

# Disregard and danger: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and the voices of trans (and cis) African feminists

The Sociological Review Monographs

2020, Vol. 68(4) 817–833

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DOI: 10.1177/0038026120934695

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**Abstract**

In March of 2017, best-selling Nigerian author and feminist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in an interview with Britain's Channel 4, was asked whether being a trans woman makes one any less of a 'real woman?' In the clip, which went viral shortly thereafter, Adichie responded by saying 'When people talk about, "Are trans women women?" my feeling is trans women are trans women.' Echoing the essentialist, predominantly white Global Northern, feminist politics of trans-exclusionary feminists (TERFs), by implying that trans women are not 'real' women because, as she assumes, they benefited from male privilege, Adichie set off a social media maelstrom. The publicised responses to her comments largely came from feminists and trans women in the Global North, and though many trans people from the African continent responded, with hashtags such as *#ChimamandaKilledME*, very few of these received any attention. As the hashtag suggests, for trans people living on the African continent, given the general lack of recourse to rights, Adichie's words as an African writer carry considerable weight. Given this, the absence of media attention is curious. This article offers a recentring, by focusing on those voices, maligned in the broader debate – trans people from the African continent. I argue that while Adichie might be stumbling over the questions that lie at the heart of TERF politics (what does it mean to be a woman? and does it matter how a person arrives at being a woman?), trans women on the African continent have been busy reconstituting the terms of the terrain.

**Keywords**

African feminism, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, male privilege, socialisation, transgender Africa

**Come Fetch Your Fave<sup>1</sup>**

Single stories . . . facilitate ignorance, they make it impossible to see the full spectrum of others, they allow one to project notions onto another while solidifying position of superiority for no possibility of connection as human equals. (Adichie, 2009)

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On the 10 March 2017 acclaimed Nigerian feminist and author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, promoting her new book *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*, was asked the following in an interview on the UK television network Channel 4 News (2017):

Does it matter how you've arrived at being a woman? I mean, for example, if you're a trans woman who grew up identifying as a man, who grew up enjoying the privileges of being a man, does that take away from becoming a woman? Are you any less of a real woman?

She responded by saying that her 'feeling' was that 'trans women are trans women'. She continued,

It's not about how we wear our hair or whether we have a vagina or a penis. It's about the way the world treats us, and I think if you've lived in the world as a man with the privileges the world accords to men, and then switched gender, it's difficult for me to accept that then we can equate your experience with the experience of a woman who has lived from the beginning in the world as a woman, and who has not been accorded those privileges that men are. . . . And so I think there has to be – and this is not, of course, to say, I'm saying this with a certainty that transgender should be allowed to be. But I don't think it's a good thing to conflate everything into one. I don't think it's a good thing to talk about women's issues being exactly the same as the issues of trans women, because I don't think that's true. (Channel 4 News, 2017)

Described as a 'global feminist icon', a 'public thinker' (Brown, 2017) and 'one of the most vital and original novelists of her generation' (MacFarquhar, 2018), Adichie is perhaps most well known as author of award-winning and best-selling novel *Americanah* and her TED Talk *We Should All Be Feminists*, sampled by Beyoncé on her 2013 track 'Flawless' (Brown, 2017). As a 'self-professed card-carrying feminist', a self-identified 'African woman' (Adichie et al., 2017) and a vocal campaigner for LGBT rights in Nigeria, Adichie's work is deeply linked to her experiences and life on the African continent. In her work, she has spoken widely, and not uncontroversially, on issues of race, gender and the power and importance of language. Given this, the global response to her controversial comments was almost instant. In the following few days headlines such as 'Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has sparked outrage for her comments about transgender women' (Oppenheim, 2017), 'Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie clarifies transgender comments as backlash grows' (Kean, 2017) and 'Women's issues are different from trans women's issues, feminist author says, sparking criticism' (Schmidt, 2017) appeared on English news websites across the Global North. African news site AllAfrica went with 'Africa: Trans-women are trans-women and women are women says Chimamanda Adichie' (Mbamalu, 2017).

While both cis and trans women in the Global North had their responses to Adichie's comments amplified over several media platforms, trans women from the African continent, those arguably with the highest stakes in the conversation, were ignored even when using provocative hashtags like #ChimamandaKilledME. In the almost overwhelming moment of what Adichie would later call 'trans noise' (Adichie, 2018), one common framing of her response, emanating largely from the Global North, has been an accusation that Adichie is in fact practising trans-exclusionary radical feminism. In other words,

participating in a strand of white Western feminism which, at its most basic, does not deem trans women to be women, and at its most extreme understands trans women to be interlopers and a direct threat to (cis) women's rights. Increasingly, trans-exclusionary radical feminism has come to stand in for or represent what is perhaps at present the most visible form of popular feminism in the Global North. It is an understanding of feminist politics, as I will argue, that has very little, if anything, to do with the various strands of African feminism.

In this article, I read Adichie's past work, and the accounts of African trans and cis women who responded to Adichie's statements, against her arguments on womanhood. This is done in an effort to unpack the taken for granted assumptions that underpin Adichie's perceptions of trans women as they pertain to trans identity and women on the African continent. I use this article to focus on how these assumptions are constructed in relation to the lived realities of trans women from the African continent and current African feminist politics, in particular with regard to perceptions about gender, male privilege, the notion of 'womanhood' and language. I aim to provide an alternate African-based feminist analysis to the currently overwhelming centring of trans-exclusionary radical feminist (TERF) arguments from the Global North, and in doing so amplify voices that for various political reasons were not brought into circulation during the initial furor. Given Adichie's visibility as a feminist and a Nigerian, I explore why, in the moment of her pronouncements about trans women, not a single trans woman from the African continent was asked to respond. I argue that while Adichie might be stumbling over the question that lies at the heart of TERF politics: What does it mean to be a woman (and who gets to decide that)? Women trans and cis from the African continent, echoing the critique and heritage of generations of African feminists before them, have been resisting single stories, Anglocentric and colonising perceptions of gender, and by extension Anglocentric (and colonising) understandings of trans identity. Indeed they, trans and cis women, have long been reconstituting the terms of this already historically fraught terrain. Drawing on transnational feminism, I suggest that in the seemingly ongoing TERF media frenzy, the voices of trans and cis women from the African continent continue to be disregarded for the converse reason Adichie's is elevated: it represents a single story.

## **Spelling danger: Colonial gender and disruptions of biologic**

Shocked by the mounting public outcry to her comments and calls to burn her books, in the days following the TV interview, Adichie shared two Facebook posts as a form of response. The second, titled 'Clarifying' (2017b), stated:

I said, in an interview, that trans women are trans women, that they are people who, having been born male, benefited from the privileges that the world affords men, and that we should not say that the experience of women born female is the same as the experience of trans women. . . . I think the impulse to say that trans women are women just like women born female are women comes from a need to make trans issues mainstream. Because by making them mainstream, we might reduce the many oppressions they experience. . . . Perhaps I should have said trans women are trans women and cis women are cis women and all are women. Except that 'cis' is

not an organic part of my vocabulary. And would probably not be understood by a majority of people. Because saying ‘trans’ and ‘cis’ acknowledges that there is a distinction between women born female and women who transition, without elevating one or the other, which was my point. . . . I have and will continue to stand up for the rights of transgender people. Not merely because of the violence they experience but because they are equal human beings deserving to be what they are.

When Thabiso Ratalane (Collison, 2017), a 25-year-old South African ‘woman of transgender experience’ heard Adichie’s words, she heard ‘transgender women do not count as women’. Respondents from the African continent did not only hear that trans women were not women but that to be a woman, by Adichie’s reading, has specific, presumably universal contours and expectations. In the vein of what has been called TERF politics, Adichie invoked a narrative which ties bodies to biology, gender, socialisation and ownership of space. At the outset, Adichie defines womanhood through the experiences of those ‘born female’ and raised as girls – (cis) women. She considers the ways in which they are raised to be constitutive elements of womanhood: sexualised, treated as secondary citizens and often exploited, social conditioning – undermining their sense of themselves, as girls and women. That is, a universal womanhood. Concomitantly, transgender women, according to Adichie, having been ‘born male’, cannot know what it is to experience girlhood, with its accompanying dangers, because those ‘born male’ are raised as men and experience ‘male privilege’. Echoing the core tenets of TERF approaches to feminism – a biology-based/sex essentialist understanding – Adichie takes up what she presents as a universalist biological position.<sup>2</sup> A political alignment which contends that it is seemingly impossible to separate sex and gender. Sex is determined at birth, onto which a specific gender maps, and based on this, certain privileges are accrued (Hines, 2007). This essentialist understanding, she adds, does not dismiss the ‘pain of gender confusion’ or complexities trans women experience ‘living in bodies not their own’ but is instead a ‘conception of gender’ which is ‘more honest and true to the real world’ (Adichie, 2017b).

As with Adichie’s universal ‘woman’, there also exists the singular universal ‘transgender woman’. This is someone who ‘switch[es]’, at some point in her life, a seemingly simple linear migration, from being a man to a *trans* woman. The prefix ‘trans’, here, acts not as an adjective but as a qualifier, signalling the biological difference (and privilege) of being ‘born male’. The particular construction of transgender existence Adichie alludes to, not only involves a type of clear transition from point A to point B, ‘a switch’, but also invokes the ‘wrong body narrative’ (Bettcher, 2013a) – an expression, critical to Global Northern constructions of transgender existence, intimated by the suggestion that trans women exist in ‘bodies not their own’. The crux of her argument, and indeed its trans-exclusionary underpinnings, is seen when she expresses sympathy for trans women who she acknowledges must ‘undergo difficulties as boys’ (Adichie, 2017b). That is to say, difficulties not as people who are misgendered as boys, or as girls being perceived or raised as boys but as that which their biology, supposedly, dictates – boys. The place of trans people within feminist politics has long been disputed, but in the new millennium, this tension has seemingly escalated to hitherto unthought-of proportions. At the heart of TERF beliefs, which we see in Adichie’s sentiments, is the idea, as noted, that gender and

sex are somehow locked to one another. To be a trans woman, then, is read, at least in Global Northern perceptions of this particular strand of feminism, as ‘a male practice, devised by a patriarchal medical system in order to construct subservient women’ (Hines, 2019, p. 146). By extension, trans women are not and can never become women. As Sally Hines notes, this particular feminist perspective on trans existence ‘has been extremely difficult to dispel in both feminist writing and activism’ (Hines, 2019, p. 146). Authenticity has been the critical pivot point to these conflicts – ‘of who is, or can be, considered to be a “woman”’ (Hines, 2019, p. 146).

This question ‘of who is, or can be, considered to be a “woman”’ is not new. Indeed, it has particular cultural and political resonances for critical thinking from the Global South. Crucially it is tied to a longer history of gender as a critical tool of colonial imposition or, what Maria Lugones (2016) refers to as ‘the coloniality of gender’. African feminist scholar Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí (1997, p. 16), in her book *The Invention of Women: Making African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, asks ‘Women? What women? Who qualifies to be a woman in this cultural setting, and on what basis are they identified?’ The exclusion of particular kinds of women, from the definition of what it might mean to be a woman, has historical precedence, for the African continent (Roy, 2016). As Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí (1997), Obioma Nnaemeka (2004), Raewyn Connell (2014), Maria Lugones (2016), have argued, feminism from the Global North has long erased or outright denied the womanhood of various women in the Global South. Oyěwùmí argues that ‘woman’ as a concept ‘is derived from Western experience and history, a history rooted in philosophical discourses about the distinction among body, mind, and soul and in ideas about biological determinism and the linkages between the body and the “social”’ (2017, p. xiii). She calls this understanding, which echoes both Adichie’s and TERF political sentiments, ‘the Western bio-logic’. For Oyěwùmí, biology is itself socially constructed, and, is, by extension, inseparable from the social. Inseparable then from the space – nation, communal or societal – in which a body is situated.<sup>3</sup> Highlighting this linkage, Ratalane notes that as a South African ‘woman of trans experience’ she was not raised as ‘typically male or female’ (Collison, 2017), very clearly linking her trans identity to her geopolitical locale.

Ricki Kgositau (2017), a trans woman and activist from Botswana, pointed to a host of women who would fall short of Adichie’s ‘perfect definition of women’. She warned that for trans women like her, those from the African continent, ‘this’, that is Adichie’s universality and her imposition of very Global Northern perceptions of womanhood, ‘spells danger for me’. The danger here is two-fold. Firstly, for those living on the African continent, Adichie’s words as a Nigerian icon carry substantial weight. ‘Transgender’ as a term is not widely used (Camminga, 2018a). In light of this, as Ugandan transgender activist Victor Mukasa (Mukasa & Balzer, 2009, p. 124) explains, ‘generally, all gender non-conforming people are “automatically” branded homosexuals as in most of our communities, a man who looks or has tendencies of a woman is the proper picture of a gay man’. Accusations of homosexuality (given its widespread criminalisation) often carry the threat of violence, exploitation and in some cases even death. To have one’s womanhood denied, to suggest that trans-ness is an indicator of maleness by virtue of having accrued perceived male privilege, in such an environment, is to suggest that trans women are, in fact, always already men. That is, deceptive men, but men nonetheless. Second, it

is to perpetuate the colonial legacy of (violently) imposing particular ideas, of gender, sex and sexuality (and some would argue even feminism itself) vested in the Global North. It was not only trans women from the African continent that responded to Adichie highlighting these dangers. Kenyan poet and activist Shailja Patel (2017), a cis person, asked Adichie through a series of tweets what or how we might define ‘a real woman’. Like Kgositau, she listed several examples of those who might have at one time or another been barred from the category, including those who could read and write. Women like Adichie.

## **Perceptions of privilege and feminism**

For Kgositau, aside from questioning Adichie’s biologically based definition of womanhood, the real problem lies with Adichie’s perception that all trans women are raised in the gender they are assigned at birth – in essence as boys – and forcibly so. Adichie’s reliance on the accusation of male privilege for Kgositau is a clear indicator that for Adichie, trans women can never be or are never ‘real’ women, a category defined by the lack of male privilege. To put it another way, although she vehemently denied this, Adichie implied that trans women are not ‘real’ women in the same way that women, who are cis, are. This is because cis women – a term she does not use due to it ‘not being an organic part of her vocabulary’ – do not experience male privilege. Kgositau, similarly to Ratalane, disputes this. She notes that although there were several attempts to raise her as boy, these failed and that she was actually raised as a girl. For Kgositau, this directly disrupts the understanding that trans women universally experience male privilege. As Kgositau (2017) explains:

... for having been assumed to be male but expressing and identifying as a feminine being I did not benefit from any male privilege at any point for my expressions an identity as a girl made it impossible to fit into this privilege nor assume it in a way that could be positively reinforced.

In a similar vein to Kgositau, Miss Sahhara (2017), a trans woman, model and Nigerian refugee living in the UK who runs the online support community [transvalid.org](http://transvalid.org), argued that Adichie’s assertions about the definite accumulation of male privilege were a contentious accusation to make given the patriarchal nature of Nigerian society. She was the only respondent to call Adichie herself a ‘TERF’ outright. Pointing to their shared heritage, and the danger Kgositau alluded to, Miss Sahhara noted how people assigned male who express femininity in Nigerian society are often treated as an aberration, and that this is usually followed by violence. Speaking as a trans woman who grew up in Nigeria, Miss Sahhara disrupts even Adichie’s bio-logic, in stating that she feels that her gender, that of being a woman from the African continent, is in fact rooted or ‘influenced’ by her biology, being assigned male, that which Adichie would dismiss as inherently privileged.

My gender and self identification comes from my brain. I was not influenced by my environment or society ... if I was influenced by society, then the beatings, abuse, bullying, Church deliverance/prayers and harassment I got for being womanly in Nigeria should have realigned

my brain to act/dress/look like a male. I rebelled growing up by looking and presenting as the female I am. My gender is obviously influenced by biology and not by environment, I was discouraged from all things feminine growing up, but it never stopped me from being fabulously girly, will you and Chimamanda call that 'MALE PRIVILEGE'? (Miss Sakhara, 2017)

One of the critical issues raised by Miss Sakhara and Kgositau is the assumption that they were ever men, rather than *misgendered* as men in societies which do not privilege those assigned male who express any form of femininity. Similarly to Miss Sakhara, a South African trans activist for rural trans women, Seoketsi Mooketsi (2017), tweeted:

As a Trans womxn I'm hypersexualised . . . exploited for my body, not paid, denied education, employment & told I'm not 'Womxn Enough'.

Challenging Adichie's ideas regarding a 'harmful sense of self' as the defining burden of 'female born women' who experience their bodies as 'repositories of shame' while having to 'to cater to the egos of men' (2017b), Mooketsi highlights the very real experiences of shame and harm which leave trans women exploited and catering to those self-same egos. Indeed, whereas Adichie suggests trans women, by virtue of being 'born male' and therefore always already being men, are spared the socialisation and problematic self value issues experienced by (cis) women, Mooketsi makes clear that her day-to-day experiences, as a woman, are comprised of exactly that. The difference being, that in the case of Mooketsi, these experiences, rather than functioning as an affirmation of her womanhood are often accompanied by its direct denial. Reflecting Mooketsi's arguments, trans women from the African continent who responded to Adichie underlined how their experience of being misgendered as boys, if they were not raised as girls as Kgositau was, still did not mean they experienced the stereotypical male privilege Adichie intends. As Kgositau (2017) offers:

We need to interrogate the under-privilege that comes with renouncing and divorcing oneself from this male assignment from birth; transwomen [*sic*] are harshly punished by society for actually refusing this male assignment and privilege that comes with it. They are labelled, insulted, raped and even murdered for refusing this privilege by virtue of being women in bodies categorised as male; that is the many blindspots to Ms. Adichie's simplification of male privilege to simply being attained just by the sex one is assigned at birth. For transwomen [*sic*] given that many's [*sic*] feminine expressions manifest very early on in life, they never get to benefit any male privilege for they are an irritation to masculine maleness.

Philosopher Talia Mae Bettcher (2013b), in her article 'Trans Woman and the Meaning of "Woman"', refers to the denial of trans women's authenticity as women as a form of transphobia through which a type of 'identity enforcement' takes place. She goes on to suggest that when a person is defined by their trans-ness in relation to their woman-ness, in Adichie's case as 'a trans woman is a trans woman', what it really infers 'in dominant cultural contexts . . . is understood to mean "a man who lives as a woman"' (Bettcher, 2013b, p. 235). Marking some of Oy w m i's critique, Bettcher calls this 'the taken-for-granted assumption' of the dominant cultural view of transgender identity as it functions in the Global North. For Bettcher (2013b, p. 242), and as several trans women from the

African continent point out, ‘this conflict over meaning is deeply bound up with the distribution of power and the capacity to enforce a way of life, regardless of the emotional and physical damage done to the individual’.

Given Adichie’s status, this type of identity enforcement can have genuine material effects on the lives of women already struggling to survive. Mooketsi’s hashtag *ChimamandaKilledME*, which remained part of her twitter handle for several weeks after Adichie’s public statements, is a testament to this. As Ratalane contends, ‘we are at this critical stage where transgender women are highly marginalised and face high levels of violence. So any insensitive comment that denigrates trans women – or discounts their experiences . . . justifies such violence’ (Collison, 2017). Phumelele Nkomozake (2017), the author of the blog [mytransrevolution.wordpress.com](http://mytransrevolution.wordpress.com), echoed Ratalane in slamming Adichie for the ‘abuse’ of her power and her misrepresentations of trans women, stating: ‘You do not know me. I was never a man. I have always been a woman.’ By ‘me’, as with Miss Sahhara, Ratalane, Kgositau and Mooketsi, she means women of trans experience from the African continent.

## Sins and semantics

Language matters. (Adichie, 2017a)

Following the Channel 4 interview, Adichie, at an event in Paris, told *The Atlantic*’s national correspondent Ta-Nehisi Coates and editor in chief Jeffrey Goldberg that she understood the ensuing furore as a kind of growing intolerance to dissent. She framed this as an expectation around conforming to language ‘orthodoxy . . . and if you don’t, you become a bad, evil person, and it doesn’t matter what you’ve done in the past or what you stand for’ (Adichie et al., 2017). For Adichie, her ‘major sin’ since the initial interview had been to refuse to abide by this language orthodoxy (Allardice, 2018). Yet, in the past language has been a profoundly feminist concern for Adichie.<sup>4</sup> We might want to say, as Adichie has, that the issues raised by her critics are simply semantics, and perhaps this would be possible if she were not someone whose entire career has been built around constructing and exacting ideas from language. This is not merely about the use of the term ‘cis’ which, as noted, Adichie understands as ‘foreign to her’ (whereas a term like ‘trans’ is seemingly not). It is about what Kgositau (2017) has called her ‘reckless’ use of language, the kind of language that is dangerous, and the kind of language that perpetuates violence. For Kgositau, this is seen in the way in which Adichie refers to trans women as ‘they’ – a separate group. Also, perhaps seen in her statement that trans women should be allowed to be ‘what’ they are. Not who, but what. In light of these, possibly more minor examples, it is critical to consider Adichie’s words.

Firstly, as noted, she constructs gender as both binary and something trans people ‘switch’ between, a position that echoes TERF perceptions of trans identity. Secondly, the use of this specific term ‘switch’ reifies a particular understanding of trans identity grounded in the Global North. Indeed, switching suggests access to hormones and affirming healthcare that is not available across the African continent and therefore, in many senses, is simply not part of the trans imaginary. It, therefore, fails to account for and invalidates the existence of trans identities prior to (or regardless of) affirming healthcare

(Iranti-Org, 2017). Miss Sakhara (2017) goes so far as to reject medicalisation. As a trans woman from Africa, she argues that she did not ‘switch’ or ‘transition’ rather ‘my brain and sense of self has always been female, my self-definition may not be synonymous with most trans women, *but it is my definition*. I grew up thinking, looking and acting like the female I thought I was [emphasis added]’ (Miss Sakhara, 2017). This point is critical in the assumption of what it might mean to be transgender within the presently dominant Global Northern models of transgender identity and the reality of being transgender in the Global South. The very same models that TERF politics, invested in particular bio-logics and Western models of gender identity, are constructed in relation too. As Miss Sakhara clarifies:

The way I look/dress and present myself as a human being is a choice, but the way I feel is not a choice. I did not choose to have the feelings I have. Who will choose to be hated, misunderstood and rejected? We all want to be loved, accepted and respected for who we are. Please don’t confuse my struggles as a choice. (Miss Sakhara, 2017)

Returning to Oyěwùmí (1997, p. 10): if, as Adichie argues, gender is socially constructed, then ‘gender cannot behave in the same ways across time and space’. Writers and feminists from the Global South, as noted by Desiree Lewis (2001, p. 6), have long argued that ‘women’s socially inscribed identities in Africa take very different forms from women’s acquisition of gender identities in the West’. Why would this be any different for trans women?

Susan Stryker (2006, p.12) explains that ‘transgender is without a doubt, a category of first world origin that is being exported for third world consumption’. It is invested with particular ideas of gender and hails a particular person when used – as with the term feminist – usually, someone who is white. Trans scholar Viviane K. Namaste (2005, p. xi) is deeply critical of what she calls the anglocentric bias of the term transgender. Namaste stresses that it is necessary for feminism in particular to be aware of the how specific language and concepts ‘are marked by specific nationalist and colonialist traditions . . . institutional mechanisms through which imperialism is achieved, denying rights to some humans, according them to others’. As Jesse Shipley and Chika Unigwe (2018) note in their article ‘Naming as Righting and Regulating’, location matters. How African sexualities and gender identities are framed and by whom has crucial and at times deeply political impacts.

To uncritically apply names and concepts invested and ‘constructed by people with colonising and nationalising agendas’ (Shipley & Unigwe, 2018) runs the risk of turning the specificity of experiences that are, to use decolonial terms, geo- and corpo-politically situated into a broader monolithic narrative with no nuance – a single story. Naming and language, for instance, the terms ‘women’ or ‘transgender’, must expand and transform to fit experiences and actualities. In a press release addressing Adichie’s comments, South African transgender, intersex and queer media rights organisation Iranti-Org (2017) noted that in her approach to a very narrow definition of womanhood, Adichie was perpetuating the very thing she has built a platform on working against. The organisation, which works with and for transgender people across the African continent, addressed Adichie directly. They asked her, in their response article, to consider how ‘she

is now silencing and speaking over the many trans voices who have also been colonised and misrepresented for far too long, and to not let Western definitions and stereotypes be her sole source of knowledge on trans identities' (Iranti-Org, 2017).

What perhaps lies at the heart of the language issue is the term 'cis'. Adichie suggests that it is both foreign to her and represents a 'type of language orthodoxy'. To suggest as such is actually to highlight the asymmetry that exists between trans and cis. It also brings the power relations of language and the ways in which trans people are consistently separated as 'Other' into full visibility (Bettcher, 2013a). Trans women have always had to justify who they are, while cis women, like Adichie, more generally do not or have not had to. It is this continuous creation of 'Other', to say 'trans women are trans women', a negative recognition, that situates trans women outside the category of 'woman' as defined and policed by a cis woman. It is this exclusion that so easily echoes, and to a certain extent is co-opted, as trans-exclusionary. Not only does Adichie define the category, but also she refuses to see her privilege in the very fact that she assumes she can do so. In her response, cis Zimbabwean novelist Panashe Chigumadzi (2017) called on cis feminists 'to recognise that this is an issue beyond semantics'. For Chigumadzi, the creation of a fixed category of womanhood defined by cis women, something which lies at the heart of TERF perceptions, necessarily implies boundaries, which need policing 'in ways that often have violent consequences for those who do not fit neatly into the category'.

## Are there trans women in Africa?<sup>5</sup>

The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story. (Adichie, 2009)

In her TED Talk *The Danger of a Single Story*, Adichie explains how, as a child exposed to particular perceptions of the world, perceptions already explicitly invested in whiteness and Western ideals shaped her expectations of the world around her. Since she was living in Nigeria at the time, this was a world which was not commensurate with the one she read about. In the talk, she goes on to explain how this single story, one that is anglocentric, lacks nuance and represents groups as homogeneous, has historically often worked to the detriment of those that are not white and Western. For Adichie, stereotypes silence nuance and the only way to redress this is to elevate a diversity of voices. In this moment, for critics like Mia Fischer, the response from Adichie brought to the fore a kind of single-story feminism, one which resonates in the Global North. A feminism that has long privileged the views of particular women or presented these views as universalising: claiming to speak for all women everywhere. Feminism today, or at least popular feminism for Fischer, continually 'emphasises cisgender perspectives and experiences, replicating a cis-hegemonic feminism' (2017, p. 897). A feminism labelled by Adichie's critics in the Global North as 'TERF'. For Cameron Awkward-Rich (2017, p. 828) it is utterly surprising given the breadth of feminism today that trans-exclusionary radical feminism continues to 'so frequently stand in for what feminism is'. Regardless of how TERFs are dismissed or written off as perpetuating bad science or pure hatefulness, 'they persist and continue to structure mainstream representations of trans lives. For this reason, it seems to

me that we too must take them seriously in order to properly understand the appeal' (Awkward-Rich, 2017, p. 828). What then, is the appeal here? Put another way, why the focus on Adichie?

The circulation of feminist thought globally is complex and largely uneven. There are, as noted, particular historical, institutional, social and political structures 'allowing for differential scales of power and powerlessness' (Roy, 2016, p. 292). Srila Roy refers to these as enduring 'circuits of marginalisation' (Roy, 2016, p. 292). Transnational feminist writing by authors such as Roy (2016), Tambe (2010) and Amanda Lock Swarr and Richa Nagar (2010) remind us that this flow of feminisms is never one-sided or unidirectional. It is never just from the Global North to the Global South, but rather, there is a circulation of feminist ideas and principles that happen within realms of difference and inequality. It cannot be forgotten that these circuits have, in part, been fostered by ongoing Northern epistemological domination which often privileges 'the voices of a few hand-picked Southern scholars' (Roy, 2016, p. 292). Acclaimed South African author Sisonke Msimang notes that in recent years Adichie has 'been used as an expert' on issues of race, gender and African politics. For Msimang (2017), Adichie has become a spokesperson for the West, a household name who has 'used her voice to galvanise the urgency of diverse voices and perspectives. A worthy cause, for sure, but one that has been manipulated to foment divisions within the women's movement worldwide' (Sanchez, 2017). Kgositau (2017) underlines these points when she notes that although the original interviewer, in asking Adichie about trans women, placed her in a difficult situation, a question which Adichie herself acknowledged verged on 'anti-feminist', she chose to answer as she did. This was, for Kgositau, a trivial use of trans people's lives on a global platform aimed at feeding already existing tensions and creating discordance – tensions which she continued to feed in her Facebook clarifications following the original incident.

The responses of cis women like Msimang (2017), Chigumadzi (2017) and Patel (2017), cis women in the Global South, point to a type of politics far more closely aligned to understanding trans women as women. The kind of politics which in global 'circuits of marginalisation' offers a direct challenge to TERF approaches to trans bodies which seemingly dominate popular perceptions of feminism. As Chigumadzi (2017) explains:

. . . when black, African cisgender women (that is, women who identify with the gender they were assigned with at birth) such as feminist icon Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, insist that because of the difference of their experience of womanhood 'transwomen are transwomen' [*sic*] and therefore not part of the category 'woman,' it becomes a deep dishonour to the centuries-old traditions of black and African feminisms seeking to disrupt white and Western women's exclusionary definitions of womanhood. . . . Black and African feminists have long taught us that, indeed, anatomy is not destiny. As a cisgender black feminist, I believe that it is an indictment on our contemporary activism that it purports to 'support' transwomen [*sic*], only to exclude them in the very same ways that we have historically been excluded from the category of 'Woman'.

This is not to say that there is a homogeneous African feminism which sits in direct contradiction to popular versions of feminism in the Global North. Instead, as African feminists such as Filomena Chioma Steady (1996), Josephine Ahikire (2014), Nana Darkoa

Sekyiamah (2014), Danai Mupotsa (2014) and many others have pointed out, feminism on the African continent is comprised of 'myriad heterogeneous experiences and points of departure' (Ahikire, 2014, p. 8). African feminism combines the very many dimensions of oppression across the continent to produce 'a more inclusive brand of feminism through which women are viewed first and foremost as human, rather than sexual, beings' (Steady, 1996). These debates of radical feminism, as Gwendolyn Mikell (1997) noted in the 1990s, are not the ways characteristic of African feminism.

To return to Patel's (2017) tweets, she ends by asking 'Who gets to unwoman women? Who profits from the policing of women? What is threatened by transgressive women and gender variance?' Kgositau (2017), from her perspective as a trans woman from Botswana, calls Adichie's approaches and, indeed, Adichie's feminism, 'long dead and buried'. The kind of feminism which, as a trans woman from the African continent, does not resonate with her, and with the trans and indeed cis women who responded. The kind of Western bio-logic feminism which, she points out, operates on the premise of 'who has a vagina and who does not'. Kgositau (2017), in a moment of acerbic pity for the seemingly foreign and out of touch ideas in which she perceives Adichie to be invested, calls out Adichie's 'vagina politics' as 'fossils of feminism'. The kind of feminism that might be labelled 'TERF' in the Global North, but as Kgositau seems to suggest, holds no currency for her and indeed many of the feminist writers and activist of non-trans experience like Patel who did respond. What might we infer from the vocal support of cis feminists such as Msimang, Chigumadzi, Patel and others? Perhaps, that the kind of feminism attempting to dominate transnational circulation currently, a feminism presenting itself as universally applicable, is in fact not. Rather, on the African continent, at least visibly and vocally, concerning trans women is a feminism which, in the lineage of other feminisms from the South, refuses to 'speak about the whole world . . . in a conceptual language derived from the most powerful part of it' (Connell, 2014, p. 521).

## An entirely different story

Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanise. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity. (Adichie, 2009)

*The Danger of a Single Story* is perhaps one of Adichie's most-watched TED Talks. In it she challenges humanity to acknowledge and listen to each other's complexity. Yet, in the instance of the Channel 4 interview, Adichie, quite peculiarly, presents a single narrative. One which sees 'trans women as trans women', not as people who are often misgendered or coercively assigned in a particular way at birth. A position that perhaps, though not intentionally meant as such, echoes and therefore very easily opened itself up to accusations of TERF intention. Adichie, in her own confounding single story of trans existence, invested in very particular Global Northern narratives of gender and perceived perceptions regarding the body, conveniently overlooks her own privilege and power. That is the power and privilege cis people have in being correctly gendered from birth. Moreover, the assumptions she makes as a cis woman are constitutive of this – for example, that she supposedly had the right to answer a question on whether trans women are women.

Feminists from the African continent have for the most part responded, at least on public platforms, in support of transgender women, questioning Adichie and her stance. It is notable too that responses from authors such as Msimang and Chigumadzi suggest the possibility of a different space for feminism and trans women within South Africa in particular. My own, albeit anecdotal, experience of writing for the South African collection *Feminism Is* (Camminga, 2018b) as a trans person who identifies as a feminist, has been exceptionally positive, inclusive and welcoming. At the same time, although publicly feminist spaces and feminists on the African continent seem to be more open, it does not negate the physical danger that trans people across the African continent experience daily. What I am suggesting though is that the narrative of trans-exclusionary feminism in the Global North, which currently seems to be dominant at least in a popular cultural sense, is seemingly not an issue in the same way on the African continent. The voices of those I have centred in this essay have provided an outright and explicit rejection of both the kind of feminism and gender politics that Adichie espouses. Critically, it is not just trans women doing so but cis women too. Perhaps Chigumadzi (2017) says it best:

When our trans sisters have to look at us, and ask as our feminist foremother Sojourner Truth did a century and half ago, ‘Ain’t I A Woman?’, it tells us that our visions of freedom from the oppressions that we face as black women are not only unimaginative, exclusionary, and violent, but historically regressive.

For Oyěwùmí (1997, p. 13), these debates, about the differences between women and the ‘preoccupation with gender bending/blending that have characterised feminism’, are culturally specific concerns invested in the social hierarchies of the West. She adds that what seems to be truly fascinating is how feminism has become so deeply imbricated in the ‘ethnocentric and imperialistic characteristics of the Western discourse it sought to subvert’ (Oyěwùmí, 1997, p. 13). This is because the concerns that have informed this feminism are Western and have continued to be so in a self-perpetuating colonialist sense. Oyěwùmí (1997, p. 13) also notes then that feminism, as seemingly is the case for Adichie, remains ‘enflamed by the tunnel vision of the bio-logic’ of Western discourse. A discourse structured on historical power. It is this power that is crucial here, as Adichie herself notes:

It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power. There is a word, an Igbo word, that I think about whenever I think about the power structures of the world, and it is ‘nkali.’ It’s a noun that loosely translates to ‘to be greater than another.’ Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of nkali: How they are told, who tells them, when they’re told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power. Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person. The Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti writes that if you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story and to start with, ‘secondly.’ Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story. (Adichie, 2009)

Start the story, as Ratalane, Miss Sahhara, Mooketsi, Kgositau, Chigumadzi, Msimang and Patel have, by acknowledging history, geo- and corpo-political difference, along

with colonial impositions of language and gender and how terms travel and have imperialist tendencies but can and do transform, and you have an entirely different story.

## Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Notes

1. These are the words of a Twitter-user, @Seoketsi\_M, who tweeted this under the hashtag #ChimamandaKilledme in 2017. The account no longer exists.
2. Trans-inclusive feminism in the Global North is also highly critical of these bio-logics.
3. Nigel Patel (2019) does similar work linking the gendered colonisation of trans people of colour in South Africa to the violent legacy of sex segregated bathroom spaces. Patel suggests that the difficulties trans people in South Africa experience accessing bathrooms safely cannot simply be understood as an issue of gender but is intertwined with the particular history of racism and colonialism in South Africa. For more on bathrooms, see Slater and Jones, this collection.
4. For example, Adichie has taken public issue with terms like ‘baby bump’ which she has argued obfuscates the more serious issues of maternity leave and the gender pay gap (Allardice, 2018).
5. This a riff on a statement Elaine Salo made to Amina Mama (2001) regarding the suggestion that there are no feminists in Africa.

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