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## The Risky Business of Postfeminist Beauty

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### Introduction

Women in Africa, in their diversity, have long ‘dressed up’, that is fashioned selves and subjectivities through changing styles of beautification, adornment, clothing and display. Africans are also longstanding consumers and participants in transnational media and commodity cultures. Indeed the multi-disciplinary literature on dress in Africa shows that for women there, just like women elsewhere, central to the imagination and presentation of ‘stylish’ and ‘modern’ femininities is participation in the transnational, keeping up with new trends abroad (for example, Allman 2004; Dogbe 2003; Mustafa 2002). Necessarily, *structurally*, African women fashion themselves in ‘the linkages between local and transna-

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tional circulations of images, objects, events, and discourses of dress and adornment' (Mustafa 2002, p. 178). They dress 'in the interstices of multiple cultural and socioeconomic grammars—colonial, local, global, and neocolonial' (Dogbe 2003, p. 382).

In the city of Lagos, Nigeria, both in the flesh and in local media representations, a new transnational style of femininity is increasingly visible. This style, which I call 'hyper-feminine' or 'spectacularly feminine,' is characterised by the extravagant use and combination of normatively feminine elements of dress including cascading hair extensions or 'weaves'; long and brightly painted acrylic nails; heavy and immaculate make-up; false eyelashes; towering heels; masses of jewellery and accessories, and so on. The style looks like that of the luminous new figure of the 'post-feminist masquerade' as Angela McRobbie describes it, 'triumphantly re-instating the spectacle of excessive femininity'; 'weighed down with bags, shoes, bracelets and other decorative candelabra items, all of which need to be constantly attended to'; 'endlessly and repetitively done up' (2009, pp. 66–67).

Postfeminism is a contemporary cultural sensibility that proclaims and celebrates that women are now 'empowered' and 'equal,' hence able to return 'freely' to 'all things feminine and 'girly'' (Lazar 2009, p. 375). This centrally implicates their styles of dressing up and appearing. Women are invited to style themselves as postfeminist subjects by spectacularly putting on their femininity. In practice this means the disciplinary consumption of a growing basket of fashion and beauty goods and services, and women subjecting their embodied appearances to an ever expanding and intensifying regime of self-scrutiny (for example, Banet-Weiser 2013; Blue 2013; Evans and Riley 2013; Gill 2007; McRobbie 2009). Yet in a postfeminist discursive logic, the spectacularisation and 'maintenance of the feminine body [are] steeped in the rhetoric of choice as an endless series of supposedly positive and empowering, autonomous consumer decisions for women' (Blue 2013, p. 665).

Whereas postfeminism has been overwhelmingly conceptualised and researched as a Western cultural phenomenon, I take a view of it as *transnational* (Dosekun 2015a). The transnational designates that which exceeds and crosses boundaries of nation-state and region without thereby erasing or negating them (Grewal 2005; Hegde 2011). It is con-

stituted by heterogeneous and historicised 'connectivities' such as media networks, commodity circuits and migratory and diasporic flows, through which discourses, capital, commodities and people travel (Grewal 2005). As a thoroughly mediated and consumerist entanglement of meanings and practices, postfeminism travels via transnational media and consumer connectivities especially. From happy rhetorics of 'girl power' to the highly mediated figure of 'Kim Kardashian' and the new norms and technologies of spectacular femininity that she embodies, postfeminism is broadcast and sold across borders. It interpellates subject-consumers that have the material, discursive and imaginative capital to buy into it, their diverse locations and histories notwithstanding. Thus while postfeminism may be understood to have emerged in the West in response to a specific Western feminist time, it must also be understood to have since exceeded these origins, and to have 'gone global,' as it were, in ways that are not merely derivative or linear.

This chapter is concerned with educated and class-privileged Lagosian women between the ages of 18 and 35 who dress up in hyper-feminine style. It draws on a larger research project that enquired into the kinds of feminine subjectivities that such women are performatively constituting in and through their style, to which the short answer is that they see themselves as cosmopolitan postfeminist subjects (Dosekun 2015b). The present focus is on what the research participants revealed to be the relative risks of their dress style, their constructions of their 'choice' to take on or consent to such risk, and their strategies to try and mitigate it. The chapter is based on discursive analysis of qualitative semi-structured interviews with 18 women, and on a feminist poststructuralist understanding of power as productive, as constituting the subject, its desires and its self-government or self-conduct (Butler 1997, 1999; Davies et al. 2002; Rose 1998).

I argue that with the postfeminist intensification of feminine beauty norms and the attendant, commodified proliferation of beauty technologies or 'solutions,' the pursuit of beauty comes to pose heightened, embodied and psychic risks for women. These risks compel what I theorise as 'aesthetic vigilance'. Aesthetic vigilance is a calculative and self-governmental labour of *risk-managing* one's attachments to beauty and its technologies. It includes the taking of 'aesthetic rest'. This is the prac-

tice of taking a deliberate break from the laborious and risky pursuit of beauty so as to be fortified to later return to it. The chapter emphasises how the research participants construct their vigilant practice as a new feminine competence and indeed a further site and mark of feminine empowerment precisely because it allows them to continue their quest for beauty. Thus, I argue that as a new form of knowledge, aesthetic vigilance is a postfeminist and neoliberal rationality of power in that it makes the women's subjection to these forms of power seem reasonable and manageable (Davies et al. 2002), and thereby delimits their visions of resistance.

## Attached to Beauty, Consenting to Risk

In terms of their hyper-feminine dress practice, the women in my research positioned themselves as agentic and individualised subjects who freely and actively chose their style. Furthermore, they emphasised that the choice was above all to see and please *themselves*. For instance, one participant, Adaeze,<sup>1</sup> explained her love of dressing up in spectacular style with the comment: 'even if I'm at home, I wanna look a certain way, it's not even about, it's not about how other people perceive me, it's for me. It's like looking good makes me feel good'. Looking good, being pretty, beauty in a word, was the central motivation for and desired effect of the women's dress practice. Women often experience or envision beauty as unattainable or elusive, a perfect state that is rarely if ever present (for example, Coleman and Figueroa 2010; Evans and Riley 2013). But not so for those in my research. From their weaves to their pedicures, the myriad constituent elements of the women's dress promised to compliment, accentuate, conceal, transform and so on. Beauty was now thoroughly technologised and commodified, hence with sufficient effort, skill and disposable income, beauty was *attainable*, albeit iteratively.<sup>2</sup>

Diane, for example, explained her love of wearing weaves and her accumulation of about ₦1 million (roughly \$7000) worth of the femi-

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<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> The British women in Evans and Riley's (2013) research, figured as 'ordinary women', also see beauty as attainable for such reasons but not for themselves, rather for celebrities with time and material means.

nine commodity in terms of her love of 'looking good'. Stating that she was 'into makeup a lot,' another woman, Ima, remarked that she felt 'prettier' with it, as did Alero who described a daily process of applying and perfecting her makeup, on which she spent up to an hour. Bisi, conversely, reported that she was not really into makeup. Detailing that she wore 'white powder, fake eyelashes, eyeliner and clear lipgloss or red lipstick,' Bisi explained that it was because she considered her makeup regimen light and her face otherwise relatively bare that she always wore false lashes, to get the additional effect that she evocatively called 'the oomph'. As Bisi and other participants variously elaborated it, the 'oomph' was a certain lift. It was an interiorised and embodied sense of self-confidence and empowerment that beauty promised. Bisi subscribed strongly to such postfeminist promises. She believed that 'looking good' enabled a woman to face and take on the world. She was insistent that a woman should always dress for herself therefore:

not even for your boyfriend, not for your husband, for your *self*. Cause if you wear something and you don't feel you look good, other people will automatically, they'll feel that vibe about you ... When I dress up, I feel like I glow and I'm happy and I'm comfortable and I'm confident. Wherever I go, nobody can put me down.

Although insisting on such self-pleasing, self-regarding and self-empowering postfeminist discursive positions, in the course of their interviews the women also revealed a range of disciplinary norms and external considerations and pressures that governed or guided their 'choice' of style. Here I will highlight examples that implicated some of the style's risks. Sade, who worked in the Nigerian media industry, cited and naturalised the 'standard' of appearing on local television in a weave. She recounted that having duly worn the hairstyle for work, she had suffered the loss of some of her own hair due to the friction and pulling of the weave on her scalp. Hair loss was a risk, a possible adverse outcome, of wearing weaves. Another participant, Misan, shared that she did not like to wear acrylic nails. She later described the accoutrement as 'really terrible' because 'after you take it [off] your [own] nails get really weak'. However, Misan, an entrepreneur in the local fashion and beauty sector,

explained that due to pressure and advice from her female clients to dress like she was ‘earning some money,’ to look like a modern and upwardly mobile career girl in other words, one of her new year’s resolutions had been to more regularly affix false nails. Tobi, a presenter on local television, spoke of having worn false nails for years before stopping because she was experiencing the kind of bodily damage to which Misan was referring. Yet she was now back to the beauty technology, she explained, because: ‘One day I was on TV and my friend says, she sends me a message that “babe, fix your nails, they look horrible” (*laughs*)’.

I asked Tobi if she worried about the risks involved in her renewed consumption of acrylic nails. Her reply: ‘Yes I do ... but you know what these are necessary evils, ugh! (*putting on a falsetto voice*) A girl has to be a *girl!*’ The very notion and language of ‘necessity’ is a governmental rationality of power. It works to pre-empt critical questioning or resistance and instead invite and naturalise the subject’s compliance. In this case the necessity of which Tobi spoke was to be ‘appropriately’ subjected, embodied and thereby recognised and recognisable. The necessity was to “cite” the norm in order to qualify and remain a viable [gendered] subject’ (Butler 2011, p. 177). Alero also spoke in terms of gendered necessity, normativity and therein belonging, in her case with regard to the wearing of high heels. Referring to the potential physical pain of such shoes, which was yet another risk of the research participants’ spectacularly feminine style, she said: ‘Some heels are comfortable but even when they are not comfortable and you go out, you just have to manage, just, yeah, swallow the pain’. She further justified the logic and ostensible reasonability of swallowing the pain of high heels by claiming that it was a shared feminine experience: ‘I am not the only one suffering with that. It’s a group thing ... everyone has to just (*pauses*), it’s just, I mean like they say “beauty is pain.”’ In this formulation, stepping into a feminine community of pain was not only something that a woman did, it was constitutive of being or becoming a woman. Thus, painful shoes were constructed as a feminine inevitability.

Sharon also cited the notion that beauty is pain, a notion that I would insist is a patriarchal rationality. She named herself as a ‘lover of heels,’ happily adding ‘the higher the better’. To my question about the comfort of such style, Sharon reflected that ‘of course’ one’s feet would eventually

begin to hurt ‘but it’s worth it, it’s totally worth it so I don’t think—“beauty is *pain*” they say’. Sharon’s view that the reward or promise of beauty was ‘totally worth’ the price of pain, and her consequent practice of paying the price, vividly illustrates the poststructuralist theoretical insight that a key modality of power is to work *through* rather than against desire (Butler 1997; Davies et al. 2002; Petersen 2008). [D]iscursive constructions take hold—take hold of the body, take hold of desire ... rigidly colonizing the flesh’ (Petersen 2008, pp. 55–56). Indeed, inciting the subject’s desires and inviting its psychic attachments renders power all the more effective or stubborn. In what follows, I argue that my research participants’ consenting to the risky technologies and practices of spectacular postfeminist beauty rendered their attachment to this style of beauty ‘cruel’ because it meant attaching and consenting to ‘compromised conditions of possibility’ (Berlant 2006, p. 21).

## Cruel Attachments and Cruelly Optimistic Vigilance

An attachment to a state such as feminine beauty or to a putatively beautifying object like high heels is cruel if this state or object ‘contributes to the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible in the work of attachment in the first place’ (Berlant 2006, p. 21). According to Lauren Berlant, such an attachment is therefore also ‘cruelly optimistic’ because it draws the subject repeatedly back to the desired state or object and its putative promises. Cruel optimism keeps the subject ‘in proximity to the scene of desire/attrition’ (Berlant 2006, p. 21). It keeps women like Sharon and Alero dressing up and stepping out in their painful heels over and over again, as heard above. It leads them to push through and rationalise the pain rather than try to avoid it, by wearing comfortable shoes, say. More cruelly optimistic in my hearing of the research participants was their attachment to the beauty technologies of hair weaves, false eyelashes and acrylic nails. Repeatedly, the women expressed a knowledge or recognition that these technologies were ‘not good’ for their own hair, eyelashes and nails, respectively, some instances of which I have cited above. At times speaking from personal experience,

other times commenting more generally, they explained that wearing weaves could cause one's hair to thin or fall out; that in the process of removing false lashes, one's real lashes could be lost too; that acrylic could cause one's own nails to weaken and break.

Yet in most cases where the women noted such risks, they did not talk of therefore rejecting or resisting the beauty technology in question. Instead, knowing the risk, their predominant practice was to anticipate and manage it. *Their predominant practice was one of risk-management, in short.* Risk-management is a core entrepreneurial logic and value, and thus it is a core mentality and practice of the ideal responsibilised, calculating and enterprising neoliberal subject (Binkley 2006; Leve et al. 2012; Rose 1998). The inflection of such a neoliberal mentality with postfeminist beauty standards, or what we can understand as the growing imperative for women to be aesthetic entrepreneurs, meant, for those in my research, engaging in a strategic 'on-off' beauty practice. The women's practice was to give oneself occasional reprieve from the hyper-feminine beauty technologies viewed or experienced as risky, to enable one's relative recovery from them, so as *to better withstand the subsequent redeployment of the very same technologies.* In the interviews this on-off practice was often expressed in terms of allowing one or another part of one's body, and sometimes one's mind, to 'breathe' or 'rest'.

Consider Ima who said that she kept her false nails on for about a month and then after taking them off: 'I would let my [own] nails breathe for like maybe two weeks or another month and do it again'. Folake similarly explained why she had recently taken off her false eyelashes:

cause I wanted my natural lashes to breathe and you know the longer you do them [that is, false eyelashes], the more you do them, it weakens your natural lashes ... So I just, I was just like let me take a break, take a break you know and not do it too much.

I propose to understand this on-off beauty practice as 'aesthetic vigilance,' a new and specialised postfeminist and neoliberal form of aesthetic labour. As I have begun to outline above, aesthetic vigilance is an entrepreneurial practice of risk-managing one's spectacularly feminine appearance. It is a labour of vigilance specifically, a mental and interiorised rather

than physical or surface labour, because it entails keeping a reflexive and watchful eye on one's attachment to and consumption of cruel hyper-feminine technologies, as well as scheduling and juggling periods of what I call 'aesthetic rest'. The aim of this labour is to forestall the renouncement of the cruel beauty technologies by pre-empting or minimising the embodied and/or psychic loss that they may engender. Aesthetic vigilance is a cruelly optimistic practice, then, because its aim and intended effect is to sustain cruel feminine attachments.

To put the point conversely, aesthetic vigilance and its constitutive rationalities work to forestall resistance. Detailing how she wore make-up every working day for her television show and then most weekends when 'you have somewhere to go', Tobi welcomed the odd day that her face could have 'off':

Sometimes I don't go out on Saturday. I *loooove* the fact that on days like that my face can *rest*. I'm not wearing *any* makeup. Cause I mean I feel, I feel that once I give my face that rest, once I put it on again, I'll be looking too *fine!*

Berlant notes that 'the return to the scene where the [cruel] object hovers in its potentialities' may not always '*feel* optimistic' (2006, p. 20, original emphasis). The surrender to one's cruel attachments may be tinged with dread or ambivalence or disappointment in one's self, for instance. But a happily optimistic affect is clearly palpable in Tobi's remarks above. This followed from her reasoning, maybe experience too, that for having had brief respite from makeup she would look even better with it subsequently. I asked Tobi if one day was 'rest enough' for her face:

Tobi: It's not but what can I do?

Simidele: Eh how much rest would you need ideally, to now be back to—

Tobi: Cause I've been putting on—like maybe if I can do, if I can do two days without makeup I will be happy, I will be happy.

Tobi returned to an implicit logic of 'necessary feminine evil' to account for her resignation to the fact that although one makeup-free day did not really suffice as aesthetic rest, it was all she tended to have.

The necessary evil here was the normative requirement to wear makeup in both her professional and social lives, a norm that she left completely unquestioned, again as the logic of 'necessity' encourages. In Tobi's comments above, the said necessity of makeup had the further governmental and depoliticising effect of constructing aesthetic vigilance as also necessity, the reasonable and indeed fortunate 'solution' to her beauty dilemma. Tobi's logic distilled to the following: because it was necessary for her to wear makeup virtually every day, what was also necessary was to find some time and space to give her face a breather. She depicted the breather as empowered though brief. Aesthetic rest constituted a certain 'me-time,' that is to say a postfeminist, putatively indulgent break from the very demands of postfeminism itself (Lazar 2009). The rest was framed as further empowering, moreover, because further beautifying.

Other women similarly represented their practice of aesthetic vigilance as recursively empowered and empowering by representing it as the informed, responsible and rational thing to do to continue to achieve their desired look. In this the women further positioned themselves as knowing, agentic and empowered postfeminist consumer subjects. Diane interpellated me as also knowing when, describing her typical routine for getting dressed, she made an aside about her use of an exfoliating face scrub: '[I] use my scrub cause I use makeup every day to work—like we all know makeup is not good for the skin, your skin has to breathe, and with the kind of job I do I see people every day so I know I have to look nice every day'. According to Diane, a corporate customer service representative, her face scrub was a tool to risk-manage the potentially adverse effects on her skin of her daily professional need for makeup. Yet it seemed that she also had to risk-manage her use of the scrub! Having first stated that she used it 'probably like twice or once a week,' Diane later made an apparent error and said that she used it 'every morning'. She promptly corrected herself: 'not every morning cause it's not good'. From my own feminine consumer subject position, I took it that Diane meant that too-frequent use of an exfoliating face product could be harsh on the skin.

In this example, the commodified 'solution' (makeup) to the putative core and foundational feminine problem of 'inadequate beauty' could

engender a new beauty problem ('bad skin') for which there was another commodified solution (exfoliating scrub) which could engender yet other beauty problems, and so on. For this kind of iterative and frankly exhausting feminine beauty dilemma, aesthetic vigilance—watching, gauging, weighing, timing, spacing—became the resolution. Again the possibility of resistance, such as not wearing makeup in the first place, was not so much as mooted. As is quite clear in this example from Diane, the ostensible solution of aesthetic vigilance also relied on considerable class privilege, on having not only an array of beauty commodities but also the time and energy to deploy them.

Adaeze provided another example of a potentially iterative beauty problem that called for both a watchful eye and an extensive wardrobe. To the unstated yet implicit (and of course racialised) problem of 'inadequate hair,' she indexed wigs as a second or backup solution to weaves should the latter have proven too cruel. She did so while proposing that there was a psychic aspect to why women might return to feminine technologies like weaves that they deemed risky:

You know it's addictive though, like the weave for instance. I started wearing wigs because the weave does actually damage your hair so just, you have to change things up. But you get so used to how you look that when you don't have a weave, you don't think you don't look good [*sic*]. If you don't have [false] eyelashes, if it's something you're used to, you don't feel you look good.

What Adaeze was suggesting as addictive was beauty and its promises. This suggestion, or what I have theorised in this chapter as the cruelty of being attached to beauty, is utterly crucial. It allows us to not see the women in my research as somehow 'silly', or self-destructive, for continuing to use beauty technologies that they actively worried about and recognised or in some cases experienced as potentially harmful. Rather, we see that a certain sense of self and self-recognition was not only founded but also persisted in and through their risky beauty practice. We see that the subject might, as Adaeze put it, 'get so used to' looking and feeling a certain way. The concepts of cruel attachments and cruel optimism:

allow us to encounter what is incoherent or enigmatic in our attachments, not as confirmation of our irrationality, but as an explanation for our sense of *our endurance in the object*, insofar as proximity to the object means proximity to the cluster of things that the object promises' (Berlant 2006, p. 20, original emphasis).

And, indeed, if we understand the subject as dependent on power for its very existence, rendered a subject *by* power, we understand that to 'desire the conditions of one's own subordination is thus required to persist as oneself' (Butler 1997, p. 9).

Yet as Butler (1997) further argues, the subject founded by power is not determined by it but is rendered agentic by its very subjection, and so able to resist. One participant, Tinu, spoke of having become aware of what she deemed an unhealthy, creeping dependency on her false eyelashes. She vividly described how she sometimes saw herself when she was not wearing the lashes: 'I feel something is wrong with my face. I look at the mirror, I'll say "Oh God what is wrong, why am I looking so pale, so ugly and I'm looking sick?"' Problematising this as a self-alienation and misrecognition, Tinu took up an opposing 'natural beauty repertoire' that promised a more authentic and healthy sense of self, saying of her false lashes: 'I wanna be myself without them. I still wanna be myself and still feel great'. For this reason, she explained, she now 'deliberately weaned' herself off the lashes. Unlike aesthetic vigilance, which I have argued bolsters postfeminist disciplinary norms and imperatives by promising the subject an imminent and improved return to them, Tinu was referring to an act of resistance, of trying to sever her cruel attachments.

However, Tinu revealed that her spectacularly feminine dress choices were guided by other imperatives, too. Tinu was an actress in Nollywood, the booming Nigerian film industry. She explained that when she had to appear for public events in her professional capacity, she put her false lashes back on. She described the lashes for this purpose as like her 'trademark,' and as enhancing her celebrity 'packaging'. Here Tinu was speaking of aesthetic labour as it has tended to be conceptualised, namely 'the embodied *work* some workers have to do to maintain their bodies for particular forms of employment' (Entwistle and Wissinger 2006, p. 776, original emphasis). But as heard from her and the other women in my

research—and as in this edited collection as a whole—to understand women's contemporary beauty practices and pressures the conceptual demarcation of paid work as a distinct aesthetic sphere no longer holds. Neoliberalism hails subjects 'as entrepreneurs of themselves or, more precisely, as *investors* in themselves, as human capital that wishes to appreciate' (Feher 2009, pp. 30–31, emphasis added), while postfeminism promises women that their 'capital' lies especially in beauty. Thus it is that under conditions of neoliberal postfeminism, women are hailed and guided to be entrepreneurial in their pursuit of beauty.

## Conclusion

Individualised and responsibilised, called by ever-increasing consumer options, obliged to exercise 'choice,' *per force* the entrepreneurial neoliberal subject becomes a risk-taker. Based on interviews with young and class-privileged women in Lagos, Nigeria, who dress up and appear in spectacularly feminine style, this chapter explored the risks involved in their intensified and hyper-technologised postfeminist beauty practice. It showed how the consumption of new or increasingly normative beauty technologies posed both physical and psychic risks for the women, to which they tended to consent as a means to access the highly desired promises of beauty. I argued that the women's beauty practice was characterised by entrepreneurial calculations of risk-reward, then, including a knowing and concerted effort to manage what became construed as beauty's 'necessary' risks.

The chapter introduced the concepts of 'aesthetic vigilance' and 'aesthetic rest' to theorise the research participants' particular risk-management strategies and practices. These entailed keeping a keen eye on one's beauty practice so as not to fall into beauty's traps, and taking mini-breaks from beauty to later become all the more beautiful. I cast aesthetic vigilance and aesthetic rest as cruelly optimistic for further binding or attaching the women to disciplinary power. Indeed they are especially effective and insidious vehicles of power, I would argue, because they appear not only reasonable but also empowered and empowering, even somewhat subversive. In subscribing to such logics, being passionately

attached to the terms and tools of their spectacularly feminine style, the women took up subject positions as aesthetic entrepreneurs: subjects guided by the fundamental postfeminist and neoliberal rationality that, for women, beauty is a most serious business.

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