
Reviewed by Alexandra M. Thomas

Published on H-Black-Europe (October, 2019)

Commissioned by Robbie Aitken (Sheffield Hallam University, Humanities Research Center)

*Chez Jolie Coiffure* is an elegant portrayal of the social, political, and aesthetic lifeworld of a Cameroonian hairdresser, business owner, and activist—the talented and hard-working Sabine. In Matonge, the African quarter of Brussels, there is a lively community with hustle and bustle comparable to the streets of African cities. In a locality in which black-owned businesses flourish, filmmaker Rosine Mbakam chooses an African hair salon as the subject of her recent film, *Chez Jolie Coiffure*. The film, titled after the name of the salon, is owned by a Cameroonian woman named Sabine. Like Mbakam herself, Sabine is a Cameroonian immigrant living in Belgium. In an intimate glimpse into Sabine's busy life, we witness a multitude of encounters between Sabine and the rest of her community as she takes on a multifaceted role as an accomplice to other women's freedom, a successful businesswoman, a careful lover, and someone deeply knowledgeable of the relationship of race and gender to geopolitics.

Sabine owns and manages a hair salon called “Chez Jolie Coiffure.” From the opening moments of the film, it is apparent that Sabine is a master of multitasking. She exemplifies the black feminist ethic of making a way out of no way. Through Sabine's everyday life, we take an intimate glimpse into the dynamic role that a black hair salon plays in an immigrant community.

That is to say, Sabine practices a black femethic of communal care: in her salon, the surrounding community is nurtured in generous and careful ways. The man who comes by to sell oxtail kebabs receives relationship advice from Sabine, resulting in the reconciliation between the man and his significant other. As Sabine braids hair in delicate and complex designs, her patrons remind her, *I don't just let anyone do my hair*. They trust Sabine. In another moment, Sabine is figuring out how to give more money to her brother, Atoko. *I will figure it out*. As she delicately applies eyelash extensions to a patron, Sabine comforts the nervous woman by telling her that the brand she uses for the job is one that is less likely to give anyone rashes or an infection of any sort.

There are particular choreographies to the political, social, and aesthetic network of the African hair salon. There are certain movements, rules, and guidelines one must follow. The women who work in Sabine's salon go outside and attempt to get customers, yet quarrels occur if one hairdresser poaches a customer from another. Mbakam captures these arguments as they happen: Sabine mediates and calms down the situation before the police are called, emphasizing to both the hairdressers and the camera that encroaching on another hairdressers' clientele is unethical in their place of business.
One of the most authentic and endearing aspects of Chez Jolie Coiffure is the way that Mbakam captures Sabine's thoughts and flirtations with notions of spectatorship, voyeurism, and the gaze. In one scene, Sabine is doing her own hair in the mirror when she pointedly asks, “What are you focusing on?” Mbakam quickly replies, “You.” Sabine is not only hyperaware of who and what Mbakam is capturing, but she is also cognizant of the physical object of the camera itself, even suggesting to Mbakam where she should and should not place the camera so that someone does not break or steal it. Rosine, come get your camera, the men here will knock it on the ground. When a group of white tourists walk by the hair salon and stare through the windows, Sabine notices their gaze and playfully tells Mbakam that she should point the camera toward them so they will go away. Move on, whites! In her remarks on the white gaze and the ability of the camera to make a spectacle of one’s actions, Sabine is implicitly affirming the power of Mbakam's camera and artistic gaze in her hair salon as well. Thus, Sabine’s humorous flirtations with the camera are not because she does not take its gaze seriously, but because she is acutely aware of representation and the work that it can do.

If there is one universal marker of the black experience across space, time, nation, and gender, it may be the sociality of the hair salon and/or barbershop and its political role in the community. Like the scene of the hair salon and barbershop that black people throughout the world know so well, Sabine’s salon is a locale in which black life is sustained through communal uplift and political awareness. In between asking people if they want their hair done, braiding hair, and making sure the business of the salon is taken care of, Sabine tells Mbakam and her camera about the horrors experienced by migrant African women working as domestic laborers in Lebanon. Sabine tells the story that she and other Cameroonian migrants know well: the pipeline of Cameroonian women going to work as domestic workers in Lebanon on severely unethical contracts, in which they are assigned to work for families for years while their passports have been taken away. Many of these women, Sabine tells us, are victims of sexual violence, racism, and severe classism while working in Lebanon, experiences that Sabine herself has had. She now warns other West African women to avoid moving to Lebanon for these positions, but many are still tricked into terrifying situations where they are then forced to take a dangerous journey to Europe through Syria.

We witness Sabine sharing her own harrowing journey, as well as her frustration with always trying to warn other women not to make the same mistake. Despite the perilous journeys Sabine and the West Africans who frequent her salon have undertaken to arrive in Belgium, as well as contributing significantly to the cultural landscape of the country, they are constantly at risk for deportation if they are not regularized as foreign nationals staying in Belgium legally. Mbakam captures the treacherous ways in which Belgian police show up in Matonge to arrest and deport people. Many Cameroonians and other West African immigrants have spent several years applying for regularization but have not been approved by the Belgian government. When Sabine is forced to shut down the hair salon to avoid attracting attention from police who are in the area finding people to arrest and possibly deport, we observe the fear tactics used by the state to keep migrant workers in an unstable way of life. The visceral tension and fear that emerge in these moments of disruption when the police are in the area are not a result of paranoia—paranoia implies an irrational train of thought. The fear is rational, as these people can be deported at any time despite the length of time they have spent living, working, and building roots in Belgium.

It is apparent that we are to read Sabine’s narrative as triumphant and hopeful—she is a
Cameroonian businesswoman working in a European city that is often hostile to her, yet she works with other African immigrants to raise awareness for issues facing them and maintains a healthy space for beauty, pleasure, gossip, and joy within the hair salon alongside the conversation on politics and its tangible effects on their lives. As Sabine talks about the process of applying for regularization, there is a hopeful tone to her dialogue. Sabine reminds herself and others that the state will consider how long people have been there when deciding whether to accept their applications for legal residency. Despite this, the police raids in Matonge are worrisome and reveal the fearful undertone of any appeals to the state for recognition or visibility: these appeals could be followed by deportation. Chez Jolie Coiffure expresses to its viewers that the precarity of African immigrants living in Belgium is tethered to the profound creativity and sociality of black beauty and style.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-black-europe


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54637

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.