

Feminist Africa

Issue 21 | 2016



The politics of fashion and beauty in Africa

Feminist Africa 21

The politics of fashion and beauty in Africa

Issue 21: September 2016

First published in 2016 by the
African Gender Institute
All Africa House
University of Cape Town
Private Bag
Rondebosch 7701



© in published edition:
African Gender Institute,
University of Cape Town,
South Africa, 2016

ISSN: 1726-4596

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording and/or otherwise without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published with the support of the African Women's Development Fund.

Typesetting, printing and cover design: COMPRESS.dsl | www.compress.dsl.com

Cover photograph: Still image from *Yellow Fever*. Credit: Ng'endo Mukii

Distribution: AGI staff

Feminist Africa is a scholarly journal accredited by the
South African Department of Education.

Editorial policy

Feminist Africa is guided by a profound commitment to transforming gender hierarchies in Africa, and seeks to redress injustice and inequality in its content and design, and by its open-access and continentally-targeted distribution strategy. *Feminist Africa* targets gender researchers, students, educators, women's organisations and feminist activists throughout Africa. It works to develop a feminist intellectual community by promoting and enhancing African women's intellectual work. To overcome the access and distribution challenges facing conventional academic publications, *Feminist Africa* deploys a dual dissemination strategy, using the Internet as a key tool for knowledge-sharing and communication, while making hard copies available to those based at African institutions.

Two issues are produced per annum, in accordance with themes specified in the calls for contributions.

The editorial team can be contacted at agi-feministafrica@uct.ac.za

Acknowledgements

The *Feminist Africa* team acknowledges the intellectual input of the community of African feminist scholars and the Editorial Advisory Board.

We thank the African Women's Development Fund for their financial support towards production and publication.

Disclaimer

The views expressed by contributors to *Feminist Africa* are not necessarily those of the Editors, Editorial Advisory Board, the African Gender Institute, or our partners. While every reasonable effort is made to check factual accuracy in published material, the contributors are ultimately responsible for verifying claims made in their writings. Neither *Feminist Africa* nor the African Gender Institute will be responsible for errors or inaccuracies in contributions.

Editor

Amina Mama

Issue 21 editor

Simidele Dosekun

Reviews editor

Simidele Dosekun

Copy editors

Jane Bennett

Simidele Dosekun

Proofreader

Helen Douglas

Editorial team

Jane Bennett

Selina Mudavanhu

Barbara Boswell

Sylvia Tamale

Victoria Collis-Buthelezi

Divine Fuh

Amrita Pande

Editorial advisory group

The editorial advisory group of *Feminist Africa* consists of scholars and researchers, located in different fields in the social sciences and humanities, who offer their expertise to the development and dissemination of *Feminist Africa* as an innovative African-focused journal.

Advisory group members are:

Akosua Adamako-Ampofo, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, Teresa Barnes, Kum-Kum Bhavnani, Hope Chigudu, Tsitsi Dangaremba, Carole Boyce Davies, Simidele Dosekun, Amanda Gouws, Pregs Govender, Pumla Dineo Gqola, Shireen Hassim, Desiree Lewis, Zine Magubane, Takyiwaa Manuh, Helen Moffett, Chandra Mohanty, Patricia Mohammed, Patricia McFadden, Ruth Ochieng, Margo Okazawa-Rey, Awino Okech, Charmaine Pereira, Jennifer Radloff, Rhoda Reddock, Vasu Reddy, Kopano Ratele, Ebrima Sall, Fatou Sow, Chinyere Oparah, Sylvia Tamale,

Dzodzi Tsikata, Zenebeworke Tadesse,
Muthoni Wanyeki and Paul Zeleza.

Manuscript submissions

Feminist Africa has a submissions policy determined by its continental focus on feminist studies and activism. Periodic calls for contributions along particular themes guide submissions. All contributions must register the centrality of feminist politics and critical gender analysis to past, present and ongoing processes of social, political and cultural change in Africa. We regret that we cannot respond to all unsolicited submissions.

Please submit contributions electronically to agi-feministafrica@uct.ac.za. We regret that we do not currently have the capacity to consider contributions in languages other than English.

All submissions to *Feminist Africa* must use the FA style sheet, and should not include graphics.

Feature articles should not exceed 6 500 words. Other contributions should not exceed 2 000 words.

Editorial procedure

Contributions submitted to *Feminist Africa* are considered by the editorial team. Feature articles are peer-reviewed by readers with expertise in relevant areas. Editorial discretion in relation to submitted work resides with the editorial team.

Copyright and reproduction

The authors and artists hold individual copyright. Overall copyright is held by the African Gender Institute. Material, artwork extracts and articles from *Feminist Africa* may not be reproduced in any form of print or electronic publication without the permission of the Editors, who can be contacted at agi-feministafrica@uct.ac.za. Requests for permission to reproduce material will not be granted until one calendar year after first online publication in *Feminist Africa* has lapsed.

Distribution

Adams Campus Bookshop
University of KwaZulu-Natal
Howard College Campus
Durban, South Africa
tel: 27 31 261 2320
fax: 27 31 261 6053
email: campus@adamsbooks.co.za

Clarke's Bookshop
211 Long Street
Cape Town 8001
South Africa
tel: 27 21 423 5739
fax: 27 21 423 6441
email: books@clarkesbooks.co.za
web: www.clarkesbooks.co.za

International subscriptions

EBSCO Subscription Services
P O Box 749
Cresta 2118
South Africa
tel: 27 11 678 4416
fax: 27 11 678 4464
email: mailsa@ebSCO.com
web: www.ebsco.com/home/southafrica

Contents

Editorial: The politics of fashion and beauty in Africa

– by *Simidele Dosekun* 1

Features

African Women Do Not Look Good in Wigs: Gender, Beauty Rituals and Cultural Identity in Anglophone Cameroon, 1961–1972
– by *Jacqueline-Bethel Mougoué* 7

Contesting Beauty: Black Lesbians on the Stage
– by *Zethu Matebeni* 23

“These Girls’ Fashion is Sick!”: *An African City* and the Geography of Sartorial Worldliness
– by *Grace Adeniyi Ogunyankin* 37

Skimpy Fashion and Sexuality in Sheebah Karungi’s Performances
– by *Evelyn Lutwama-Rukundo* 52

Standpoints

The Weave as an ‘Unhappy’ Technology of Black Femininity
– by *Simidele Dosekun* 63

Dreadlocks as a Symbol of Resistance: Performance and Reflexivity
– by *Tendai Mutukwa* 70

In Conversation

Doing Beauty as African Feminists: A Conversation between Aleya Kassam, Fatma Emam, Valérie Bah and Yewande Omotoso 75

Profiles

- 'Keep Your Eyes off My Thighs': A Feminist Analysis of Uganda's
'Miniskirt Law'
– by *Sylvia Tamale* 83

Reviews

- Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the
Global Politics of Soul*
– by *Kabura Nganga* 91

- Regarding Muslims: From Slavery to Postapartheid*
– by *Sa'diyya Shaikh* 94

- The Remaking of Social Contracts:
Feminists in a Fierce New World*
– by *Sehin Teferra* 98

Tribute

- Hajiya Bilkisu Yusuf and Her 'Jihad' of the Heart
– by *Maryam Uwais MFR* 101

- Contributors** 103

Editorial: The politics of fashion and beauty in Africa

Simidele Dosekun

From wigs and weaves to skin-bleaching to the clothes that we use to cover or reveal our bodies, fashion and beauty are complex structural considerations for women in Africa, and at the same time immensely personal. Occupying diverse socio-cultural positions, we exercise different degrees of practical choice over how we dress and adorn ourselves, limited by sheer material means and the market forces and asymmetric commodity flows of globalisation, as well as by the host of norms of embodied appearance to which we actively subscribe or with which we are expected or made to comply. Constantly shifting, often conflicting, these norms are at once local and global; racial, ethnic and national; new, old, and much more. To cite Esi Dogbe, in Africa it is necessarily the case that we fashion and beautify ourselves “in the interstices of multiple cultural and socioeconomic grammars—colonial, local, global, and neocolonial. These grammars refract the very issue of ‘choice’” (2003: 382). But even when we *are* choosing from the given options, acting agentically and self-reflexively on what we consider subjective preference or taste, our very sense of what looks and feels and signifies best is also thoroughly conditioned. I heard this quite clearly, for instance, in my research on young Nigerian women who almost exclusively wear weaves or hair extensions. One after the other, the women asserted that they simply, individually and therefore unproblematically preferred how they looked with weaves than with their own hair. Yet this preference is not individual or idiosyncratic, and not apolitical. However much felt, the fact is that it is rooted in “discourses on [black feminine] beauty and ugliness and the embodied practices of beauty which sediment in our structures of feeling over centuries” (Tate, 2009: 4).

Critics may react to these women’s negative feelings about their own hair, perhaps casting them as victims of what in Nigeria we call ‘colo-mentality’ (i.e. an internalised colonial mentality). For the fashioned and beautified

woman, apart from questions of how she might see herself, there is also always the matter of how she is seen by others. It is by no means only in Africa that women's embodied appearances are overburdened with meaning and widely considered other people's business, hence in need of scrutiny, comment and control. Tendai Mutukwa provides a personal example of this gendering process in her contribution to this issue of *Feminist Africa*, where she recalls and performatively re-enacts the adverse reactions of her parents and other family members to her decision to style her hair in 'locs.' Among other things, their concern was that her 'respectability' as a good Christian girl was being called into question by her new look. The kinds of patriarchal logics that underpin the widespread policing of women's fashion and beauty practices are well-recognised and critiqued in African and other feminist scholarship and activism. We know that it is women who are figured as symbols/embodiments of the moral standing of community, family and nation, yet simultaneously as morally weak and polluting; that women are constructed as the guardians of 'tradition'; that women are considered property, subject to male authority and domination; that it is our putative sexual propriety that matters most, and so on (e.g. see discussions in *Feminist Africa* 2 and 5). Such logics render women's bodies "the battlefield for cultural-moral struggles," as Sylvia Tamale puts it in her contribution to the present issue. Tamale's concern is the Anti-Pornography Act passed in Uganda in 2014, which is known more colloquially, and tellingly, as 'the miniskirt law.' Critically deconstructing this Act, and arguing that it is in fact unconstitutional, Tamale demonstrates how it centrally targets and incriminates women's bodies and dress, and thereby incites further violence against women.

Juridical attempts to control how women dress and appear in public like the Ugandan Anti-Pornography Act have recurred historically across the continent, as have both brute and symbolic violence directed at those deemed inappropriate. Young, urban, working-class women have borne the brunt of such misogynistic attacks, which are often carried out in the name of 'decency' and bolstered by invocations of 'tradition,' 'African culture,' 'black pride' and 'nationalism,' as well as both Christianity and Islam (e.g. see Bakare-Yusuf, 2010; Ivaska, 2004; Pereira and Ibrahim, 2010). In her feature article, 'African women do not look good in wigs,' Jacqueline-Bethel Mougoué considers a historical moral panic over women's changing modes of appearance in the former West Cameroon. Reading women's advice columns in local newspapers

along with letters from their audiences – the provocative title of the article derives from a 1968 letter from a disgruntled male reader – Mougoué details the conflicting and ultimately unattainable standards to which young women engaging in new beauty practices were being subjected by not only men but the educated, middle-class women columnists, too. While new technologies such as wigs and cosmetics conferred social success and visibility, they also attracted disapprobation from some quarters. Just how much women were to beautify themselves, the fine line at which one crossed from supposedly respectable, modest and modern femininity to excess and shame, was also in contention.

Typically, in such public panics and debates over what women are doing, the voices, thoughts and desires of the women in question are little heard. This is the case in the newspaper texts that comprise Mougoué's primary archive, making it important, methodologically and politically, that she complements this source with interviews of local women who were in their late teens or early 20s in the 1960s. Unable to secure an interview with Sheebah Karungi, the Ugandan Afropop star, to get at the question of why she styles and presents herself as she does, in her feature article Evelyn Lutwama-Rukundo relies instead on media representations of the entertainer, and on public pronouncements that Sheebah has made about her image. Lutwama-Rukundo reads Sheebah as agentic, intentional and self-pleasing in her practice of dressing in 'skimpy fashion,' and argues that she seeks to project an emancipated feminine sexuality. Noting that Sheebah's sexy style is not unique in the popular music scene in Africa or beyond, and that it is itself commodified, part of the brand, Lutwama-Rukundo locates the Ugandan star within a now-global 'raunch culture,' and poses the difficult questions that continue to tax feminists about what it means, how we understand it, when women *self*-objectify.

In all this, it is quite crucial that one question which Lutwama-Rukundo does not raise is whether Sheebah should be taking on a new and clearly non-indigenous style of dress and self-presentation at all. This is important not only because it is precisely what I would call women's right to adopt one or another style in Africa that is denied in moral panics and pronouncements about our variously changing fashion and beauty practice. It is also important in relation to Eurocentric and anthropological/anthropologising scholarly and popular visions of Africans as normatively embodying 'African looks'

(read: static, essential and exotic), such that stylistic change means cultural contamination and loss (e.g. for discussion and critiques of such thinking see Adeniyi Ogunyankin, this issue; Allman 2004). The contributors to this issue of *Feminist Africa* do not engage with questions of how ‘African women’ should or should not, or can and cannot, self-fashion *reductive, essentialist questions about our basic capacities and rights*. We take it as given, obvious, that African women are worldly and self-aware, not fixed in ontological, cultural or material otherness. I would suggest that, theory aside, we know this as African women ourselves! That the discussions in this issue of *Feminist Africa* about feminine fashion and beauty in Africa therefore start at less stereotypical and, in my view, more productive points is but one reason for the utter political and epistemological importance of a journal that prioritises our knowledge production.

African women’s “sartorial worldliness” is Grace Adeniyi Ogunyankin’s concern in her feature contribution. More specifically, Adeniyi Ogunyankin looks at the fabulously Afrocentrically stylised characters on the new web series, *An African City*, a show which bills itself as the *African Sex and the City*. Adeniyi Ogunyankin admits that she watches and analyses this show from her positionality as a Nigerian-Canadian frustrated on a quite personal level with derogatory, hegemonic Western visions of Africa and Africans. Her article is not celebratory, however. While she commends the representational challenge that the fashionable characters featured in *An African City* pose to negative stereotypes of African femininity, Adeniyi Ogunyankin also recognises and problematises the fact that this challenge rests upon the women’s classed and consumerist distinction as ‘Afropolitans,’ next to whom ‘local’ others are still depicted as women without fashion and without the self-consciousness that fashion demands. It follows that Adeniyi Ogunyankin proposes the need for a new vision of Afropolitanism, one that is not about being fabulous and privileged, jetsetting while African, but rather about being an African who is open to the world.

Contrasting this inclusive redefinition of what ‘African’ could mean and look like is the charge of ‘unAfrican’ with which we are all too familiar. A charge of inauthenticity and non-belonging, it has been and continues to be levied against bodies, practices and sites that challenge patriarchal power, from women’s changing fashion and beauty routines, to feminism, to queerness. How queer bodies challenge, de-familiarise, and also expand

normative and restrictive categories in Africa, in this case the category of ‘beauty,’ is the matter to which Zethu Matebeni attends in her feature article. Matebeni looks at little known and as yet un-researched black lesbian beauty contests in South Africa. It is particularly imperative, she argues, to locate and recognise beauty in black lesbian bodies in a national context where, overwhelmingly, these bodies are seen “as sites of danger, trauma and violence.” By reconstructing events at three black lesbian beauty contests from the perspective of organisers, participants and audiences, Matebeni explores how the events function as safe and empowering sites of visibility and belonging for the black lesbian community, including as rare stages on which beauty can be performed on masculine female bodies.

The converse, heteronormative pressure to be ‘feminine beautiful’ is the subject of the *In Conversation* piece. Here, four young feminists from different corners of the continent – Aleya Kassam, Fatma Emam, Valérie Bah and Yewande Omotoso – engage in an intimate and reflective discussion of the relative pressures and pleasures of their own beauty practices, and their acts of resistance. Hair removal is a recurring topic! Difficult questions are contemplated: Is beauty pleasure or pain? Is beauty a disciplined practice or a form of self-expression and self-care? Is it all these things? How does one do beauty as an African feminist? If one word sums up the tone of the conversation, it is ambivalence. The same applies to my standpoint piece on the hair weave, in which I outline a new theoretical view of the beauty technology as an ‘unhappy’ yet nonetheless valid and historically present technology of black femininity. This view, I propose, allows us to move beyond simplistic notions that black women wearing weaves want to be white, but without going so far as to depoliticise or de-historicise the style.

As the thematic contributions to this issue of *Feminist Africa* variously and richly show, the inescapable fact is that in Africa, as elsewhere, women’s fashion and beauty are always political matters, and are never simply one thing or the other. They are structured and shaped by power, and they constitute and stir deeply subjective and affective considerations about who we are, and who we can and indeed should be. These considerations are echoed in different ways in the three book reviews included in the issue and in the tribute with which *Feminist Africa 21* concludes: to Hajiya Bilkisu Yusuf (1952-2015), a Nigerian journalist and activist who desired and worked ardently to fashion a world that would be more just, more beautiful.

References

- Allman, Jean. 2004. "Fashioning Africa: Power and the politics of dress," in *Fashioning Africa: Power and the politics of dress*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1-10.
- Bakare-Yusuf, Bibi. 2011. "Nudity and Morality: Legislating Women's Bodies and Dress in Nigeria", in Tamale, S. ed. *African Sexualities: A Reader*. Cape Town: Pambazuka Press.
- Dogbe, Esi. 2003. "Unraveled Yarns: Dress, Consumption, and Women's Bodies in Ghanaian Culture", *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* 7(3/4): 377-396.
- Ivaska, Andrew. 2004. "'Anti-mini Militants Meet Modern Misses': Urban Style, Gender and the Politics of 'National Culture' in 1960s Dar es Salaam, Tanzania", in Allman, J. ed. *Fashioning Africa: Power and the Politics of Dress*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Pereira, Charmaine and Ibrahim, Jibrin. 2010. "On the Bodies of Women: The Common Ground between Islam and Christianity in Nigeria", *Third World Quarterly* 31(6): 921-937.
- Tate, Shirley. 2009. *Black Beauty: Aesthetics, Stylization, Politics*. Surrey: Ashgate.

African Women Do Not Look Good in Wigs: Gender, Beauty Rituals and Cultural Identity in Anglophone Cameroon, 1961–1972

Jacqueline-Bethel Mougoué

“Nebuchadnezzar lived in the bush and his nails became so long that they looked like claws of cats, following a punishment from God for his disobedience,” runs a May 1964 letter to ‘Women’s Special,’ a dedicated women’s advice column for the English-language newspaper, the *Cameroon Times* (Isuk, 1964:4). The letter writer, Augustine Isuk, denounces women’s beauty habits by drawing on the biblical story of God’s punishment of King Nebuchadnezzar for worshipping false gods. He connects long nails to poor housekeeping, arguing that “women with long nails keep painting them thus hiding the dirt underneath and in preparing food, the dirt is washed into the food, and no wonder they complain of belly aches.” Isuk further associates long, painted nails with British women, and insists that men in Cameroon prefer “natural beauty.” He writes: “The nature of man is the work of God and no excessive decorations will change you from what you are...You can sandpaper the face, powder your nose, paint the lips, and look wonderful under electric lights, yet you can’t beat natural beauty which is always there... Women, cut short your nails please!” (Isuk, 1964:4).

The *Cameroon Times* was the oldest English-language newspaper in the federated state of West Cameroon, and circulated in most urban towns, including Limbe, Kumba, Bamenda and West Cameroon’s capital, Buea (Doh, 2014). ‘Women’s Special’ was a column addressing women’s issues and concerns, and most West Cameroonian newspapers at the time contained content of this kind.¹ These columns, run by formally educated women, featured with some frequency letters by elite urbanites discussing expected norms of behaviour for women. The letters expressed the trepidations of the urban elite in the anglophone West Cameroon State during the 1960s and early 1970s about women’s aesthetic rituals, and reflected underlying anxiety about changing societies and changing gender norms for women.

This article argues that the West Cameroonian urban elite's focus on women's beauty rituals was in fact about women's access to money and status; and about morality, modernity and sexual politics. The article draws on interviews conducted in 2011-12 and 2015-16, as well as newspaper records, to explore how journalists and readers struggled to control women's behaviour by regulating their cosmetic rituals. Letters such as Isuk's mirrored a larger pattern sweeping across newly independent African nations in the 1960s: urban Africans desired to shape their own understanding of cultural identity and modernity, informed by both local and global cultural values. Concerns about skin whitening, dieting, wig wearing, and cosmetics informed trepidations that the 'modern' African woman did not symbolise West Cameroonian cultural identity, not least as formal education became increasingly available for women beyond the wealthiest demographic throughout sub-Saharan Africa (Berger, 2016). The majority of anglophone elites were Protestants, due to the success of missionaries under British rule from 1922 to 1961 (Bowie, 1993). Furthermore, many had formal schooling (being often mission, Nigerian, or Western educated) and/or formal political affiliations, and while they generally applauded women's expanded access to education, their anxiety that women follow traditional gender norms grew in its shadow.² The elite frequently admonished the behaviours of West Cameroonian women who diverged from these norms, and used Christianity and biblical figures to claim moral authority. At times, they contrasted the moral virtues of West Cameroonian women with those of their francophone counterparts in the East Cameroon State. However, the urban elite did not constitute a single ideological bloc, and often women and men had contrasting agendas and divergent understandings associated with the issue of cosmetic rituals.

Early postcolonial African women encountered violence for donning miniskirts, wigs, painted nails, complexion lighteners, and lipstick, which their attackers considered to be symbols of Western decadence and immorality (Decker, 2014: 73). The current article builds on scholarship on this theme by addressing the case of the West Cameroonian 'modern lady' whose modernist aesthetics posed a similar threat. The article makes an important addition to the literature because there remains little scholarship that differentiates between modern womanhood in anglophone and francophone regions of early postcolonial Cameroon. West Cameroonians like Isuk at times accused

the ‘modern lady’ of emulating East Cameroonian women rather than white British women. They rebuked the immorality and sexual looseness of both East Cameroonian and white women alike. The unique experiences of anglophone Cameroonians complicates traditional Africanist scholarship on modern African womanhood by illuminating the legacy of dual colonial rule.

The period this article addresses, 1961 to 1972, corresponds to the period of the Federal Republic of Cameroon which consisted of two socio-politically autonomous states: the West Cameroon State (with British administrative legacies, today the Southwest and Northwest Regions of Cameroon), and the East Cameroon State (with French governing inheritance). The two states had differing cultures, histories, and socio-political outlooks (Ndi, 2005, 2014). Because of French governing influences, the postcolonial Cameroonian federation was in reality a decentralised unitary state in which French values pervaded the federation at the expense of English ones.³ East Cameroon dominated West Cameroon in many respects but the latter’s elites nonetheless sought to protect their national honour and cultural identity, their government’s semblance of political power, and the independence of their newspapers—something East Cameroon newspapers lacked — from the annexationist and hegemonic agenda of the francophone government. The period concluded when, on 24 July 1972, a presidential decree effectively ended West Cameroonian political autonomy and the British and French federal states became a unitary state, although the desire of elites to preserve anglophone cultural identity persisted. Under the unitary state, the hegemonic francophone government shut down or co-opted the newspapers that had flourished in West Cameroon, effectively ending the public discourse in which female journalists and letter writers had participated (Stanbridge and Ljunggren, 2003). Nevertheless, this discourse remains of scholarly interest because of its aims of managing women’s behaviour as a means of protecting national unity, political identity, and anglophone culture in a postcolonial African nation.

West Cameroon was typical of nations in colonial and postcolonial Africa in that members of the educated urban elite saw themselves as the leaders of nation building agendas, and at the forefront of defining morals and respectability (Aderinto, 2015; George, 2014; Jean-Baptiste, 2014). Like Tanganyikan nationalists in the 1930s, they believed that collective African progress depended on the rejection of foreign influence and the creation of

authentic and recognisably indigenous modern cultural forms (Callaci, 2011: 366-7). Moreover, comparable to 1930s Johannesburg, where most Africans lived close to poverty, appearances were especially important in defining class differences and respectability (Thomas, 2006: 478). Formally educated women in urban West Cameroon became the focus of scrutiny, not least because urban elites posited that education increased one's social status such that its beneficiaries should model higher standards of respectable behaviour.

Prevailing ideas about educated women's sexual morality and respectability informed beauty advice. A woman's fertility, chastity, support for children, and effective household management defined and shaped her respectability in urban West Cameroon at this time (Feldman-Savelsberg, 1999; Goheen, 1996; Konde, 2005). Women's adherence to 'proper' gender relations, such as assuming a subservient position in society and respecting the position of men as head of households, churches and communities, were also important factors. Conversely, a stereotype arose in 1960s urban West Cameroon that condemned 'free' or 'loose' urban women, often unmarried, as too Westernised – more specifically, British influenced and sexually loose because they frequented bars, smoked cigarettes, drank beer, wore short skirts and wigs, used too much makeup, and engaged in illicit sexual activities, often with married men (Ndimolo, 1971; Ngafor, 1964; Nkepyah, 1967). Hence, because 'free women' were associated with sexual laxity, a sexually moral and respectable educated woman was to avoid makeup or use it minimally.

At first glance, the newspaper articles I analyse in this article seem to offer contradictory guidance about beauty; the female journalists appear to discourage the use of wigs and all cosmetics while at the same time recommending foreign beauty products.⁴ In reality, they equated *modest* cosmetic use with modernity and social progress. Journalists cautioned readers that the use of too many cosmetics and beauty products concealed their natural beauty, and urged them to wear neutral coloured nail polish and lipstick. The newspapers further illustrate that elite urban men, unlike their female counterparts, frequently invoked pan-Africanism and accused black African women of racial betrayal for whitening their skins and wearing wigs. Single and married men wrote to the women's columns more frequently than women, asking for advice on love and marriage and sharing opinions about women's beauty rituals.⁵ As one male letter writer points out in 1969, "Most men show considerable concern about the morals and the appearance of

our women” (Benato, 1969: 7). Some men believed that women engaged in relationships with wealthy men so as to obtain money to buy beauty products and improve their social standing. Because such behaviour was believed to demonstrate sexual immorality and a subscription to Western beauty standards, the women were not considered ‘authentic Africans’ or deserving of the improved standing that they sought, in contrast to educated women who adhered to sexual restrictions and avoided any or excessive cosmetics. That the men at times compared the former to francophone East Cameroonian women, whom they deemed to be inherently immoral, suggests the complex policing in these critiques: the ‘modern’ West Cameroonian woman was to be formally educated and selectively incorporate modern ideas about gender and beauty, while still preserving the prevalent sexual morals and ideas about ‘African cultural values.’

Drawing on newspapers as sources for the historical opinions of urban elites imposes some complications for the researcher. Information about the writers of letters such as Isuk, beyond the town where the letter originated, is absent. Further, while West Cameroonian newspapers were privately-owned, they were nonetheless subject to state propaganda; the *Cameroon Times* had strong ties to the Kamerun National Democratic Party (KNDP) and other newspapers also had political affiliations. Consequently, unlike Ruff Wanzie of the *Cameroon Times*, who was a government employee and the wife of the secretary of state for primary education, a number of writers of women’s columns wrote under pseudonyms because they feared political retribution (Ney, 2016). In the course of my research, I have not discovered all these women’s identities, but I believe they were similar to Clara Manga, a civil servant writing as ‘Auntie Clara’ for the *Cameroon Champion* or Nkuku Nwigwe who wrote weekly columns as ‘Sister Dolly’ for the *Cameroon Outlook* and ‘Aunty Lizzy’ in the *Cameroon Post*. Nwigwe was formally educated, a former teacher and later a civil servant. As members of political elites, these women might have feared repercussions such as experienced by Cecelia Esemé, who wrote in the *Cameroon Times* and faced a two-count charge of contempt of court in October 1967 because of one of her articles. The women’s columns reflect a distinctive and authentic authorial voice, and readers understood the authors to be educated. The columns at times featured detailed accounts of local women’s organisations’ meetings at which there were no men present. While the sources have limitations, they nonetheless provide a view onto one

set of debates taking place among West Cameroonian urbanite elites in the early postcolonial period.

“Every Woman Is Beautiful”: Beauty Advice and Consumption in Newspapers

Statements about women’s beauty rituals in Anglophone newspapers suggest their political and cultural significance. Women’s columns shared advice on nutrition, weight loss, and self-care in endeavours to shape definitions of the ‘modern lady’ in West Cameroon. This included a plethora of advice about ‘natural’ beauty rituals and beauty products. They claimed that ‘natural beauty’ had pride of place among modern elite West Cameroonian women, condemning wigs, skin-lightening creams, and chemical hair straightening treatments. However, the columnists approved of beauty rituals that did not drastically alter the natural state of a woman’s beauty, such as the use of heat (not chemicals) to straighten hair. For instance, Martha Njoka, a young female journalist in charge of the women’s column for the *Cameroon Outlook*, encouraged young women to “make use of the hair God has given us,” and endorsed natural hair styles, nails without polish, and minimal makeup so as to make one look “neat and attractive” (1969: 6). Maintaining ‘natural beauty’ evidently required the purchase of *some* products. Many of the beauty products journalists recommended came from European countries, such as soaps from the United Kingdom. Consequently, the columnists constructed feminine consumer desire and forged an ideology of domesticity through the demarcation of masculine and feminine spheres. New aesthetic rituals shaped perceptions about the modern African woman who was cosmopolitan and adhered to local standards of respectability (albeit disputed); they were similar to Lynn Thomas’ (2006) description of the Black ‘modern girl’ in 1930s South Africa who was not only international in her focus but endeavoured to seek local respectability. Hence, West Cameroonian female journalists carved new spaces of cultural and political authority for themselves by regulating other women’s behaviours and offering beauty advice.

In a typical piece of advice, Mami Tolma (‘Mami’ is the Cameroonian Pidgin English spelling of ‘mother’), the editor of ‘Women’s World’ for the *Cameroon Observer*, provided guidance on the lipstick colours women should use, as well as advice on nail care, asserting that women should frequently change nail polish colours (1966: 3). Anne Fosah makes similar suggestions

for the 'Women's Bay' column in the *Cameroon Workman* in 1969, describing extensive skincare and hairstyle regimens (1969a: 3). She recommended Oil of Ulay (today Olay), naming a beauty shop that sold the product. She advised against consuming cassava, saying it and other rich foods lead to a poor complexion. Informing her reader that your "face is your fortune," she suggested that salon visits provided a good return on investment, concluding, "You will find in the long run that it will be the most rewarding" (Fosah, 1969b: 3). Such advice alarmed men who wrote letters to female journalists arguing that the economics of women's beauty rituals threatened gender norms within domestic spaces; that is to say, hindered women's successful household management by encouraging them to spend money on beauty products instead of necessary items for the home.

As evident in the preceding commentaries, journalists' advice infused a mix of promotional messages about beauty, modernity, and socioeconomic status. These messages responded in part to global cultural values, as when Mami Tolma counsels women about weight loss, writing, "If your body contour is anything beyond 36-26-36, make sure you do a little exercise every morning. Don't say that your fatness is evidence of good living... 'Miss World' tomorrow can be you... After all, the world is your stage" (1966: 3). Middle-class women in the United States and in the United Kingdom experienced increased pressure to be thin during the 1960s and 1970s, but Cameroonian cultures, then and now, considered a robust shape a measure of health and wealth. Mami Tolma's advice reflects changing ideas among some urbanites that women should be slim and trim like their Western counterparts. The invocation of the Miss World beauty pageant, a mostly Western European and North American phenomenon with little African participation in the 1960s, suggests this Western influence.

Oral evidence suggests that new beauty rituals did confer social success. Several working-class women whom I interviewed, who were in their late teens and early 20s in the 1960s, said that hair straightening was *nyanga* – a Cameroonian Pidgin English term for "putting on airs and graces," "dressing up," or "pretending to be better off than one is" (Todd, 1982: 122). "Women used an iron comb to straighten their hair because the hair would become relaxed. That was the fashion at the time. They would also plait the hair after so when you loosened it, it was soft and curly. These are the things we did to look *nyanga*," said one such woman (Ngum, 2011). Said another, "Women

wanted straight hair... because they wanted to be *nyanga*" (Eyambe, 2011). Using heat to straighten hair was new and cosmopolitan, and it connoted social success and confidence. Women also believed that they looked *nyanga* and displayed elite socioeconomic status by spending money on certain products.

Female journalists also urged their elite counterparts to use little makeup and beauty products as a way to demarcate class boundaries within West Cameroon, and to distinguish between anglophone and francophone Cameroonian women. The preceding oral evidence illustrates why some journalists advocated for the use of minimal makeup so as to prevent class blurring. Lower-class women who endeavored to be *nyanga*, thus "pretending to be better off than one is," might falsely pass as elite and acquire or enjoy social privileges that critics believed were not rightfully theirs to enjoy. For instance, in a February 1964 column in the *Cameroon Times*, Ruff Wanzie cautions women not to "interpret the word modern to mean unnecessary boldness, *pata-pata* [a sexually suggestive dance style], loud laughter, arrogance, short skirts, too much makeup... A woman should be very proud to hear men, both young and old, even women admire her and say, 'that's a well-dressed and nice dame, isn't she?'" (1964: 3). Additional newspaper evidence also demonstrates that female journalists endeavoured to clearly distinguish between women in the West and East federal states. Martha Njoka advised women in her July 1969 column for the *Cameroon Outlook* that: "The type of dresses I feel girls of our age should wear are not the type the East Cameroon girls come to show us here... your body is the temple of God and you have to preserve it" (1969: 6).

Oral evidence also shows that urbanites in this period considered themselves different from East Cameroonians with respect to morality, modernity, and cultural identity. According to a former civil servant with whom I spoke in 2015, women and men alike believed West Cameroonian women to be more modest, thrifter, and better housekeepers than francophone women. Two other women I interviewed concurred (Zumafor, 2015). They compared the modesty of the traditional African clothing styles West Cameroonian women wore to French clothing styles popular with East Cameroonian women (Ebey, 2011; Yonkeu, 2011). Hence, the highlighted newspaper and oral evidence in this section underline how beauty rituals were embedded in wider socio-cultural and political structures.

“Our Women Have a Very Strange Notion of Beauty”: Male Power, Pan-Africanism and the Perceived Demise of African/Black Culture

Male critics of women's beauty habits regularly invoked issues related to sexual politics and Pan-Africanism. Like the black men who contributed to *Bantu World*, the first newspaper targeting black South Africans that was established in 1932, West Cameroonian men's denunciation of women's cosmetic rituals suggested transatlantic connections and awareness of the socio-political status of black Americans (Thomas, 2006: 471). They invoked a unitary black culture and blamed black African women for hindering the socio-political progress of all blacks. While they applauded women's educational and professional achievements, these men, unlike female journalists, saw nothing rectifiable in the wearing of makeup.

Male opponents of cosmetics deemed their use to be a means for young women to win the attentions of wealthy men so as to improve their social standing and thereby also continue their beauty consumption. By doing so, such women continually reaffirmed their new social positioning while remaining sexually attractive for their male lovers, who bolstered their own social positioning and masculinity by gaining sexual access to young women whom they deemed beautiful. Consequently, as male letter writers pointed out, young women rebuffed the advances of working-class or non-elite men. Patrick Tataw Obenson, the journalist who wrote 'Ako-Aya' a popular satirical column in the *Cameroon Outlook*, equates a woman's social status to the cosmetic products she can afford. He laments, "My mother loved her husband to the very end and to her my father was her life, her income, her all... But times have changed from then till now and nobody knows what a woman wants" (Obenson, 1971a). He describes an East Cameroonian woman whose social status plummeted when she could no longer have a wealthy man buy skin lightening creams for her, saying 'Just yesterday this beauty was riding in Mercedes cars in Buea and today she runs after footballers.'⁶ Obenson's censure of East Cameroonian women's beauty rituals serves as a cautionary tale of immorality for West Cameroonian women. Additionally, Obenson conflates skin lightening creams with financial standing. Like many beauty products, the creams were expensive and symbolised a new understanding of beauty, attraction, and social success. From Obenson's perspective, women were negotiating their social visibility through such beauty rituals, becoming visible ornaments to complement and confirm a wealthy man's social standing.

Obenson's criticisms about women using skin lightening creams to secure financial security with wealthy men also highlights competition among men of various classes for young women. Similar to towns in western and eastern Africa, working-class or non-elite men in urban West Cameroon often competed with 'Big Men' for socio-political authority, including sexual or romantic access to young women. Scholars have shown that the African 'big man' constitutes the most enduring image of masculinity across the continent. Ambitious men worked to enlarge their households and used their "wealth in people" for political and material advancement (Lindsay and Miescher, 2003: 3). Accordingly, in various parts of Africa, male power was (and remains) equated with having livestock, houses, wives, and juvenile dependents (Lindsay and Miescher, 2003: 3). The concentration of power in the hands of 'big men' and male elders leads to power struggles between older and younger men, in which a major source of the tension is women. For instance, in much of sub-Saharan Africa, adolescent women often marry older men, in part because they have the resources to pay bride wealth. Obenson's censures suggests that older men's greater access to younger women comes at the expense of younger working-class or non-elite men who cannot provide the same degree of financial stability and material consumption. Thus, complaints about the economics of women's new beauty rituals were also about concern that lower-class men might not achieve ideal manhood by getting married and financially providing for their own households.

Male critics also alluded to the dissolution of a certain 'African pride' in their letters. Martin Ngum, a resident of Limbe, writes to the *Cameroon Times*: "White ladies with various colours of hair could, with success, buy wigs of any colour, but not African women. After all, our women don't look beautiful in these wigs. They only expose themselves to criticism. So let wigs give way to simple Cameroonian hairdo" (Ngum, 1968: 2). Obenson (1971b) similarly laments in a column, "Europeans are forming this hatred for our colour for their own purposes. How else can I explain this when many dark Cameroon beauties have suddenly become 'white'... Let us be proud of our colour and not imitate foolish things." Both authors assert that wigs and skin bleaching are a violation of God's will and call upon women to disassociate from Western products and cultural values.

While Ngum and Obenson accuse women of being race-traitors and 'un-African' in their beauty practices, their commentaries reveal a selective

and gendered definition of the so-called ‘un-African’. As Marc Epprecht (2008) argues in his work on sexuality in Africa, colonial rule and political and cultural nationalism have shaped the evolution and transformation of the idea of ‘un-Africanness.’ Ideas about African authenticity often regurgitate colonial stereotypes about Africans. Yet these ideas are not stagnant or uncontested. Female journalists in West Cameroon maintained that, if carefully utilised, cosmetics and beauty products could define the modern African lady who was still traditional, Christian, and sexually moral. On the other hand, men such as Ngum and Obenson saw these rituals as by definition Westernised and so constituting cultural and racial betrayal, even as they accepted Christianity as African and as a barometer for traditional morals. From their viewpoints, it was women who were responsible for safeguarding cultural identity, which they failed to do so when engaging with un-African beauty practices.

A lengthy letter from Buea to the *Cameroon Telegraph* in May 1969 further encapsulates larger concerns among men about the loss of male authority over women and the loss of black culture on the global level. Appearing in the ‘Women’s Page,’ Benato’s letter pontificates at length, stating that “women beautify themselves for the eyes and hearts of men. We men have taken too long to tell some of our women that most of them [who use] makeup and who think they are fashionable look like masquerades” (1969: 7). Benato infers that men alone have the ultimate power to judge women’s beauty, and connects the new beauty rituals of women to falseness. The economics of wigs and cosmetics also makes a strong appearance in his discourse: “Few men have the money to put into wigs and other artificial devices which falsify and distort our personality.” Benato does not admit the possibility that women themselves afford these luxuries, even though women were increasingly earning their own money at the time. He assumes a script in which a man evaluates the woman under the wig as a potential wife who would demand he pay for the accoutrement. He proposes that women ‘return’ to traditional African cultural values while also cautioning that this “does not mean casting away everything that is foreign.” He concedes that Cameroonians are suffering from an inferiority complex: “The White man’s educational system brainwashed us to hate even our very selves... That is why our women want the White man’s red face and complexion... And that is why our modern men sit back and pretend to admire these oddities.” Here Benato suggests that European colonialism informed feelings of self-

hatred among African women who endeavour to achieve white-dominated standards of beauty; they purportedly modify their phenotype and adhere to false assumptions that black physical traits are not beautiful. However, he also denounces men for propagating low self-esteem among Africans by internalising the white ideal image of women's beauty. He implies that modern African men who mimic European behaviours embolden African women to live up to the externally imposed beauty standard so as to please men. Hence, Benato perceived *both* women's and men's alleged preference for white beauty as a sickness, a self-hatred to be overcome.

Benato (1969) also makes a larger argument that black pride in general is disintegrating because of specific beauty rituals that African descendants in the U.S. and African women engage in. He narrates:

The story began many years ago when white men treated the black man as beats [local vernacular: a group to be abused] and tried to justify slavery. As a reaction, Afro-Americans began to imitate white men to aspire to whiteness... They have red skins, stretched hair, red lips, and deformed noses... Let us do something to save our Afro-American colleagues who are now fighting for selfhood, manhood, and equal rights.

According to Benato, West Cameroonian women, like black Americans, express racial self-loathing that is born out of European cultural hegemony. He invokes pan-Africanism and the civil rights movement that was raging in the United States at the time to suggest that West Cameroonian women and men must also regain their personhood and black pride. Scholarship on pan-Africanism in the mid-20th century concludes that, for educated Africans, racial assertion was a response to feelings of humiliation, an expression of race pride and an important 'consciousness-raising' phase in the development of a more coherent political awareness of the structural factors of oppression (Bush, 1999: 15). However, various scholars have cautioned that pan-Africanism has a history as a relatively masculinist discourse that seeks to restore masculine pride, power and self determination to black men (Reddock, 2014: 66). This masculine ideological narrative sought to subordinate black women, and reinforced existing customs and views about them. Benato encourages masculine initiatives and male authority by suggesting that women heed men's demands to condemn 'strange makeup' and thereby prevent the degeneration of African cultural identity, and, with this, black

pride and culture on a global level. Statements from Benato, Ngum and Obenson thus reflected men's anxiety about westernisation and their loss of cultural and economic power over women. The invocation of Christianity as a measurement of women's authenticity and morals further supports and evidences the patriarchal assumptions unpinning their commentaries.

Conclusion

This article argues that West Cameroonian urban elite's focus on women's beauty rituals during the early period of independence in the Federated State of West Cameroon was in fact about women's changing social and cultural norms. Female journalists and male letter-writers specifically homed in on morality, sexuality, modernity and women's growing economic power. Moreover, reproach against women's beauty rituals, such as skin whitening, dieting, wig wearing, and the use of cosmetics, reflected apprehensions about the 'modern lady,' and how well she symbolised West Cameroonian cultural identity within the francophone-dominated Cameroonian Federal Republic and on the international level. Therefore, female journalists and male urbanites who wrote in or to newspapers endeavoured to carve spaces of cultural authority for themselves by offering advice on what they deemed to be proper and 'natural' beauty rituals for women. Both parties were invested in defining the 'modern lady' so as to distinguish her from her East Cameroonian counterpart. Evidence of West Cameroonian women's singular virtue was deemed an important way by which they could prove their respectability and sexual morality. Though female journalists recommended selective beauty products for purchase, they cautioned women to use minimal cosmetics so as to maintain their natural beauty. Contrariwise, men wholly reproved women who they alleged were imitating British beauty rituals, and accused them of thereby losing West Cameroonian cultural identity and values. They further maintained that women's actions contributed to the loss of black pride globally. This article has therefore contributed to the growing understanding of how globalising consumer capitalism and globalised modernity has structured social life for women in urban Africa, pointing to the long history of these processes, in this case in English-speaking West Cameroon.

Acknowledgements

As part of a broader study of gender and political identity in Cameroon, research for this paper was supported by the Baylor Summer Sabbaticals, Purdue University Research Foundation Research Grant and the Bernadotte E. Schmitt Grant (American Historical Association). I wish to gratefully acknowledge this support and the generous assistance of the staff of the National Archives of Cameroon in Buea and the National Archives in the UK. I wish to thank Alicia C. Decker, the two anonymous reviewers, Simidele Dosekun, Kate Epstein, Ellen Gruenbaum, Whitney Walton and Konrad Tuchscherer for their comments and suggestions for revision.

Endnotes

- 1 The *Cameroon Times*, founded in 1960, was a tri-weekly publication with about 8,000 copies printed per issue at its peak in the mid-1960s. The paper closed temporarily in 1968, then permanently in 1982.
- 2 Elite families in West Cameroon often sent their daughters to Nigeria for post-primary education in the 1950s and 1960s because of fewer options for young women in anglophone Cameroon.
- 3 For instance, the attempted Frenchification of the West Cameroon State influenced the Highway Code, monetary policies, and the system of political administration.
- 4 The fact that female journalists often promoted foreign beauty products illuminates the particular psychology of consumer culture in urban West Cameroon. Female journalists perceived European beauty products as working better and being more prestigious than local ones. Moreover, there was a degree of trust in the quality of authentic European or North American brands, unlike some African counterfeits from Nigeria or other local beauty products.
- 5 Perhaps this speaks to the reality of disparities in formal educational opportunities for anglophone Cameroonian men and women that have existed since the 1960s. Women achieved lower levels of formal education than men because of their domestic role (defined by tradition and society) and the preference for marriage over education imposed on them, coupled with general societal prejudice against the education of women.
- 6 Some scholars assert that there was an influx of prostitutes from East to West Cameroon when the Tiko-Douala highway connecting both states was constructed in the early 1960s.

References

- Aderinto, Saheed. 2015. *When Sex Threatened the State: Illicit Sexuality, Nationalism, and Politics in Colonial Nigeria, 1900-1958*. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Benato, David. 1969. "A Rejoinder." *Cameroon Telegraph*, 1 May.
- Berger, Iris E. 2016. *Women in Twentieth-Century Africa*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Bowie, Fiona. 1993. "The Elusive Christian Family: Missionary Attempts to Define Women's Roles: Case Studies from Cameroon", in Bowie, F., Kirkwood, D. and Ardener, S. eds. *Women and Missions: Past and Present: Anthropological and Historical Perceptions*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Bush, Barbara. 1999. *Imperialism, Race, and Resistance: Africa and Britain, 1919-1945*. Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge.
- Callaci, Emily. 2011. "Dancehall Politics: Mobility, Sexuality, and Spectacles of Racial Respectability in Late Colonial Tanganyika, 1930s-1961", *The Journal of African History* 52(3): 365-384.
- Decker, Alicia C. 2014. *In Idi Amin's Shadow: Women, Gender, and Militarism in Uganda*. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Doh, Emmanuel F. 2014. *Anglophone-Cameroon Literature: An Introduction*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Ebey, Asong Martha. 2011. Interview by Jacqueline-Bethel Mougoué, Buea, Cameroon, 8 November 2011.
- Epprecht, Marc. 2008. *Heterosexual Africa?* Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Eyambe, Bekene (pseud.). 2011. Interview by Jacqueline-Bethel Mougoué, Buea, Cameroon, 8 November 2011.
- Feldman-Savelsberg, Pamela. 1999. *Plundered Kitchens, Empty Wombs: Threatened Reproduction and Identity in the Cameroon Grassfields*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Fosah, Anne D. 1969a. "Women's Bay: Every Woman With a Young and Lovely Complexion." *Cameroon Workman*, 18 August.
- Fosah, Anne D. 1969b. "Women's Bay: On Fashion With Mrs. Fosah." *Cameroon Workman*, 26 September.
- George, Abosede A. 2014. *Making Modern Girls: A History of Girlhood, Labor, and Social Development in Colonial Lagos*. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Goheen, Miriam. 1996. *Men Own the Fields, Women Own the Crops: Gender and Power in the Cameroon Grassfields*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Isuk, Augustine. 1964. "Women with Claws." *Cameroon Times*, 16 May.
- Jean-Baptiste, Rachel. 2014. *Conjugal Rights: Marriage, Sexuality, and Urban Life in Colonial Libreville, Gabon*. Athens: Ohio University Press.

- Konde, Emmanuel. 2005. *African Women and Politics: Knowledge, Gender, and Power in Male-Dominated Cameroon*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press.
- Lindsay, Lisa and Miescher, Stephan. 2003. *Men and Masculinities in Modern Africa*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.
- Ndi, Anthony. 2005. *The Golden Age of Southern (West) Cameroon, 1946-1972: Impact of Christianity*. Bamenda, Cameroon: Langaa Research and Publishing.
- Ndi, Anthony. 2014. *Southern West Cameroon Revisited (1950-1972) Volume One: Unveiling Inescapable Traps*. Bamenda, Cameroon: Langaa Research and Publishing.
- Ndimolo, Vincent C. 1971. "Free Girls, Their Parents Versus Moral Society." *The Hero*, 13 September.
- Ney, Poubom L. 2016. Interview by Jacqueline-Bethel Mougoué, Buea, Cameroon, 18 April 2016.
- Ngafor, Martin S. 1964. "Women of Pleasure." *Cameroon Times*, 5 September.
- Ngum, Fidelia (pseud.). 2011. Interview by Jacqueline-Bethel Mougoué, Buea, Cameroon, 4 November 2011.
- Ngum, Martin. 1968. "Do Wigs Add Beauty?" *Cameroon Express*, 19 September.
- Njoka, Martha. 1969. "Untitled Column." *Cameroon Outlook*, 11 July.
- Nkpeyah, P. J. 1967. "Tax Free Women." *Cameroon Times*, 9 February.
- Obsenson, Patrick Tataw. 1971a. "Na War-O." *Cameroon Outlook*, 24 February.
- . 1971b. "Changing Colours." *Cameroon Outlook*, 15 June.
- Reddock, Rhoda. 2014. "The First Mrs. Garvey: Pan-Africanism and Feminism in the Early 20th Century", *Feminist Africa* 19: 58-77.
- Stanbridge, Roland, and Ljunggren, Maria. 2003. *African Media and ICT4D: Documentary Evidence: A Baseline Study on the State of Media Reporting on ICT and Information Society Issues in Africa*. New York: United Nations.
- Thomas, Lynn. 2006. "The Modern Girl and Racial Respectability in 1930s South Africa", *Journal of African History* 47(3): 461-490.
- Todd, Loreto. 1982. *Cameroon*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing.
- Tolma, Mami. 1966. "Women's World: Every Woman is Beautiful." *Cameroon Observer*, 2 July.
- Wanzie, Ruff. 1964. "Fashion Parade." *Cameroon Times*, 22 February.
- Yonkeu, Vanessa (pseud.). 2011. Interview by Jacqueline-Bethel Mougoué, Yaoundé, Cameroon, 24 September 2011.
- Zumafor, Anthony Y. 2015. Interview by Jacqueline-Bethel Mougoué, Buea, Cameroon, 30 July 2015.

Contesting Beauty: Black Lesbians on the Stage

Zethu Matebeni

Introduction

The 1995 publication, *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa* (Gevisser and Cameron, 1995), pioneered a new field of study that is yet to be fully recognised in South Africa. This rich collection, written by South Africans across the country, assembled a wide range of gay, lesbian and, although unnamed, transgender experiences. The literature has expanded over the years, taking consideration of the changing landscape of lesbian and gay politics in the country. Topics of concern, beauty, style, fashion and glamour tend to be located in particular bodies, namely the bodies of gay men. More specifically, the figure of the drag queen or the effeminate gay man is often viewed as representing notions of beauty and femininity that are yet to be fully explored.

This representation is not without contestation. The drag queen or ‘moffie,’ as popularly known in Cape Town, is both an ‘undesirable’ figure and a site of beauty and entertainment. Typically a coloured effeminate gay man of a particular social and class background, the ‘moffie’ is a regular feature in the ‘coon’ carnival, often seen leading the troupe (Jeppie, 1990). The annual ‘coon’ or Cape Minstrel carnival, held around New Year, has a long history in the Cape, dating back to as early as 1907 (Meltzer, et. al, 2010). In the 1950s carnivals, the ‘moffie’ was perceived to be both ‘sexually abnormal’ or pathological, as well as colourfully joyous or symbolising “the most subversive” (Jeppie, 1990: 82). It is not uncommon for the beautiful and the ugly to be viewed in relational terms; as Sarah Nuttall (2006:8) argues, “beauty is to be found at the limits of the ugly.” In the African context, the history of beauty is an ugly one. For centuries, colonisers have seen Africa and Africans as both beautiful and ugly – doomed to capture and exploitation.

South Africa's transition to democracy had significant effects for the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. The Equality Clause, often dubbed the 'gay rights clause,' in the post-apartheid constitution was the first of its kind in the world to prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (Cock, 2003). Prior to this, gay and lesbian people were criminalised because of who they were and because of the people with whom they chose to spend their lives. By the mid-1990s, however, people were able to claim their sexual and gender identities openly, although social acceptance continued to be a challenge. Lesbian and gay annual pride events, which had started in 1990 in Johannesburg and later in Cape Town, became spaces in which gay and lesbian people could publicly claim or fight for their rights. The events around Pride also often included a 'beauty' contest. Pageants or beauty contests also took place among gay male hairstylists, many of whom are at the forefront of fashion and styling (Reid, 2013).

Beauty contests, drag contests in particular, continue to be popular and spectacular shows in Cape Town, accompanied by regular drag queen performances in some areas of the city. These have a longer history in Cape Town than Johannesburg, having been recorded as early as the 1950s (Chetty, 1995). Currently, in the 'pink village' alone, located in an area of Cape Town known as Greenpoint, at least three bars have regular drag shows, featuring some of the city's most talented drag performers. In the pink village strip, Bubbles Bar used to be dedicated to drag shows. Since its closure, Zero21 has showcased shows by coloured and black drag performers. The high presence of drag in certain areas of Cape Town is "employed as a form of 'queer visibility'" (Tucker, 2009: 21). Similarly, the annual Miss Gay Cape Town and Miss Western Cape are both events where drag queens show off, and where male femininity is displayed and spectacularly contested.

Lesbian and gay specific contests have a more recent history – the first recorded as having taken place in 1987 (Gevisser, 1995). On the surface, these contests appear to be somewhat different from drag shows. Drag shows are more glamorous and public affairs. They also attract a wider audience and can rely, to some extent, on sponsors, due to drag queens' public visibility and relative presence in popular culture. By contrast, lesbian and gay contests appear to be much more community driven and focused. Often, these contests are organised by lesbian and gay organisations or related groups. The Gay and Lesbian Organisation of the Witwatersrand hosted the first contest by

an organisation in Johannesburg in 1995, Miss GLOW-Vaal (Gevisser, 1995). This article looks at three different gay and lesbian beauty contests in Johannesburg that, while fascinating and visually entertaining, have received very little scholarly attention. This is because, in some respects, beauty contests are often seen as frivolous (Hansen and Madison, 2013). The concern of the article is with what constitutes beauty in these contests, and how so, as well as the significance of the events for Black lesbians.

“Beauty is inside, it is not make-up”

In September of 1996, the Hope and Unity Metropolitan Community Church (HUMCC) hosted a beauty contest, ‘Mr and Ms HUMCC,’ at the top of the Harrison Reef hotel in Hillbrow, Johannesburg. It was fairly well attended, mostly by Black lesbians and gay men, many of whom were members of the church (GALA, 1996). While the contest was entertaining and a success, because winners were crowned, the rehearsal was of particular fascination. A few days before the contest, participants had to undergo ‘coaching sessions,’ as captured in video footage archived at GALA, during which they would be taught how to ‘turn.’ ‘Half turns’ were reserved for gay men and ‘full turns’ for their counterparts, lesbian women. To successfully accomplish the task, gay men were asked to walk and turn like ‘gentlemen,’ and lesbians to do so like ‘ladies.’ After much annoyance and irritation, the flamboyant coach, a gay man, left the rehearsals greatly disappointed and elected for divine intervention from the Reverend. In both groups, none could ‘turn’ according to their gender.

Enter Reverend Tsietsi Thandekiso, a charming and charismatic gay man and leader, loved and respected by his congregants (Reid, 2010). He started his address to the contestants with much vigor, quoting a passage from the scripture and encouraging them not to give up on the contest:

It’s the first time that this is done by the church... you are here to contest about beauty. Beauty is inside, it is not make-up; you’ll still be an ugly person if you are ugly inside... Bring out your beauty and show it to yourselves and demonstrate it to our God... How does God see you when God looks at you as a young person? When you make the twist and turn, you can invoke God in it... When gay and lesbianism is said to be unAfrican, unChristian, inhuman, unwanted and unnatural – you are called to be beautiful at that time... God made you beautiful...

Reverend Thandekiso managed to recapture the contestants' attention and interest in the contest. His assertion that the goal of the contest was to evoke beauty was the first time that beauty had been the frame of reference during the rehearsals. In this way, the first contest situated and pursued the politics of beauty as a form of building self-confidence and fashioning a lesbian and gay identity. The Reverend also suggested a rarely articulated and complex relationship between sexuality, beauty, technique and religiosity. This was surprising, even for the contestants, and many were adamant that they would proceed with the beauty contest. It was also a powerful tool to position lesbian and gay sexualities within religion when, even today, some religious leaders and Abrahamic faiths continue to use it to alienate lesbian and gay people (Mutua, 2011; Rossouw, 2009).

Indirectly, Reverend Thandekiso alluded to an idea of beauty contests as “not just about femininity or beauty or even competition. They (beauty contests) evoke passionate interest and engagement with political issues central to the lives of beauty contestants, sponsors, organisers and audiences – issues that frequently have nothing obvious to do with the competition itself” (Cohen et.al., 1996: 2). At the same time, Thandekiso did not trivialise beauty. Rather his use of the beauty contest platform served to communicate a different political message than the dominant heteronormative, homophobic and alienating discourse to which contestants are regularly exposed.

The contestants' inability to 'turn' per the gender assigned them may easily be seen as failure. Instead, gay men mastered how to 'turn' like 'ladies' while lesbians' turns were 'half turns.' Whether this represented role reversals was not clear. What was clear, though, was the fact that 'half' and 'full' turns required no rehearsal or coaching for lesbians and gay men respectively. Thus failure, in this instance, must not be seen as the inability to produce desired results. Rather, it is a case of seeing preferable alternatives and rewards (Halberstam, 2011). It was the very idea of making 'ladies' and 'gentlemen,' through turning, that failed. Simply put, failure lay in coaching a technique that turns people into gender stereotypes. In successfully exposing the failure of turns, contestants created an opportunity to escape and resist society's rigid gendered norms and behaviours.

Again, there are possibilities to see and read failure differently, as a tactic for something else. Judith Halberstam (2011) suggests that by embracing failure, new forms of challenging the status quo and the norm are opened up. Those who fail, lose, forget and so on are usually relegated to the margins

of society. Often, they are not seen and not recorded. However, through alternative ways of seeing, the marginal, the non-normative and the non-conforming can become sites where theorisation and resistance take place.

“...let’s show we are proud of being women”

A lot can be said about the absence of lesbian bodies in relation to beauty and beauty contests. Overwhelmingly, in contemporary South African writing, Black lesbian bodies are seen as sites of danger, trauma and violence. Moreover, the characterisation of the Black lesbian as victimised works towards making her invisible, enforcing the dominant narrative that positions her as undesirable and threatening (Matebeni, 2015). In this framework, Black lesbians cannot appear or be beautiful.

It is within this paradigm that Ashley Currier’s (2012) *Out in Africa: LGBT Organizing in Namibia and South Africa*, which maps out the different strategies of visibility and invisibility deployed by lesbian organisations such as Forum for the Empowerment of Women (FEW) in Johannesburg, fails to see one of the most significant cultural and political forms that these strategies take, namely beauty contests. While lesbian beauty contests do not appear in most LGBT scholarly writing, they have been taking place in Johannesburg since at least 1997. Following ‘Mr and Ms HUMCC,’ Nkateko, a Black lesbian organisation, formed in late 1996, hosted ‘Ms Sappho.’ Contestants were Black lesbians only, a political stance taken because Black lesbians were carving out their own spaces and determined to render themselves visible. It is worth noting that one of the winners of ‘Ms Sappho’ was Zanele Muholi, an internationally renowned photographer whose work will be explored in the next section of the article.

The political landscape in relation to lesbian and gay rights had changed by 1997, and so did the nature and purpose of the lesbian contests. With the protection and promotion of their rights, lesbian and gay people became more visible. However, as their visibility increased, so did the heteronormative backlash. Violence and hate crimes towards Black lesbians became much more reported and, by the early 2000s, the term ‘corrective rape’ had become synonymous with Black lesbian lives in South Africa (Muholi, 2004). Threats to lesbian visibility and spaces grew enormously, leading to increased demand for safe spaces and supportive networks. These were some of the challenges that contributed to the closure of Nkateko in 1998.

As Nakedi Ribane (2006) has argued about heterosexual beauty contests generally in South Africa, they are always implicated and entangled in the political climate of the time. The same applies for lesbian beauty contests. The escalation of violence towards Black lesbians in the 1990s saw a group of Black lesbians organising to form the Forum for the Empowerment of Women in 2002 (FEW, 2005). The organisation aimed at providing a safe space for Black lesbians affected by escalating homophobic violence. Undeterred by the challenging context, FEW also ensured that it continued to create visibility for Black lesbians. The organisation – some of whose members and co-founders had been part of Nkateko – also carried on Nkateko’s legacy of hosting, among other things, lesbian beauty contests.

‘Miss Lesbian 2004: Celebrate the Woman in You’ was held in a stylish and hip venue in downtown Johannesburg. The organisers chose the venue for its safety and accessibility. The two-storey bar/restaurant welcomed hundreds of Black lesbians and gay men for a fun-filled evening with different versions of lesbian expression and performance. Of particular interest were the performances by Black lesbian contestants. Ace, a contestant who had won previous Miss Lesbian contests a number of times, and two other contestants performed *indlamu*, a dance traditionally performed by heterosexual, masculine Zulu men during coming of age ceremonies. For this dance, the trio wore men’s *amabeshu* (skins), headrings, ceremonial belts, ankle rattles and carried shields and spears. Ace, with much confidence and control of the shield and spear, led the others in a flawless and captivating war song that revealed their fearlessness.

While the group performed, the audience clapped and an affirming voice screamed in isiZulu: “*Amadod’ethu!*” (our men!). The voice, electric, articulated what many in the crowd felt. That the contestants’ moves were so impeccable was surprising. It was the first time that many had seen female bodies exhibiting ‘traditional’ male roles so boldly. Arguably, it was the connection of a dominant heteronormative masculinity performed by Black lesbians that most moved the audience, blurring as it did the categories ‘man’ and ‘woman.’ As if Buhle, the host, knew the audience was mesmerised by what it had witnessed, holding the mic she came on to the stage requesting a round of applause, and shouted: “Dear sisters, let’s show that we are proud of being women.”

It is necessary to pause on the use of dominant masculinity in ‘Miss Lesbian 2004’. In his ethnographic exploration of beauty pageants and hairstyling in

a small town in South Africa, Graeme Reid (2013: 33) noted the aspirational value attached to contests “within the constraints and uncertainties of social and political transformation.” In these contexts, gay men were making use of femininity to articulate beauty, fashion and style. At the same time, their deployment of femininity allowed them to assimilate easily into heterosexual women’s work, such as church ceremonies and other gendered cultural rituals and networks in their communities, as well as to negotiate acceptance. For gay men, feminine beauty then became a tool for social integration.

Conversely, masculinity on female bodies is often considered threatening. Some masculine Black lesbians deploy masculinity, often through dress, as a tool for attracting women and for publicly claiming their boldness and same-sex erotic stance (Matebeni, 2012a). Exploring one’s gendered roles can be a liberating experience. The relationship between dress, body and performance, as Karen Hansen and Soniyi Madison (2013: 3) argue, come together as “embodied practice.” In addressing the lack of serious attention to the relationship between dress and the body, it is important to note the “experiential and physical dimension to the power of clothing, both in its wearing and its viewing” (2013: 3). The black lesbians at ‘Miss Lesbian 2004’ eloquently portrayed this through their performance of *indlamu*, both through their clothing and in the bodies that wore the clothes.

Femininity can be very restricting, especially for more masculine, cisgender lesbian women. As Halberstam (1998) shows, female-born people have exposed and scrutinised the assumed coherence of male masculinity. Unlike the versions of femininity that some gay men embody, as Reid (2013) explores, when Black lesbians deploy masculinity, a set of negotiations in navigating dominant culture is required. Mignon Moore (2006: 13) notes how dangerous it is for black non-feminine women to present black masculinity, as this goes against strong conventional norms. She argues that, because they challenge “core” assumptions about male dominance, such presentations can “invite openly punitive responses from others and may cause men to question the meaning of their own masculinity.” The importance of safe spaces for Black lesbians is all the more imperative in this context to allow for a public negotiation of gender that is not constrained by threats of violence and policing.

The need for Black lesbian spaces resonates also for Tanya Saunders (2012). In her study of black lesbians in Havana, Cuba, she argues that the

social isolation that they experience, and the complex racial system they face, ‘hides’ them away. This is compounded by the homophobic, sexist, patriarchal and classist societies that Black lesbians find themselves in. Thus, Black lesbian spaces are a necessity, and indeed have continued to be a defining element of Black lesbian organising in South Africa. FEW remains one of the very rare spaces that working-class Black lesbians in Johannesburg occupy, or from which they find social support. In recent years, different groupings that offer social and networking spaces have emerged, including queer monthly events such as ‘Open Closet’, which takes place in Melville in Johannesburg, and the most recent ad hoc travelling event *#ForBlackGirlsOnly* that is held in different South African cities. Sivu Onesipho Siwisa, organiser of *#ForBlackGirlsOnly* describes it as:

a deliberate and unapologetic space to centre the lives and experiences of Black women right across gender and sexuality lines. It is a space to share tools to build ourselves. A space to tend to our wounds – wounds we may have not even known we had. It is a space of safety, however momentary, where Black girls are not threatened.” (Vanguard Reporter, 2015)

“*I Stand Corrected*”

For many years now, Black lesbian visual activist Zanele Muholi has been capturing the lives of black LGBT persons in South Africa and elsewhere. Muholi has a long history of activism, having been a part of the Black lesbian organisation Nkateko in the 1990s and later co-founding FEW. Driven by the urgent demand of representing black queerness and ensuring its visibility, Muholi’s photographic work remains one of the richest visual archives on black queerness on the continent. It is Muholi’s *Miss Lesbian* photographs, a series of the artist’s self-portraits posing as a beauty contestant, that are of interest here. This series is a continuation of Muholi’s own experience as a runner-up in the Ms Sappho contest discussed earlier. At the same time, it speaks to other current realities that are taking place in South Africa.

In August 2012, Cape Town dancer and choreographer, Mamele Nyamza, in collaboration with British-based playwright, actor and director Mojisola Adebayo, put together a stage performance, *I Stand Corrected*, first performed at Artscape Theatre in Cape Town. The poster advertising the play was that of a Zanele Muholi photograph from the series *Miss Lesbian*. The

selection of the image for the play's poster was purposeful, as it portrayed the dual quandary faced by Black lesbians: being invisibilised by not being seen as women on the one hand, and facing regimes that aim to 'correct' femininity and womanhood on the other. In the image, Muholi poses as a beauty contestant who has won the title 'Miss Lesbian.' Writing about *I Stand Corrected*, Adebayo (2015: 135-6) states:

I Stand Corrected is a response to the so-called 'corrective' rape and violence against lesbians and transmen in South Africa, and the anti-gay marriage voices in Britain that direct so much emotional violence against LGBTIQ people. The play features Zodwa (played by Nyamza), a black South African lesbian woman who (we later realise) has come back from the dead, arising from a rubbish bin on what was supposed to be the morning of her wedding, after she has been raped and murdered in a township alleyway by a group of homophobic men who want to 'make her straight'. Zodwa/Mamela uses dance and movement to explore physically what it means to be a 'corrected' woman.

There are strong connections between the photographic series *Miss Lesbian* (2010) and the play. The latter is the enactment of the former. Both address the contemporary issue of Black lesbian erasure, either through feminising regimes (Matebeni, 2012b) or through destabilising dominant notions of femininity and violence. Through the series of seven photographs, Muholi positions herself as an uncontested queen in a Black lesbian beauty contest – perhaps to claim a title she missed in Ms Sappho – to make visible contests that have not been explored outside Black lesbian organising. What is at stake in exposing this title publically, and in the manner Muholi does?

Muholi opts to embody a type of beauty contestant who would be classified outside heteronormative feminine standards of beauty. Her muscular body; her poses and postures that claim space; her serious face without a smile; her unshaven legs and tattooed body; and her 'fake' hair and visible pubic hair disrupt conventional notions of feminine beauty. Muholi stages a provocation articulated by artist Nandipha Mntambo (2007, 2014) in her work on cowhide. In a recent presentation about her choice of cowhide as material and method, Mntambo argued that she was fascinated by the "idea around beauty, attraction and repulsion that seemed to centre around the body being hairless" (2014, n.p.). Through this work, she wanted to see "how the viewer would respond to a completely hairy female form". Thus the hairy

skin is used to “challenge and subvert preconceptions regarding representation of the female body, and to disrupt perceptions of attraction and repulsion.” And, tellingly, one viewer who was exposed to Mntambo and Muholi’s works was reportedly repulsed by what she saw (Matebeni, 2013).

Beyond ideals of beauty and femininity, the representations explored by Muholi and Mntambo expose the “struggles over power to control and contain the meanings mapped on the bodies” (Cohen et al., 1996: 9) of beauty contestants and women generally. This is but one of the power struggles that Black lesbians have to contend with everyday, made visible in *I Stand Corrected*. It speaks to how Black lesbian bodies are restricted from existing beyond gender binaries and associated expectations. Within this frame, any resemblance to masculinity on a female body is ‘corrected.’ Lesbian sexuality and gender presentation outside the norm carry severe consequences, limiting our understandings of these categories while also inhibiting lesbians from experiencing the fullness of their realities.

Beauty Queers

It is difficult to describe beauty; not only because it is subjective, contextual or cultural, but also because beauty, and its relational ugliness, forces one to carefully consider what is prioritised in looking, seeing and imagining. In the South African context, where beauty has been racialised, gendered, sexualised and also classed, we must ask: is beauty what it really is? It appears that beauty’s construction is closer to heteronormative ideas around femininity and masculinity. This version of beauty is completely exclusionary and limited to those who perceive the world in rigid binaries. If beauty remains this fixed, then it can be argued that beauty has been made ugly.

Mbembe (2009) calls for a reimagining of beauty that would take into consideration new manipulations, constructions and strategies. José Esteban Muñoz’s (1999) disidentification can be seen as one such strategy. Disidentification, Muñoz (1999) argues, is a process whereby those who feel excluded by dominant cultures transform these cultures for their own purposes, rather than try to assimilate. In the first instance, a process of defamiliarising is essential. To experience “variations of the beautiful” (Mbembe, 2009) demands that one open up to new ways of seeing and feeling. Affective registers are deeply political, as are ways of gazing.

In the beauty contests explored above, disidentification is realised through

Reverend Thandekiso's intervention, as well as through the performance of *indlamu*. In the former case, the same biblical texts that are most often used to speak against lesbian and gay people are redeployed to affirm and assert connections between godliness and non-normative sexuality and gender expression. Following Muñoz, we can understand this as a "survival strategy that is employed by a minority spectator to resist and confound socially prescriptive patterns of identification" (1999:28). The traditional male Zulu dance, *indlamu*, performed by masculine lesbians is similarly strategic. When danced by women, masculinity's beauty on female bodies becomes attractive.

The use of disidentification in the performance of *indlamu* produced what the audience considered beautiful. It was no surprise that Ace, the leader of *indlamu*, won the 'Miss Lesbian' contest. The voice screaming *amadod'ethu* during the contest suggests a sense of ownership to female forms of masculinity. Moreover, the ability to watch and appreciate what is considered against the norm is in itself an important strategy for visibility and 'membership' in a kind of community. For the audience to claim masculinity (*amadoda/ubododa*) as belonging to them as well as the contestants hints at a level of acceptance that can be publicly owned.

Conclusion

While much has changed in the queer landscape in South Africa in the last twenty years, many things do stay the same. The importance of lesbian beauty contests as fundraising events, awareness and visibility campaigns, claiming of space, and also entertainment remains. Beauty contests will keep evolving as queer people find new ways of defining themselves and carving alternative spaces for their existence. Over the years, and in the different cities, the shifts in beauty contests have been remarkable. In one Miss Lesbian contest organised by the Cape Town-based Black lesbian organisation, Free Gender, contestants were asked to wear school uniforms to encourage young people to go back to school. In another contest, organised by FEW, contestants were competing for the title of Ms. Township Lesbian to celebrate township life. But such shifts alone are not enough. The difficult and fundamental questions about what constitutes beauty, and how beauty ought to be represented, remain contested. Beauty can no longer be what it used to be in South Africa. Its colour, gender, sexuality and class have to consider the many who have long been on the margins of its constructions.

As I finish this essay, I am looking at a recent poster of the fundraising carnival for the ‘Mr & Miss LGBTI Triangle Project 2016’ contest. This poster captures the continuities and discontinuities of queer beauty contests in Cape Town. The categories for contestants are listed as Male (Mr. and Miss) and Female (Mr. and Miss). It will be curious to observe who makes it to the finals. The radical surprise, within such a contest, will be when the drag queen’s hyper-femininity is not the defining factor of beauty; or when beauty finds expression in bodies that are not restricted to gender binaries.

References

- Adebayo, Mojisola. 2015. “Everything You Know About Queerness You Learnt From Blackness: The Afri-Quia Theatre of Black Dykes, Crips and Kids”, in Campbell, A and Farrier, S. eds. *Queer Dramaturgies: International Perspectives on Where Performance Leads Queer*. New York: Palgrave McMillan.
- Chetty, Dhianaraj. 1995. “A Drag at Madame Costello’s: Cape Moffie Life and the Popular Press in the 1950s and 1960s”, in Gevisser, M., and Cameron, E. eds. *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Cock, Jacklyn. 2003. “Engendering Gay and Lesbian Rights: The Equality Clause in the South African Constitution”, *Women’s Studies International Forum* 26 (1): 35-45.
- Cohen, Colleen, Wilk, Richard and Stoeltje, Beverly. eds. “Introduction: Beauty Queens on the Global Stage”, *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage: Gender, Contests and Power*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Currier, Ashley. 2012. *Out in Africa: LGBT Organizing in Namibia and South Africa*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Forum For the Empowerment of Women (FEW). 2005. “You Ddon’t Have to be Butch to be Miss Lesbian”. *FEW Newsletter*, 23 September. Johannesburg: FEW.
- Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action (GALA). 1996. *Hope and Unity Metropolitan and Community Church AM 2733, Mr and Miss HUMCC*. Johannesburg: GALA.
- Gevisser, Mark. 1995. “A Different Fight for Freedom: A History of South African Lesbian and Gay Organisation – the 1950s to the 1990s,” in Gevisser, M and Cameron, E. eds. *Defiant Desire. Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Gevisser, M and Cameron, E. eds. 1995. *Defiant Desire. Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Halberstam, Judith. 1998. *Female Masculinity*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- . 2011. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Duke University Press.

- Hansen, Karen Tranberg and Madison, D. Soyini. eds. 2013. *African Dress: Fashion, Agency, Performance*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Jeppie, Shamil. 1990. "Popular Culture and Carnival in Cape Town: The 1940s and 1950s", in Jeppie, S. and Soudien, C. eds. *The Struggle for District Six: Past and Present*. Cape Town: Buchu Books.
- Martin, Denis-Constant. 2007. "Chronicles of the Kaapse Klopse: With Some Documents on the Sources of their Music." *The New Year Festivals in Cape Town*. French Institute for Southern Africa (IFAS).
- Matebeni, Zethu. 2012a. *Exploring Black lesbian Sexualities and Identity in South Africa: An Ethnography of Black Lesbian Urban Life*. (Published PhD thesis). Germany: LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing.
- . 2012b. "Feminizing Lesbians, Degendering Transgender Men: A Model for Building Lesbian Feminist Thinkers and Leaders in Africa?" in McGlotten, S and Davis, D. eds. *Black Genders and Sexualities*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- . 2013. "Intimacy, Queerness and Race", *Cultural Studies* 27(3): 404-417.
- . 2015. "Sexual Minorities in South Africa", in Wright, J.D. ed. *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 2nd edition, vol. 21. Oxford: Elsevier.
- Mbembe, Achille. 2009. *Variations of the Beautiful in the Congolese World of Sounds*. Translated by Dominique Malaquais. Cape Town: Chimurenga Magazine.
- Meltzer, Lalou; Mooney, Katie; Clayton, Fiona; Galant, Shanaaz; Rahim, Shamila. 2010. *Ghoema and Glitter: New Year Carnival in Cape Town*. Cape Town: Iziko Museums.
- Mntambo, Nandipha. 2007. *Ingabisa*.
<http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/mntambo/index2007.htm>
- . 2014. "State of the Art ft Athi-Patra Ruga, Nandipha Mntambo and Zanele Muholi". *Design Indaba*. <http://www.designindaba.com/videos/conference-talks/state-art-ft-athi-patra-ruga-nandipha-mntambo-and-zanele-muholi>
- Moore, Mignon. 2006. "Lipstick or Timberlands? Meanings of Gender Presentation in Black Lesbian Communities", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 32(1): 113-139.
- Muholi, Zanele. 2004. 'Thinking through Lesbian Rape', *Agenda* 61(18): 116-125.
- Muñoz, Esteban José. 1999. *Disidentification: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press.
- Mutua, Makau. 2011. "Sexual Orientation and Human Rights: Putting Homophobia on Trial", in Tamale, S. ed. *African Sexualities: A Reader*. Oxford and Nairobi: Pambazuka Press.
- Nuttall, Sarah. ed. 2006. *BeautifulUgly: African and Diaspora Aesthetics*. Cape Town: Kwela Books & Durham and London: Duke University Press.

- Reid, Graeme. 2013. *How to Be a Real Gay: Gay Identities in Small-Town South Africa*. Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- . 2010. *Above the Skyline: Reverend Tsietsi Thandekiso and the Founding of an African Gay Church*. Pretoria: UNISA Press.
- Ribane, Nakedi. 2006. *Beauty: A Black Perspective*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Rossouw, Mandy. 2009. "Pastor Ray: ANC at Prayer? Faith Group Plans to Challenge Constitution," *Mail & Guardian* 25 (36, 11-17 September).
- Saunders, Tanya, L. 2012. "Black Lesbians and the Struggle for Safe Social Space in Havana", in McGlotten, S. and Davis D-A. eds. *Black Genders and Sexualities*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Shongwe, Zodwa. 2006. "It was Magic", in De Waal, S and Manion, A. eds. *PRIDE: Protest and Celebration*. University of the Witwatersrand: GALA.
- Tucker, Andrew. 2009. *Queer Visibilities: Space, Identity and Interaction in Cape Town*. UK: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Vanguard Reporter. 2015. "#ForBlackGirlsOnly: A Space for Support, Creativity and Healing for Black Girls". *Vanguard Magazine*, Aug 5. <http://vanguardmagazine.co.za/forblackgirlonly-a-space-for-support-creativity-and-healing-for-black-girls/> (accessed 25 April 2016).

"These Girls' Fashion is Sick!": An African City and the Geography of Sartorial Worldliness

Grace Adeniyi Ogunyankin

They are the noble savages, staring out from coffee table books. *Africa Adorned*. *The Last Nomads*. Backdrops and extras for *Vogue* fashion shoots. Stock ingredients for tourist brochures ... They are the myth of tribal splendour. Everything about them is foreign ... Their "timeless culture" is the stuff of children's books, of Western fantasies. They are everyone's dream of people untouched by modernity. (Patel, 2010: 45; emphasis in original)

What happens when black womanhood, black femininity, black women's spaces, places and poetics are "Not on the margins"? if these conceptual and political differences are not simply cast as marginal, they do not have to replicate marginality. (McKittrick, 2006: 134-135; emphasis in original)

Introduction

As an urban feminist geographer with a research interest in African cities, I was initially pleased when the web series, *An African City*, debuted in 2014. The series was released on YouTube and also available online at www.anafricancity.tv. Within the first few weeks of its release, *An African City* had over one million views. Created by Nicole Amarteifio, a Ghanaian who grew up in London and the United States, *An African City* is offered as the African answer to *Sex and the City*, and as a counter-narrative to popular depictions of African women as poor, unfashionable, unsuccessful and uneducated. The show centers around the lives of five upper-middle-class repatriated women: Nana Yaa, Makena, Zainab, Ngozi and Sade. The characters are in their mid-to-late twenties and have decided to settle in Accra, Ghana, after having spent

the larger part of their lives living abroad in Europe and North America. The show is mainly about how the women navigate their lives as single women and ‘returnees’ in Accra. The episodes in the first season depict their returnee lives as luxurious, from high-end clothing labels to the leisure and pleasures of cosmopolitan Accra. *An African City* is not novel in its representation of upper-middle-class African lifestyles, and may be read differently by viewers who live on the continent and/or those familiar with other, similar shows aired on African broadcasting networks such as the Nigerian and South African soap operas, *Tinsel* and *Scandal*. However, unlike such shows, *An African City*, dubbed the first African web series, has received much media attention in the West. Interviews with Amarteifio have featured on National Public Radio in the United States and on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and there have been articles on the show and its fashion on CNN, BBC, vogue.com, US-based Spanish online magazine, *Complot*, and *Refinery29*, a website on fashion and style with over 175 million users. Amarteifio was cited in *The Financial Times 2015* as one of the “Top 25 Africans to Watch,” and recently won the Creative Artist of the Year at the African Diasporan Awards in New York.

True to Amarteifio’s goals, the first season of *An African City* challenged and sought to redefine dominant Western narratives about Africanness and African women, illustrated the worldliness of African cities, and troubled the notion that “there can be no authentic description of Africa that does not touch on witchcraft, kinship, poverty, or chieftaincy” (Mbembe and Nuttall, 2004: 350). I was intrigued by the possibilities of analysing the sartorial elegance and creativity embodied by the five main characters in the web series as a geographic performance/site for resistance and counter-narratives. More specifically, in this article I am interested in the depiction of the characters as ‘Afropolitan,’ and in what I posit as their ability to use fashion to signify African women’s worldliness. The terms Afropolitan and Afropolitanism are both popular and contentious. Writer Taiye Selasi (2005) was one of the first to use the term Afropolitan to describe a 21st-century African who is modern, cosmopolitan and transnational. According to Selasi, Afropolitans are the newest generation of African emigrants for whom there at least one place on the African continent to which they tie their sense of self, and then “the G8 city or two (or three) that [they] know like the backs of [their] hands” (Selasi, 2005: n.p.). Achille Mbembe (2007) later defined Afropolitanism as

the domestication of the unfamiliar, an interweaving of worlds, and a way of being in the world, refusing on principle and form the identity of victim. Yet such portrayals of Afropolitans have been challenged. Brian Bwesigye (2013) argues that they reify the West as centre (read: the world) and promote Afropolitanism as Africa's new single story. In a similar vein, Emma Dabiri contends that, with the concept of Afropolitanism, "it seems again that African progress is measured by the extent to which [we] can reproduce a Western lifestyle, now without having physically to be in the West" (2016: 106). Echoing Binyavanga Wainaina's 2012 lecture, 'I am a Pan-Africanist, not an Afropolitan,' given at the bi-annual African Studies Association UK conference (see Santana, 2016), Dabiri notes that Afropolitans are not only consumerist in their reproduction of Western lifestyles but that Afropolitanism also comprises the commodification of African culture. Similarly, Stephanie Santana posits that, in Afropolitanism, "style and 'worldview' [become] conflated" and "people and identities [are] commoditized" (2016: 121).

Although Afropolitanism challenges negative portrayals of Africans as peripheral to modernity and cosmopolitanism, the concept is also unproductively divisive in that it demarcates some Africans as Afropolitan and others as not, in terms of their relative class positions and spatial mobility. Similarly, the concept seems to insinuate that some Africans have not progressed. At the same time, the name 'Afropolitan' is appealing because it breaks away from the colonial imposition of 'African,' with its associated, negative stereotypes. However, if Afropolitan and Afropolitanism are to remain in our critical lexicon, I would suggest that we need to move away from classist conceptualisations of them, such as those promulgated by Selasi (2005), and instead come to understand Afropolitans as Africans of any social class who respect, value and embrace their 'Africanness' – which can have various meanings for different people – and are at the same time aware that, at the level of their everyday realities, embodiment and social political thought, they are very much connected to, and influenced by, the global. This expanded definition is less divisive and also less dependent on spatial mobility, thereby providing flexibility in determining how the global and local intersect in the production of identities and lifestyles. In response to the critiques of Santana (2016) and Dabiri (2016), this new understanding of Afropolitanism accepts that, in an increasingly neoliberal and globalised world, Africans (and non-Africans) are inevitably exposed to and likely to

desire to consume multiple cultures. Therefore, what we must work towards are anti-colonial and anti-racist forms of consumption, rather than decrying the mere fact of consumption and commodification. It is also important to not reduce Afropolitanism on the continent to mimicry, as Dabiri (2015) does. This reduction ignores agency, leaves little room for nuance and creates a binary between the 'West' and 'Africa.'

Thus, in terms of *An African City*, rather than reading the embodied urban geographies of the characters and their agency in relation to urban consumption and spaces of pleasure and leisure (Peake, 2009) as a transfer from the global north, we can view them as sites of humanisation within the "paradoxical space" (McKittrick, 2006) of Accra. This humanisation transcends the discursive othering of Africa and entails the re-narration of African women's bodies as a public space that has been historically, and contemporarily, dehumanised and rendered a spectacle for the Western gaze; while the "paradoxical space" refers to the rapidly changing urban landscape informed by the 'Africa rising' narrative, which projects that unprecedented economic growth is taking place on the continent and that several African economies will become integral to the global economy. The 'Africa rising' narrative fuels the aspirations of African cities to be recognised as 'world-class,' which entails redrawing their "geographies of inclusion and exclusion in radical ways" (de Boeck, 2011: 277). It is precisely because of these aspirations that the characters in *An African City* opt to return to the continent. Their embodied sartorial identity blurs the binary between Western and African fashion, and also signifies their aspiration "to be global even as they register a sense of national belonging that is also compatible with other ways of being in the world" (Farber, 2010: 132). The characters insert and assert themselves into the global fashion world, declaring their refusal to be dispossessed and rendered ungeographic in the cosmopolitan cartography of sartorial worldliness.

Thus, in this paper, I contend that, through the use of fashion, *An African City* makes a geographic intervention that challenges the Western imagination of African women as the undifferentiated 'other' who is also at the periphery of global/world-class fashion. By making this assertion, I answer Mbembe and Nuttall's call to "identify sites within the continent, entry and exit points not usually dwelt upon in research and public discourse, that defamiliarise commonsense readings of Africa. Such sites would throw people off their

routine readings and deciphering of African spaces” (2004: 352). Mbembe and Nuttall (2004) propose the city as a good site for undertaking this project of defamiliarisation. I extend their argument by positing that fashion in the African city is a more specific site because “clothing is part of the aesthetic of everyday urban life” (Hansen, 2010: 233). However, while fashion serves as a site for challenging hegemonic Eurocentric discourses on *An African City*, I show that, through the depiction of low-income class women and those deemed non-Afropolitan as unfashionable, the show simultaneously reproduces similar discourses to those that it serves to critique. It is through narrow depictions of Afropolitanism as the sole purview of the upper-middle-class returnees on the show that stereotypes about further-othered ‘local’ African women are reproduced.

World-Class City, World-Class Fashion

“Fashion plays a MAJOR role in the series and I like to say that fashion [is] the 6th main character!” – Millie Monyo, executive producer of *An African City*

“[*An African City* is] putting Ghana on the map – in a different way and in a way that’s so needed to be out there.” – Marie Humbert, actress, *An African City*

In 2000, *The Economist* called Africa the “hopeless continent”. Many African cities were perceived as unproductive, inefficient, and non-functional. Within the world/global conceptual framework for understanding cities that are integral to the world economy (see, for example, Friedmann, 1986; Sassen, 1991), many African cities were at the bottom of the hierarchy. They were not considered “world city quality” but rather unsophisticated and needing to catch up with “primary world-class cities” (O’Shaughnessy, 2008: 3). But now, Africa is seen to be rising. The Afropessimism discourse has been tempered by the widespread belief, and growing evidence, that an urban revolution is taking place in Africa. Africa has been dubbed the ‘final frontier,’ on the brink of an economic take off; with a growing middle class and rapid urbanisation, African cities present opportunities for multiple commercial interests (Watson, 2014). Part of this revolution entails the revisioning of urban Africa in “the image of cities such as Dubai, Shanghai and Singapore” (Watson, 2014: 215), particularly through the development of new cities such as Eko Atlantic in

Lagos, Nigeria, the ‘Silicon Savannah’ in Konza, Kenya, Hope City in Ghana and La Cité du Fleuve in Kinshasha, Democratic Republic of Congo. Several existing cities on the continent are undergoing urban renewal planning, and striving to become symbols of modernity in the re-creation of cities that are more globally recognisable and that offer possibilities for transcending negative narratives about Africa.

An African City is very much framed within the ‘Africa rising’ rhetoric. After spending years in Europe and North America, the five characters on the show return to the continent because of the economic opportunities available, and to find love. The show spends little time on the women’s careers, and instead depicts them engaged in leisure in “modernized upscale establishments” (The KSM Show, 2014) within Accra, thus putting the city on the map of world-class cities. Fashion, make-up, hair and sex are among the major themes of the show, a far cry from Gwendolyn Mikell’s (1997) essentialised claim that African women are largely pronatal and concerned about survival. The African women we see in the web series do not match the usual Western portrayal of, say, the woman with a child on her back and a load on her head, who appears to care little about fashion. Nor are they the barely clothed women on a World Vision commercial, whose breasts are hanging out, and who hold on to emaciated children while flies buzz around. The consumption of high-end Afrocentric fashion on the web series also challenges stereotypical portrayals of African women as always-poor actors who consume second-hand clothing from the West. Although Karen Hansen has produced important work on Zambia to counter the notion that second-hand clothing consumption is a passive imitation of the West, but rather allows for “the expression of variety, individuality, and uniqueness in clothing practice” (1999: 345), *An African city* unequivocally illuminates that not all Africans partake in the second-hand clothing market in any case, and that there is a growing market for ready-made Afrocentric clothing. Afrocentric fashion is a predominant feature of the webseries, and signifies that being fashionable and cosmopolitan in the African context is not about mimicking or desiring Western styles. The *haute couture* by African designers also showcases Accra as an urban space of innovation and asserts that African women are very much part of the world-class urban spectacular in their own way.

During the colonial encounter, African women’s bodies served as a key site for locating putative African backwardness. Those who were unclothed,

or barely clothed, were considered uncivilised, while the attire of those who were clothed was deemed inferior to that of European women. Even after independence, when African women's items of dress such as boubous and caftans became a brief fascination for the Western fashion world, they were not considered "fashion in their own right" (Rovine, 2004: 191). Rather, they were "described by terms such as 'costume', 'dress', and 'garb,' words often modified by the overarching adjectives 'traditional,' 'native,' 'indigenous,' and 'authentic'" (Rovine, 2004: 191). *An African City* challenges the notion of African attire as timeless and ungeographic in the fashion world and emphasises that cosmopolitan African fashion is "constitutive of global culture"¹ (Farber, 2010: 132). For example, Danielle Kwateng (2014) notes of the show in *Styleblazer*, an online lifestyle magazine, that "all along the way, the fashion is the most striking element. If there was any doubt about African designers or how fashion trends translate in the colorful continent, the show will eradicate it". Thus, the embodied garments on the show close the spatial "distancing of fashion from non-Western culture" (Rovine, 2004: 191), whereby:

the term fashion is rarely used in reference to non-western cultures. The two are defined in opposition to each other: western dress is fashion because it changes regularly, is superficial and mundane, and projects individual identity; non-western dress is costume because it is unchanging, encodes deep meanings, and projects group identity and membership (Craig, 1994: 18, cited by Rovine, 2004: 191).

An African City also deconstructs notions of African women as undifferentiated geographic subjects by focusing on various styles unique to each character, as well as their changes. In the show, the characters change outfits multiple times a day: for example, an outfit worn to work may not be the same as that worn out to dinner, on a date, to hang out while eating ice cream on the street, or to go shopping at a local boutique. Contrary to Eurocentric perceptions of African women's clothing choice as serving the mere purposes of covering, or as symbolic of culture, *An African City* demonstrates that African women are agentic as their fashion is very much about self-expression and a conscious decision to connect clothing with time and place. Also, as there is often little focus on the subjectivities of African women in popular Western media representation, fashion plays an important role in delineating the characters on the show as subjects and as individuals, with different

identities. The characters are not just dressed, but have their own styles. *An African City* forces the viewer to defamiliarise the familiar and wait in anticipation for what the women will wear next, knowing that one character's dress is not simply substitutable for another. As a case in point, the show's executive producer, Millie Monyo, states that:

everything the girls wear tells a story. In season 1, you will notice Nana Yaa's evolution from when she first returns and slowly see how her fashion choices change with the more comfortable she becomes with being back home. If you pay close attention you will see that the fashion in the series is telling a story all [on] its own.²

Moreover, the show demonstrates that African fashion is indeed geographic by using designers who have retail locations across the globe. Finally, by putting the show on YouTube, the fashion trends gain a broader reach and contribute to the production of a cosmopolitan sartorial mapping of African women. In sum, through the conscious use of fashion and upscale spaces as a counter narrative in *An African City*, the show's creator promotes a postcolonial approach that dislocates the hierarchical divisions that "continue to ascribe innovation and dynamism – modernity – to cities in rich countries" (Robinson, 2006: 2). By inserting fashion as the sixth character on the show, the narrative that African women are "the people without fashion" (Allman, 2004: 3) is displaced.

The Afropolitan Answer or the Afropolitan Question?

We're showing a different view of Africa that, for some people, they say they didn't even know existed. They didn't realize that there's people in Africa spending money, who have money And fabulous clothes! People have no idea that this actually exists on the continent and that's what we really want to show.

– Millie Monyo, Executive Producer, *An African City*

While I have commended the ways in which *An African City* dislocates the hegemonic geographical practice of locating the cosmopolitan aesthetic of fashion in the West, it is also important to question the ways in which this dislocation is able to take place. It happens, I contend, by locating Africa's progress on the bodies of upper-middle-class women who are also portrayed as Afropolitan. Afropolitan, here, refers to bourgeois, transnational feminine subjects whose classed positions and mobility enable them to challenge

Eurocentric temporal and spatial paradigms about Africa. More specifically, the Afropolitan has an accent-free English (or similarly speaks another dominant European language), has cosmopolitan values and embraces creative aesthetics (Abebe, 2015). The characters' Afropolitan identities increase the probability that Western viewers and/or other individuals who are transnational can identify with them, and feel that the show could take place in any world-class city. As noted by one of the hosts of the African culture and entertainment show, AriseEntertainment360, when interviewing the producers and the lead character of *An African City*, the women are glamorous and "could be living anywhere, Paris, Luxembourg, etc." (AriseEntertainment360, 2014). More importantly, the type of Afropolitanism depicted on the show espouses the idea that there is a 'traditional Africa,' and that the characters' Afropolitan identities bridge the gap between this Africa and the modern global. This logic is embodied by the type of outfits the women wear, for instance, which combine European tailoring and Afrocentric patterns (Farber, 2010). Christie Brown, a Ghanaian brand promoted on the show, elucidates this hybridisation on its website as follows:

Christie Brown is a Ghanaian based luxury women's fashion brand that aims to satisfy the stylish urge of "that modern woman who seeks *a true taste of Africa*". At Christie Brown, our aim is to *infuse modernism* into carefully selected traditional African aesthetic that transcends international borders. It's really about allowing women to experience the culturally rich and opulent side of Africa *without having to compromise their personal contemporary style* ("Christie Brown," n.d., emphases added).

I argue that this description on the Christie Brown website very much frames the depiction of fashion in the episodes of *An African City*. The modern African woman is portrayed as the 'empowered' returnee, hence Afropolitan. These Afropolitans are stylish, rich and well-educated, and by virtue of their African roots and re-location to the continent, are able to project a new image of African women as glamorous and cosmopolitan, but thereby contrasting and positioning the poor women who have pervaded Western imaginations for years as having no style.

Other female characters depicted on the show are not as stylish as the five main characters. Viewers are left to assume that these women, who are often hired help, service providers, or simply walking around town – while

the main characters are riding in private cars – are incapable of being trendy because they are not Afropolitan and have yet to become modern. The lower-class women on the show are often seen wearing ill-fitting clothes, or simple outfits that are not as fashionable as those of the main characters. Thus, sophisticated fashion is depicted as the sole purview of the wealthy Afropolitan. For example, in episode four, *A Customs Emergency*, the lead character, Nana Yaa, encounters her ex-boyfriend when she accompanies her friend, Sade (another main character), to retrieve her belongings from Ghana Customs. The ex-boyfriend, Segun, is with his new girlfriend, Kukua, who proceeds to speak Twi when introduced to Nana Yaa. After Kukua and Segun leave, Nana Yaa, who is not fluent in Twi, becomes upset because she has been “out-Twi’d.” She claims that it is obvious that Segun wants a ‘traditional’ African woman. Kukua, who is bigger in size than Nana Yaa, and who also happens to speak in a slightly accented English, is wearing a non-stylish dress in a bold print – most likely not from a Christie Brown collection or another high end label. When Segun and Kukua are out of earshot, Nana Yaa starts to lament. Sade comforts her by retorting: “That’s his girlfriend?... Ah please you’re fabulous... you are, I mean honestly. She probably did some *juju* on him. Please. How could he choose her over all your fabulousness?” Sade’s words, alongside Kukua’s outfit and other forms of embodiment, position Kukua outside the class of African women capable of speaking back to Western narratives and participating in the global. The African women who are shown to do so are the upper-middle-class Afropolitans.

Sade’s words also construct Kukua as non-modern via the inference that she uses *juju*, that is black magic, to get her man. This is underscored by Nana Yaa’s sarcastic retort: “I am a Westernised African and I’m lost; she’s Ghana, she’s Africa.” In the season finale, *The Big Decision*, Segun visits Nana Yaa and they have a conversation about his relationship with Kukua. Nana Yaa asks “why her?” to which Segun answers, “Because she makes me feel like a man.” The stylish, cosmopolitan upper-middle class Afropolitan woman is perceived, in this case by an African man, to be emasculating. She is a far cry from the Victorian-influenced construction of the ‘good’ African woman (for example, see Allman, 1996; Oyewumi, 1997). However, Nana Yaa unapologetically distances herself from this notion of the ideal traditional African woman, and further belittles Kukua by responding to Segun:

what you have right now is some chick who is infatuated with the fact that you are some Nigerian with a British accent who lived in the States. Now you're in Africa, you're in Ghana, her home country. Romantic. Whatever. That is just surface level. With me you had a woman who loved you for you, Segun. Just you. If that doesn't make you a man, if that doesn't make you feel like a man, I don't know what does.

Kukua is not only framed as someone who is not fashionable and fabulous, she is also cast as a gold-digging, *juju*-practicing woman who can never be truly like Nana-Yaa, a transnational and cosmopolitan African woman who has been freed from tradition.

Another example in which putatively modern and traditional African women are starkly counterposed can be found in episode nine, *#TeamSade, #TeamNgozi*. While Sade, Ngozi and Zainab are on dates with members of parliament (MPs), the men argue that there is no need to wear condoms with women who “look clean.” The three women are quite shocked and upset by this statement and proceed to refute the men’s argument. One of the MPs points to a woman who is sitting by the bar as an example of someone who does not look clean and who could therefore have HIV. The camera briefly focuses on a woman in a short gold dress that looks ‘cheap.’ The dress has hiked up on her thighs and is showing the shorts/spanx that she is wearing underneath. The woman later gets up from the barstool on which she had been seated, and is shown pulling down her dress to cover the exposed underwear. While it is crucial that Sade, Ngozi and Zainab disagree with the theory that women who look clean could not have HIV/AIDS, the camera tells another story, in which a seemingly ‘local’ woman is depicted as a ‘slutty’ person with little class. This kind of woman is incapable of pulling off sexy without appearing sloppy or cheap. By contrast, when the main characters themselves dress in revealing clothing, it is shown as ‘classy’ rather than distasteful, for instance with no undergarments on inadvertent display. Further, the characters do not challenge or deconstruct the ways in which ‘looking clean’ is a classed construct.

Thus in *An African City*, women’s dressed bodies do not only serve to depict an embodiment of cosmopolitan worldliness. They also mark a difference between transnational Diasporan returnees and those who are simply ‘national.’ This distinction illustrates the spatial distancing of seemingly ‘non-Afropolitan’ women’s bodies from the world-class spaces of fashion. The notion that only certain African bodies can be part of the modern spaces

of global fashion is problematic. I would argue that this notion is partly informed by the understanding of Afropolitanism on the show. It is important to consider that “one does not need to be an elite or even to live in one of the big cities of Africa or the West to be an Afropolitan” (Eze, 2014: 240); an African subject informed by the local and global. Through circulating stories/rumours and the increasing availability and use of technology, the global is very much part of the local and vice versa in Africa. Moreover, low-income subjects also participate in, and desire, aesthetic consumption and production, and it would be erroneous to assume that they do not contribute to creating fashion and/or are unaware of the latest trends. Although Nicole Amarteifio has explicitly stated that she wants her show to be about “modern, beautiful, educated African women” (Karimi, 2014), and I believe that it is important to produce such counter-narratives of African femininity, other African women do not have to be rendered ungeographic, that is, unmappable in the cosmopolitan cartography of sartorial worldliness, to achieve this aim. Viewers, especially those unfamiliar with the fashion scenery in Accra, should not be left with the impression that non-educated/local African women are not modern, beautiful and fashionable. This is clearly an issue that needs to be addressed to fully complete the intervention that is being made by situating fashion as a geographic and political site in *An African City*.

Conclusion

Since the first season of *An African City* aired, my friends and I always seem to engage in debates about the show. These debates reveal a lot about our complex identities as postcolonial scholars, women, Africans, Canadians and feminists. Some of my friends are annoyed by how classist the series is, while others are happy that there is a show that reflects something of their reality, and that does not seem to be driven by an obvious international development agenda such as HIV/AIDS awareness. While it is certainly true that there are numerous African-based television shows and films that are also classist and do not emphasise the need for Africa’s progress, *An African City* is the only African show that we have all watched, and that our non-African friends and colleagues are also more likely to see because of its mode of distribution and the fact that it has been actively promoted in Western media.

I remain ambivalent about *An African City*. On the one hand, as a Nigerian-Canadian who has been told, “I like your ‘costume’” one too many

times, and asked if I lived in the jungle when I was in Africa, it is refreshing to see a show that announces to the West, via the world wide web, that Africa has cities where fashion is a key aspect of visual culture. Most delightfully, but not unproblematically, *An African City* emplaces African women in the geography of *haute couture* and fashion trends, and defamiliarises the conventional portrayals of, and discourses about, us. On the other hand, I am troubled by the ‘Africa rising’ narrative that seems to insist that there is a dawn of a new Africa, one that seems to necessitate the rise of the African woman, a new (modern) African woman. *An African City* posits that the new African woman is an “Afropolitan,” meaning fashionable, well-traveled, rich and educated. This narrow understanding of Afropolitanism suggests that the Africa of the future is only for certain bodies, which serves, among others, as justification for the increased spatial inequality and displacing of the urban poor that is underway in many cities on the continent. Moreover, by asserting that there is a new African woman, the suggestion is that there is an ‘old’ or ‘traditional’ one. Positioning this ‘old African woman’ as antithetical to the new has classist and neo-colonial undertones, thereby calling into question whether the new African woman can truly constitute a progressive counter-narrative. Thus, while I do applaud the intervention that *An African City* has made, subsequent seasons need to be more critical about the underlying assumptions and stereotypes that create an exceptionalist narrative about fashionable African women.

Endnotes

- 1 I am aware that African fashion designers have been on the world stage and their designs part of numerous fashion shows much prior to the airing of *An African City*. However, I would argue that fashion shows are less relatable and because *An African City* depicts the everyday through narrative, it has the potential to reach a broader audience.
- 2 <http://www.africanprintinfashion.com/2014/04/an-african-city-changing-narrative.html>

References

- Abebe, Alpha. 2015. “Afropolitanism: Global Citizenship with African Routes.” Available at <http://blog.qeh.ox.ac.uk/?p=910>.
- Allman, Jean. 1996. “Rounding up Spinsters: Gender Chaos and Unmarried Women in Colonial Asante”, *The Journal of African History* 37(2): 195–214.

- Allman, Jean. ed. 2004. *Fashioning Africa: Power and the Politics of Dress*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- AriseEntertainment 360. 2014. "An African City" Creators and Star Drop by to Promote the Show. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ajp6PMqgAow>
- Bwesigye, Brian. 2013. "Is Afropolitanism Africa's New Single Story? Reading Helon Habila's Review of *We Need New Names*." Available at <http://asterixjournal.com/afropolitanism-africas-new-single-story-reading-helon-habilas-review-need-new-names-brian-bwesigye/>
- Christie Brown. No Date. Available at <http://christiebrownonline.com/about.html>
- Dabiri, Emma. 2016. "Why I'm (Still) Not An Afropolitan", *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 28(1): 104-108.
- De Boeck, Filip. 2011. "Inhabiting Ocular Ground: Kinshasa's Future in the Light of Congo's Spectral Urban Politics", *Cultural Anthropology* 26(2): 263-286.
- Eze, Chielozona. 2014. "Rethinking African Culture and Identity: The Afropolitan Model", *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 26(2): 234-247.
- Farber, Leora. 2010. "Africanising Hybridity? Toward an Afropolitan Aesthetic in Contemporary South African Fashion Design", *Critical Arts: South North Cultural and Media Studies*, 24(1): 128-167.
- Friedmann, John. 1986. "The World City Hypothesis", *Development and Change* 17: 69-83.
- Hansen, Karen. 1999. "Second-Hand Clothing Encounters in Zambia: Global Discourses, Western Commodities and Local Histories", *Africa* 69(3): 343-365.
- Hansen, Karen. 2010. "The Search for 'the Latest' in Colonial and Postcolonial Zambia", in Lemire, B. ed. *The Force of Fashion in Politics and Society: Global Perspectives from Early Modern to Contemporary Times*. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.
- Karimi, Faith. 2014. "An African City Web Series Generates Buzz, Dismantles Stereotypes." Available at <http://www.cnn.com/2014/04/18/world/africa/ghana-african-city/index.html>.
- Kwateng, Danielle. 2014. "An African City Showcase Best in Ghanaian Fashion." Available at <http://styleblazer.com/230289/an-african-city-fashion/>
- Mbembe, Achille. 2007. "Afropolitanism", in Njami, S., Durán, L., and Hubert Martin, J. eds. *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*. Johannesburg: Jacana Media.
- Mbembe, Achille and Nuttall, Sarah. 2004. "Writing the World from an African Metropolis", *Public Culture* 16(3): 347-372.
- McKittrick, Katherine. 2006. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Mikell, Gwendolyn. 2010. *African Feminism: The Politics of Survival in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

- O'Shaughnessy, Emma. 2008. "African Urban Discourse: Invisible and Reflexive Practice in African Cities", *Postamble* 4(2): 1-17.
- Oyeronke, Oyèwùmí. 1997. *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Patel, Shajila. 2010. *Migritude*. New York: Kaya Press.
- Peake, Linda. 2009. "Gender in the City", in Kitchin, R. and Thrift, N. eds. *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography: A 12-Volume Set*. Elsevier Science.
- Robinson, Jennifer. 2006. *Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development*. London: Routledge.
- Rovine, Victoria. 2004. "Fashionable Traditions: The Globalization of An African Textile", in Allman, J. ed. *Fashioning Africa: Power and the Politics of Dress*. Bloomington and Indianapolis. Indiana University Press.
- Santana, Stephanie. 2016. "Exorcizing the Future: Afropolitanism's Spectral Origins", *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 28, 120-126.
- Sassen, Saskia. 1991. *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Selasi, Taiye. 2005. *Bye-Bye Babar*. Available at <<http://thelip.robertsharp.co.uk/?p=76>>.
- The KSM Show, 2014. "An African City Creator and Two Cast Members Part 1." Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zOwEDRrZSLw>.
- Watson, Vanessa. 2014. "African Urban Fantasies: Dreams or Nightmares?" *Environment and Urbanization* 26(1): 215-231.

Skimpy Fashion and Sexuality in Sheebah Karungi's Performances

Evelyn Lutwama-Rukundo

Myriad factors determine people's choice of dress for any particular occasion, but when the event is a musical performance in a short-lived stage appearance, or in a music video meant to be viewed widely and possibly eternally, what to wear becomes a significant decision. For a musician, dress, or what can be called costume, is a channel through which she, others behind her act, and her audience communicate a desired message about her music and her stage and possibly off-stage identities. The different parties involved may have divergent or complementary wishes about this message. As such, the final outfit chosen for a performance is either the aspiration of the most powerful agent involved, such as the performer, costume designer or producer, or a negotiated compromise that variously serves the competing needs.

This article is concerned with how the costumes of the Ugandan 'Afropop' musician, Sheebah Karungi, often called 'sexy,' involve her in a nexus of self-presentation and sexuality. Born to a Ugandan mother and Rwandese father, Sheebah, as she is commonly known, dropped out of secondary school in Form Two because the Ugandan education system did not offer her many opportunities to dance (Maganja, 2015). Now 29, she began her performance career in a dance group known as the Obsessions at the age of 15, but later switched to a musical career (Rumanzi, 2012). Her maiden hit song, *Ice Cream*, catapulted her to fame amongst Ugandan audiences in 2013, earning her first music award in the Hipipo Awards. In 2016, two of her songs, *Nipe Yote* and *Otubatisa*, were again nominated for these awards under the 'Afropop' category.

'Afropop' is an all-encompassing term for popular African music that combines electric instruments and African melodic sounds and rhythms favorable for popular African dance movements.¹ Whereas most music produced in Uganda could quite easily fall within this classification, the Hipipo

Awards' Afropop category includes songs with relatively fast danceable beats, and with lyrics predominantly written in African languages. Often played in night clubs and night performances, Sheebah's songs are fast and sometimes funky. When performing, the artiste's trademark style of dress includes hot pants, see-through mini dresses, skirts and other suggestive outfits – a style that I term 'skimpy' in this article. Costumes in Sheebah's music videos tend to also be skimpy and sexually provocative, albeit with some measure of consideration for possible younger and conservative viewers.

Given the difficulty of securing an interview with the popular singer, this article is based on a reading of media images of her skimpy costuming during performances,² analysis of excerpts of media interviews with her, and my observation of both the performer and her audience during one of her night-time musical concerts, *Nkwatako*, which took place in Kampala in April 2016. My analysis is premised on Desiree Lewis' (2009) elaboration of the notion of the "gendered spectacle." According to Lewis, public spectacles "play an important part in socially marking bodies, and therefore also in creating political meanings about gendered and other social identities" (2009: 127). Therefore, they can also be mobilised as "powerful signifiers of resistance to oppression" (2009: 127), including in the form that Lewis calls "riotous bodily performance" (136). I argue that performance allows Sheebah to resist social and cultural control of her body, and to exhibit this resistance to her audience. Through her dress and body she negotiates conservative structures and ideologies around female fashion and artistic performance in Uganda, thereby asserting her individuality and sexuality. The article starts with a historical overview of tensions around skimpy dress in Africa, before focusing on Sheebah's particular embodiment of the style in a global culture which is a site of mixed reactions to the effects of globalisation on individual, communal and national identities (Eriksen, 2005).

Skimpy Fashioning in Africa

For the most part, Buganda, the part of Uganda where Sheebah is most popular, has historically controlled women's dress codes, expression, movement into the public sphere and sexuality (Musisi, 2001; Nannyonga-Tamusuza, 2005). Women in pre-colonial and colonial Buganda who were known to be publicly free and proud of their sexuality were demonised by not only missionaries, Baganda politicians and colonial administrators, but

also by fellow Baganda women who conformed to the prescribed conservative moral standards for femininity. The so-called ‘free women’ of Kampala city were patrolled and derogatory names were crafted to mark them as different, bad and deviant (Musisi, 2001). Negative labeling of such women was a tool to dissuade others from exploring sexual freedom.

In Africa, control of women’s access to the public sphere, and to freedom of their bodies, is not restricted to Ugandan history. Scholarship on African theatre suggests that, in many African countries, the social status of colonial and early post-colonial female performers was marked by negative perceptions about their career choice and identities as women. Regardless of their dress code, many female performers in these periods were castigated for their mere presence in public spaces, in this case on theatrical stages, and they were often regarded as ‘women of loose morals’ (Article 19 African Programme, 2003; Banham et al., 2002). Women’s dress, in particular skimpy fashion, is still an issue of contention across the continent. Bibi Bakare-Yusuf (2011) and Brigid Sackey (2003), for instance, cite recent public and government attempts to outlaw the fashion in Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, Uganda, Malawi, Ghana, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Nigeria and Gambia. This is despite the fact that, in itself, flesh-revealing dress is not new on the continent. Many African cultures traditionally permit and normalise the baring of flesh, from the Masai people of Kenya and Tanzania to the Karamajong of Uganda, to the ‘young virgins’ paraded annually before the King of Swaziland to be chosen as brides.

The literature suggests that the introduction of Islam and Arabic culture, as well as European colonialism in Africa, served to encourage conservative and moralising attitudes towards the revealed or barely clothed body, female bodies in particular. For example, Margaret Hay (2004) notes that the once minimally dressed Luo and Luyia people in Kenya were encouraged by colonial administrators and missionaries to cover their bodies: men were to be covered in the coastal Arab-influenced garment called ‘kanzu,’ and women in two-metre length pieces of cloth. In Ghana, the resistance of the Talensi people to replacing their traditional dress style of skin, waist beads and leaves with European-style clothing was broken when the British High Commissioner summoned their earth priest and dressed and paraded him in cloth (Allman, 2004).

Many postcolonial African governances sustained the colonial practice of monitoring and attempting to control the public exposure of female bodies,

and hence skimpy fashion continues to be viewed through moralistic lenses across the continent. Close scrutiny of the moral opinions and agitations over this fashion brings to the fore the deep fear behind them: the fear that skimpy clothes will unleash female sexuality and free the female body from the tight clutches of patriarchy (Machera, 2004; Muhanguzi, 2014; Tamale, 2005). Women's bodies are positioned as sites of a so-called 'African morality' that must be guarded from erosion (Bakare-Yusuf, 2011), a task to which self-appointed male and female patriarchal agents apply themselves (Kiruga, 2014). This policing of women's morality, dress and freedom ignores women's subjectivities, desires and agency (Arnfred, 2004; Bakare-Yusuf, 2011; Musisi, 2001). However, not all women conform to conservative dressing, Sheebah being a clear and visible example.

Despite all the reprimanding of skimpy wear in Uganda, which peaked in the passing of the Anti-Pornography Act in 2014 that rendered it illegal to publicly expose parts of the body deemed sexual or sexually exciting (The Republic of Uganda, 2014; also see Tamale, this issue), Sheebah continues to appear in skimpy clothing. In July 2015, in an interview with the *Observer* newspaper, the artiste was asked if she would give up this fashion when starting a family. Her reaction was candid: "I would still dress up like that, even if I was a *nnalongo*³ of six children. Yes I would, because that is who I am. It has nothing to do with age, nothing to do with whether I have children or not. It is who I am. I feel more comfortable revealing my nice body." A number of nude pictures of Sheebah have also found their way on to social media but rather than expressing shame about this, Sheebah declared that she felt sorry that "twisted minds" exploit innocent female victims by exposing private images of them without their consent (Maganja, 2015).

Constructing a 'Sexy' Identity through Dress and Performance

Sexual freedom is visibly imprinted in most images of Sheebah performing.⁴ It is conveyed by almost all the elements of her embodied appearance, in her outfits, body posture, facial expression, gestures and dance moves. While Sheebah's costumes boldly reveal expanses of her flesh, suggesting an expression of bodily freedom, her postures help to reinforce this signification further. Sheebah's typical postures include: lying down on her back; lying with her torso arched upwards; sitting cross-legged; and standing with her

legs apart and her hands positioned between them or rubbing her groin. Her facial expressions also contribute to the sexy message. For example, in one picture she licks her lips and in another, she strains her face, like a woman about to reach an ecstatic sexual moment. Quite a number of Sheebah's stage images are provocative and portray a woman aware of and confident in her sexuality. On stage, she is a free performer who uses every part of her body in communication. She disregards many of the local traditions well known to her and her audience that seek to control the movement and posture of female bodies lest they expose parts of the body deemed private.

The sexualised meanings of Sheebah's stage image become more apparent when considered together with the content of her music. Sheebah sings about love and sex. *Ice Cream*, for example, is a description of how she feels that she may die if she does not get a 'lick,' a suggestive reference to either a penis or its products. *Twesana* describes her admiration for a handsome man who she alleges resembles her in ways and looks. In this song, Sheebah attempts to initiate a love/sexual relationship with the subject of her admiration. An even clearer signification of Sheebah's romantic and sexual messages appears in her duet, *Go Down Low*. This song suggests that, at intervals, Sheebah and her co-singer, Pallaso, should take up the lower sexual position.

From my observations at the *Nkwatako* concert, Sheebah's music, dress and behaviour on stage seemed neither unfamiliar nor repulsive to the audience. Many of the young women in the crowd wore similar clothes to the artiste and drinking, dancing, and often in romantic company, the audience rowdily cheered Sheebah on. The stage lights provided a favourable ambience in which Sheebah displayed her costumes and body provocatively. Her prominent yet protected position on the lit stage vis-à-vis her audience in the darker auditorium gave Sheebah greater chance to additionally use sexy gestures and dance moves. Such a performance would likely have been more difficult in a more open and well-lit public place.

Expressing Feminine Sexuality in Uganda

While performance gives Sheebah a particular opportunity to appear in skimpy fashion and communicate sexy messages, this form of agency is not limited to the stage. She uses skimpy and figure-hugging clothes as signifiers of her liberated sexuality even when she is not performing, such as when socialising with friends. Her dress code both on and off stage stubbornly

emphasises sexual independence and confidence. Sheebah's rebellion against bodily imprisonment in dress can also be read in some of her public communications. For example, on her Twitter account, the singer once posted the message "am Queen Sheebah the diva, a Uganda-based musician with lots of great music. To me the sky will always be the limit..." The biblical 'Queen of Sheba' is known for travelling a long distance in pursuit of King Solomon's wisdom, before getting caught up in a sexual entanglement with the king (Zeiger, 1996). By likening herself to the Queen of Sheba, Sheebah is laying claim on this figure's fame, search for wisdom and sexuality. To some degree, just like the Queen, Sheebah is successful at establishing her independence from social regulations about women's mobility, expression and search for fame.

On the Ugandan scene, although Sheebah's explicit and carefree public expression of sexuality is notable, open discussion of female sexuality is not altogether alien in the country, albeit restricted to designated sites. For example, Sylvia Tamale notes that through the institution of *Ssenga*, Baganda girls are tutored by their paternal aunts in 'erotic skills' and in the use of 'sexual paraphernalia', and 'aphrodisiacs' in the form of herbal perfumes, sensual oils and 'sexual beads' (2013: 268). Within the same community, the 'dancing the twins' ritual permits free sexual expression. During this ritual, as twins are welcomed into the world, with feasting, singing and dancing throughout the night and sometimes over several days, *naalongo* (their mother) transcends the traditional formalities restraining Baganda women's speech and narrates and sings in graphic detail about what her husband had to do, sexually, to make her pregnant with twins (Lutwama-Rukundo, 2010). Florence Muhanguzi (2014) discloses that low-income Banyankole and Bakiga women of Western Uganda also openly express their sexual needs to their husbands.⁵ Indeed, women's passivity during private sexual encounters is generally frowned upon in a number of Ugandan cultures.

If women's sexual expression is in itself not new in Uganda, why, then, does Sheebah stand out? The answer is to be found in the sites in which she communicates, and the candidness with which she does so. Whilst Sheebah situates her sexual communication in the public setting, the women in Western Uganda cited above restrict theirs to the private and very intimate sphere. Whereas the Buganda *naalongo(s)* also communicate their female sexuality in public, their audience mostly comprises a tight-knit collection of

relatives and friends. By contrast, Sheebah's address is to the general public. The modern commercial *Ssengas* described by Tamale (2005) also speak of sexuality in public, but they use camouflaged and proverbial language. Sheebah's sexual language is thinly veiled, at best. I argue, then, that in her costumes and music, Sheebah is engaging in explicit sexual advocacy, demanding for the right to free sexual expression by Ugandan women.

Global Raunch Culture and the Question of Empowerment

Sheebah's demand that skimpy style, and women's sexual expression, be allowed and respected in Uganda must also be understood as part of a broader culture – a global 'sexy dressing' trend in the music industry. It is situated in what Ariel Levy (2005) calls "raunch culture." Within this culture, Levy argues, women's sexuality and nudity have become publically acceptable and even expected in media. And, indeed, most contemporary African music performance is marked by skimpy fashion and explicit representations of female sexuality, from the lyrics of songs to the wriggling female bodies in bikinis, underwear and hot pants. There are clear similarities between Sheebah's style and that of other African performers like South African Pam Andrews, Ghanaian Mzbel, Ugandan Cindy, Nigerian Seyi Shay and Congolese Tshala Mwana, for instance.

Internationally, women's sexuality and nudity are now profitable commodities, packaged and sold in fashion, music, pornography, movies and a range of other sites. Sheebah explicitly situates herself within this cultural and commodified logic. For instance, she explained to a *New Vision* newspaper reporter: "musically speaking, I dress nude because that is my brand. I only do it for the sake of making my videos attractive...This is just a profession that has its own dynamics and dressing half-naked is one of them."⁶ The blatant commodification of women's bodies provokes a two-sided debate. On the one hand, some argue that it is a form of capitalist exploitation of women, while others see it as a sign of women's emancipation. Donald Mosher and Paula Maclan (1994), and Stephen Prince (1990), for example, suggest that the women involved are trapped in a culture that de-humanises their bodies by turning them into "commercial sexualised commodities." Prince (1990) propounds that the sexualised female figure, and the audience that consumes her, are equally de-humanised by the process. As the female performer is sexually objectified, the viewer increasingly loses his or her ethical human

relations with her and demands more, pushing the objectified woman to shed more and more clothing in order to satisfy her audience. This demand-supply relationship between audience and performer may mean that the performer's dress code gets skimpier and skimpier over time.

On the other hand, not all skimpily dressed or nude women are mere objects. For example, earlier in the article I cited Sheebah stating that she likes to reveal her "nice body" to her audience, and just above that she is knowingly commodifying it. In my research, I did not come across any utterances or indication from the artiste to the effect that she is unhappy about using her body as a means to her success. To the contrary, Sheebah expresses satisfaction with the rewards of her bodily exposure, namely money, fame, success, and greater self-esteem. A correlation has been found between sexual confidence and women's agency such as that exuded by Sheebah. Susie Jolly, Andrea Cornwall and Kate Hawkins (2013) suggest that women who view their sexuality positively are empowered by the knowledge and practice of pleasurable sex. They cease to see their bodies as mere objects for men's sexual satisfaction, or as requiring concealment and control, but rather as sources of pleasure and empowerment. They value their bodies and expect others to value them, too. Similarly, Dorothy Aken'ova (2013) argues that a woman who is confident sexually is more likely to be confident in other ways, including demanding that her rights – to education, freedom, self-actualisation and so on – are respected. The focus on female pleasure, according to Jolly et al. (2013), helps to deconstruct inequalities between women and men.

Conclusion

While 'dressing up' offers the dressed subject an opportunity to conform to, or contest, the social norms of her community, it also provides the community with an opportunity to attempt to redefine, refuse or accept the styles that this subject chooses. In Africa and elsewhere, women have more choices for how they dress to express and ostensibly empower themselves. 'Raunch culture,' of which one manifestation is sexually explicit dress, can be perceived as both empowering and disempowering for women. Through her dress, Sheebah is able to contest social norms about women's bodies and expression. In the gender and development context, this is a positive contribution, for it is possible that Sheebah's agentic demand for the respect

of women's free sexual expression and experience can translate into women's increased confidence and a greater demand for women's rights in Uganda, as suggested by Aken'ova (2005).

Endnotes

- 1 Retrieved from <http://www.afropop.org> on 22 December 2015.
- 2 See for example: <http://www.google.com/search?q=images+of+Sheeba+Karungi,> [www.ugandaonline.net/gallery/sheebakarungi?category=240,](http://www.ugandaonline.net/gallery/sheebakarungi?category=240) www.howwe.biz/himages/1411559907.html
- 3 *Nnaalongo* is a mother of twins. Twins are exalted in the cultures of Southern Uganda, and a woman who bears twins and earns the title is perceived as special, almost super-human, and her social status in these cultures is elevated. At the same time, stricter measures are applied to her social conduct. She is expected to be the epitome of the traditionally prescribed femininity of Buganda.
- 4 See for example [www.ugandaonline.net/gallery/sheebakarungi?category=240,](http://www.ugandaonline.net/gallery/sheebakarungi?category=240) www.howwe.biz/himages/1411559907.html.
- 5 On the basis of these women's low income class, it could be assumed ordinarily that they are subjugated and lack voice.
- 6 Retrieved from www.chano8.com/sheeba-karungi-reacts-anti-pornography-law/ on 11 June 2016.

References

- Afropop Worldwide*. Retrieved from <http://www.afropop.org> (Accessed on 22 December 2015).
- Aken'ova, Dorothy. 2013. "Better Sex and More Equal Relationships: Couple Training in Nigeria", in Jolly, S., Cornwall, A. and Hawkins, K. eds. *Women, Sexuality and the Political Power of Pleasure*. London: Zed Books.
- Allman, Jean. 2004. "Introduction", in *Fashioning Africa: Power and the Politics of Dress*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- . 2004. "'Let your Fashion Be in Line with Our Ghanaian Costume': Nation, Gender and the Politics of Cloth-ing in Nkrumah's Ghana", in Allman, J. ed. *Fashioning Africa: Power and the Politics of Dress*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Arnfred, Signe. 2004. "African Sexuality/Sexuality in Africa: Tales and Silences", in Signe, A. ed. *Rethinking Sexualities in Africa*. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.
- Article 19 African Programme. 2003. *Women's Voices and African Theatre: Case Studies from Kenya, Mali, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Zimbabwe*. Braamfontein 2017, 23 Jorissen Street, South Africa. (Accessed at www.article19.org on 14 August 2003).
- Banham, Martin, Gibbs, James, Osofisan, Femi and Plastow, Jane, eds. 2002. *African Theatre: Women*. Oxford: James Currey.

- Bakare-Yusuf, Bibi. 2011. "Nudity and Morality: Legislating Women's Bodies and Dress in Nigeria", in Tamale, S. ed. *African Sexualities: A Reader*. Cape Town: Pambazuka Press.
- Eriksen, H. Thomas. 2005. "How Can the Global be Local? Islam, the West and the Globalisation of Identity Politics", in Hemer, O and Tuftte, T. eds. *Media & Glocal Change: Rethinking Communication for Development*. Buenos Aires: CLASCO.
- Hay, J. Margaret. 2004. "Changes in Clothing and Struggles over Identity in Colonial Western Kenya", in Allman, J. ed. *Fashioning Africa: Power and the Politics of Dress*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- HiPipo <http://www.hipipo.com/music/news/2326/Sheebah-Karungi--The-New-Big-Female-Name-In-Ugandan-Music> (Accessed December 22 2015).
- Howwe Biz. *Sheeba Karungi*. <http://www.howwe.biz/artist/bio/sheebah-karungi.html> (Accessed 22 December 2015).
- Jolly, Susie, Cornwall, Andrea and Hawkins, Kate. 2013. "Women Sexuality and the Politics Power of Pleasure: Introduction", in *Women, Sexuality and the Political Power of Pleasure*. London: Zed Books.
- Kiruga, Morris. 2014. "Understanding Africa's 'Fashion Gestapo': Miniskirts, Maxi Skirts, Make-up and Long Beards", *Mail and Guardian Africa* 5 December 2014. <http://mgafrica.com/article/2014-12-04-understanding-africas-fashion-police> (Accessed 29 December 2015).
- Levy, Ariel. 2005. *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*. New York: Free Press.
- Lewis, Desiree. 2009. "Gendered Spectacle: New Terrains of Struggle in South Africa", in Schlyter, A. ed. *Body Politics and Women Citizens: African Experiences*. SIDA.
- Lutwama-Rukundo, Evelyn. 2010. *Communication for Development: Community Theatre and Women's Rights in Buganda (Uganda)*. Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing AG & Co. KG.
- Machera, Mumbi. 2004. "Opening a Can of Worms: A Debate on Female Sexuality in the Lecture Theatre", in Arnfred, S. ed. *Rethinking Sexualities in Africa*. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.
- Maganja, G. Johnson. 2015. "Sheebah Will Live Her Dreams, No Matter What", *The Observer* 24 July 2015.
- Miller, I. Joshua. 2005. "Fashion and Democratic Relationships", *Polity* 37:1
- Mosher, L. Donald and Maclan, Paula. 1994. "College Men and Women Respond to X-Rated Videos Intended for Male or Female Audiences: Gender and Sexual Scripts", *The Journal of Sex Research* 31(2): 99-113.
- Muhanguzi, K. Florence. 2014. "Sex is Sweet: Low-income Women in Uganda Talk about Sexual Desire and Pleasure", in Bantebya, G., Siri, G., Ahikire, J. and Muhanguzi, F. eds. *Gender, Poverty and Social Transformation: Reflections on Fractures and Continuities in Contemporary Uganda*. Kampala: Fountain Publishers.

- Musisi, B. Nakanyike. 2001. "Gender and the Cultural Construction of 'Bad Women' in the Development of Kampala-Kibuga, 1900–1962". in Hodgson, D and McCurdy, S. eds. *'Wicked' Women and the Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa*. Suffolk: James Currey.
- Nannyonga-Tamusuza, Sylvia. 2005. *Baakisimba: Gender in the Music and Dance of the Baganda People of Uganda*. New York: Routledge.
- Prince, Stephen. 1990. "Power and Pain: Content Analysis and The Ideology of Pornography", *Journal of Film and Video* 42(2): 31–41.
- Rumanzi, Abraham, 2012. "Sheba's Kigali Mission" *The Independent* 13th March 2012. <http://www.independent.co.ug/rwanda-ed/rwanda/5393-shebas-kigali-mission> (Accessed 22 December 2015).
- Sackey, M. Brigid. 2003. "Apuskeleke: Youth Fashion Craze, Immorality or Female Harassment?" *Etnofoor* 16(2): 57–69.
- Tamale, Sylvia. 2013. "Eroticism, Sensuality and Women's Secrets among the Baganda: A Critical Analysis" in Jolly, S., Cornwall, A. and Hawkins, K. eds. *Women, Sexuality and the Political Power of Pleasure*. London: Zed Books.
- The Republic of Uganda. 2014. *The Anti-Pornography Act*.
- Vance, Carole. 1984. "Pleasure and Danger: Toward a Politics of Sexuality", in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*. Boston: Routledge.
- Zeiger, Gene. 1996. "The Queen of Sheba", *The Georgia Review* 50(2): 383–385.

The weave as an 'unhappy' technology of black femininity

Simidele Dosekun

Black women everywhere seem to be in weaves these days. Afua Hirsh (2012) half-jokingly declaims that “the weave has invaded Africa on its march to world domination” while, referring to North America, Cheryl Thompson observes similarly that: “From Oprah to Janet Jackson to Tyra Banks and a slew of others, weaves have become a normative part of Black beauty. More so than ever before, Black women are bombarded with images that have normalised long, straight hair” (2009: 847). Certainly the research that I briefly reference in this standpoint piece, a study of young Nigerian women who dress in what I call “hyper-feminine style” (Dosekun, 2015a), began with my subjective sense of being surrounded, in Lagos, by women in cascading hair extensions. Yet whether in relation to black women in Africa or in the diaspora, feminist and other critical literatures have not caught up with the weave at all. Women’s contemporary hairstyling in Africa is under-researched in general, while in a number of works on black diasporic women and their hair, the weave is considered only as one style among others, in some cases merely listed (e.g. Tate, 2009; Thompson, 2009). The larger concern in these works is on black women straightening or otherwise chemically altering the texture of their hair.

The significant lack of scholarly attention to black women’s weaves does not mean the lack of a certain prior and sedimented mode of seeing the style, however. There is a tendency, scholarly and popular, in Africa and beyond, to see black women’s appearance with hair longer and less ‘kinky’ than ‘nature’ would have it as evidence of a relative racial ‘self-hatred’ and ‘inferiority complex’; as a form of repudiating ‘blackness’ and sign of desiring ‘whiteness.’ For instance, Francis Nyamnjoh and Divine Fuh cite participants on a South African television debate on the topic of “Natural vs Weave” who

contend that black women in weaves “mimic the standards of beauty set by whites, standards which [push] them to seek to distance themselves from their natural black African hair, seen and treated as inferior” (2014: 59). Nadine Sanger additionally frames such debate in the context of South Africa in terms of an oppositional ‘African/Western’ binary, writing that in local adverts for chemical hair straightening products the “racist Western construct of straight hair as beautiful is presented as aspirational for black African women” (2009: 143). Having heard a range of perspectives from black women in Canada on why they use such products and/or wear weaves, including the deeply problematic notion that the look of their hair impacts their employability, Thompson still concludes that such hairstyling practice “stunts any potential to overcome the legacy of slavery and a multi-generational pathology of self-hatred” (2009: 855). Looking at a magazine cover featuring the African-American singer, Diana Ross, posed naked with an extra-long black weave running down her back, bell hooks ‘sees’ that: “The longing that is most visible in this cover is that of the black woman to embody and be encircled by whiteness, personified by the possession of long straight hair” (1992: 71).

Frankly I am *tired* of such analysis. I am *frustrated* with such too-ready and too-simple suppositions that the grip of white supremacy on black feminine subjectivity and psychic life is so totalising that the beauty black women come to desire is ‘*white* beauty.’ The casual recitations of such claims is performative, producing a seeming truth that needs no evidence, support or justification beyond its own assertion, as in the few examples above. I am fully in agreement with Shirley Tate when she critiques it as a “*myth* which still circulates in feminist writings on beauty... that all ‘Black women want to be white’, because white beauty is iconic” (2012: 195, my emphasis). I am not sure if this ‘myth’ grates more when I find it in black or white feminist writings. In the former, it seems almost irresponsible in its simplicity, if only from our own racialised positionalities, black feminists should know that black beauty is deeply complex, and should also know to accord it status and consideration as a thing in itself, not a mere derivative or external imposition. From white feminists, the analysis seems patronising and ultimately self-confirmatory. In either case, the notion that black women want white beauty psychopathologises us as racially damaged and presumes gross delimitations of our capacity for self-reflexivity and agentic self-stylisation, our capacity to take on new styles – also our very right, I would insist. Instead it fixes

and essentialises blackness and its ‘proper’ or ‘authentic’ appearance, thereby disallowing that black beauty is necessarily multiple, fluid, contested and syncretic, including in and for its ability to incorporate white and other beauty norms.

In this short piece I want to join black feminist scholars of black beauty such as Maxine Craig (1997, 2006) and Shirley Tate (2009) to argue that we must complexify and move beyond the analytic claim that black women effectively want white beauty. Because I deem the claim ultimately racist in its presuppositions and effects, my charge here is especially directed at black feminists. By way of reference to the weave, I will briefly outline a new conceptual view of such a hairstyle that neither over-privileges whiteness in black women’s desires for it nor forgets the racist histories and logics that contribute to constituting these desires. In the first place, my argument is that we must allow a style like the weave into blackness, aesthetically, conceptually and politically, not least as it is already here, worn and desired by many a black woman around the world. This is not a naïve, ‘happy’ or merely empiricist argument. Rather it is premised on what I deem the necessary theoretical understanding that blackness, like all other racial categories, is a performative fiction: a political, material and cultural construct that is made and re-made, and thus can and does change, versus an essence that simply is. Following Tate (2009), we can see that by definition a ‘black hairstyle’ is also performative. That is, a black hairstyle is a matter of doing, styling, naming, *making* ‘black.’ Whatever it may comprise or look like, a black hairstyle becomes any that results from the manipulation of that which is itself performatively named and produced as ‘black hair,’ and any located on a body variously and multiply racialised as black. As Tate further adds, such a hairstyle recursively constitutes and signifies blackness too, including when it looks ‘fake’ or ‘unnatural’ for the body to which it belongs, as is a popular critique of the look of black women’s weaves.

That all the above necessarily applies to ‘white hairstyles’ nullifies by rendering incoherent or impossible the notion that certain black styles are mimics or approximations of the former. Within a performative theoretical framework, the so-called ‘original’ is understood to be as performatively constituted and therefore as unfixed and unfixable as its said copy. Thus white hairstyles are also cultural fictions. They are not inherent, necessary or exclusive to whiteness, and nor are they somehow owned by white people.

Rather white hairstyles are a matter of doing – and, quite tellingly, they too can be done through weaves (e.g. see Berry, 2008). As such a performative theoretical view enables us to see past the simplistic notion that black women in weaves are copying or desiring whiteness – an analysis further called into question by the fact that, these days, black women may be wearing or seeking so-called ‘human hair’ from such non-white places as India and Vietnam. Instead we are enabled to see the weave as *a technology of black femininity* meaning a way or style of doing black femininity – and one of very many (Tate, 2009). This opens up our analytic and methodological horizons. It means that rather than presuming to already know what black women in weaves are doing or about, we can and indeed must *enquire* into it, and can and must do so with more nuance and with greater analytic respect for our research subjects.

As I have stated above, I am not seeking here to make a ‘happy’ case for the weave, which I mean in Sara Ahmed’s (2010) critical sense of the happy as that which obscures or forgets or enjoins us to ‘get over’ power and violence. I am also not making a consumerist case for the proliferation of black beauty styles and technologies. Yet happy, apolitical, ‘girly’ consumption was precisely what I heard from the class-privileged young women in Lagos whom I interviewed about their spectacularly feminine dress style (Dosekun, 2015a). As with the other elements of their style – long acrylic nails, heavy and immaculate make-up, false eyelashes, towering high heels and so on – the women embraced and experienced their fabulous weaves as promising spectacular beauty and femininity, and, with and through these happy states, a subjective sense of self-confidence and empowerment. For example, one participant, pseudonymously called Diane, recalled her 21st birthday when she had been wearing a long-desired, especially expensive human hair weave as follows:

Diane: I knew I was looking nice, believe me, cause everybody was telling me I was looking awesome.

Simidele: (*laughs*) Because of the hair or the whole package?

Diane: *No, the hair!* The hair just gives you a different look. It gives you, it gives you. And I think when I look nice, I have this (*pauses*) a different me. I’m so confident.

Simidele: Oh really?

Diane: Like it brings out this different me.

Overall but also in direct relation to their weaves, I argued that my research participants positioned themselves as ‘already empowered’ or ‘postfeminist’ subjects, as happily beyond patriarchy.¹ Thus in my research I conceptualised the weave more specifically as a technology of black *postfeminist* femininity, a conceptual view also suggested by the ubiquity, if not near compulsoriness, of the style in what could be considered exemplary black postfeminist figurations: from Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj to the women on transnationalised reality TV shows such as *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* to African celebrities such as Dencia and Tiwa Savage. But while the Lagos women with whom I spoke expressly celebrated their weaves, as well as insisting on their consumerist right to the style, there was an undercurrent of ambivalence and melancholy in the women’s positions, a wish that things might be otherwise. Consider the rather rueful words of Folake:

I wish – if I had longer hair, maybe I’d stopping doing all of this [i.e. wearing weaves a lot], cause I’ve got really thin hair, I’ve got thin but long hair, but what I really like, what I would *really* want is a really, I would like my hair to be fuller. Fuller and longer. And then maybe I’d carry [i.e. wear] my natural hair more often.

As we hear in this quote, part of the happy promise of the weave was to solve one’s putative ‘hair problem,’ in Folake’s case the problem of too-thin-not-quite-long-enough hair. Yet as I heard it in the sum of the 18 interviews that I conducted in Lagos, the hair problem was, of course, not merely personal or idiosyncratic. To the contrary it was deeply structural, historical, and shared, and effectively taken for granted. The problem was *racial*. The problem was ‘natural black hair.’

In its very promise to solve this so-called problem, the weave in fact expanded and exacerbated it. The fact of the weave expanded the category of ‘natural black hair’ to encompass both chemically unprocessed and processed hair. In other words, next to the weave, the natural became the hair that had grown from one’s head, regardless of what was subsequently done to it. The putative deficiency of such hair was then exacerbated by the new standard of the weave, that is, in comparison to the fetishised look, feel and experience of wearing a long, full head of extensions. We can hear this logic of comparative natural deficiency in Folake’s remarks above, as well as an additional sense of self-alienation in another participant’s comment that, when not wearing the weaves to which she was increasingly accustomed, she felt that her own hair (chemically processed) looked “too *flat*... [and] so *strange*.”

For my research participants, young, fashion-conscious, educated career women in Lagos, the weave represented the most spectacular standard for doing black femininity and beauty. Hence the women positioned themselves as happily doing weaves. But as I have briefly shown, it was far from all happiness because the women's views of the weave and deeply felt preferences for it were premised on and continued what we might call '*unhappy*' histories of black hair. Ahmed theorises "unhappy objects" as those that "embody the persistence of histories that cannot be wished away by happiness" (2010: 159). With this, we can understand the weave as a most unhappy object for black women, understanding, though, that this does not render it any less a performative technology of black femininity but rather enters precisely and fundamentally into this performativity and all it promises.

My standpoint, then, is to conceptualise the weave as an unhappy technology of black femininity. This standpoint allows us much. It allows us to admit the weave into black femininity; to de-pathologise and de-psychologise its place there; to decentre whiteness from this aspect of black women's beauty practice; but, in all the foregoing, to not forget or wish away the fact that race is both founded in and a form of structural and symbolic violence. Understanding the weave as an unhappy black technology allows us to keep white supremacy firmly in view yet without reducing blackness and black subjectivity to it. It allows us to remember the much less than happy histories that render such a hairstyle especially desirable for many black women, but not collapse the present into this past or simply equate the two. Thus, most importantly, what the new conceptual view that I am proposing here allows is analytic recognition of and respect for the complexities of the fact that, as subjects who variously desire 'beauty' and style ourselves to achieve it, black women do so in a world certainly not of our choosing.

Endnotes

- 1 See Dosekun 2015b for my argument about how and why it is possible to think in terms of 'postfeminism' in such a place as Nigeria.

References

- Ahmed, Sara. 2010. *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Berry, Esther. 2008. "The Zombie Commodity: Hair and the Politics of its Globalization", *Postcolonial Studies* 11(1): 63–84.

- Craig, Maxine. 1997. "The Decline and Fall of the Conk; or, How to Read a Process", *Fashion Theory* 1(4): 399–420.
- Craig, Maxine. 2006. "Race, Beauty, and the Tangled Knot of a Guilty Pleasure", *Feminist Theory* 7(2): 159–177.
- Dosekun, Simidele. 2015a. "Fashioning Spectacular Nigerian Femininities: Postfeminism, Consumption and the Transnational", Unpublished PhD thesis. King's College London.
- Dosekun, Simidele. 2015b. "For Western Girls Only? Postfeminism as Transnational Culture", *Feminist Media Studies* 15(6): 960–975.
- Hirsch, Afua. 2012. "The Weird World of the Hair Weave", *The Guardian*, November 4. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2012/nov/04/hair-weaves-ghana-women>.
- Hooks, Bell. 2001. "Straightening Our Hair", in Johnson, P. and Harris, J. eds. *Tenderheaded: A Comb-bending Collection of Hair Stories*. New York: Pocket Books.
- Nyamnjoh, Francis and Fuh, Divine. 2014. "Africans Consuming Hair, Africans Consumed by Hair", *African Insight* 44(1): 52–68.
- Sanger, Nadine. 2009. "New Women, Old Messages? Constructions of Femininities, Race and Hypersexualised Bodies in Selected South African Magazines, 2003–2006", *Social Dynamics* 35(1): 137–148.
- Tate, Shirley. 2009. *Black Beauty: Aesthetics, Stylization, Politics*. Surrey: Ashgate.
- Tate, Shirley. 2012. "Not All the Women Want to Be White: Decolonizing Beauty Studies", in Rodríguez, E.G., Boatca, M. and Costa, S., eds. *Decolonizing European Sociology: Transdisciplinary Approaches*. Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.
- Thompson, Cheryl. 2009. "Black Women, Beauty, and Hair as a Matter of Being", *Women's Studies: An Inter-Disciplinary Journal* 38(8): 831–856.

Dreadlocks as a Symbol of Resistance: Performance and Reflexivity

Tendai Mutukwa

Performance auto-ethnography, an interdisciplinary qualitative research praxis, combines auto-ethnography and performance studies as a system of enquiry. Auto-ethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to systematically describe and analyse personal experience, or autobiography, in order to understand a wider cultural context (Spry, 2001:707). Performance auto-ethnography takes the embodied form of narration and performance in front of an audience. It situates the socio-politically inscribed body, as well as emotion and poetics, as central sites of meaning-making. As such, performance ethnography as research method disrupts hegemonic modes of knowledge production, including colonial, white and male perspectives.

In this standpoint, I reflect on my own body as a site for resistance, through my choice over ten years ago to wear my hair in dreadlocks. I describe my family's responses to this hairstyle, and my strategy of re-enacting these familial scenes via performance ethnography as a form of reflexive research capable of rewriting my authority in the academy. In doing so, I suggest the value of moving 'everyday' personal struggles around the politics of embodiment into performance work which can incorporate audience feedback. I suggest the power of autoethnography as a method to counter the retelling of 'the master's narrative' in academic spaces.

The following account draws from personal events that took place in my life. I narrate the events as I remember them.

The politics of dreadlocks

In 2010, whilst completing a Master's in Dramatic Arts at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, a course I was taking in performance theory required students to create a performance presentation of their own choice.

I saw this as an opportunity to present, share and reflect on my experiences as a black woman wearing dreadlocks, in particular my family's initial reaction to my decision to wear the hairstyle. The final performance, which was a one-woman show, was presented to faculty members, fellow students and course examiners.

It was back in 2002 that I decided to wear my hair in dreadlocks, which remains my style to this day. I loved the idea of keeping my hair in its natural black and 'kinky' state. Black women's dress and fashion choices have psychological, social, political and economic meanings and consequences (Sika, 2014). However, I was not prepared for those that attended my choice of hairstyle. When I went home from university for a semester break with black, worm-like studs on my head, both of my parents were outraged as they had negative perceptions and beliefs about women with dreadlocks.

A struggle ensued between my parents and me, which was made worse by the fact that I was no longer living at home. My parents felt that I was rebelling against them and disregarding what they had taught me as 'a good Christian girl.' They queried what I would do with my hair when it was time to go to formal gatherings such as church, my graduation ceremony, and the job interviews that would soon follow. My father expressed concern about me smoking marijuana or converting to Rastafarianism. It seems that a lot of people do not understand the complexities of natural hair on black women; when they see dreadlocks they think of Bob Marley.

The tension over my hairstyle involved not only my parents but also other senior members of my extended family, who shared my parents' sentiments. The conflict was only resolved over time because of my determination to keep the style, as well as the pleasure that I experienced from resisting. Eventually, the hairstyle was accepted as part of my identity. But, in the meantime, I had become interested in exploring the connections between my family's mistrust and fear of my deadlocks, and the meanings of the style historically.

Dreadlocks, it seems, are particularly contentious. For instance, since 2005, the United States Army has restricted black hairstyles and banned women personnel from having dreadlocks. In 2014, the ban was extended to other black hairstyles like cornrows, braids and twists. This ban is seen as offensive by the African-American community, especially given that the policy described these hairstyles as unkempt and matted, (Abdullah, 2014; Byrd and Tharps, 2014). Critics of the policy argue that the rules are not the problem; the

problem is with such perceptions of natural black hair, which are of course racially biased.

Feminists consider the body a site for the creation of identity, and the bearer of multiple cultural signs. Dressing the body is an inherently political activity (Dogbe, 2003). Therefore, my choice to fashion myself through dreadlocks was a way of using my body to establish and signify my identity as a young, black African woman. But, for many, this process of emphasising my blackness signified rebellion. Fanon (1964) argues that what is deemed right, proper or correct to the coloniser often becomes right, proper, and correct to the colonised. Both of my parents experienced white rule first hand. Thus their identities are deeply rooted within a system of racial oppression, what Fanon (1964) terms the “colonised personality”. Therefore, it should not have been a surprise to me that they expressed what I would call ‘white sensibilities’ concerning my ‘proper’ embodiment. That said, it seems to me that it was as a sign of my independence and non-conformity that my dreadlocks may have been most offensive to my parents and other members of my family.

Performance beyond the everyday

This section of the article will take the reader through the final performance piece¹ created to explore my experience with my dreadlocks.

As the lights slowly fade in, I can be seen dressed in a long hooded gown. The hood hides my head and face, and only the shape of my body is visible to the audience. On stage left is an elevated black chair. ‘Dressed’ in a brown jacket, a long sleeved shirt and a matching tie, this chair represents my father. Next to it is another chair, representing my mother. This chair ‘wears’ a brown skirt. A hair-piece, tied down with a traditional African doek or head-cloth, protrudes from the back of the chair. Far down stage left is a clothes rail with lots of different kinds of clothes, hair-pieces and wigs on it. Some of the clothes are on hangers, others are strewn about. All over the floor lie different kinds of shoes. Three wooden crates are placed far upstage at equal intervals. These are also overflowing with clothes and hair-pieces. On all sides of the walls, and scattered on the floor, are pictures of different women in different hairstyles and clothes.

The light illuminates the stage, and my body starts moving but it soon becomes apparent that there are heavy chains holding down my left leg. I try to shake these chains off, only to realise that a thick rope is tied to my left

hand as well. I struggle more to free myself. The scene gradually turns violent until I manage to break free. I then remove the hooded gown and show myself to be wearing only green leaves, made of green cotton material. I begin looking for clothes and shoes to wear. I run through all the options in the boxes on the stage, looking for the right outfit for me. After I am dressed, I start trying out different wigs and hair pieces, all the while using the audience as my mirror. When I realise that I won't find the 'right' wig or hairpiece, I untie my hair and celebrate my dreadlocks in dance and song.

After this, I go behind the chair representing my father and imitate his voice:

"Eeh!!!, Tendai I will not allow such a hairstyle in this house. You won't bring shame to this family, an educated girl like you, degrading yourself, putting on such a shameful hairstyle. I will not allow Rastafarians to live in my house and smoke weed."

I move behind the second chair representing my mother and put on her voice:

"Tendai, listen to your father. My daughter, I can take you to the salon. You can have any hairstyle you want. Those dreadlocks do not suit you, lovie"

There is much struggle between my parents and me concerning my hairstyle. I ask the mirror: *'What's so wrong with the way I look? I love the way I look. I love my hair.'*

The audience, functioning as my mirror, is forced into an unplanned reaction. There are responses like: *'you look good'*; *'they look nice on you'*; *'stick to your choice'*; *'listen to your parents.'* With my hands in my hair, I break into song and dance and continue to celebrate my dreadlocks, my joy and energy rising as I resolve the issue – I keep the dreadlocks. With this spirit of celebration, the lights slowly fade out and I exit the stage.

After the performance, I sat down for a discussion with the audience. As Spry (2001) asserts, watching an auto-ethnographic performance forces members of an audience to deal directly with the history of the body on the stage, and in conjunction with the history of their own bodies. Women in the audience shared that they had had similar struggles with their parents in relation to their clothing and/or hair choices. I was surprised when some men stood up to recount similar experiences too, in which their fathers had denied them permission to get certain haircuts that they deemed for 'bad boys' and 'thugs.'

From this research experience, contrary to those who would refuse performance auto-ethnography a legitimate place in the academy for being too subjective and emotional, I would argue that the method is pedagogical and political. It brought about personal change and new awareness, not only for me, but for others who witnessed it. I would assert that any research that brings about “a change in understanding” (Bolton, 1979: 45) is scholarship with social significance, and contributes to knowledge. Auto-ethnographic performance can provide a space for the emancipation of the voice and body from hegemonic structures and discourses of academic knowledge production. It can also provide a space for *different* kinds of voices and bodies: in my work, concerned as it was with the politics of my dreadlocks, I placed my black African female body on to the academic stage, and through it created and celebrated new ways of knowing and resisting.

References

- Abdullah, Halimah. 2014. “Army’s Ban on Dreadlocks, Other Styles Seen as Offensive to Some African-Americans”. Available at <<http://www.edition.cnn.com/2014/04/08/politics/army-hairstyle-ban-debate>>.
- Bolton, Gavin. 1979. *Towards a Theory of Drama in Education*. London: Longman.
- Byrd, Ayana and Tharps, Lori I. 2014. “When Black Hair is Against the Rules”. Available at <<http://www.mobile.nytimes.com/2014/05/01/opinion/when-black-hair-is-against-the-rules.html>>.
- Dogbe, Mary, E. 2003. “Unraveled Yarns: Dress, Consumption and Women’s Bodies in Ghanaian Culture”, *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture* 7:3-4.
- Fanon, Frantz. 1964. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press.
- Sika, Varyanne. 2014. “Fashion for Feminists: How Fashion and Dress Shape Women’s Identities”. Available at <<http://www.osisa.org/buwa/regional/fashion-feminists-how-fashion-and-dress-shape-women-identities/http>>.
- Spry, Tami. 2001. “Performing Auto-ethnography: An Embodied Methodological Praxis”, *Qualitative Inquiry* 7(6): 706–732.

Doing Beauty as African Feminists: A Conversation between Aleya Kassam, Fatma Emam, Valérie Bah and Yewande Omotoso

Four feminists from different parts of the continent converse, electronically, about their own beauty practices: Aleya Kassam (33, Kenya); Fatma Emam (33, Egypt); Valérie Bah (29, Benin and Haiti); Yewande Omotoso (35, Nigeria). Moderated by Simidele Dosekun.

Simidele Dosekun (SD): Thank you all for agreeing to participate in this conversation and for your patience while we figured out how to make it work. The first set of questions I want to pose is about what you do or do not do: what beauty practices do you engage in, from head to toe (e.g. makeup, hairstyling, dieting/exercise, hair removal, manicures, pedicures, tattooing, etc.)? What do you not engage in? Are there any practices you actively resist and, if so, why?

Fatma Emam (FE): Actually I practice almost all of them, but when I feel like indulging myself. Some days I feel okay to have hairy arms or messy eyebrows [and] I get comments from fellow women, family and friends. Once my boyfriend noticed a hair on my chin [and pointed it out] and I replied with “I am ok with my body, however it is.” I think the [beauty] act itself is not problematic but imposing it is the problem. I sometimes do tattooing to assert my Nubian identity; that is part of our culture.

Yewande Omotoso (YO): Fatma, I’m curious whether it’s always been that way or when it ‘began’. I ask because it’s changed for me over the years and I get the sense it’s still in flux. As a feminist I think it’s important to think about the question over a period of time versus just in the time the question is asked. I remember the first time I removed all the hair on my legs (which wasn’t much); I was 12 and I used ‘no-hair.’ I was in Nigeria and curious. Then nothing for a few years. In South Africa I read *Cosmo* magazines and didn’t

understand the technique of air-brushing. The ideal of beauty presented was impossible but I wanted it. But I've never done make-up, possibly 'cause my mother didn't. I actually don't like make-up. I don't like the idea of having to 'make-up' a face when I already have one! I want my lips to be the colour they are. I often find people less attractive with their faces made up.

But the hair removal thing has followed me. I've waxed (I no longer do), I've shaved (I occasionally do now, as in every three or four months). I've never had boyfriends who've insisted on it, not sure I'd be into someone who did. I am indoctrinated though, because I do feel more feminine when my legs are hairless and I think that's a problem – that femininity has been so pegged. I really want to resist these notions of femininity even while being a victim of them.

About three years ago I bought mascara – this I enjoy and use on special, going-out occasions. But I've had the same stick for three years, so...! My friends bought me lip gloss, never actual lipstick, which I can't stand. I love what eye pencil does to my eyes but too lazy to do the labour. No base – feels too much like hiding my actual skin. These days I've started doing pedicures and manicures. I've always loved these but not always had the money for it. It might fade away as a thing I do, but currently I do it for fun, I like it (haven't always). Long answer, not even sure I've covered all facets as it's a big question. I'll stop here for now and listen to others.

Aleya Kassam (AK): Hair removal has always fascinated me. As an Indian girl, hair removal has been an integral part of my beauty routine, and my wardrobe is planned around what time of month it is; the longer it has been since I have waxed, the longer my hemlines become! On the one hand I resent the imposition on my time on having to arrange waxing appointments, and yet I definitely feel more beautiful hairless. It has an almost ritualistic aspect. We had to wait till we were 13 years old before we could wax, and the first time is always done at home with older aunts and sisters there with you to talk to you, make jokes and take your mind away from the pain. Later on, you are left alone, and what parts of your body you want to wax are up to your discretion.

I have had the same waxing lady coming to my home for years, and when I first started doing a bikini wax, I wondered if I was normal down there... after all, who would have told me if I was? And so I think an interesting relationship develops between your waxing lady and yourself, a very intimate one, where you learn about your body and even sex. It is also very interesting, because

the waxing lady is black Kenyan and I am brown Kenyan, and so you learn about this from a different cultural context.

Beauty acts I actively resist: 1) Straightening my hair regularly. I have learned to love my hair and refuse to change it to fit into other people's definitions of what it should look like, which is odd considering I am willing to remove my body hair because of society's perspective on beauty. My also-general beautification philosophy is that I want to look like me... so I don't want to do anything to myself that makes me look drastically different. I also hate spending time on long beautification rituals... I would so much rather be spending that time gobbling up a book. 2) When we were younger, if we spent a lot of time in the sun and got much darker, my grandparents would make a mixture out of chickpea flour that we had to scrub our faces with to lighten them. I actively, aggressively refuse to do that anymore, and resist the assertion that the lighter your skin the more beautiful you are. Interestingly, in my language, Gujarati, to be 'rupari' is 'to be fair,' and the word is interchangeable to mean 'beautiful.'

SD: Fatma, going back, when you say you practice all of them, can you give some examples. Also what kinds of comments do you get from family and friends?

FE: For dieting, I was playing handball and stopped for school requirements so I gained weight. That happened in 1999 and since then I have been on a diet or sort of system of eating to lose weight because I gained a huge amount after stopping sports. I wear size 18. As for the comments, my mum forced us to relax our hair when we were younger, me and my sister. I have stopped now and I am doing this cause I am comfortable with myself and I hate to follow orders.

SD: Val, what about you? What practices do you engage in or resist? I'm interested also in what you all think about Fatma's comment about not engaging in certain practices because she's 'comfortable with herself'? Would you also frame your decision to not do certain beauty things in terms of a sense of comfort or acceptance of yourself?

FE: I want to add something: that one of the comments I get is that I look 'more African' than 'regular Egyptian.' We have a problem with identity politics in Egypt, between being Arab and being African.

Valérie Bah (VB): It's interesting that body hair removal has come up over again. I wonder why that's such a central part of female beauty standards?

Is it linked to infantilising women, or making us more aerodynamic or what? I jest... I have tried most hair removal methods: wax, lotion, razor, threading, electrolysis, laser, nuclear warfare. Everything goes: the legs, the toes, the knuckles, etc. And I have the healthiest moustache you've ever seen, which I hide with all my might. Like you, Aleya, hair removal began as a rite of passage when I was in my early teens, except it was alone in the bathroom with a razor I stole from my dad, so nothing as glamorous as a gathering of aunts.

Now makeup: I have embraced it since my mid-20s, the whole gamut, from lipstick to the ever expanding eyebrow. Yewande, I agree with you about 'makeup face.' Wearing it feels like donning a mask approximating my actual face, not more beautiful or younger, but just more... more. In fact, I wear so much of it, and so consistently, that I worry about the implications of having my funeral makeup done by a mortician. Will they get the colours right? Will they overdo my eyes? I should probably tattoo instructions on my buttocks!

In all seriousness, I feel some guilt when I consider the internalised oppression and consumerism that inform these grooming compulsions. This might seem contradictory, but I don't think it has much to do with self-esteem or being comfortable. It seems that the whole 'natural beauty' thing is just another bait that aims to reel us onto the roller-coaster of comparison and inadequacy. It's so fitting that Maybelline asks 'Maybe she's born with it?'

Finally, it may have been easier and faster to start by naming the beauty practices that I resist, since there aren't many. These include whitening and hair straightening; I guess things that are linked to achieving 'whiteness.' Come to think of it, it's funny that my beauty practices would actively resist white supremacy, but not 'ideal womanhood.'

YO: I like the point about internalised oppression. I feel this relates to the question of comfort. I'm not sure how we consider 'comfort with self' in a world constructed the way ours is. What is the quality of that comfort, really? The 'perfect' version of every aspect of our bodies has been decided for us, down to my cuticles, which the lady at the salon tells me I have too much of and I must apply oil each night. If we really inventory the amount of doing we 'must' do, I just wonder about the notion of comfort. I mean, if I lived alone in the world and didn't have to contend with the billboards and the messaging, I would think everything about me is absolutely fine (no cuticle oil required). But against what's been decided not only as beautiful but in many cases as normal – I think that's another thing, we're discussing beauty

but there is a lot in the practices that has been normalised, making it even more dire! So the comfort is always in opposition to all the noise about what ought to be done.

I know you're not specifically asking about fashion, Simi, but another thing is dress, wearing dresses as a beauty practice for instance, because for many years I did not. This wasn't conscious but I just didn't. My garb did not announce my gender and, needless to say, being skinny and not very buxom, I was mistaken for male occasionally, or at least ambiguous. I was horrified at this: the possibility of not being seen and recognised as female. I wear more dresses now. And I think this is another aspect of the conversation, the onus on women to use beauty and beauty practices to signal their gender.

So while I would say I am comfortable with myself, that comfort often amounts to not much. I still have to deal with a world that measures me in certain ways.

AK: My resistance is to the value assignment of beauty in my life. On this thought, I wrote something previously [entitled F**K BEAUTY] that sums up my resistance:

<https://chanyado.wordpress.com/2015/04/13/fk-beauty/comment-page-1/>

YO: Thanks for the piece, Aleya, the title seems on point! Simi, in terms of Val's point re: 'natural beauty,' I do agree that that's just become another platform for commodification, consumerism (because we haven't talked numbers yet but money is definitely part of this, the monetary value of the beauty industry, the endless things we must do and pay for), and as far as I'm concerned, oppression. Quick thing – apparently Hugh Masekela refuses to take pictures with [black] women who wear weaves, and he'll do it publicly, i.e. if a fan comes up to him and asks for a photo, if her hair is braids or 'natural' then fine, but if she's in a weave he will refuse. Other women have spoken up and accused Masekela of 'shaming,' here rejecting [black] women because they aren't performing the so called 'natural beauty' thing.

So it's as if we're screwed either way! The hegemony is so total and all powerful and all consuming. It's so deep and been going for so long (generations and generations), it's so vast... Part of resistance for me is recognising all this and still trying to bring a level of consciousness/honesty to my choices versus thinking I'm somehow above beyond or through it.

Another thing: natural beauty almost has no meaning. In this age (and especially within the middle class) 'natural' is a commodified word. And it costs you. Natural food. Natural hair. If you check out the natural hair videos

on YouTube, the amount of labour and product involved... I'm not knocking it but even in the natural space there are these almost unattainable ideals, these amazingly impossible photos of incredible afros – it's all fine but it's still within some bigger story about beauty and acceptability. It's a different flavour of juice to the weave and heavy make-up world but still juice.

SD: I want to change tack a little and ask about the effort, or not, that goes into the beauty practices you've described. Fatma, right at the start of the conversation, used the word 'indulging' to describe when she engages in beauty; Val described a lot of effort, Yewande too; Aleya spoke of the time for waxing, and so on. So the question is: Is beauty work? Is it leisure? Does it depend?

AK: For me beauty is definitely work. I certainly do not enjoy the process, but I do enjoy the outcome. So I pick and choose. To be honest, I would so much rather be reading a great book or walking in the forest or even drinking at a bar than sitting in the salon or being waxed. It feels like a chore and sometimes I resent both the time and cost. But I love looking at my shocking pink nails or smooth legs. It feels like a necessary trial. Indulging for me would be going to get a massage or a body scrub or something like that. I certainly make my decisions based on the time it will take and the maintenance requirement – for example I would love to dye my hair, but the thought of maintaining it exhausts me! Maybe my reluctance with certain beauty rituals is less to do with some sort of ideology and more to do with laziness.

FE: I agree with Aleya that beauty needs effort, still the result is celebrated. I enjoy the outcome and enjoy myself.

SD: What about pain? There's the saying 'beauty is pain.' For me, with things like waxing, apart from thinking about the cost, inconvenience, my political ambivalence about it, slight embarrassment about lying on a table in front of a virtual stranger and exposing myself... is the pain.

VB: Oh, how it hurts. It's gendered labour and pain. Worst of all, I don't know how to reconcile it with my politics, as if there's a loop in my head saying, 'you're not worthy unless you do this.' Occasionally, I consider the scenario wherein I am called on some adventure or mission to a remote, fantastical location. I would probably turn it down because, sorry friends, I need to live within a certain radius of a trustworthy salon. What I'm saying is that this beauty ritual thing will probably keep me from transcending, or whatever.

But on the other hand, I wonder if some of the less painful aspects of beauty rituals can be construed as ‘self-care,’ or if that’s a ruse... What do you all think?

Perhaps it’s misguided to try to establish what we should or shouldn’t do with our bodies. That seems like a fool’s errand. Beauty standards are already overdetermined by so many factors. Also, I refuse to go on quests like that of feminist writer, Naomi Wolf, who said that popular images of beauty harm women. Okay, I get it. But I think she meant white American pop culture, which, no... Frankly, I’m not having it. It seems like a way of reasserting the supremacy of those things. I don’t want to centre my pain or beauty within racism, patriarchy, or whatever system of oppression. Don’t deny my interior life.

AK: I think beauty rituals can certainly have an element of self-care. I think for me it comes down to whether I feel like I HAVE to do something, or whether I CHOOSE to do it. So having to have perfect nails all the time for me is exhausting and I would resent the pressure, but picking a weekend to get my nails done with my sister can be lovely – the process in this case is as important to me as the outcome – the spending of time together treating ourselves, and then it sure perks me up to look down and see my neon pink nails. I agree with Val about saying it is misguided to say what we should or shouldn’t do with our bodies... it is precisely when someone says I ‘should’ do something that I feel the kneejerk reaction to shove my middle finger up at them.

SD: Aleya, your comment raises the important point that beauty is not only what we do alone, say in a bathroom at home, but also in community and as a form of relating with other women, family and friends. I must say that in my personal experience I don’t really enjoy getting ‘done up’ with other women, though, mostly because it often translates for me into pressure to do more than I would want to on my own.

The last theme I wanted to touch on is related to this: it’s about who we pay to do beauty work and what kinds of relationships, or not, that we have or develop with such people. Whether hairdressers or manicurists or waxing providers, are there people you go back to regularly? Do you get to know them? Or are you precisely interested in not getting familiar? Is there some kind of intimacy or awkwardness involved in the process? (There is for me, especially with waxing!)

VB: Would you all agree with me that a class and race factor determines who does beauty work and how that labour is remunerated? In Montreal, where I am currently based, I go to this Latin American aesthetician who talks openly about how backbreaking her work is and how she wouldn't want it for her daughters. Lo and behold, one day I walk into her parlour and there's a 15-year old girl from the Dominican Republic who has been placed there on a full-time basis by her school administration for an 'internship' because they don't believe she can finish high school. Now, the context behind this is that some Canadian provinces encourage a two-tier education system where some are directed to university studies, i.e. professional fields, while others, mostly people of colour or from working class backgrounds, are told that they should opt for the 'trades' – air conditioning repair, plumbing, and all that. Is it that the trades are less dignified? No, but the skills sure aren't valued in the same way. So, the day the 15-year-old showed up, we were livid. The aesthetician actually got the girl's mother on the phone and said, "don't let them do this."

YO: Definitely there is a class issue involved, I agree, Val. It would be interesting for me if a salon had a special situation where the workers could get massages and manicures etc., this might be the case, I'm not sure. In terms of relationships [with beauty providers], I have not been doing this consistently enough in my life to have made any. Some time back in Cape Town I was consistently (in my case that is every few months, seldom monthly) waxing my legs and I got to know the lady doing it. I learnt about her son and their relationship and so on. I also shared about my own situations. I've never had a bikini wax and not really able to get past the level of intimacy required for it. Not to mention the pain!!!!!!! I don't mind engaging if they are willing and open. The conversation is seldom 'deep' though, and it is framed by the setting and the task at hand.

SD: I am going to suggest we end the conversation here. One thing that struck me on reading it over as a whole text is that a shared strand in the resistance to beauty norms that we talked about concerns race: resisting practices like hair straightening and skin lightening that are often seen (rightly or wrongly?) as oriented or consenting to 'white' beauty standards; so resisting precisely as *black, brown and Nubian African women?*

Thank you all again for participating!

Profile: ‘Keep Your Eyes off My Thighs’: A Feminist Analysis of Uganda’s ‘Miniskirt Law’

Sylvia Tamale

Introduction

On February 6, 2014, Uganda’s President Yoweri Museveni signed the Anti-Pornography Act (APA) into law. This single stroke of the presidential pen signalled a redeployment of women’s bodies as a battlefield for cultural-moral struggles, and an eruption of new frontiers in sexual political tensions in the country. Plans to draft the law date back to 2005, when the Minister of Ethics and Integrity at the time, Nsaba Buturo, set off alarm bells by announcing that the “vice of miniskirts” had taken hold of society to the extent of distracting mentally-weak male drivers on Ugandan roads!¹

State moral panics over women’s dress, thickly layered with cultural and spiritual references, are by no means new in postcolonial Africa. They usually peak during times of socio-economic crises (Decker, 2014; Jones and Jones, 1999). Reports are rife in cities across Africa of marauding vigilante groups of self-proclaimed ‘moral police’ stripping women naked in public spaces.² Several postcolonial dictatorships on the continent passed codes that censored women’s sartorial choices: Uganda’s Idi Amin legislated against women wearing shorts, hot pants, slacks, low-necked garments or miniskirts (defined as any dress with a hemline that rose “5.08 centimetres above the upper edge of the patella”);³ in Kamuzu Banda’s Malawi, the Decency in Dress Act of 1973 also imposed a dress code forbidding women from wearing miniskirts and trousers. Most of these laws were uprooted by the ‘winds of change’ that swept across the continent in the 1990s and shone a constitutional spotlight on women’s rights. In 2008, however, the Nigerian government unsuccessfully attempted to introduce a similar law, which was thwarted by feminist groups (Bakare-Yusuf, 2009).

Feminist scholarship has shown that constructions of nationhood and national identity involve specific notions of womanhood, and implicate women's bodies (Moghadam, 1994; Yuval-Davis, 1997). In Uganda, through dress, and ostensibly in the national interest, women are symbolised as the nation's honour, decency and respectability. Such imposed images of womanhood have triumphed in many postcolonial projects aimed at enhancing national identity, while shifting attention away from undemocratic governance (Decker, 2014). Yet, within the rich diversity of African traditions, public semi-nakedness was not necessarily linked to immorality. Indeed, even today, in many parts of rural Africa, women go about their daily routines with unclothed torsos, and without anyone eroticising their bodies.

The idea of objectifying women as sexual bodies and 'seeing' their nakedness as immoral was mostly introduced to Africa through the Abrahamic religions of Christianity and Islam (Bakare-Yusuf, 2009; Tamale, 2014). Morally neutral female nakedness was burdened with 'shameful sexuality' in a way that male bodies were not; a moral link between the woman's body, purity and chastity was constructed. Hence, the logic that women's 'seductive bodies' had to be covered in public to protect men from 'impure thoughts' and the corruption of their morals (Eilberg-Schwartz and Doniger, 1995). Today, most women practice self-regulation in conforming to the prescribed bodily script, but many also transgress against it (Bordo, 1989).

Uganda's 1995 Constitution declared the full advancement, protection and empowerment of women, and in the decades that followed, women enshrined a legacy of gender activism. Such developments provoked a socio-cultural backlash, however. The backlash has manifested as a resurgence of various forms of fundamentalisms, including cultural and religious, and has often been expressed through political agendas. Whenever women assert their collective power and their identity as autonomous social subjects, calls for moral regeneration and the protection of 'traditional cultural values' take centre stage; women have to be reined back into the sphere of male dominance and control. It is against this backdrop that the APA was added to Uganda's legislative agenda.

On the Vexed Term, 'pornography'

The link between religious fundamentalism and the APA is clearly seen in the personalities of its primary architects, Nsaba Butoro and Simon Lokodo, the two successive ministers who held the cabinet portfolio of Ethics and

Integrity during the drafting and passing of the Bill. While Butoro is a self-proclaimed born-again Christian, Lokodo, his 2009 successor, is a Catholic priest. The main arguments that these men made in support of the Bill were that pornography offends public morality and fuels sexual violence against women and girls.⁴

Despite the claim that the bill was intended to protect women, the chauvinist and misogynistic impulses that lay behind it were not difficult to unravel. Two of the glaring deficiencies of the Bill are its vague definition of the term pornography, and its failure to delineate the parameters of this offence. The original bill defined pornography thus:

...any *cultural practice*, radio or television programme, writing, publication, advertisement, broadcast, upload on internet, display, entertainment, music, dance, picture, audio or video recording, show, exhibition or any combination of the preceding that depicts

- (a) A person engaged in explicit sexual activities or conduct;
- (b) *Sexual parts of a person such as breasts, thighs, buttocks or genitalia*;
- (c) Erotic behaviour intended to cause sexual excitement; or
- (d) Any indecent act or behaviour tending to corrupt morals

[Emphasis added]

During the second reading of the Bill in parliament, MPs flagged the absurdity of including “cultural practice” in the definition of pornography, citing traditions such as dances and circumcision ceremonies that might fall into the category, and citing the example of the Karimojong people who never cover their breasts. The chair of the Committee on Legal and Parliamentary Affairs got his proverbial knickers in a twist defending the paradoxical tensions between culture and pornography, and the committee was forced to omit “cultural practices” from consideration. The new definition of pornography which was eventually passed in the APA is:

...any representation through publication, exhibition, cinematography, indecent show, information technology or by whatever means, of a person engaged in real or stimulated explicit sexual activities or any representation of the sexual parts of a person *for primarily sexual excitement*. [emphasis added]

The committee chair explained that the key to interpreting what amounts to pornography lay in the intention of the offender, i.e., if the intent was “primarily to arouse sexual excitement.”⁵ Several MPs challenged him: “I would like to find out from the chairman... how they would measure sexual

excitement, for example, when a lady is in a miniskirt and she is not intending to arouse the interest of anybody. I think it is very difficult to measure sexual excitement according to the behaviour or activities of someone.”⁶

One can easily see the danger of such a subjective standard for determining pornography, in a context where women’s bodies have been eroticised and constructed as inherently provocative objects. If a society has already reduced a woman to eroticised body parts, isn’t her very being immutably doomed by this new law? A law that allows an prejudiced standard of provocation to be imposed on the subject being gazed upon, and further permits the enforcing authority to presume to know this subject’s intent, is extremely problematic. It violates the basic constitutional rights of women.

Indeed, such ambiguity and vagueness have resulted in the APA being dubbed the ‘Miniskirt Law,’ despite the fact that the term ‘miniskirt’ is not mentioned anywhere in the text. This misreading and *gendering* of the law is the popular interpretation of its prohibition of “any representation of the sexual parts of a person for primarily sexual excitement.”⁷ Of course, the reference to “*breasts, thighs, buttocks or genitalia*” in the original draft did not help with the lingering association of the law with women, not men. The misreading was also fuelled by Father Lokodo’s remarks on what his ministry (pun intended) planned to do: “Anything related to indecent dressing, exposing certain parts of the anatomy of a person, I call it pornographic and therefore condemn it... when you go indecently on the streets of Kampala you’ll become... a cinema.”⁸ Later he added: “If you are dressed in something that irritates the mind and excites other people, especially of the opposite sex, you are dressed in wrong attire [so] please hurry up and change.”⁹

In sum, the vague definition of pornography supplied by the APA lacks the certainty required of a criminal offence under the Ugandan Constitution. What, for example, amounts to ‘indecent’? Failure to provide an explicit definition of the elusive term ‘pornography,’ opens it up to the unsatisfactory ‘I know it when I see it’ standard.¹⁰

The Pornography ‘Axe’ Falls

As soon as the APA was signed into law, several vigilante groups made up largely of young men started publicly undressing women around the country who they perceived to be contravening the law.¹¹ Police officers also started ordering women on the streets to return home and ‘dress decently.’ There was

even a case in which a magistrate summarily sentenced two women in her courtroom to a three-hour confinement for wearing miniskirts.¹² Ironically, the law that was passed ostensibly to protect women from violence was fuelling it. It emboldened Ugandans to abuse women's rights. The already appropriated feminine body was turned into a site for further socio-political contestation.

Infuriated women's rights activists, most clad in miniskirts, protested against such actions, their indignation expressed in placards with messages such as: "Don't sexualise *my* body," "Give us maternal health care; don't undress us on the street!", "Keep your eyes off my thighs and fix the economy", "Thou shall not touch my mini-skirt", "My body, my closet, my money, my rules."

Enforcement of the APA spiralled into further abuses, with several cases of Internet sex tape exposures of female celebrities. In late 2014, the jilted lover of singer Desire Luzinda was allegedly responsible for uploading nude photographs of her and a sex tape. The material went viral on social media platforms. Instead of invoking the APA to protect these sexual violations against Luzinda, Father Lokodo ordered the police to arrest her for having committed the offence of pornography.¹³ Although the arrest was never effected, the case vividly demonstrated how the dragnet provisions under the APA could lead to grave injustice: Luzinda was *the victim* of a violent cybercrime whose rights to privacy and freedom of expression had been violated through a breach of trust, and yet was being treated as the criminal. A similar fate befell news anchor Sanyu Mweruka, who was also subjected to state interrogation and threats of prosecution under the APA.¹⁴ The political agenda behind these cases was to represent the female body as erotic and degenerate, an instrument threatening to pollute social morality, hence necessitating social control. Such actions fuelled moral panics and social insecurities, effectively distracting the disgruntled public from the inefficiencies in the state's systems of governance.

The double standards in enforcing the APA are on public display every day. Even as women were hounded by the law, several tabloid newspapers like *Red Pepper* and its sister publications, *Hello Uganda*, *Kamunye* and *Entatsi*, made (and continue to make) millions from publishing pictures of semi-naked women for the prurient consumption of their male readership. The silence of Father Lokodo on the tabloids points to a patriarchal *modus operandi* that allows the heterosexist capitalist state to commodify and pornify women's bodies while negating their agency to make sartorial choices.

What APA Portends for the Future of Women's Rights

The upsurge of sexual harassment and a *de facto* dress code on Ugandan women in the wake of the APA have raised several gender and human rights concerns (Oloka-Onyango, 2014). Linking the APA to a miniskirt ban and to the targeting of women was inevitable, given the gendered subtexts that had been constructed as far back as the Bill's initial formulation in 2005. The 'mob undressing' and sex tape sagas that followed the passing of the Bill must be viewed within the wider context of violence against women. Unfortunately, for the majority of Ugandan women, violence is not an isolated act but a fact of life. The 2006 Uganda Demographic and Health Survey (UDHS) revealed that up to 60 percent of women in the country aged 15 and above had experienced gender-based violence (UBOS, 2007).

The objectifying language contained in the definition of the term 'pornography' in the APA, particularly the phrase, "representation of the sexual parts... for primarily sexual excitement" clearly targets women's sexualised bodies. Men's bodies do not fit the sexualised script, and that is why women invariably became the target of mob undressing.

The threat of the APA continues to hang like a Damocles sword over the heads of Ugandan women. A likely future target of its discourse will be sex workers, who already face untold harassment, including being classified as "idle and disorderly" persons (Tamale, 2009).¹⁵ This is why sex work organisations have joined other human rights defenders to challenge the legality of the APA in the Constitutional Court.¹⁶ The law is a direct violation of Ugandan women's rights to bodily integrity, privacy, equality and non-discrimination. But the petition also challenges the economic inequality and control perpetuated by the APA. When women's bodies move from the 'private' sphere of the home to the 'public' arena of the market, they are inscribed with a sexual/morality marker to be regulated and controlled by laws such as the APA.

Endnotes

- 1 See "Uganda Seeking Mini-Skirt Ban," <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7621823.stm> [last accessed December 5, 2015].
- 2 E.g., see Sara Malm, "Woman is Stripped and Beaten by Group of Men Because She Was 'Tempting Them' by Wearing a Miniskirt in Kenya," *Mail Online*, November 17, 2014, available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2837884/Kenyans-march-against-attacks-women-mini-skirts.html> ; Alexandra Stonehouse,

“Policing Sexuality in Africa: The Namibian Mini-Skirt Ban,” *Sister Namibia*, 24 July 2014, available at <http://sisternamibia.com/2014/07/24/short-story/> [last accessed 21 December 2015].

- 3 See Section 1(ee) of the now repealed Penal Code Act (Amendment) Decrees of 1972-1974.
- 4 See Official Hansard, 19 December 2013.
- 5 See Hon. Stephen Tashobya in Official Hansard, 19 December 2013.
- 6 See Hon. Gilbert Olanya in Official Hansard, 19 December 2013.
- 7 See for example, Jimmy Senteza, “Language in the Law Against Pornography is Vague,” *New Vision*, 4 March 2014.
- 8 See “Ethics Minister Proposes Law to Ban Miniskirts,” available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jCuxFJipQUk> [last accessed 16 August 2014].
- 9 See Francis Kagol and Priscilla Alinda, “Women Face 10 Years Over Dressing,” *New Vision*, 19 February 2014 at p.7.
- 10 This famous declaration was made by the US Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart in the case *Jacobellis v. Ohio* 387 US 184 (1964) after admitting failure to define the term pornography.
- 11 See Yazid Yolisigira, “Mob Undresses 10 People Over Indecent Exposure,” *Daily Monitor*, 26 February 2014 at p. 26; Tina Musuya, “Activist Vows to Wrestle Anti-Porn Law,” *Daily Monitor*, 28 February 2014 at p.22.
- 12 See Malik Fahad Jingo, “Women Get Three-Hour Jail Term for Wearing Miniskirts” *Daily Monitor*, 7 March 2014.
- 13 See Ronald Musoke, “What the Desire Luzinda Nude Photos Say About Us,” *The Independent*, 14–20 November 2014 at p.14–17.
- 14 See Sylvia Tamale, “Sex Tapes are Part of Pervasive Levels of Violence Against Women,” *Daily Monitor*, 10 February 2015.
- 15 Because it is next to impossible to successfully prosecute sex workers under the prostitution laws of the land, most are charged with the broad and well-worn crime of being “idle and disorderly” under section 167 of the Penal Code Act.
- 16 Decision on the case, *Center for Domestic Violence Prevention & 8 Others v. Attorney General* [Const. Petition No. 13 of 2014] was still pending at the time of publication of this article.

References

- Bakare-Yusuf, Bibi. 2009. “Nudity and Morality: Legislating Women’s Bodies and Dress in Nigeria”, *East African Journal of Peace and Human Rights* 15(1): 53-68.
- Bordo, Susan. 1989. “The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity”, in Jaggar, A. and Bordo, S. eds. *Gender, Body, Knowledge*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Decker, Alicia. 2014. *In Idi Amin’s Shadow: Women, Gender and Militarism in Uganda*. Athens: Ohio University Press.

- Foucault, Michel. 1979. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. (Trans. Allan Sharidan). New York: Vintage.
- Eilberg-Schwartz, Howard and Doniger, Wendy. eds. 1995. *Off with Her Head! The Denial of Women's Identity in Myth, Religion, and Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Jones, Marsha and Jones, Emma. 1999. *Mass Media*. London: Macmillan Press.
- Moghadam, Valentine. ed. 1994. *Gender and National Identity: Women and Politics in Muslim Societies*. London: Zed Books.
- Oloka-Onyango, J. 2014. "Understanding the Genesis and Impact of Recent Legislation in Uganda", *Pambazuka News*, Issue 676, available at: <http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/91567>.
- Tamale, Sylvia. 2014. "Exploring the Contours of African Sexualities: Religion, Law and Power", *African Human Rights Law Journal* 14(1): 150–177.
- UBOS. 2007. *Uganda Demographic and Health Survey 2006*. Kampala: Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS).
- Yuval-Davis, Nira. 1997. *Gender and Nation*. London: Sage Publications.

Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul. By Tanisha C. Ford. Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2015

Kabura Nganga

Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul spans four continents, eighteen countries and the socio-historical planes of black liberation struggles in the black diaspora, and in Africa to a lesser extent, to explore the ways in which black women's resistance has been visible and concentrated not only in actions within political movements but also in the realm of style and fashion. Focused especially on the 1960s and 70s, Tanisha Ford's concern is with the deliberate and resistant 'African-inspired' fashions that she calls "soul-style": from Angela Davis' iconic afro, to Nina Simone's attitude, described as "straightforward, relaxed and African" (29), to the West African wax prints, caftans and dashikis that became popular with women in organisations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Black Panther Movement London, as well as among university students on American campuses.

By studying soul-style, Ford illustrates the feminist assertion that the personal is political, as well as how what she calls an "internal revolution" was an important part of black women's resistance to the systemic and violent racism that they faced. She credits activist-professor Angela Davis with popularising the afro among black women, and argues that her arrest served as a catalyst for their re-politicisation and re-energisation. For instance, Ford documents how young black women on college campuses began to subscribe to a 'Black is Beautiful' consciousness by starting to make deliberate decisions about their own style, such as appearing with their "natural hair, head wraps, large hoop earrings, and denim skirts" (96). Looking at the Black Panther Movement in London, she shows how soul-style served women in the movement to not only resist white standards of beauty and decorum; with elements like "little badges saying black power, or little pendants with black

fists on them” (143), the style also made the women *feel* more militant, and so further sustain their resistance.

According to Ford, the sexualisation of police brutality against women in black movements also factored into their style choices. Crucially, she notes, too, that the pro-black movements and spaces within which the women were located were characterised by patriarchal politics and notions of respectable femininity. Her consideration of the activist Olive Morris, in London, as a figure who queered soul-style is therefore very important – but is, unfortunately, one of only few times that, queerness is considered in *Liberated Threads*. Ford argues that with her gender non-conforming looks, Morris took soul-style “outside of the realms of respectable black womanhood” (146) and beyond the “radical feminine chic” (146), instead fashioning it into something “unique, something disturbing” (146).

Turning to Africa, the book explores soul-style as it manifests in Johannesburg through the early career of Miriam Makeba, whose signature looks included “off-the-shoulder sheath dresses” (20) below a full, black Afro, a fashion which linked Makeba to the struggle for black liberation long before she spoke on it. According to Ford, Makeba appealed to her growing international audiences as a kind of voice and image of Africa. For those in the black diaspora, she symbolised a return to an ‘Africanism’ lost to time and racial oppression, and embodied “a soul style ... considered more African in form, origin, and inspiration.” Makeba and her band exported this style on their very backs. For example, Ford discusses how sharply dressed men in Makeba’s band, who would be expected to meet the social norms of jazz clubs in their local South African townships and to maintain an air of respectability, became a sort of spectacle to behold in America, valued aesthetically and politically for more than their sound but also for their visible, stylistic link to Africa.

Overall, ‘Africa’ is handled in an unsatisfactory manner in the book. It is often invoked as a homogenous place, and the essentialised and romanticised imaginations of it that feed into African-American soul-style, such as ideas of Africa as “motherland” (97), are not deconstructed enough. In her exploration of the early days of the Black Consciousness Movement and the South African Students’ Organisation (SASO), Ford assumes but does not convincingly show that what she has termed soul-style translates into, and is shaped by, the same sentiments as ‘the Afro look’ in the South African context. Similarly, Steve

Biko is also arguably misread to fit into the notion of 'soul'. Important parts of the global black struggle intricately linked to imperialism, capitalism and neo colonialism are also not taken into account.

Nonetheless, *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and The Global Politics of Soul* does very important work: shining light on the personal and gendered politics often written out of grand, patriarchal narratives of history, and on the gendered complexities of past and, in fact, ongoing struggles for black liberation.

Regarding Muslims: From Slavery to Postapartheid.
By Gabea Baderoon. Johannesburg: Wits University
Press, 2014.

Sa'diyya Shaikh

Regarding Muslims: From Slavery to Postapartheid is a pioneering study that examines historical and contemporary representations of Islam and Muslims in South Africa. With intellectual sophistication and creativity, Gabea Baderoon examines varying forms of visual, culinary, artistic and popular representations in ways that speak back to official historical and colonial records. She reads against the grain of dominant narratives and is keenly attentive to “genres that hover between fiction and fact, and generate the kind of knowledge that fills the spaces between the more authoritative sources” (23). Yet hers is neither a simply reactive nor redemptive response to colonial hegemonies. Baderoon succeeds in presenting intricate and complex analyses of her subject matter, and the reading practices that she adroitly employs are both methodologically and analytically instructive to feminist postcolonial scholars interested in re-imagining archives and authoritative canons.

Throughout the book, Baderoon illuminates the seamless interweaving of forms of public and intimate violence defining colonial slave history, and their lingering legacies in South Africa. Her work also retrieves dissident memories, histories and counter-narratives of Islam and Muslims in the South African archive from the 17th century until the contemporary period. She avoids a clichéd approach to culture, religion and politics, approaching these fraught areas obliquely, through the lens of etymology, cuisine, sexuality and gender, gangsterism, and contemporary literature. This refreshing approach manages to avoid the traps that await any scholar of society and politics, namely, cultural essentialism on one hand, and political correctness on the other. It seeks to place on the agenda the diversity of identities within Islam as a global faith even as it celebrates the local, contextual and nuanced nature of its emergence as a minority yet vocal religion in contemporary South Africa. Most

compelling for a scholar of religion is that the book vividly demonstrates that religious identities are never isolated nor independent but deeply responsive to complex contextual influences.

Given the political freight of racial terms and identities in the South African context, Baderoon's careful unpacking of language is a most helpful beginning. Rigorous and relentless in her interrogation of contentious terms such as 'Indian,' 'Coloured,' 'African' and 'Malay,' she correctly calls attention to their constructed nature and to how, historically, religion came to be integrally woven into racial classifications, for example in cases in which a person's racial designation was changed from White or Coloured to Malay when s/he converted to Islam. Baderoon observes that the term 'Cape Malay' has a contested set of connotations. In reality, enslaved people were brought to the Cape from countries as diverse as Mozambique, Madagascar, India and Ceylon, and spoke a variety of languages. Thus 'Malay' is not an accurate reflection of country of origin but could just as well mean Muslim. Baderoon carefully distinguishes this term as a historical appellation for Muslims in the Cape from its contemporary meaning of a sub-category of the apartheid Coloured racial group. This is an important distinction, and it positions Baderoon as a non-racialist thinker who seeks to come to terms with religio-cultural diversity in the context of a society saturated with racism.

Another of the central contributions of the book is to lucidly bring into focus the submerged and neglected history of enslaved Muslims that undergirds the Cape, and indeed the South African, legacy. Playing with the ideas of sight and visibility, Baderoon develops the idea of the oblique gaze, a gaze that looks "at an angle" or at a slant, a "questing" gaze that denotes complexity and refuses to acquiesce to the dominant culture (4-5, 40). As such, Baderoon's book might be described as a sustained oblique gaze – at once agile and nuanced, attentive to complexity and intricacy, refusing simplistic narratives of Islam and Muslims. Baderoon notes that the study of Cape slavery is characterised by little discussion outside the academy. In spite of the important revisionist research done by historians recently, she observes that slavery is rendered exceptional, atypical and unrepresentative of broader South African history. With apposite references to and analyses of the official and popular archives that include paintings, cookbooks, travel writing, folktales, media, and fiction, Baderoon leads her reader to the shocking awareness of the insidious forms of aesthetic representation that

sanitise and minimise a violent South African slave history – a history that is fundamental and formative in relation to the colonial presence and the apartheid state. She examines the ways in which aesthetic traditions represent slaves as picturesque, exotic, decorative and placid, lingering at the margins of public visibility. Such depictions do powerful ideological labour, Baderoon tell us: they banish from our view the violence and savagery implicit to a slave economy, rendering it mild and benign while suppressing all evidence of slave resistance. Moreover, she notes that slaves were presented as “figures of exoticism or pathos, abstracted from history and... [functioning] solely to add depth and distinctiveness to white subjectivity” (21). She neatly captures these modes of representation via the concept of “ambiguous visibility,” wherein Muslims and Islam are “disproportionately visible yet strangely overlooked,” a thematic that she explores throughout the book in a variety of different times and spaces of the South African imaginary.

The chapter on slavery and sexual violence is one of the most powerful and poignant chapters in this extraordinary book. Critically probing the harrowing nexus of race, colonialism and sexual violence, Baderoon notes that: “For almost two hundred years, the system of slavery ensured that systematic sexual violence was built into the colonies that would eventually form South Africa” (83). Baderoon’s mastery of a feminist intersectional approach reveals the mutually constitutive and interlocking relations of power between race, gender, sexuality, religion and colonialism. Intrinsic to enslavement were the unimpeded possibilities for rape and sexual violence against female slaves by male slave owners. Having thus revealed that systematic sexual violence was inherent in the making of race and in the foundations of colonial presence in South Africa, Baderoon then turns to depictions of women and race in contemporary South African art and literature. Here she traces the artistic forms of “reclaiming alternative modes of visibility for black subjectivity” which resist historical erasure by resolutely engaging with sexual violence. Yet these nuanced forms of contemporary representation also portray black women’s “resilience, wholeness and sexual pleasure,” and “stake a powerful new claim on public space by black women” (106).

Baderoon also traces the “brittle intimacy” encountered in colonial kitchens where servitude and invisibility were closely connected to food and spices. She offers a feminist reading *par excellence* that reveals the inextricable and fluid relationships between private domestic realms and public political forces. We learn how food created in slave kitchens became appropriated as national

dishes, claimed by the dominant Afrikaner culture of the day. Foregrounding the fundamental contributions of the Malay slaves to what eventually came to be known as South African cuisine, Baderoon also incisively interrupts dominant tropes of exoticism on the subject of cuisine. Instead she retrieves counter-narratives of survival and preservation reflected in cookbooks authored by Muslim women from the 1960s onwards. Here Baderoon draws on Betty Govinden's crucial insight that "cuisine was considered a way of preserving cultural identity in a strange land" (59).

The book includes a chapter on the sea as a metaphor for "experiences that transcend conventional categories" (67), and examines memoirs and stories of pilgrimage and sacred geography. The notion of the sea as metaphor is evocative given the associations with ships bringing slaves and indentured labours to South Africa as well as sacred journeys to Mecca by enslaved Muslims. Yet this chapter integrates with less ease into the book than the others, possibly requiring deeper analytical development and conceptual integration.

On the one hand, it might be argued that that Baderoon is perhaps attempting to do too much in her ambitious and provocative work: she traverses the large historical sweep of four centuries, discussing many different aspects of Muslim history and identity. On the other hand, while the book certainly engages multiple and diverse types of representation over an extensive historical period, it is characterised by a clear and sustained analytical and theoretical coherence. Precisely because Baderoon employs a rigorous intersectional approach, her work presents a finely-honed and strikingly perceptive lens on complex social-political processes and identities. *Regarding Muslims: From Slavery to Postapartheid* is an innovative, imaginative, erudite and courageous piece of scholarship. It makes a fresh and vibrant contribution to feminist debates, adding nuanced insights to questions of race, slavery, gender, sexuality, religion and representation drawn from the South African context. Instructive for audiences in a variety of fields, including gender, social history, anthropology, politics, literature, and art, it also makes a powerful contribution to contemporary academic debates and a postcolonial South African and Indian Ocean archive. And, in addition to providing us with a ground-breaking work of enormous intellectual creativity, *Regarding Muslims* is also a beautifully crafted and deliciously pleasurable book to read.

The Remaking of Social Contracts: Feminists in a Fierce New World. Edited by Gita Sen and Marina Durano for DAWN. London: Zed Books, 2014

Sehin Teferra

DAWN – Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era – has produced a fine-grained, well-articulated vision in its latest offering, *The Remaking of Social Contracts: Feminists in a Fierce New World*. The book invites us to imagine what the authors characterise as a “fierce new world,” which is obviously a counterpoint or perhaps complement to the “brave new world” envisioned by the World Social Movements.

The authors, an impressive set of inter-generational activists and academicians from across the global South, offer a convincing critique of the ways in which the “social contract” of the world has been compromised, from environmental degradation to the devastating impact of capitalist greed, to conflict and violence. The feminist lens through which DAWN examines the state of affairs unearths the complicated interplay between trade, globalisation, finance, climate change and militarisation. The book explores the gendered facets of these phenomena, for instance pulling together the longstanding assertions of feminist economists that economic systems all over the world depend on women’s unpaid labour. An example of one of the more obscure political economy arrangements examined from a gender perspective is that of free trade. Whereas most free trade agreements are considered harmful to poor women and men, Lise Cokanasiga’s short contribution on trade in the Pacific elucidates that the loss of land considered sacred by Pacific Islanders not only marginalises women economically but also detaches them from their traditional status, roots and authority.

The book is also strong in its dissection of climate change from a feminist perspective, highlighting the absence of women’s groups in the various citizens’ organisations demanding climate justice. Land grabs are discussed as a gendered phenomenon affecting women’s access to agricultural lands

and biodiversity, while ‘investments’ by international companies often create opportunities for feminised jobs. I particularly appreciated the examination of current fads and trends ostensibly designed to counteract the environmental disasters characterising our world. Here, contributions ranged from an exploration of the challenges of secularisation in increasingly conservative religious contexts – with the associated backlashes against gender equality – to a discussion of climate finance mechanisms such as the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation mechanism (REDD), which may prove to be business as usual where gender equality is concerned.

Included in the narrative of *The Remaking of Social Contracts* is a series of texts that are highly critical of the neoliberal state, which the authors argue stretches women’s unpaid care to breaking point when common resources such as land for food, as well as water, are commercialised. The book is also critical of state policies that offer token prescriptions of the ‘add women and stir’ variety.

Furthermore, with what it terms gender power as an analytical tool, the book questions the “institutionalised gender approach” involving watered-down gender equity work by governments and non-governmental organisations that usually avoids difficult political questions. It shows that, in addition to relationships between women and men, the gender regime is shaped by economic, political, ecological systems and structures. The human rights approach to development, often offered as the antidote to the neoliberal state, is likewise problematised for its reliance on state machinery, which does not always leave room for feminist activism. The book also expresses concern over the authoritarian nature of the developmental state. I could relate personally to many of the arguments presented in this regard: in Ethiopia, our nascent feminism faces most of the constraints outlined in the chapter, “The State of States” by Claire Slatter, chair of the DAWN Board, including the political conditionality of ‘good governance’ as well as the tension between democracy and authoritarianism. DAWN’s position is clear: the organisation advocates feminist enquiry as a key analytical tool for the transnational activism of feminists of the global South, and questions if the United Nations is the appropriate locus for this multilateral engagement. However, global conferences such as the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo (1994) and landmark documents such as the Beijing Platform for Action,

which both featured strong voices from the global South, are given due credit. A key concern of both the ICPD and Beijing platform, was, of course, reproductive rights, and the abortion question is highlighted in the book beyond the United States where it is almost always under debate. Lastly, the rise in homophobia in Africa, particularly in Uganda following the passing of the controversial anti-homosexuality legislation in 2012, is treated to an impressive Foucauldian analysis that critiques Western liberal human rights and humanitarian discourses which purport to save us Africans from ourselves. One of the gems offered by *The Remaking of Social Contracts* is the reframing of women as more than vulnerable or victimised to instead recognise them as agents, including in the very social contracts that the book considers. An example is that women may willingly participate in fundamentalist religious organisations. At the same time, the book also features women engaged in efforts to recreate a better world, including in a wonderful account from Gujarat in which Muslim and Hindu women were able to overcome their mutual distrust to work together for peace following riots in March 2002. Women's groups working for relief and rehabilitation in both communities faced the threat of their work being completely. Eventually, using religious festivals and symbols adapted from both communities, the women's groups were able to come together *as women* whose livelihoods are the first to be threatened in riots. In one instance, the women lay down on the road in protest when a riot started between Muslims and Hindus; by the time the police arrive, the problem had been solved.

There were a few instances in the book where I was left hungry for a deeper feminist analysis, for example in the chapter discussing the new "colonisation" of African countries by China. However, most of the contributions offer a rich set of feminist viewpoints which will greatly enhance understandings of the processes shaping our world. DAWN has done it again: it has produced a definitive text that creates necessary discomfort, that poses as many questions as it answers, but resolutely positions women and the perennial quest for equality as key for the fierce new world towards which readers are invited to journey.

Tribute: Hajiya Bilkisu Yusuf and Her ‘Jihad’ of the Heart (December 1952–September 2015)

Maryam Uwais MFR

Born December 2, 1952 in Kano, Hajiya Bilkisu Yusuf passed away on the 24th of September 2015, in the process of performing the Holy Pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia. In the years between, she accomplished so much that it would be foolhardy to attempt to capture even the essence of her many achievements in one short tribute. Hajiya Bilkisu graduated in 1975 with a BSc degree in Political Science from the Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, Nigeria, and, after an MA in political science from the University of Wisconsin in the United States, went on to become a journalist *par excellence*. She obtained an advanced diploma in journalism and international relations at the Moscow Institute for Journalism and International Relations, and became the first female editor of a daily newspaper and weekly magazine in Northern Nigeria.

A devout Muslim, a loving mother of two children, an accomplished woman and role model, Hajiya Bilkisu was known for so much more than journalism. Her abiding passion for social justice and public service was manifest in the very many vocations that she successfully facilitated and engaged in over the years. She founded the Girl Child Concern (GCC), advocating for girl-child education to curb the many deprivations that diminish girls’ opportunities and potential, particularly in Northern Nigeria. GCC was a pioneer and shining example of what could be done for adolescent girls: from offering scholarships to indigent girls to organising summer camps, mentoring, skill acquisition and networking activities.

Hajiya Bilkisu also wrote ardently in favour of the less privileged and against press censorship. She would foster debate, strategise, plan, advise and implement those decisions which she found contextual and feasible. And she was everywhere: supporting the internally displaced; learning, sharing and speaking at events at home and abroad; organising and executing her plans

in a quiet but determined manner. Even as she traversed the world for the causes in which she believed, Hajija Bilkisu remained true to herself. She was especially passionate about peace-building, interfaith dialogue and gender justice. She was a committed leader of the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria (FOMWAN), encouraged and promoted women's involvement in interfaith dialogue, monitored elections, engaged in improving health outcomes in respect of reproductive health and, specifically, maternal mortality and HIV/AIDS, laboured to end violence against women, worked for child survival and against child marriage, supported youth empowerment as a panacea against terrorism, promoted the participation of women in politics, at every opportunity reiterated the critical need for good governance, and consistently called for strategic leadership and for peace and development in our country. She truly lived a life of service to Nigeria and to humanity.

As a civil society activist, she led, consulted for and belonged to many non-governmental organisations, including Women in Nigeria, the Federation of Muslim Women's Association of Nigeria, ABANTU for Development, Health Reform Foundation of Nigeria, GCC, MUSAWAH, Advocacy Nigeria, Women's Interfaith Council, Bring Back Our Girls Movement, Vision Trust Foundation and the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council. She also keenly served on ad-hoc, fact-finding committees set up by the Nigerian government to address and redress the sundry challenges that have afflicted the nation at various periods in its history.

Hajija Bilkisu was also a mentor and mother to so many. Kind, generous and compassionate, a sincere and faithful woman, her close friends spanned faiths, class structures, cultures and nationalities. Her simplicity, resolve and calm amidst any storm were legendary. She went about her life's calling diligently and purposefully, always with a smile on her face, impacting positively on others. She was patient and humble, but also principled and disciplined. Her faith was unshakeable, and those who witnessed her final moments when she was about to lose her own life recall that she departed with prayer on her lips, encouraging others around her even as she realised that her time was nigh.

Those fortunate to have met her along life's journey will sorely miss Hajija Bilkisu. As family, friends and associates who mourn her abrupt passing, we are somewhat consoled by her preserved eloquence on sundry matters of public interest. Immortalised by the written word, Hajija Bilkisu will continue to be read and appreciated through her numerous publications in newspapers, magazines, journals and books. She remains with us still, even though physically departed from this earthly realm. She will never be forgotten.

Contributors

Grace Adeniyi Ogunyankin is currently an assistant professor of Women's and Gender Studies at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada. She is an African feminist geographer who uses a postcolonial urbanism lens to analyse urban renewal projects and new city building projects in Nigeria and Ghana. Her other research interests include: critical race theory, the paradoxes of 'Africa rising' narratives, mothering and disability in the new African Diaspora, and African Diaspora literature.

Valérie Bah is a Canadian-born, Haitian-Beninese freelance writer and photographer, currently based in Montreal. Her work focuses on human interest stories and portraiture, and has been featured in international publications and media, including *Al Jazeera* English and *This is Africa*.

Simidele Dosekun is a lecturer in media and cultural studies at the University of Sussex, prior to which she was a fellow in qualitative methodology at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She has a PhD in gender and cultural studies from King's College London. Her research centres black African women to explore questions of gender, subjectivity, power and inequality in a global context. Her current project is on the fashioning of postfeminist subjectivities among elite women in Lagos, Nigeria. She is reviews editor for *Feminist Africa* and the guest editor of the present issue.

Fatma Emam is a feminist from Egypt. She works as a researcher and translator, and is interested in the intersections between gender, religion and ethnicity. She also advocates for Nubian rights in Egypt.

Aleya Kassam is a Kenyan reader, writer and performer who moonlights as a copywriter in the advertising world. She has written for *Jalada*, *UP Magazine*, *The Rumpus*, *Mail and Guardian Africa* and *The Sahar Journal*. She blogs her musings at www.chanyado.wordpress.com which was nominated for Best New Blog at the Blog Awards Kenya 2015 and has performed in *The Vagina Monologues* and *Stories from the Mall: A Westgate Memorial* as well as Sitawa Namwalie's acclaimed shows *Silence is a Woman* and *Cut Off My Tongue*. She is a proud Jaladan and member of the Weavers Collective.

Evelyn Lutwama-Rukundo is a lecturer at the School of Women and Gender Studies, Makerere University. Her research interest is in gender and entertainment in Uganda. She has written an article, “Dancing to Change: Gender in the Popular Music of Kampala,” a book chapter, “Western Theatrical Performance in Africa and Gender Implications”, and a book, *Communication for Development: Community Theatre and Women’s Rights in Buganda (Uganda)*. Besides her academic engagement, she is a screenwriter and director. Her forthcoming films include a documentary on the trajectory of gender studies in Ugandan universities and one on outstanding women in Uganda.

Zethu Matebeni is the convenor of the *Queer in Africa* series, senior researcher at the Institute for Humanities in Africa (HUMA) at the University of Cape Town, and a part-time documentary filmmaker. With an interest in LGBT life and activism, black queer studies, photography and African cinema, Matebeni has created works such as *Reclaiming Afrikan: Queer Perspectives on Sexual and Gender Identities*; *Breaking out of the Box*; and *Jo’burg TRACKS: Sexuality in the City*, as well as contributing to numerous books and journals.

Jacqueline-Bethel Mougoué is an assistant professor of modern African history at Baylor University. Her research focuses on gender, nationalism and political identity in early postcolonial anglophone Cameroon. She has presented her research at various universities in the United States, including Yale University, Northwestern University, and University of California-Berkeley.

Tendai Mutukwa holds a BA Hons. (Theatre Arts), University of Zimbabwe and MA (Dramatic Arts), University of Witwatersrand. In 2010 she was awarded a Peace and Security Research Fellowship for African Women at King’s College, London. She is currently pursuing her PhD studies.

Kabura Nganga is a young researcher for the African Gender Institute and a scholar in the University of Cape Town’s African studies department. Her work is on decolonisation, gender and resistance to state-sponsored violences, particularly in post-Apartheid South Africa. She has been active in various activist spaces, from the Rhodes Must Fall movement to focused activism on sexual and reproductive health rights, and hopes to never tire of wanting the world to be a better place for all.

Yewande Omotoso is a Nigerian-Barbadian author and architect who lives in South Africa. Her debut novel, *Bom Boy*, was published in 2011. It won the 2012 South African Literary Award for First-Time Published Author, was shortlisted for the 2012 Sunday Times Fiction Prize in South Africa as well as the M-Net Literary Awards 2012, and was the runner-up for the 2013 Etisalat Prize for Literature. Her second book, *The Woman Next Door*, was published this year.

Sa'diyya Shaikh is associate professor and head of the department of religious studies at the University of Cape Town. Working at the intersection of Islamic studies and gender studies, she has a special interest in Sufism and its implications for Islamic feminism and feminist theory. Her areas of research include gender-sensitive readings of hadith and Quran; theoretical debates on Islam and feminism; religion and gender-based violence; and an empirical project entitled "South African Muslim Women, Marriage, Gender and Sexuality." Her published books include *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn Arabi, Gender and Sexuality* (UNC Press 2012 and UCT Press 2013); and *Violence Against Women in Contemporary World Religion* (co-edited with Dan Maguire, Pilgrim Press 2007).

Sylvia Tamale is a leading African feminist who teaches law at Makerere University in Uganda, where she was the first female dean in the School of Law. Her research interests include women in politics, gender, law and sexuality, and feminist jurisprudence. She has published extensively in these and other areas, and has served as visiting professor in several academic institutions globally and on several international human rights boards. She holds a bachelor of laws from Makerere University, a master's in law from Harvard Law School and a Ph.D. in sociology and feminist studies from the University of Minnesota.

Sehin Teferra is the co-founder of Setaweet, a feminist collective engaged in research and activism in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. She recently obtained a PhD in gender studies from SOAS, University of London. Her thesis consisted of a feminist analysis of violence against sex workers in Addis Ababa.

Maryam Uwais MFR is Special Advisor for Social Protection to the President of Nigeria. A legal practitioner and human rights activist based in Abuja, she has previously served on the National Job Creation Committee and consulted with the Open Society Initiative for West Africa, UNICEF, the World Bank, and the British Department for International Development. She founded the Isa Wali Empowerment Initiative in 2009, which targets the conditions of women and children in education, healthcare and empowerment. She is a fellow of the Nigeria Leadership Initiative and a member of the Aspen Global Leadership Network.

A publication of the
African Gender Institute
University of Cape Town

Harry Oppenheimer Institute Building
Engineering Mall
University of Cape Town

Private Bag, Rondebosch 7701
South Africa
Tel: +27 21 650 2970
Fax: +27 21 650 4840
Email: genderstudies@uct.ac.za

Websites
www.agi.ac.za/journals
www.agi.ac.za