

Texts, Talks and Tailoring: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Fashion Politics

In September 2016, the celebrated author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie attended the *Dior* catwalk show at Paris fashion week (Carlos 2016).<sup>1</sup> While the writer's appearance was unsurprising given her recent inclusion in the *Vanity Fair* International Best-Dressed List (Anon 2016), Adichie was in fact the show's guest of honour because the title of her feminist manifesto, *We Should All Be Feminists* (Adichie 2014), was emblazoned on a T-shirt worn by one of the models (Carlos 2016). The piece has undergone a remarkable transformation since it was first presented in a *TED* talk in December 2012.<sup>2</sup> It has been published as a pocket essay (Adichie 2014), featured on a track by Beyoncé (2013), and, as illustrated above, materially woven into the collection of a famous fashion brand.

Analysing the multiple manifestations of *We Should All Be Feminists*, this article assesses the creative effects of Adichie's portrayal of fashion in order to deepen understanding of the intersections between literary celebrity and politics. By responding to Pamela Church Gibson's (2012, p.11) argument that Celebrity Studies neglects the significance of fashion, I offer a case study that demonstrates the potential for fashion to provide a productive and mediating link between the fields of celebrity, politics and literature. While scholars such as R. S. Koppen (2009) and Rod Rosenquist (2013) note that the clothing and brand naming of authors were instrumental in developing the modernist literary celebrity, little work has been done to consider the significance of sartorial fashion for the phenomenon of the celebrity writer in the digital media age. As fashion functions on different material, modal and discursive levels, I argue that Adichie deploys its transformative significance to forge an intersectional and transmedia discursive space: one that enables her to speak in

registers at once popular and literary, and to engage diverse audiences with her feminist politics.

The significance of fashion for Adichie's celebrity image and political discourse is beyond doubt. However, journalists and critics tend to read her deployment of fashion discourse and imagery through narrow conceptual lenses. During the launch of her novel *Americanah*, for instance, the media became preoccupied with the politics of the novel's exploration of black women's hair.<sup>3</sup> Expanding on this, Erin Johns Speese (2016) argues that as a black female intellectual, Adichie is expected to market her body as an object of consumption. Although her argument resituates Adichie's celebrity in the realm of black feminist thought by resonating with bell hooks' call (1982, pp. 12-13) for an intersectional approach to the racial and gendered oppression affecting black women, such analysis risks denying the potential for more productive conclusions to be drawn from Adichie's fashion politics. As Judith Perani and Norma Woolf (1999, p. 28) argue, clothing can be used for multiple purposes: to proclaim solidarity, convey status, and resist tradition. The broader field of fashion thus represents a complex interweaving of different material, semantic and political threads, and can be used to add a further conceptual layer to both hooks' intersectional framework and the study of the politics of literary celebrity.

A first observation about *We Should All Be Feminist* is that Adichie uses references to fashion in order to challenge stereotypes about feminism. At one point, the writer playfully self-identifies as 'a Happy African Feminist Who Does Not Hate Men And Who Likes To Wear Lip Gloss And High Heels For Herself' (2014, p. 10). Her tongue-in-cheek tone undercuts historical ideas about feminism being incompatible with femininity and with it being un-African. Furthermore, the

references to lip gloss and high heels work to cast feminism as a popular cultural movement championing gender equality. This rhetorical move is reinforced in the text by anecdotes concerning Adichie's own experiences of sexism in Nigeria and the United States, which further diversify her argument and underscore her transnational identity.<sup>4</sup>

*We Should All Be Feminists* also demonstrates the author's ability to use the multivalent potential of fashion to skilfully transpose her politics and image across and between different media forms, developing her work into a transmedia phenomenon. The grafting of Adichie's text onto *Dior* clothing, for instance, not only projects her message into different cultural arenas, but also imbues her authorial identity with new significance. *Vogue* fashion writer Marjon Carlos (2016) concludes her write-up of Adichie's catwalk appearance by asserting that her outfit 'delivered as strong a message as her words' (Carlos 2016), suggesting that the creative transformation of the writer's text into fashion also works to transfer some of its political power to her fashioned image. As transmedia adaptation destabilises the socio-cultural meanings and economic hierarchies that underpin cultural artefacts (Hassler-Forest and Nicklas 2015, p. 1), the both material and digital mixing of image with text and textile has enabled Adichie's iconic persona and discourse to become enmeshed and circulated through a combination of literary, intellectual and popular forms.

However, since fashion is 'transitory, mobile, and fragmentary' (Lehmann 2000, p. xii), such multimedia mutation also risks subverting the intended meaning of a given fashion statement. At one point in *We Should All Be Feminists*, Adichie affirms that she no longer apologises for her love of lipstick and unusual clothing – synecdochic representatives of her feminine identity (2014, pp. 39-40) – because 'the

“male gaze”, as a shaper of [her] life’s choices, is largely incidental’ (2014, p. 40).

This liberal and anti-patriarchal view of fashion’s relationship with cultural ideas of

femininity helps explain why Adichie allowed Beyoncé to sample her text on a pop

track despite criticism of the singer’s glamourised portrayal of black female bodies.<sup>5</sup>

Yet the writer has herself come under fire for retroactively distancing herself from

Beyoncé’s use of *We Should All Be Feminists* because she thinks the singer’s

feminism focuses too much on men (Adichie 2016a). This explanation fits with

Adichie’s belief that the male gaze should not define a woman’s style choices, but the

writer has also been accused of hypocrisy (Osman 2016) for stating that she resents

being continually asked about the Beyoncé connection rather than her writing

(Adichie 2016a), despite gaining huge exposure because of it. The tension this reveals

between the writer’s celebrity status and artistry is arguably the result of her

exploitation of fashion’s representative and transformative power, which has

augmented the substance and reception of her work even as it has given it

extraordinary mobility across a variety of media.

In conclusion, while Adichie uses fashion in her writing and public discourse

as much for the purposes of self-promotion as to make public interventions, it is

significant precisely because it foregrounds the interpretive risks as well as the

dynamic potential of the celebrity body politic.<sup>6</sup> As such, her fashion politics

represent both a personal and creative manifestation of her desire to disseminate her

message despite the inherent dangers. This analysis drives forward the discipline of

Celebrity Studies by arguing that it needs to delve deeper into the multi-layered field

of fashion in order to produce a richer picture of the generative connections and fault-

lines that mediate between an author’s public image and their political work. The

significance of fashion’s negotiation of this intricate relationship is further

complicated in the most recent reincarnation of *We Should All Be Feminists*, a *Facebook* post (Adichie 2016b) in which the writer makes the ethical assertion that despite their cultural significance, ‘clothes have absolutely nothing to do with morality’ (2016b). While this may be true, by using her literary celebrity to demonstrate the power of dress and to empower people from diverse contexts to embrace it, Adichie’s work shows that fashion has everything to do with the politics of identity, and with her becoming one of the most prominent writers and feminists of the age.

### Notes

1. In April 2015, Adichie was included in *Time* magazine’s annual list of The 100 Most Influential People (Jones 2015).
2. Although Adichie’s speech was first given in December 2012 (Adichie 2014, p. 3), the recording (2013a) was not published online until April 2013.
3. The author has been questioned about the importance of hair in *Americanah* in a variety of interviews, for example with *The Observer* (Kellaway 2013), *Channel 4 News* (Snow 2013), and *The Rumpus* (Jones 2014).
4. Adichie splits her time between Nigeria and the United States (Brookes 2014).
5. Fiona McCade (2014), for instance, argues that Beyoncé’s feminism is tokenistic because she sexualises her body in order to sell records.
6. Another controversy arose when Adichie (2013c) rejected the label of Afropolitan writer. Afropolitanism represents a cosmopolitan, transcultural and transnational (Eze 2010, p. 241) phenomenology of Africanness (Gikandi 2011, p. 9). Miriam Pahl (2015, p. 75) argues that this configuration reflects Adichie’s writing, but the author

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finds it annoying because she feels happily African, and does not see the need for a new term (Adichie 2013c).

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