The risky business of postfeminist beauty

This chapter explores the risks involved in women's beauty practice under conditions of neoliberal postfeminism, drawing on a research project on young Nigerian women who fashion themselves in 'spectacularly feminine style.' It argues that with the postfeminist intensification of beauty norms, attended by the commodified proliferation of beauty technologies, the pursuit of beauty comes to pose heightened embodied and psychic risks for women. The chapter explores the research participants' constructions of their 'choice' to take on such risk and their strategies to manage and mitigate it. It proposes the new theoretical concepts of 'aesthetic vigilance' and 'aesthetic rest' as entrepreneurial practices of risk-managing one's attachments to beauty and its technologies so as to better maintain rather than resist them.

Women in Africa, in their diversity, have long 'dressed up,' that is to say 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 (e.g. Allman, 2004; Dogbe, 2003; Mustafa, 2002). Necessarily, *structurally*, African women fashion themselves in what Hudita Mustafa terms a 'sartorial ecumene,' meaning 'the linkages between local and transnational circulations of images, objects, events, and discourses of dress and adornment' (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 and voluminous 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. It looks like the style 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, p. 66-67).

Postfeminism is a contemporary cultural sensibility that proclaims and celebrates that women are now 'empowered' and 'free,' and hence able to return 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 investing in the disciplinary consumption of a growing basket of fashion and beauty goods and services, and women subjecting their embodied appearances to an expanding and intensifying regime of self-scrutiny (e.g. 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 predominantly conceptualised and researched as a Western cultural phenomenon, I take a view of it as *transnational* (Dosekun, forthcoming). 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 constituted 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, commodified and consumerist entanglement of meanings and practices, postfeminism especially travels via transnational media and consumer connectivities. 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 as having emerged in the West in response to a specific Western feminist historical moment, it must also be understood to have since exceeded or travelled beyond 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 and appear in hyper-feminine style. It draws on a larger research project that explored 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, 2015). Based on discursive analysis of qualitative semi-structured interviews with 18 such women, the present focus is on what their talk revealed to be the relative risk of their style, their constructions of the 'choice' to take on or consent to such risk, and their attendant strategies to try and mitigate it. I show that with the postfeminist intensification of feminine beauty norms and 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,' an entrepreneurial and self-governmental labour of risk-managing one's attachments to beauty and its technologies, attachments that I also understand as 'cruel' (Berlant, 2006).

The chapter emphasises how the women 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. 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. The chapter is based on a feminist poststructuralist understanding of power as productive; as constituting the subject and its desires and its self-government or self-conduct (Binkley, 2006; Butler, 1997, 1999; Davies et al., 2002; Rose 1998).

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,[1] 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 (e.g. 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,

[1] All names are pseudonyms.

conceal, transform and so on. Beauty was now thoroughly technologised and commodified, and thus with sufficient effort, skill and also disposable income, beauty was attainable, albeit iteratively.[2]

Diane, for example, explained her love of wearing weaves and her accumulation of about ₦1 million (roughly $7,000) worth of the feminine 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 it, on which she spent up to an hour. Bisi, conversely, reported that she was not really into makeup. Noting that she wore 'white powder, fake eyelashes, eyeliner and clear lipgloss or red lipstick,' she 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 proposed that 'looking good' enabled a woman to face and take on the world and, as such, she was insistent that a woman should always dress for herself:

> 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 'free choice' of style. Here I will highlight examples that implicated some of the risks of the style. 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 her mediated professional appearing, she had suffered the loss of some of her own hair due to the friction and pulling of the weave on her scalp. Misan shared that she did not really like to put on acrylic nails. Elsewhere in her interview she described the accoutrement as 'really terrible' because 'after you take it [off] your [real] nails get really weak.' However, Misan also explained that due to pressure and advice from her female clients to dress like she was 'earning some money,' to look like a contemporary and succesful career girl, 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 experiencing the kind of bodily damage to which Misan was referring. Yet she now back to the risky 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 whether she worried about the potential damage of her renewed consumption of acrylic nails. Her reply: 'Yes I do… but you know what these are necessary evils, ugh! (*putting on a falsetto or 'girly' 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 was to be 'appropriately' subjected, embodied and thereby recognised and recognisable – as not just 'a girl' but a girl of a particular sort. The necessity was to '"cite" the norm in order to qualify and remain a viable subject' (Butler, 2011, p. 177). Alero also spoke in terms of gendered necessity, normativity and therein belonging, in her case with regard to

[2] The 'ordinary' British women in Riley and Evans' (2013) research also see the attainability of beauty for such reasons but for the neoliberal celebrity figures whom they look at, not for themselves.

the wearing of high heels. Referring to the potential physical pain of such shoes, which was yet another risk of the women's 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 or reasonability of swallowing the pain of heels by claiming that it was a shared or communal 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. As such painful shoes were constructed as a feminine inevitability.

Sharon also cited what I would insist is the patriarchal notion and rationality that beauty is pain. 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 rightly 'worth' the price of pain, and her consequent practice of paying the price, vividly illustrate 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, p. 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 the women's consenting to the risky technologies of spectacular postfeminist beauty rendered their attachment to 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 Berlant, such an attachment is therefore also 'cruelly optimistic' because it draws the subject repeatedly back to the desired state or object and its ostensible 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, heard above, dressing up and stepping out in their painful heels over and over again. It leads them to push through and rationalise the pain rather than try to avoid it, by wearing flat or 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 and 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 detailed 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, *so as to continue their pursuit of beauty*. The strategic recognition, calculation and management of risk in the adjudication of choices and means to achieve desired outcomes is a core neoliberal rationality and value (Binkley, 2000; Leve et al., 2012; Rose, 1998). It is 'business strategy 101.' Thus weighing up risks versus rewards is one of the mentalities of the entrepreneurial neoliberal subject that is governed by 'an array of rules for the conduct of [its] everyday existence: energy, initiative,

ambition, calculation, and personal responsibility' (Rose, 1998, p. 154). Business mentality meets postfeminist beauty meant the women engaging in a strategic and calculated practice of allowing one or more parts of their bodies to 'breathe' or 'rest' – their hair, their nails, their lashes, their faces, their skin – as well as their minds, too. The practice comprised giving themselves measured reprieve from the hyper-feminine beauty technologies deemed potentially detrimental or already experienced as such, to enable their relative recovery *so as to better withstand the subsequent redeployment of the very same technologies.* Ima, for example, said that she kept her false nails on for about a month and then when she took them off: 'I would let my [own] nails breathe for like maybe two weeks or another month and do it again.' Folake explained why she had recently taken out her false eyelashes:

> cause I wanted my natural lashes to breathe and you know the longer you do them, 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 kind of 'on-off' dress and beauty practice as 'aesthetic vigilance,' a new and specialized 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, and thus a mental and interiorized 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 will call 'aesthetic rest.' The aim of this labour is to forestall the renouncement of the cruel 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 effect is to sustain cruel feminine attachments.

Or, conversely framed, aesthetic vigilance and its constitutive rationalities work to forestall resistance. Detailing how she wore makeup 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, perhaps. 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. Moreover, in Tobi's comments above, the so-called necessity of makeup had the additionally governmental and depoliticising effect of constructing aesthetic

vigilance as also necessity, the reasonable and indeed 'happy' or promising 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 at least some time and space to give her face a breather. She depicted the breather as empowered though brief. Aesthetic rest constituted a certain postfeminist 'me-time' given that an 'inexorable hectic [postfeminist] lifestyle has detrimental consequences on women' (Lazar, 2009, p. 377). The rest was further empowering, moreover, because further beautifying.

Other women similarly represented their practice of aesthetic vigilance as recursively empowered and empowering by constructing 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 everyday 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 everyday so I know I have to look nice every day.' According to Diane, a corporate customer service representative, her face scrub was a commodified tool to risk-manage the potentially adverse effects on her skin of her daily need for makeup. Thus like her makeup itself, her scrub was a tool for the aesthetic labour that she undertook to maintain her professional embodied appearance (Entwistle and Wissinger 2006). Yet 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 scrub 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 – a labour of watching, gauging, assessing, weighing, timing, spacing – became the solution. Again the possibility of resistance, such as not wearing makeup in the first place, was not so much as mooted. The solution of vigilance depoliticized the problem by rendering it manageable and thereby acceptable.

Adaeze provided another example of a potentially iterative beauty problem that called for a watchful eye. To the unstated yet implicit and also 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 recognised as in some way 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 claiming was addictive was beauty and its promises, promised via the requisite and repeated consumption but, in practice, both physically and psychically risky to pursue. Her suggestion of beauty's addictiveness, or what I have framed here as the possible cruelty of being attached to it, is utterly crucial. It allows us to see my research participants not as 'irrational' or 'silly' girls for continuing to use beauty technologies that they actively worried about and recognised or suffered as potentially damaging. Rather we are enabled to see a certain sense of self and self-recognition *endured* in and through their risky beauty practice. If we

understand the subject as dependent on power for its very existence, rendered a subject *by* power, we can understand that "[t]o desire the conditions of one's own subordination is thus required to persist as oneself" (Butler 1997: 9).

Yet as Butler (1997) further argues, the subject founded by power is not therefore determined by it but rather is rendered agentic by the very terms of its subjection and thereby able to resist. Speaking directly to Adaeze's theory about the psychic risks of subscribing to and embodying spectacularised postfeminist beauty standards, Tinu revealed how her subjection to these standards had come to engender her relative resistance to them. Tinu was an actress in Nollywood, the booming Nigerian movie industry. She vividly described how she had sometimes caught herself seeing her appearance when she did not have on her false 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?'' Tinu problematised this as a self-alienation or self-misrecognition. Stepping into an opposed 'natural beauty' repertoire and constructing this kind of beauty as a route back to a more authentic and healthy sense of self, she said of her false lashes: 'I wanna be myself without them. I still wanna be myself and still feel great.'

As such, Tinu explained, she now 'deliberately weaned' herself off the hyper-feminine accoutrement. Unlike aesthetic vigilance, which I have shown bolsters postfeminist disciplinary norms and imperatives by promising the subject an imminent and improved return to them, Tinu was speaking of an act of resistance. She was speaking of an attempt to sever her psychic attachment to her false lashes, and of coming to desire other styles of femininity. However, she constructed her 'choice' to resist as yet delimited by *other* strategic or entrepreneurial postfeminist considerations: when she had to appear publicly in her professional celebrity capacity, she put her false lashes back on.

Conclusion

Individualised and responsibilised, hailed and seduced 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 has explored the risks involved in their intensified and hyper-technologised beauty practice under conditions of neoliberal postfeminism. It showed how the consumption of new or increasingly normative or expected beauty technologies posed both physical and psychic, or exterior and interiorised risks for the women, to which they tended to consent as a means to the highly desired end of beauty and all it promised. Thus the women's pursuit of beauty was characterised by entrepreneurial calculations of cost-benefit, risk-reward, and duly incited a knowing and concerted practice of managing and mitigating what became constructed as the 'necessary' risks of beauty.

The chapter introduced the new concepts of 'aesthetic vigilance' and 'aesthetic rest' to theorise the women's particular risk-management strategies, casting them as cruelly optimistic for further binding or attaching the women to disciplinary power. Indeed these strategies or forms of aesthetic labour can be seen as especially insidious and effective vehicles of power insofar as the women constructed them as not only reasonable and doable but in fact empowered, empowering and even somewhat subversive. Their practice 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 so as to become all the more beautiful. In subscribing to such logics, the women revealed themselves to be passionately attached to the terms and tools of their subjection. They took up positions as exemplary 'aesthetic entrepreneurs' guided by the fundamental postfeminist rationality that, for women, spectacular feminine beauty is now a most serious business.

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