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Reading « Hairstories » and « Hairitages » in Léonora Miano's and Rokhaya Diallo's Works

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Léonora Miano – Déranger le(s) genre(s) ?

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Résumé de l'article

Cet article vise à analyser un symbole qui distingue les femmes afro-descendantes : leur chevelure crépue. Ces dix dernières années, de nombreuses afro-féministes (aux États-Unis, en France, dans la Caraïbe et ailleurs) ont repris possession de leurs cheveux comme partie essentielle de leur héritage et ont choisi de garder leur état naturel, souvent surnommé « nappy » (contraction de l'anglais « natural » et « happy »). Dans notre analyse, nous comparerons les approches de l'écrivaine Léonora Miano et celles de l'activiste Rokhaya Diallo telles qu'elles apparaissent dans leurs oeuvres respectives, à savoir le roman *Blues pour Elise* et la nouvelle « Corpus Christi » pour la première et le roman graphique *Pari(s) d'amies !* pour la seconde. Dans leurs oeuvres, Léonora Miano et Rokhaya Diallo souhaitent déconstruire les discours et les représentations négatives des cheveux et du physique des afro-descendantes, en revendiquant l'amour de soi. Bien que certains personnages résistent à l'idée du cheveu naturel, nous verrons que cette réappropriation constitue un acte performatif.

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet article vise à analyser un symbole qui distingue les femmes afro-descendantes : leur chevelure crépue. Ces dix dernières années, de nombreuses afro-féministes (aux États-Unis, en France, dans la Caraïbe et ailleurs) ont repris possession de leurs cheveux comme partie essentielle de leur héritage et ont choisi de garder leur état naturel, souvent surnommé « nappy » (contraction de l'anglais « natural » et « happy »). Dans notre analyse, nous comparerons les approches de l'écrivaine Léonora Miano et celles de l'activiste Rokhaya Diallo telles qu'elles apparaissent dans leurs œuvres respectives, à savoir le roman *Blues pour Élise* et la nouvelle « Corpus Christi » pour la première et le roman graphique *Pari(s) d'amies !* pour la seconde. Dans leurs œuvres, Léonora Miano et Rokhaya Diallo souhaitent déconstruire les discours et les représentations négatives des cheveux et du physique des afro-descendantes, en revendiquant l'amour de soi. Bien que certains personnages résistent à l'idée du cheveu naturel, nous verrons que cette réappropriation constitue un acte performatif.

ABSTRACT

This article aims at analyzing a distinctive symbol of black women : their hair. In the last decade, many Afro-feminists (in America, France, the Caribbean and many other countries) have been reclaiming hair as part of their heritage and embracing its natural « nappy » state (for « natural » and « happy »). In my analysis of hair, I will compare and contrast how Léonora Miano in her novel Blues pour Élise and her short story « Corpus Christi » and Rokhaya Diallo, in her graphic novel Pari(s) d'amies !, seek to replace the self-loathing and deprecating narratives that women of color are commonly told about their hair and their physique. Instead, they reclaim these negative images of hair as well as of other bodily features by self-love and self-fulfillment. While some characters may still be struggling with this idea, I argue that the repossessing of one's own hair constitutes a performative act.

This article aims at analyzing a distinctive symbol of black women : their hair. In the last decade, many Afro-feminists (notably in America, France, and the Caribbean) have been reclaiming hair as part of their heritage and embracing its natural « nappy » state (Natural and Happy). In our analysis of hair, we will compare how Léonora Miano, in her novel *Blues pour Élise*¹ and her short story « Palma-christi »², and Rokhaya Diallo, in her graphic novel *Pari(s) d'amies*³ as well as her book *Afro !*⁴, seek to replace the self-loathing and deprecating narratives that women of color are commonly told about their hair by reclaiming these negative images of hair through self-love and self-fulfillment. I argue that the repossessing of one's own hair (or one's attempt to reclaim it) constitutes an act of recapturing one's heritage, or « hairitage » as I refer to it. Indeed, the characters try to untangle their hair from its usually tortured meanings of oppression and alienation in French society and amongst Afro-descendants, and several female characters proudly display their natural hairstyles – although some struggle with accepting their natural selves. The « natural hair journey », to use the phrase coined by many bloggers and « naturalistas » in the Afro-American and British spheres, also represents one of self-actualization and self-love in a society which insists on casting these black women in the demeaning roles of hypersexualized other. Miano's and Diallo's works use female close-knit groups as catalysts for these discussions. Both writers exemplify the innate desire to show young Afro-descendants in France there are ways to be accepted as they are instead of conforming to the demands of French society.

While many scholars in African-American studies have done and continue to do extensive work on the condition of African-American hair, the Francophone world has yet to properly address the writing of hair by Afro-descendant women. The lack of academic studies on the topic in Francophone literature mirrors the invisibility of Afropeans in mainstream media. The imaginary surrounding hair, however, is constantly present in Miano's and Diallo's works. I argue that, in the Francophone context, literature and art fill in the gaps in hairstories by offering their reader at times new, at times

¹ MIANO (Léonora), *Blues pour Élise*. Paris : Plon, 2010, 199 p. (later referred to as *BPE*).

² MIANO (L.), « Palma-christi », in : LE BRIS (Michel), MABANCKOU (Alain), *L'Afrique qui vient*. Paris : Éditions Hoëbeke, 2013, 328 p. ; p. 83-101 (later referred to as *PC*).

³ DIALLO (Rokhaya), *Pari(s) d'amies*. Paris : Delcourt, 2015, 144 p. (later referred to as *PA*).

⁴ DIALLO (R.), *Afro !* Paris : Les Arènes, 2015, 287 p.

familiar, avenues to (re)imagine Afropean women tending to their hair and speaking about their hairitage. Analysing those two types of works together is therefore an effort to show how both literary and visual arts can liberate voices and speech to foster acceptance or, at least, a better historical and sociological understanding of hairstories and hairitages in the Francophone and diasporic world.

Telling hairstories

Léonora Miano is a committed writer whose work explores gender not only in Sub-Saharan Africa, but also in France. Her books have filled a void in Afro-French stories. *Blues pour Élise* thus tells the lives of young Afropeans in the city of lights, to which they bring their African, Caribbean or mixed heritage. Miano also dedicated multiple essays to the invisibility and historical invisibilization of Blacks in France⁵ and has since edited a collection of texts focusing on French Black masculinities⁶. On the one hand, Miano delves deep into the complexities, contradictions and frustrations associated with being black in a predominantly white France. On the other, she deplores the lack of representation of Afro-French in the media. In *Blues pour Élise* and « Palma-christi », Miano unravels hairstories, which are not only the story of hair in its historical and sociological context, but also the narratives which Afropean women tell themselves about their hair, their bodies and their identities ; it is the woven fabric of their interior selves.

In *Blues pour Élise*, Miano sets her four female characters, who have adopted the phrase « Bigger than life » as their motto (« Bigger than life était devenu leur devise », *BPE*, p. 78) in the bourgeois (« bobo ») 14th arrondissement of Paris, where they work, live and play. In this novel, similar to a television series⁷, we follow the characters' lighthearted adventures with love, life, and sex. In the second chapter of the novel entitled « Excluded from gentleness » (« Radiées de la douceur », *BPE*, p. 39), Miano sets up the scene for hairstories as she takes her reader to « black Paris » and black hair salon « Coco Prestige » in the Château Rouge area, in the 20th arrondissement of Paris, to follow Akasha, a French Afropean of Cameroonian and Martinican descent.

Akasha regularly goes to Coco Prestige to twist her locks (« pour faire tourner ses locks », *BPE*, p. 44), an indication that she wears

⁵ MIANO (L.), *Habiter la frontière*. Paris : L'Arche, coll. Tête-à-Tête, 2012, 144 p.

⁶ MIANO (L.), *Marianne et le garçon noir*. Paris : Pauvert, 2017, 280 p.

⁷ KNOX (Katelyn), *Race on Display in 20th- and 21st- Century France*. Liverpool : Liverpool University Press, 2016, 224 p.

her natural hair loud and proud. Natural hair has long been identified as a key feature of « Blackness » in the white-dominated space in which the characters live. Akasha refuses to relax her hair in order to find a job more quickly. It is at the hair salon that the fraught discussion between Antilleans and Sub-Saharan Africans begins. There is a long history of hair anxiety in the black community. As the narrator remarks,

les femmes d'ascendance subsaharienne sont les seules à avoir été radiées de la douceur. Elles ne l'entendent pas de cette oreille, se battent pour en acquérir leur part, c'est le combat d'une vie entière, une angoisse transmise à leurs filles dès le vagissement. La mère ausculte la tête du nourrisson. Il faut attendre des mois, parfois la fin de la première année, pour que les cheveux dévoilent leur nature, comme oracle annonçant le cours d'une destinée. Contrairement aux autres, les fillettes noires connaîtront les bains d'huile, le lissage à la Vaseline, le lustrage à la brillantine, toutes sortes de traitements pour obliger la déveine capillaire de prendre une autre tournure (BPE, p. 39-40).

The mother's careful examination of her daughter's scalp acts as the predictor of a successful destiny. Any inauspicious circumstances will lead to actionable steps to counter the dreadful kinky hair destiny. In *Peau noire, cheveu crépu*, Juliette Sméralda traces the origins of the depreciation of kinky hair and of the images associated with it in the Afro-diasporic imaginary :

« Laine de mouton », « toison remplie de crottes », « hure de sanglier », « poils frisés », etc., sont donc quelques-unes des expressions – pour le moins imagées et fort anciennes –, à travers lesquelles les cheveux crépus se mettent à exister dans l'imaginaire occidental et, très vite, dans celui de l'Extra-occidental qui en est lui-même le porteur ⁸.

Black women's decision to relax (or chemically straighten) their kinky hair shows the (conscious or unconscious) desire to escape such deprecating imaginaries associated with it. The predominantly white society in which they live also imposes on black women the standard of controlled and straightened hair. In Miano's works, Afropeans are pressured to perform white normativity in the French public space. For instance, Akasha's hair stands in the way of her finding a job and therefore constitutes a barrier to making a living in Paris. When Akasha looks for a job and goes to the ANPE (the « Agence Nationale Pour l'Emploi », or Job Agency), she is advised to

⁸ SMÉRALDA (Juliette), *Peau noire, cheveu crépu : l'histoire d'une aliénation*. Paris : Éditions Jasor, 2005, 356 p. ; p. 58.

relax her hair to find a job faster. The irony in this encounter is that her advisor, a black woman, is wearing a grimy worn-out weave (« *un vieux tissage crasseux* », *BPE*, p. 22). Her advisor clearly chose to conform to the beauty norms which implicitly dictate she covers her natural hair with a wig or a weave, usually straight hair, in order to blend in on her workplace. She has only one piece of advice to give Akasha, to have her hair straightened (« *se faire défriser les cheveux* », *BPE*, p. 22).

Kimmy, another client at the hair salon, points out to Akasha that her employer expects her to wear relaxed hair because natural hairstyles are too « ethnic », and her skin color is ethnic enough (*BPE*, p. 42-3). As exemplified by the 2014 « Air France affair » when the company forbade one of its black stewards to wear his natural hair on duty, Afro natural hair is perceived negatively in predominantly white French society. As sociologist Juliette Sméralda notes, natural hair and its texture are often associated with lack of hygiene while straight and smooth hair is associated with cleanliness : « *dans l'inconscient occidental, le lisse est associé au propre* »⁹. In many of the media targeting Afropean readers in France, the norm, today still, is to wear one's hair straightened.

In the chapter entitled « *Radiées de la douceur* », the narrator describes how black women have been « excluded from gentleness » and from the ability for one's hair to flow in the wind, just like white women's : « *Des cheveux qui bougent sous le souffle du vent, qui ne s'aplatissent pas quand elles se couchent, des cheveux dans lesquels les hommes peuvent passer la main* » (*BPE*, p. 39). The image suggests that this kind of hair is not just desirable because it flows freely in the wind, but also because it is what men see as attractive in women. Indeed, the media, from magazine covers to TV commercials and movies, are filled with the normative white beauty standard – long and straightened hair, as Susan Bordo remarks about *Essence magazine* :

The magazine's advertisers, however, continually play upon and perpetuate consumers' feelings of inadequacy and insecurity over the racial characteristics of their bodies. They insist that, in order to be beautiful, hair must be straightened and eyes lightened ; they almost always employ models with fair skin, Anglo-Saxon features, and « hair that moves » insuring association of

⁹ SMÉRALDA (J.), *Peau noire, cheveu crépu*, op. cit., p. 153.

their products with fantasies of becoming what the white culture most prizes and rewards¹⁰.

These standards are therefore the norm which a lot of visual industries favor and contribute to reinforcing. It is the same sense of inadequacy underlined by Bordo which leads some of the Afropean characters in Miano's fiction to try and reach this ideal of beauty – straight hair but also light skin – at whatever cost.

Having hair which flows in the wind may however not only be a reflection of the white beauty standards imposed on black female bodies, but also constitutes a remnant of colonial society, as Sméralda shows. She points out that relaxed hair recalls the sexual fantasies of white colonizers when encountering black women :

*Le fantasme de la femme brune, exotique à la longue chevelure noire et lisse qui hante l'imaginaire occidental masculin, et la difficulté qu'il y a à faire correspondre la femme noire au cheveu crépu à ce cliché, expliquent sans doute qu'une attention si soutenue ait été accordée à la nature de son cheveu, dans le but de le dénigrer [...]. Face à la femme noire, africaine, les voyageurs occidentaux se sentent frustrés : ne pouvant assouvir leurs fantasmes sur une femme exotique « peignant ses longs cheveux noirs », ils dépeignent avec dépit et antipathie certains de ces traits somatologiques...*¹¹

The fantasy of the exotic black woman with straight long hair is then one of the determinants in an unspoken standard of occidental beauty. The association of black skin and long black hair also translates into an appealing combination in terms of sensuality and seduction.

At the end of the chapter « Radiées de la douceur », the reader learns that all that these women have ever wanted was to be perceived as women and to move on from a painful past :

Le défi est de faire en sorte que les heures sombres du passé deviennent enfin l'Histoire, pas un présent perpétuel. Les femmes noires du troisième millénaire cherchent leur place, dans un espace aux limites mal définies, entre aliénation et quête de la pureté identitaire. D'ici une heure ou deux, elles vont payer Coco, prendre à nouveau le métro, tenter de n'être que des femmes (BPE, p. 49 ; italics added).

The experience at the hair salon is then a transformative one. After each visit to the hairdresser's, women feel that they belong in the

¹⁰ BORDO (Susan), *Unbearable Weight : Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Oakland, CA : University of California Press, 1993, 361 p. ; p. 263-264.

¹¹ SMÉRALDA (J.), *Peau noire, cheveu crépu*, op. cit., p. 56-57.

French society, and are like any other women. I thus associate the process of relaxing one's hair with the desire to fit in a society that does not recognize black women and excludes them when they look too ethnic. These women are trying to exist as they are, forgoing their race or connection to a foreign land that is usually associated with black hair and dark skin color. This is reminiscent of Elizabeth Spelman's analysis when she writes that she is always black and a woman, every day of her life¹². This argument has been further developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw who claims « that the intersection of racism and sexism factors into black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately »¹³. Her essay underlines how difficult it is for women of color to cope with multiple forms of oppression, without necessarily realizing what is being targeted against them, as one cannot think of the female subject without thinking about her race and her gender. Since these are characteristics that shape their identities, the desire of Afropean women to be « only women » shows how much of a burden the racial aspect is for them.

Contrary to some Afropeans who do not accept their hair and decide to conform and straighten it, Akasha represents a young Afropean who accepts her natural hair and is convinced that the desire to relax one's hair or to use weaves or hair extension is a denial of one's identity :

la quête d'une chevelure lisse est la marque de l'aliénation, de la détestation de soi. Pour Akasha, même les rajouts doivent être abandonnés. Il n'y a qu'à se faire tresser les cheveux ou les laisser tels quels. Courts. Ras. Qu'est-ce que ça peut faire ? (BPE, p. 45).

In this sense, Akasha adopts a very Afrocentric view that recalls the « Black is beautiful » movement in the United States in the 60s and 70s, and historical figures such as Angela Davis are mentioned in the novel (although the greatest debate around her in the salon is whether Davis' Afro was real). To Akasha, whether hair is long or short does not matter ; what matters is the natural state of the hair which should not be altered chemically or otherwise. Her position sparks a heated debate between Antilleans and Sub-Saharan Africans.

¹² SPELMAN (Elizabeth), « Gender & Race : The Ampersand Problem in Feminist Thought », in : BAILEY (Alison), CUOMO (Chris), eds, *The Feminist Philosophy Reader*. New York : McGraw Hill, 2008, 902 p. ; p. 265-278 ; p. 265.

¹³ CRENSHAW (Kimberlé), « Mapping the Margins : Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color », in : BAILEY (A.), CUOMO (C.), eds, *The Feminist Philosophy Reader*, op. cit., p. 1241-1299 ; p. 1254.

Élise, another customer, claims that Caribbean women have an easier time than African women when it comes to hair because of their mixed hair heritage (« *leur héritage capillaire est métissé* », *BPE*, p. 47). To Élise, Akasha's posture is similar to that of those she calls Afro-terrorists (« *les afro-terroristes, les activistes de la fierté raciale* », *BPE*, p. 48), who are judgmental and deem natural hair to be the only way to live one's Blackness. As Juliette Sméralda notes, natural Afro hair is often seen as an identitarian and militant weapon as opposed to a valuable natural capital (« *un capital naturel, qui enrichit par ses atouts propres et met en valeur les personnes qui en sont dotées* »¹⁴). Though Akasha does not respond to Élise's provocations, she is aware that Caribbean women use fewer relaxers than Sub-Saharan women and that the products targeted at black people are the most harmful.

Harmful hair practices are not limited to chemically straightening one's hair, and there is another strand of hairstory which is woven into Miano's texts. In her short story « Palma-christi », we are back at Coco's hair salon. Akasha appears only briefly in the short story, to make way for Corinne, a white woman, and her adopted African daughter, Beauty, whose hair Coco will style. In this short story, the narrator reveals taboos that surround harmful practices linked to Afro hair. Since having long hair is a feature of femininity in the dominant media¹⁵, the lack of hair, whether because it is short or unhealthy, breaks away from beauty standards. In a way, one is breaking away from one's assigned gendered role and can no longer perform as female and reach for attractiveness without abundant hair. Coco, the hairdresser, suffers from seborrheic dermatitis which is a condition, not exclusive to black women, which eventually damages not only her hair but also her self-esteem. At the beginning of her expensive treatment, not only does she still have dry white patches, she also notices that her hair is scarce in some places. As she is the owner of a hair salon, her image and particularly her hair serve as the metonymy for her salon's reputation and quality of service. Coco decides to wear a front-lace to conceal her illness and make her appear healthy to her clients. By choosing to wear a straight-haired front-lace wig to conceal her condition, she too participates in reiterating the dominant beauty standards.

¹⁴ SMÉRALDA (J.), *Du cheveu défrisé au cheveu crépu : de la désidentification à la revendication*. Paris : Anibwé, 2008, 144 p. ; p. 95.

¹⁵ BROWNMILLER (Susan), *Femininity*. New York : Ballantine Books, 1994, 272 p.

Coco's battle with a sick scalp is not the only hairstory presented in Miano's fiction. In *Blues pour Élise*, we meet Bijou, another woman who suffers from alopecia, and her receding hairline makes her look as if she had a double forehead (« *un double front, tant cette partie-là de son crâne est lisse, chauve depuis longtemps* », *BPE*, p. 43). This phenomenon is extremely common for black women who wear extensions which are too heavy for the natural hair and which make it easily breakable and fragile. Bijou will then agree to wear a wig, which will cover her bald scalp to perfection. Though they are fairly common issues in Afropean communities, alopecia and seborrhea constitute taboos which make these women feel ashamed and hide their condition. Coco thus has to race back upstairs when she forgets that she is not wearing her front lace wig, while Bijou comes to the salon wearing a headscarf to hide her baldness. Coco is so afraid of being judged and recognized as having « bad hair » that she goes to London in order to purchase her wig. All in all, the taboos relating to hair and its diseases are perpetuated by the characters' desire to cover up and deny that they suffer from a condition. The cases of Bijou and Coco are seldom talked about in the mainstream media because of the shame which surrounds the topic.

These at times traumatic hairstories are often silenced for fear of judgment and shame. However, by taking up the topic in her fiction, Miano successfully conveys the damages related to hair and hairstories, whether physical or psychological. Yet, these negative hairstories are not the only ones which are silenced. Miano also shows how the transmission of hairitage is lacking. By associating « hair » and « heritage », I mean to inscribe beauty practices and hair beauty products in a lineage of tradition transmitted from mother to daughter in the African diaspora. The transmission of knowledge of hairstyles and hair products found in nature has always been present in the African diaspora. What Miano's works tell us, though, is that such transmission becomes undone when Afro-descendants enter French space. They need to comply with the unspoken rules of their workplace to have a secure financial situation and feel accepted. The decision to forgo one's hairitage may therefore not come with ease. In « Palma-christi » for instance, Coco reflects on all of the Sub-Saharan African mothers whose treatment of their daughter's hair she sees as comparable to mistreatment. Their forgoing of tradition is also a mark that they now are on French soil : « *Tout se passait comme si le fait de vivre en France les rendait soudain ignorantes de ce qui s'était transmis de génération en génération* » (*PC*, p. 97). According to Coco, they are « lost » (« *perdues dans cet univers français* », *PC*, p. 97).

Hope is however in sight when it comes to the transmission of good hair care routines. In « Palma-christi », Corinne, Beauty's mother, comes to Coco desperate to care for her black child's hair. As Marjolaine Unter Ecker notes, she considers her inability to care for her daughter's hair as a failure at being a mother (« *un échec maternel* »¹⁶). Coco seems to criticize transracial adoption, especially when it comes to adopting black children and not knowing how to care for them in every way ; yet, she is aware that many black mothers have too much pride to even enter *Coco prestige* and ask for advice. Coco decides to care for Beauty's hair and teaches her mother the best hair practices. This moment of knowledge transmission is one of the few moments when mother and daughter can be reconciled. Coco insists on the fact that it is her mother's duty to always care for Beauty and not think negatively of her hair since her self-esteem will depend on it, (« *les bonnes pratiques de l'estime de soi. Le regard de la mère était capital* », *PC*, p. 101). Coco truly believes that little girls like Beauty need to learn how to best love their hair and care for it :

Elles devaient découvrir la palette de coiffures originales à leur disposition, connaître, avec le temps, les soins particuliers à apporter à leur patrimoine capillaire, se souvenir, où qu'elles soient, qu'elles descendent d'une longue lignée de femmes pour lesquelles la coiffure avait été un art, un langage subtil (*PC*, p. 101 ; italics added).

The emphasis on the legacy of hair or, as I have referred to it, « hairitage », is an important one to Coco. Indeed, hair is a reminder of the lineage and the artistry which comes with hairstyles, hair-care and having nappy hair.

The 21st century, however, has ushered in some progress when it comes to promoting and learning about natural hair. Corinne is made aware of a blog called « The Nappies' circle » (« *le cercle des Nappies* », *PC*, p. 92) on which hair care, hairstories and hair tips are shared by an online community of natural hair women also called « naturalistas ». On this blog and on others, women ask for tips about hair care, and share their hairstory or natural hair journey, the process by which they have chopped off their relaxed or straight ends to let their natural hair grow back. In « Palma-christi », it is one of these websites that Corinne turns to, desperate to care for her child's head of locks, only to find herself rejected because of the

¹⁶ UNTER ECKER (Marjolaine), *Questions identitaires dans les récits afropéens de Léonora Miano*. Toulouse : Presses Universitaires du Midi, coll. Lettres & cultures, 2016, 190 p. ; p. 68.

fact that she adopted a black child. These forums and websites which are alluded to in the novel really exist. They allow not only to create a space where black and brown women can discuss their hairstories, whether good or bad, be vulnerable and seek help, but also where a wealth of resources about how to care for their hair and how to honor their hairitage in diverse ways can be found. One of the most influential blogs in the Francophone world was created by Fatou N'Diaye and is called « Black Beauty Bag »¹⁷. In the early 2000s, founder N'Diaye started sharing her natural hair journey, hair routine and the products she was using on her blog. It attracted so many readers that it has now become a fully functioning website and N'Diaye is now involved in advertising for natural hair products.

Living Hairitages

After seeing how hairitages are circulating thanks to the presence and dissemination of information online, I will now turn to Rokhaya Diallo's works. Diallo also had in mind to raise awareness about natural hairstyles when she created her graphic novel *Pari(s) d'amies* with artist Kim Consigny and *Afro !* with photographer Brigitte Sombié, both published in 2015. Diallo is a journalist, an activist and a TV host on BET (Black Entertainment Television) France. She is also the founder of « *Les indivisibles* » (The indivisible), an association whose slogan is « *Français sans commentaire !* » (French, no comment !) which aims at deconstructing racial stereotypes through humor and irony and disseminating another image of the « other French people ». In the fall 2017, she also took part in the Obama Foundation Summit and was the only French person present.

In the last few years, Diallo has become increasingly outspoken about her own natural hair. With her graphic novel, Diallo's goal was to show young women how a young black woman could reclaim her own heritage, starting with her hair. Reaching out to touch a younger public, Diallo sets the main character, Cassandre, in Paris, proudly wearing her natural hair after studying abroad in the United States. It is the story of her awakening to her African heritage and her attempt to find her place in the French space, which now questions her identity because of the way her hair looks. Cassandre wants to create her own line of Afro hair products which, she discovers, are invisible in French supermarkets. On her natural hair journey, she tries to draw inspiration from different French and American

¹⁷ N'DIAYE (Fatou), Blog *Black Beauty Bag*, URL : <http://www.blackbeautybag.com/> (last accessed 13-05-2019).

role model figures. For instance, her bedroom displays a poster of Angela Davis wearing her Afro hair and a black « Marianne » poster of the French republic, which is certainly Alexis Peskine's 2004 « The French Evolution (Mariam') ». Further, on her bus commute, Cassandre reads Léonora Miano's *Blues pour Élise*, using the text as a guide to continue to pursue her dream of creating a natural hair care product line.

Just as Miano exposed her reader to the different ways to do one's hair, Diallo's graphic novel aims at giving a better representation of the versatility of Afro hair and the female Afropean subjects wearing them. In eighteen vignettes, taking up two pages, Cassandre is drawn doing her hair. Cassandre's facial expressions are in turn satisfied, dissatisfied, frustrated and finally happy with the results she achieved, whereas the time devoted to hair care is seldom alluded to in hairstories. Cassandre's proud display of natural hair and confidence does not go without judgment in the graphic novel. Her mother grows extremely dissatisfied with her « unruly hair » and tells her that she needs to have her hair done (« se coiffer », *PA*, p. 13). When Cassandre goes to an Afro hairsalon in the Château Rouge area, she encounters black men on the street who try to convince her to get her hair straightened. This scene echoes another in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*¹⁸, where the main character, Ifemelu, who, just like Cassandre, has come home after living in the United States and wears her natural hair, yet encounters obstacles on that natural hair journey : « the hairdressers struggled and fumbled to comb natural hair, as though it were an alien eruption, as though their own hair was not the same way before it was defeated by chemicals » (p. 500-501). Both of these passages show how Cassandre and Ifemelu have come to terms with their natural hair thanks to their stay in the United States, by which they have learned how to love and care for it.

Cassandre initially goes to the Château Rouge area, not to get her hair straightened, but to propose her own line of beauty products called « Nappy Hair Paris », as none are to be found there, and indeed the lack of beauty products mentioned earlier comforts Cassandre in her decision to create her own line of hair products. The alternative is the « make-do system » (« système D », « D » standing for « débrouillardise ») that a lot of women of color have to resort to in their day to day lives, which is exemplified in both Miano's and Diallo's texts : because of the lack of products for kinky

¹⁸ ADICHIE (Chimamanda Ngozi), *Americanah*. New York : Random House, 2013, 610 p.

hair on the French market, black women need to either do without them, or « make-do » otherwise — which may not come cheap. In Miano's « Palma-christi », Coco's precious eponymous hair elixir, also known as black castor oil (« *huile de carapate* »), comes from the Caribbean and is a traditional high-quality product (« *un produit de qualité, fabriqué à l'ancienne* », *PC*, p. 86). Acknowledging the quality of this oil which nourishes and softens kinky hair, Coco's clients are keen on buying it from her, at whatever cost. In a way, this oil can be seen as an anointment or elixir of sorts that allows those who use it to come to like and manage their natural hair.

Similarly to what Miano portrays in *Blues pour Élise* and « Bigger than Life », Diallo shows us a palette of endless possibilities for natural hair and how powerful it can be, or make women feel, when they embrace it. Yet, despite her novel's very positive message and happy ending with Cassandre launching her natural cosmetic line, Diallo is not blinded to hairstories and their traumatic aspect. With the publication, the same year, of *Afro !*, Diallo revealed hairstories which had hitherto been silenced, the trauma they may have induced, and the acceptance of this type of hair. *Afro !* contains various photographs and testimonies of Afro-descendants in France, whom Brigitte Sombrié photographed on the streets of Paris (some of them Diallo knew, others she had just met) and to whom she asked to reflect on their relationship with their natural hair. In this book, she writes that it is crucial for her to show that one can wear one's natural hair and still be taken seriously in the French public sphere :

À la télé, on accepte qu'une Noire ait les cheveux crépus dans des divertissements ou si elle est artiste, ou éventuellement mannequin, mais dans le journalisme, métier perçu comme sérieux, le crépu demeure rare. C'est pourquoi il est si important pour moi de me présenter publiquement ainsi (Afro !, p. 246).

Notably, the former Minister of Justice Christiane Taubira appears in the book, alongside actresses and actors who have all decided to wear their hair natural. In 2017, Diallo was able to conduct a month-long exhibition and conference, entitled « Afro ! » after her book, in order to display the photographs and invite actors, spokespersons and politicians to discuss their « Afroness ». *Afro !* not only lays emphasis on the visual, with pages alternately featuring visual portraits and written testimonies, it also includes the profession of the people that she interviewed. It brings together the diversity of the African diaspora living in France : from mayors to artists, through scientists, models and scholars, the people interviewed

come from extremely varied backgrounds, and *Afro !* thus adds depth to the portrayal of France's Afro population. *Afro !* displays the diversity of the black diaspora and celebrates it with testimonies relating to hairstories for each portrait, together with what I call textual interludes inserted throughout the book. They serve as odes to black hair and hairitages and remind the reader of the long-standing tradition which hair held in the African diaspora. Stories such as Malcom X's first chemical straightener, India Arie's lyrics to « I am not my hair », or excerpts from Eva Doumbia's play *Moi et mes cheveux* constitute a woven tapestry of hairstories, transmit knowledge and remind the reader of the diasporic histories of Afro hair. This kind of testimony is a way to show how Afro hair is being worn and performed in the daily lives of these Parisian women and men and whether or not they carry a political statement in their eyes. These living portraits are not just portraits : *Afro !* leads the way in portraying Afro hair's history, a lineage and a particular view of the self which the subjects all speak about.

« Roots are on our heads » – *F(l)ammes*, Ahmed Madani ¹⁹

In the 2016 play *F(l)ammes* written by Ahmed Madani, ten black and brown women from the suburbs of Paris come together on stage to discuss how they identify with and fit in the French society, and speak of their heritages. A part of this play is dedicated to the topic of hair and the importance of telling one's hairstories and embracing one's hairitage. When I watched the play, the line « Roots are on our heads » (« *Les racines sont sur nos têtes* ») struck me as being the epitome of natural hairstories and hairitage : to wear natural hair was to let one's roots or story of origins be visible, embraced and accepted as hairitage, a lesson which both Léonora Miano and Rokhaya Diallo have shown through their works.

Though Afropean women are underrepresented in the media, literary and visual representations are abundant and associated with images of self-definition, self-acceptance and a desire to go back to one's (Afro) roots. The literary universe which Miano paints is one every Afropean knows, the black hair salon and its debates around beauty. It makes for a suitable platform to promote new beauty ideals and activism. Diallo's work stems from her activism. Thanks to her books which portray young women like Cassandre and everyday women and men wearing their natural hair and being

¹⁹ MADANI (Ahmed), *Illumination(s), suivi de F(l)ammes*. Paris : Actes Sud, 2017, 128 p.

proud of their hairitages, the Afro takes a new dimension. Pride in hairstories and hairitages is no longer something to keep secret or within the private sphere. Wearing one's hair natural ultimately reflects an underlying discourse, whether conscious or not, of acceptance of self, hairstory and hairitage. Making the roots visible on the outside points to an aspiration for inner acceptance.

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