

Response by the author

Thank you to the editors of *Africa* for including my book, *Fashioning Postfeminism*, in their series of book debates, and to Sharon Adetutu Omotoso and Daniel Jordan Smith for their engaged and generative reading of the work. As Smith notes in his review, *Fashioning Postfeminism* has two broad intellectual and political agendas, the first being to establish the mere possibility that African women might see and style themselves in terms of such a thing as ‘post-feminism’, and the second being to flesh out, based on my empirical findings, what such post-feminist subject positioning comprises in practice and how it works – or, indeed, fails to work. I would add that the critique of post-feminism that the book mounts is not intended to be limited to the Nigerian or African context. It is my hope that, much as Smith suggests, readers will take *Fashioning Postfeminism* as an African feminist problematizing of post-feminism that has implications for understanding the culture elsewhere, if not ‘everywhere’. The nub of the book’s critique, which both reviewers cite, is that ultimately post-feminism makes false promises and representations to women because the intersecting structures of oppression that engender and necessitate feminism are not behind us.

When I present the research, and now in response to the two reviews, I find that it becomes necessary and important for me to say promptly that while the book is unremittingly critical of post-feminism, the intended object of the critique is not women who might find themselves drawn to and trying to fashion and materialize the ‘happy’ culture. In the book, and in my speaking and representation of it, I try to sidestep and reject certain judgements of women such as my research participants that seem to shade into sexism and/or racism– notions that such women are ‘self-hating’, ‘shallow’, ‘feigning’, ‘inauthentic’, even ‘immoral’, because they are black women who wear weaves, because they are hyper-privileged in a nation of mass poverty, because they consume so extravagantly, because they deny or at least fail to see that their practices of self are deeply political, and so on.

For instance, on black women’s now centuries-old practices of altering our ‘natural hair’ in some way or another, the book tries to offer a new and, I propose, more nuanced, generative and also *respectful* analytic framework than ‘self-hatred’. To me, ‘self-hatred’ does not do justice to, nor take seriously enough, the complexity and creativity of black subjectivity, culture, life, *survival*. As I argue in the book in terms of related notions that Africans who adopt non-African ways are also self-hating or self-alienated, it seems to me that these kinds of views actually enact a certain violence. On this score, I must clarify that it is not my

argument in the book that, per Omotoso's review, 'the majority of [my] research participants have taken the "wrong way" and are in no way cosmopolitan, having lost discernment'. I argue throughout *Fashioning Postfeminism* that Africans are necessarily cosmopolitan people, worldly, 'in the world',¹ including in many of the things that we deem and defend as 'traditional' today, in which foreign elements may often be found. This is but one reason why I have no truck with the notion of the 'Afropolitan'; I think it is tautology. The argument that Omotoso summarizes above is not mine; rather, it belongs to my research participants. The women asserted that they were appropriately and authentically cosmopolitan Nigerians because they were open to the wider world without losing discernment about and respect for where they come from. They distinguished themselves in this regard from other Nigerian women who, putatively, do cosmopolitanism the 'wrong way' by forgetting who they are in their pursuit of new and shiny foreign things.

In response to Smith's suggestion that I treat the women a little too gingerly, that I could have challenged their positions more directly and forcefully, I suppose I would say that, if it is indeed the case, it had something to do with all of the above, with how much prejudgement and moralizing and disallowing there can be of women, and black people, and Africans, engaging in new and desirous and indulgent practices of self. I did and still do not want to reinscribe these logics, even as I am clearly critical of the stuff in question. From my very first conception of the research project, my 'seeing' that there were questions to be asked of a seemingly new type of Lagos woman, I was mindful that I would have to keep my own 'feminist sexism' in check.² I was mindful that the aim and tone of the research project would not be to judge the participants, to show them up, to presume to correct or discipline them in how to be 'properly' feminist or anything else. I was mindful, too, that the point of the interviews would not be to ask the women to justify or defend what they do. Rather, the aim was to hear and to try to understand their accounts of themselves. Of course, there are also more practical reasons for my failure to ask certain questions, one being the temporalities of the research process itself; as researchers, we might not see what else there is to ask until it

¹ A. Mbembe and S. Nuttall (2004) 'Writing the world from an African metropolis', *Public Culture* 16 (3): 347–72.

² For a fuller discussion, see S. Dosekun (2015) "'Hey, you stylized woman there": an uncomfortable reflexive account of performative practices in the field', *Qualitative Inquiry* 21 (5): 436–44.

jumps out at us from the interview data weeks or months later. A clear example, which I regret, is that it was only when I began a close discourse analysis of the interview transcripts, well after leaving Lagos, that I heard what I posit in the book as the women's relative lack of discursive resources to name and talk about sexism. I heard this in their silences and omissions, which, regarding Smith's point, I had a hand in producing. Another major theme about which I believe I clearly failed to ask enough is sex and sexuality.

Both reviewers raise questions about class, Smith suggesting that I do not give it enough priority, and Omotoso asking if and to what extent the style is available to women of less-privileged material means. I agree with Smith that I could have come back to class more strongly in the conclusion to the book. In the body of the work, I offer an account of how both the symbolic and practical logics of the women's spectacular self-stylization were very much about their privileged and, with this, their relatively visible or spectacularized place in Lagos. As the women told it, it is in Lagos that they feel heightened pressure and expectations to appear always in hyper-glamorous style – to show their 'level', to use another Nigerian colloquialism about classed stratification, display and dominance. It is also in Lagos versus London, say – where they can most casually afford to commission the beauty and other service labour on which their spectacular self-stylization relies. The labour is cheap, in short.

In terms of what kinds of Lagosian or Nigerian women are materially able to fashion post-feminism, to think this through I would suggest that we first need to distinguish the style of dress in question in my book from the style of subjectivity that I argue accompanies it for my particular research participants. The two need not coincide. So there are two questions here: materially, what kinds of Nigerian women can do the dress? And materially and otherwise, what kinds of Nigerian women can happily claim to inhabit an 'empowered' female subject position? My book is about class-privileged women because this was where I first saw the spectacularly feminine style of dress in Lagos and decided to research it, but this focus is not to suggest that only this class of women don or desire the fashion. We can see this quite easily on the ground. Weaves and wigs are ubiquitous across Lagos, for example, if not necessarily the so-called 'human hair' grade that women such as my research participants prefer. As Omotoso suggests, there is fascinating and urgent work to be done to explore what the style of dress means for less advantaged women in Lagos (and elsewhere), in terms of their own pursuit and desire of it, the kinds of ideas of self that accompany it, and the

meanings they make of elite and celebrity women's particularly extravagant and 'flawless' embodiment of it. On the last question, Smith posits that there might be ambivalence. I am not convinced. I can only speculate, but I suspect that, in Nigeria, on balance, the kind of elite spectacular woman of *Fashioning Postfeminism* may be viewed widely by other women as aspirational, as how to try to be – or, at the very least, look.

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