parents' funerals, Ifemelu develops an empathy which immediately translates into a promise of help and leads her into the next two stages of caring as developed by Tronto : a sense of responsibility and responsiveness <sup>27</sup>. « She should get up and leave, [...] but she could not get up and leave » (A, p. 364) : the repetition here, in which the only change is the substitution of the modal « could not » for « should », reinforces the tension between, on the one hand, Ifemelu's rational approach, influenced by the « political order that presumes only independence and autonomy as the nature of human life » <sup>28</sup> and, on the other, her understanding of Aisha's vulnerability and her ability to help. Having been separated from women such as Aisha through her economic success and integration, Ifemelu is now once again, briefly, aware of what links them. Adichie's emphasis on the hair-braiding salon shows an awareness of how « [f]ocusing on everydayness, on the uneventful, [...] is a way of noticing care's ordinary doings, the domestic unimpressive ways in which we get through the day, without which no event would be possible » <sup>29</sup>. What Adichie reveals in these scenes is precisely the everyday economy of care carried out by undocumented immigrants whose precariousness is a condition of the existence of capitalist North American culture.

Reflections on hair, and caring for it, are not limited to the hair-braiding sections of the novel. Several passages intricately detail the efforts required by Ifemelu to make her hair « look professional » <sup>30</sup>. In these instances, the care required, presented as « self-care » by fashion magazines and in North American culture more generally, translates into a tortuous process which is physically damaging, such as when Ifemelu relaxes her hair for the first time in preparation for a job interview. She significantly experiences pain (« needles of stinging pain shot up from different parts of her scalp, down to different parts of her body, back up to her head », A, p. 203), and it is significant that she should feel it all over her body and that the vocabulary of torture or curing sickness (« needles ») and war (« shot ») should be mobilized here. The hairdresser congratulates her on her « white girl swing », but Ifemelu simply smells

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<sup>27</sup> TRONTO (J.), *Moral Boundaries...*, *op. cit.*, p. 131-134.

<sup>28</sup> TRONTO (J.), *Moral Boundaries...*, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

<sup>29</sup> PUIG DE LA BELLACASA (M.), *Matters of Care...*, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

<sup>30</sup> RIFBJERG (S.), « Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in Conversation with Synne Rifbjerg », *art. cit.*, p. 92.

« something organic dying which should not have died » (A, p. 203). The use of the indefinite pronoun « something » in tandem with the « white girl swing » allows Adichie to pinpoint the prevalence of White beauty norms as that which is to be aspired to, and the invisibilisation and inability to even name what organic « something » is dying. What is implicit is that it is not just the hair itself which is burnt in the flat-ironing process, but a whole (African and African-American) tradition of hair care. Many of the blog posts subsequent to this take on a didactic and political function, enabling Adichie, through Ifemelu, to make bold statements about envisioning hair care differently, and about the levels of acceptability of Black women's hair in American society. This reaches its apex in the post on Michelle Obama (A, p. 296-8) where what has been implicitly suggested up until that point is explicitly laid out : « Imagine if Michelle Obama got tired of all the heat and decided to go natural and appeared on TV with lots of woolly hair, or tight spirally curls. [...] She would totally rock but poor Obama would certainly lose the independent vote, even the undecided Democrat vote » (A, p. 297). The flippant tone here (« she would totally rock ») belies the seriousness of the assertion and therefore renders it all the more powerful. Even though Ifemelu humorously rejects the clichés associated with hair styled in either braids, corn rows or an Afro (« No, it's not political. No, I am not an artist or poet or singer. Not an earth mother either », A, p. 297) she underscores the political currency of hair in all spheres of life in the U.S., from the lowest spheres to the highest, even satirising the ways in which politically conscious African Americans use their hair to make various statements.

This emphasis on hair and care is a strong Afro-feminist intervention. Adichie herself has commented on the importance of tackling easy assumptions about African women's hair in a pedagogical manner<sup>31</sup>. All kinds of agency over what hair styles to adopt are broached in the novel in a nonjudgmental way and are rendered visible. Adichie is invested in a form of decolonising here as she « start[s] a conversation about black women's hair »<sup>32</sup>, foregrounding and even celebrating the « complex visual language »<sup>33</sup> it is based on, and translating it for other readers in a form of « caring knowledge politics »<sup>34</sup>.

<sup>31</sup> RIFBJERG (S.), « Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in Conversation with Synne Rifbjerg », *art. cit.*, p. 90-93.

<sup>32</sup> NWONWU (Mazi), « Exclusive Interview : Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie », in : TUNCA (D.), ed., *Conversations...*, *op. cit.*, p. 112-151 ; p. 146.

<sup>33</sup> DABIRI (E.), *Don't Touch My Hair*, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

<sup>34</sup> PUIG DE LA BELLACASA (M.), *Matters of Care...*, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

## Caring and agency

Adichie's essay *We Should All Be Feminists* conveys an important message about gender equality. In this essay, and indeed in her more recent one, *Dear Ijeawele*, she exposes the double discourses and practices which relegate women to the background, whether in Nigeria or the United States. Both essays lay emphasis on the necessity of developing girls' and women's agency in personal and professional situations, and this position is echoed in *Americanah*, notably towards the end when Obinze compares Ifemelu to his wife Kosi : « He should not compare, but he did. Ifemelu demanded of him. [...] She expected to be satisfied, but Kosi did not » (A, p. 462). This short passage highlights Ifemelu's agency, and not just in sexual matters, juxtaposing it to Kosi's « complaisance » (A, p. 462), the likes of which Adichie has spoken of elsewhere as the result of cultural conditioning, particularly in Nigerian society : « Girls grow up to be women who cannot say they have desire. Who silence themselves. Who cannot say what they truly think. Who have turned pretense into an art form » <sup>35</sup>.

Many of the Nigerian chapters of *Americanah* are devoted to emphasizing the limited agency of Nigerian women such as Auntie Uju, Ranyinudo, and Kosi, even when they are presented as beautiful and professionally successful, and these passages function as the fictional counterparts to Adichie's essays on gender politics. Although Auntie Uju ends up relatively happy, this happiness is contingent upon a stable relationship with different men who provide economic security, and through this character Adichie highlights the discrepancy between professional accomplishment and domestic subordination in a heteropatriarchal world. Ranyinudo, Ifemelu's friend, has only one concern : getting married to a wealthy man. As a result of this, she is a rather two-dimensional character, a mere illustration of one of Adichie's suggestions in *Dear Ijeawele*, also echoed in her interview with Mazi Nwonwu <sup>36</sup> : « We condition girls to aspire to marriage and we do not condition boys to aspire to marriage, and so there is already a terrible imbalance at the start » <sup>37</sup>.

What we therefore see unfolding is that self-care, as it is presented in capitalist cultures as caring for one's appearance, often ultimately goes hand in hand with an absence of agency, even though it is frequently packaged as the opposite. Ifemelu educates her boyfriend Curt about fashion magazines and their overwhelming whiteness but falls short of interrogating the fashion industry more generally for its complicity in the

<sup>35</sup> ADICHIE (C.N.), *We Should All Be Feminists*. London : Fourth Estate, 2014, 64 p. ; p. 33.

<sup>36</sup> NWONWU (M.), « Exclusive Interview... », *art. cit.*, p. 141.

<sup>37</sup> ADICHIE (C.N.), *Dear Ijeawele : A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*. London : Fourth Estate, 2017, 80 p. ; p. 30.

erosion of women's agency. This is perhaps unsurprising when one considers Adichie's own interest in fashion, best exemplified by the fact that the designer Dior was authorized to « borrow » the title of the essay *We Should All Be Feminists* and commercialise it on a t-shirt which is currently on sale at 620 €.

Yet the relationship between care and agency is much more complex than Adichie's interest in commercially inaccessible fashion might have us believe. Caring about appearance is presented as central in the novel for both women and men, but it is caring about others which is particularly stressed, notwithstanding the careless and often selfish attitude displayed by Ifemelu, and the potential this contains for developing agencies. Maria Puig de la Bellacasa encourages us to see that the

affective tensions of care are present in its very etymology, which includes notions of both « anxiety, sorrow and grief » and « serious mental attention ». Or one could wonder, aren't anxiety, sorrow, and grief actual threats to the serious mental attention required by thinking with care ? <sup>38</sup>

In *Americanah*, Adichie engages with these tensions, showing how « anxiety, sorrow and grief » do indeed threaten both « the serious mental attention required by thinking with care » and the very agency of certain characters.

Ifemelu and Dike both suffer from depression in the novel, although Dike's is more serious since it ends in attempted suicide. In both cases, their depression is sparked by their Afro-diasporic experience, by too much caring about, and taking care of (to use Tronto's terms) the difficulties encountered. In both cases, their agency is seriously diminished as is made clear in the following paragraph concerning Ifemelu :

Everything had thickened. She was swallowed, lost in a viscous haze, shrouded in a soup of nothingness. Between her and what she should feel, there was a gap. She cared about nothing. She wanted to care, but she no longer knew how ; it had slipped from her memory, the ability to care (A, p. 157).

The use of the passive voice which elides her agency, coupled with the sibilant and fricative consonance and alliteration, as well as the heavy imagery of death and drowning, all convey the depth of Ifemelu's depression and overtly link it to an incapacity to care. Paradoxically, her agency is reaffirmed only when she becomes the subject of the sentences describing her inability to care. Ifemelu's depression is triggered by her decision to engage in a form of sex work with a banal tennis coach who perversely deploys the vocabulary of care and declares he « just need[s] some human contact to relax » (A, p. 153), and « need[s] help » (A, p. 144), in other words, a form of « caring about » which is remunerated <sup>39</sup>. The real cause,

<sup>38</sup> PUIG DE LA BELLACASA (M.), *Matters of Care...*, *op. cit.*, p. 92-93.

<sup>39</sup> Adichie has actually spoken of this episode as a form of « sexual assault », but it seems to me that the care Ifemelu takes before going to meet the man (washing,

however, is a form of anguish (or « anxiety, sorrow and grief ») in relation to Obinze and a desire to protect him, and their relationship, from this betrayal. In short, it is because Ifemelu cares about Obinze that her body's inadvertent physical experience of pleasure with this man she dislikes becomes the trigger for a disengagement with caring and momentarily strips her of her agency. Even when her friend Ginika suggests that she is suffering from depression, Ifemelu is skeptical : « Depression was what happened to Americans, with their self-absorbing need to turn everything into an illness » (A, p. 157). At this point Ifemelu rejects the way in which self-care is often synonymous with self-indulgence in the United States ; in other words, it grants people far too much agency and ultimately renders them ineffective. This attitude is later nuanced, especially after Dike's suicide attempt, which Ranyinudo, to Ifemelu's outrage, perceives as « foreign behavior » (A, p. 426), but suffice to say that caring and agency are intertwined in complex ways in this novel where almost nothing is binary.

## Blind spots

For all that Adichie's fictional and non-fictional work has been hailed as « feminist », both in Nigeria and in the Global North, and although it eschews binary, simplistic understandings of what feminism might entail, it is not quite fully a decolonial feminism. Although it foregrounds various types of feminist agency, it falls short of questioning the structural and systemic mechanisms by which women, and Black women in particular, are denied empowerment. As Ayélé Marie d'Almeida and Sandra Coffi point out, in enabling women to become agents of development, their empowerment is necessarily haunted by the specter of neo-liberalism and does not allow for any real interrogation of the status quo, nor any real systemic dismantling or transformation of social structures <sup>40</sup>. Adichie's novel *Americanah* and her essays on feminism limit themselves to a largely heteronormative vision <sup>41</sup> in which race and gender are explored

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shaving her underarms, applying lipstick) all suggest a much greater agency than Adichie seems prepared to admit. There is something in the text which resists easy interpretation, even if we read Ifemelu's self-care here as a form of distancing herself from this man – see : DUNCA (D.), « The Novelist as Therapist : A Conversation with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie », in : DUNCA (D.), ed., *Conversations...*, op. cit., p. 182-200 ; p. 193.

<sup>40</sup> D'ALMEIDA (Ayélé Marie), COFFI (Sandra), « Colonialisme, genre et développement », *Possibles*, vol. 43, n°2 (*Décolonialité(s) : dialogues théoriques et expérimentations*), automne 2019, p. 91-99 ; p. 96.

<sup>41</sup> Although her essays in particular are largely heteronormative, Adichie has written short stories which break out of this framework. See in particular « Jumping Monkey Hill » and « On Monday of Last Week » in her collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* – London : Fourth Estate, 2009, 300 p.

intersectionally, but which engages less with the structures which uphold and exacerbate class politics. The poignant representations of Obinze's experience in England in particular display a deep awareness of class issues, especially in relation to migrants, but he returns to Lagos and « takes up a position as a Big Man amongst the wealthy elite »<sup>42</sup>. The final part of the novel contains a passage in which, through Obinze's focalisation, Adiche pays brief lip service to the limits and abuses of the petrochemical industry (A, p. 471). This passage works on one level to exonerate Obinze from association with the inequalities engendered by this industry in Nigeria, even though all his wealth and influence in real estate is inextricably linked to it, and Ifemelu and Obinze's happy ending contingent upon it, yet it also indicates that Adichie is fully aware of the neocolonial mechanisms at play in contemporary Nigeria. Moreover, what remains partially invisible in *Americanah* are the forms of care provided in everyday situations : the chauffeurs, the maids, the gatemen and the plantain hawkers, all of whom are nameless. This is significantly less the case in the parts of the novel set in the United States than in those set in Nigeria. Taxi drivers and hair-braiders loom large in Ifemelu's American experience, just as lower-paid workers are very present in Obinze's disastrous experience in the U.K., but the final part of the novel elides those whose « caring [...] is a doing that most often involves asymmetry : someone is paid for doing the care that others can pay off to forget how much they need it »<sup>43</sup>.

This blind spot becomes even more obvious in Ifemelu's reverence for Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama, a reverence which Adichie clearly shares<sup>44</sup>. In her conversation with Daria Tunca, Adichie mentions a controversy she caused in Nigeria over her questioning Clinton about the fact that « wife » is the first descriptive in her *Twitter* profile : « On the car radio, I heard people saying, "How dare Chimamanda ask Hillary Clinton about this ; Chimamanda has no respect for marriage" »<sup>45</sup>. Adichie presents herself here as a fearless feminist, prepared to put difficult questions to the former Secretary of State and Democratic Party candidate for the 2016 presidential election. Yet although her question is political, by remaining solely on the territory of mainstream feminist politics, Adichie turns a blind eye to more complex questions relative to Clinton's decisions as a key player in the Obama administration. When questioned on Clinton's role in the military intervention in Libya, Adichie responds : « I thought the whole Libya thing was a complete disaster and was ill-conceived, but I

<sup>42</sup> KNUDSEN (Eva Rask), RAHBK (Ulla), *In Search of the Afropolitan : Encounters, Conversations, and Contemporary Diasporic African Literature*. London ; New York : Rowam & Littlefield, 2016, 326 p. ; p. 285.

<sup>43</sup> PUIG DE LA BELLACASA (M.), *Matters of Care...*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>44</sup> See for instance her conversations and interviews with Rifberg (p. 92-94), Nwonwu (p. 145), and Otas (p. 161) in : DUNCA (D.), ed., *Conversations...*, *op. cit.*

<sup>45</sup> TUNCA (D.), « The Novelist as Therapist... », *art. cit.*, p. 185.

just refuse to hold Hillary Clinton personally responsible for it. It's a larger part of a long history of American policy and so I don't take it as a personal failing of Hillary Clinton »<sup>46</sup>. Although Adichie does acknowledge the disastrous nature of U.S. intervention, she reduces the Libya fiasco, which has caused the country to descend into a civil war which has in turn generated a horrific migrant and humanitarian crisis, to a mere « thing », thus emptying it of any political importance. Notwithstanding Hillary Clinton's infamous statement, « We came, we saw, he died », in reference to the brutal death of the Libyan Dictator Colonel Gaddafi, for Adichie, no responsibility is to be imputed to Clinton for the equally neutral formulation, « American policy ».

I mention this for two reasons. Firstly, it is curious that Ifemelu, although not necessarily a mouthpiece for Adichie, and Adichie herself in various conversations, should pick out these two powerful American women, Michelle Obama and Hillary Clinton, as role models, and not mention any Nigerian (or African) ones. Secondly, these pronouncements show the limits of the kind of feminism Adichie ultimately espouses and position it very far from the potential embodied by a decolonial feminist approach. For Chandra Mohanty, « if we begin our analysis from, and limit it to, the space of privileged communities, our visions of justice are more likely to be exclusionary because privilege nurses blindness to those without the same privileges »<sup>47</sup>. It is difficult to find a more powerful example of privilege than Hillary Clinton whose ethics of care manifestly stops at the borders of the United States and whose feminism is an example of « femonationalism »<sup>48</sup>. For Françoise Vergès, the inclusive feminism Adichie purports to present in *We Should All Be Feminists* is impossible quite simply because all women are not equal, and neither are all men. She sees Adichie's arguments in this essay as fallacious since they elide all the criticism carried out by decolonial and Black feminists who argue in favour of liberating the whole of society and who refuse to sideline men in this process<sup>49</sup>. Vergès's analysis here is, however, perhaps a little disingenuous. In her essays, Adichie does not sideline men at all ; in fact, she actively encourages them to rethink masculinity<sup>50</sup> and she gives specific examples of the ways in which heteropatriarchy disempowers women (rape, division of household tasks, unequal freedoms in public

<sup>46</sup> OTAS (B.), « Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie : Bold and Unflappable », *art. cit.*, p. 160.

<sup>47</sup> MOHANTY (C.T.), *Feminism Without Borders...*, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

<sup>48</sup> Françoise Vergès defines « femonationalism » as an ideology complicit with new forms of capitalism and imperialism, which remains silent in the face of armed interventions in other parts of the world – VERGÈS (F.), *Un féminisme décolonial*, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

<sup>49</sup> VERGÈS (F.), *Un féminisme décolonial*, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

<sup>50</sup> See for instance the pages in *We Should All Be Feminists* devoted to suggestions for changes in how boys should be brought up and where she tackles gender conditioning – ADICHIE (C.N.), *We Should All Be Feminists*, *op. cit.*, p. 26-34, p. 40-46.

spaces). I would simply add that Adichie, in foregrounding Clinton (or, for that matter, Michelle Obama) as a role model for young women, contributes, perhaps unwittingly, to reinforcing a very limited and normative form of Western feminism which is always contingent on other forms of exploitation. Although clearly interested in matters of care, and the agencies they engender, Adichie ultimately does not manage to engage with « situated recognitions of care's importance that operate displacements in established hierarchies of value » to understand « how divergent modes of valuing care coexist and co-make each other in non-innocent ways »<sup>51</sup>.

To conclude, although Adichie is clearly one of an exciting new generation of African women writers who grapple with the complex questions of feminisms in an African and global context, the politics of care in a neo-liberal world, and the potential for decolonial analyses and poetics, her work, both fictional and non-fictional, falls short of fully embracing decolonial politics. This does not mean her work is not important and that it does not represent a significant intervention in contemporary postcolonial literatures. It clearly speaks to many people, it triggers discussion and debate, in Nigeria, the United States and elsewhere, and Adichie herself is clearly something of a role model for the next generation. However, the form of feminism she embraces remains relatively devoid of engagement with systemic forms of discrimination due to capitalism, coloniality and neo-imperialism, and bound up in a limited vision of how far a decolonial ethics of care might, even should, take us.

Fiona MCCANN<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> PUIG DE LA BELLACASA (M.), *Matters of Care...*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

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