

Be beautiful and speak up

Africana beauty at the forefront of an inclusive Internet beauty culture.

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Master's Program

Gender Studies – Intersectionality and Change

Master's thesis 15 ECTS credits



Abstract

The beauty industry has been booming in the last few years, generating immense profits as it now translates into an Internet global beauty culture in its own right that finally made room for women of color. As research barely mentions African women and their diasporas, this study aims to critically analyze the dynamic of this North American-dominated Internet beauty culture celebrating non-white women, looking at how it impacts African women and their diasporas and participates in affirming a global woman of color through commodity capitalism.

Based on discourse analysis of multiple actors in the industry using popular culture sources, I then conducted a critical feminist autoethnography of my beauty journey, put in perspective with the results of decolonial interviews with African and African diaspora women recruited online. I asked about their relationship with the beauty industry and their opinions on some arguments I made. Self and collective analysis demonstrated the emergence of an African diasporic hybrid beauty culture, empowering women to feel like actors of change.

Keywords

Acceptance, African, Africana, autoethnography; beauty, beauty industry, change, community, culture, decoloniality, diaspora, empowerment, existentialism; exoticization, feminist studies, heritage, inclusivity, Internet, intersectionality, interviews; norms, performativity, phenomenology, policing, race, racism, radical, self-love, utopia, women of color.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank my supervisor Madina Tlostanova for her genuine curiosity, benevolence, and dedication and for introducing me to Dinara Podgornova, whom I also want to thank. Madina's continuous support was a game-changer; it broadened my perspectives and allowed me to learn so much. This first year of study would not have been the same without the people I am grateful to call friends now and whom I cannot wait to meet outside of a Zoom box. My last thank you goes to my old friend B. who encouraged me to apply to this program in the first place.

Table of content

Abstract	1
Keywords	2
Acknowledgments	2
Table of content	3
Introduction	5
Reflections on my epistemological position	8
Aim and Research questions	9
Evaluation of sources and methods	11
From creative writing to autoethnography	14
Opening a conversation through decolonial interviews	16
Research ethics	19
Ethical concerns regarding autoethnography	20
Reliability	20
Relationality	20
Ethical concerns regarding interviews	21
Conversations, not interviews	21
Turning bias into an asset	22
Trusting my participants and making them aware of their responsibility	23
Honoring personal struggles and empowering journeys by giving them a name	24
Theory	24
Intersectionality	25
Performativity	26
Phenomenology	27
Culture	28
Previous research	29
Previous academic research	31
Previous non-academic research	34

I. Effortless French beauty: a myth in decline?	35
1. A cheeky French approach to beauty	36
2. The myth of the Parisienne	40
3. The privilege of self-love	40
4. The new language of beauty	41
5. Nude, not neutral	41
6. A healthy beauty philosophy?	43
II. The rise of commodified American beauty for women of color: example of Fenty Beauty by Rihanna.	the 44
1. Racial inclusivity, but make it sexy	45
2. Racial inclusivity, but make it luxury	49
3. Racially-inclusive beauty remains unfair	51
III. An autoethnography of my beauty journey: from cosmetic misery to the utopia of Africana beauty.	52
1. The end of cosmetic misery	52
2. Finally catching up	54
3. Beauty policing dies hard	56
Insider beauty policing	56
Outsider beauty policing	57
4. A reflection on beauty heritage	59
5. Curated protest beauty culture on demand	60
6. Performing beauty	63
7. An imagined community	63
8. An endless becoming	65
9. The triple presences, from the Caribbean to Africa	66
10. Africana Philosophy inspiring Africana Beauty	68
Limitations and suggestions for future research	70
Personal reflection and limitations	70
Suggestions for future research	72
Conclusion	73
References	76
Appendix	84

In August 2020, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, congresswoman at day, millennial¹ global superstar the rest of the time, did a makeup tutorial video for Vogue, published in the fashion and lifestyle magazine's YouTube channel as part of a series called "Beauty Secrets" (Ocasio-Cortez, 2020). Like any person spending an unreasonable amount of time on the Internet, I knew about beauty tutorials, but that was it. I did not use to enjoy that type of content; worse, these videos looked shallow to me. I never really understood the point of following strangers in their bathrooms, nor contemplating their blackheads and spots from so close. *Mais ça, c'était avant*². AOC³ filmed a makeup tutorial for Vogue, so I *had to* watch it closely.

Figure 1: *Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's beauty tutorial.*



Note: Ocasio Cortez, A. 2021. [Screenshot]. YouTube. [URL](#)

¹ According to the [Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus](#), a millennial is a person who was born in the 1980s, 1990s, or early 2000s.

² French expression that translates into *but that was before* and indicates a before and an after to a forever modified situation.

³ AOC stands for Alexandria Ocasio Cortez.

I remember thinking: if she chose to put lipstick on camera while fighting to establish her legitimacy every single day, there must be something I am missing out. The algorithm worked its magic, suggesting more and more similar content.

For years now, I have been reflecting on the growing representation of women of color in global Western mainstream pop culture, watching movies, shows, and music videos change gradually, but always as an outsider. This feeling is not new, and I believe it is rooted in my childhood and teenagehood in the 1990s and 2000s in Morocco, North Africa.

I was very young when I started having access to any possible TV channel on earth through the satellite dish. That unlimited, almost free (because pirated), and uncontrolled access to a galaxy of content created a subtle but violent power dynamic between global and local culture. That original dynamic has barely changed ever since. Global, which usually meant Western European (French and Spanish), American, and to some extent also Middle Eastern influences were dominating a space dedicated to entertainment, but also information and culture. That is how I opened my eyes to television at the same age I opened my eyes to the world. Because of that power relationship inherent to almost all the entertainment I knew, my dolls had old French names, and my friends and I would pretend to be the Olsen twins⁴ at the beach when making new friends. Not knowing a word of English did not stop us from trying so hard to be like them, while children in the West did not even know we existed. When exposed to TV and the Internet, feelings of curiosity and excitement would likely coexist next to potential shame but mostly marginalization.

⁴ Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen were the stars of various American children's shows in the late 1990s/early 2000s.

Going back and forth from my favorite heroes to my immediate environment was rarely smooth; a lot was lost in translation. Overall, I was constantly feeling at the periphery of (global) culture. At the time, that culture was the only one that felt legitimate. Besides, for years, I did not question my inability to identify with the people who fired my imagination. In *The Danger of a Single Story*, Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie's confession touches on a raw nerve with disconcerting clarity: "because all I had read were books in which characters were foreign, I had become convinced that books by their very nature had to have foreigners in them and had to be about things with which I could not personally identify." (Ngozie Adichie, 2009).

Although the Nigerian writer makes a point about books, I applied it to all forms of culture, and it made so much sense to me. The Internet made geographies much less relevant, creating a shared virtual space where I could realize all I had in common with others, the same people who did not know I existed. The rise of Internet culture, notably through social media, brought the stranger closer and made the global more local. It enhanced temporal positionalities like the sense of belonging to a generation rather than physical locations. Those realizations made it clear that global pop culture was also my culture, even though it started as a foreign culture. If it was mine, I could contribute to it, one way or another. Appropriating global pop culture meant setting myself free from that feeling of marginalization to start claiming center (and even centers). Consequently, I developed new expectations I had never had before. Gradually, it became essential that I feel represented in global pop culture, leaving behind a relationship based on acceptance to move towards one based on accountability.

Reflections on my epistemological position

Owning my multi-dimensional anchor is one thing. Defining it concisely, situating myself (Haraway, 1998, p.581), and putting it at the center of this research project is even harder. I am both African and African diasporic now since I live in between and have held two passports since 2018. My French passport has made me European, at least on paper, and given me new privileges like social security, freedom of movement, and free education that got me here.

As stated in the introduction, I was born and raised in Morocco, where all eyes looked on Europe and the Middle East⁵. The main consequence of that multifactorial situation was constant diminishing and denying the Africanness in our identities, even though it is visible in language, music, food, and many other levels. Until today, it is common to hear people say “Africans” when referring to Sub-Saharan Africans, as if Moroccans were not Africans, probably because they think they are living somewhere else. I grew up in a multilingual household where French was dominant⁶. I got an off-shore French education in Morocco until high school, followed by tertiary education in France.

My feminism was built around multiple references that some could see as irreconcilable, very French ones I got from school like Olympe de Gouge and her Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen from 1791, Moroccan ones I learned about at home like Fatima Mernissi,

⁵ A strong focus on the Arab heritage of Morocco left aside the other components of a complex crossroads identity, including its Indigenous Amazigh part. I believe that the invention of a region called “Middle-East North-Africa” contributed to a detachment from Africa.

⁶ My parents went to school at the French “mission”, a network of French schools that started during the French colonization of Morocco.

renowned scholar and early Islamic feminist, but also around every empowered woman I was surrounded with. This research project is my very first thesis and will undoubtedly be “partial and political” (Lyyke, 2010, p. 125). My situated perspective, the ones of my participants, have everything to do with the intersections I will be analyzing within the scope of Feminist Studies. I am hoping this contribution to research will be emancipatory because it would be “for rather than about women.” (Nielsen, Joyce, McCarl, 2019, p.30), particularly for women of color.

Before starting this study, I did not have a definition of what it meant to be a woman of color that made me feel comfortable. I was not even sure what it meant, or if I could call myself one. I could feel that I was leaning towards identifying this way. However, I did not want to use a term by default because I could not find any better, nor did I want to copy-paste it from its original North American context without precaution. I am making this research project an opportunity to confirm (or not) that I can and want to identify as a non-American woman of color. I will be exploring this point through the influence of the Internet beauty culture on me and the participants in my decolonial interviews.

Aim and Research questions

In 2022, reflecting on the representation of women of color in global Western mainstream pop culture would not be complete without including what I will be referring to as the Internet beauty culture. I believe beauty content stands out because of its practicality and buildability. For the last two years, I have been watching more and more beauty content related to hair, makeup, and skincare. I did feel curious and encouraged to explore the rabbit hole I fell into because I could

now see people who looked like me under the harsh bathroom spotlight. In other words, and unlike other beauty outlets (including the ones I grew up with), the beauty content available on the Internet nowadays has started feeling inclusive: I could now see myself in it.

It could be a so-called beauty influencer, a singer, an actress, or even a politician, who would now take me by the hand and show me how they style their hair and put on their skincare products and makeup. Now that I have access to beauty content produced by and starring women of color, I can watch how they embrace and perform that woman of color identity. The most visible ones are predominantly American, like Zoe Kravitz, Rihanna, Princess Nokia, and Alicia Keys, casually sitting together in my glamorous YouTube history.

The intimate connection, the practical feeling of closeness, and the promise of empowerment seem to depend only on their beauty routine's (many) steps and very little on geographical positionalities: we are on the Internet after all. However, the main objective of this thesis is to thoroughly critically analyze the dynamic of this North American-dominated Internet beauty culture celebrating non-white women in order to answer the following interrelated research questions:

- What is the impact of this double dynamic of glorification up to fetishization on the one hand and co-optation of racial diversity on the other hand, on African women and their diasporas?
- To what extent does the rise of the Internet beauty culture participate in the affirmation of a global woman of color through commodity capitalism and marketization?
- Can we envision the rise of Africana beauty resulting from a consumption-based shift in representation dynamics, challenging power asymmetries in mainstream beauty culture?

Evaluation of sources and methods

To answer these research questions, I have designed a mixed methodology, combining primary and secondary sources from academia and popular culture and different methods, aiming at decoding the complex big picture of the current state of the Internet beauty culture. I am substantially relying on autoethnography and semi-structured interviews.

First, I will analyze the discourses and perspectives of actors in the industry. I am adopting an open and interdisciplinary semiotic approach (Lochard & Soulages, 2014) inspired by Roland Barthes' extension of semiotic tools to new objects of study like advertising and mythologies, both relevant when talking about beauty. Going beyond strict structuralist semiotics, I will be highlighting “society's conflict over the meaning of words” (Elmo Raj, 2015) while looking into the different people producing those texts and those who receive them.

First, I will present the main characteristics of this North American-dominated beauty industry and cultural space. Because “power is everywhere” (Foucault, 1978, p.93), it might as well be makeup tutorial videos like the ones I have chosen to analyze. I will proceed to a text, and discourse analysis of two makeup tutorials:

- *French vs. USA makeup*, released in February 2022 by the makeup artist and YouTuber Ali Andreea
- and *Jeanne Damas Does French-Girl Red Lipstick—And a 5-Second Easy Bang Trim*, by the French model and influencer, and successful multi-brand owner Jeanne Damas. This first step will

allow me to understand better how the American domination of the Internet beauty culture came while unpacking the decline of the French beauty myth.

Steven Luke makes his third definition of power about manipulating people and creating needs and aspirations they believe are theirs (Lukes, 2005), which justifies taking an interest in analyzing texts in mass media (Bergström & Boréus, 2017). Both those indications feel all the more relevant as we live at a time when influencing has become a proper career and a life aspiration. I will be building on Jacques Derrida's deconstructionism, "a demonstration that it (the text) has already dismantled itself." (Miller, 1976, p.341) as I am not interested in working with structures only here but instead, trying to make contradictions visible, especially in promotional texts like these.

Then, I will illustrate how the makeup industry exercises power, the way "it incites, it induces, seduces, it makes easier or more difficult" (Foucault, 1982, p.789). To do so, I will be looking at the intersections of this North American Internet beauty culture with neoliberal globalization and commodity capitalism, both glorifying and co-opting racial diversity through marketization. I chose the example of the makeup brand Fenty Beauty by Rihanna, considered the most disruptive in the industry in the last few years. I will be going back and forth, linking "text to context" (Fairclough, 1992, p.213), between selected excerpts of an interview given by the internationally renowned performer to the New York Times and the About section of the fentybeauty.com website. I will try to understand how race is apprehended and formulated depending on who is talking, Rihanna or her brand. Finally, I will question the access to this new generation of beauty products from an African perspective, looking at how the inequalities are perpetuated. To do so, I

am simulating and comparing the same shopping experience from different locations, using the website fentybeauty.com now operating in 8 African countries.

Looking at how African and African diaspora women fit in the Internet beauty culture and from a decolonial perspective, I will also be interested in going beyond the binary oppositions Derrida criticized in the West, focusing on the oppositions commonly spread in the mainstream beauty discourse, starting with who is beautiful and who is not for instance. Using Kristeva's intertextuality (Kristeva, 1980) will allow me to question how meaning is transferred and generated to African and African diaspora women. As discourse analysis is already "in the midst of important ontological questions" (Fellows, 2016), I will be linking my epistemology to relational ontology (Wynter, 1984) as I get to the second half of this study.

Embracing such a philosophical position means that "what distinguishes subject from subject, subject from object, or object from object is mutual relation rather than substance." (Schaab, 2013). Relations, rather than fantasized fixed identities, are at the core of this study: online and in real life, inside and beyond communities, with oneself and others. I will base my reasoning on the influence of the Francophone Caribbean intellectuals Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire, one posing "the ontological question of the human" (Fellows, 2016, p.3) and the other illustrating "subject and community formation in the face of colonial history" (Fellows, 2016, p.6).

Going from discourse analysis to relational ontology after drawing an overall shape of the Internet beauty culture nowadays, I will be looking at how women of color experienced their access to it. I will conduct a critical feminist auto-ethnography of my beauty journey, mainly leaning on

Feminist phenomenology and Black existentialism. I intend to put my autoethnography in perspective with other beauty journey stories I have collected, relying on decolonial interviews with African and African diaspora women with connections with Algeria, Morocco, Senegal, Guinea, and Congo. Pushing self-reflexivity in this experiment gave me space to envision a more utopian beauty culture I will refer to as Africana beauty.

From creative writing to autoethnography

I chose to write an auto-ethnography of my beauty journey, building on Gender theory, Feminist phenomenology and Black existentialism to envision this research project critically. I first wanted to experiment with “writing as a method of inquiry” (Richardson, 2002, p.417), knowing that many of the ideas have been already on my mind for a long time and hoping others will emerge from this very writing as “I write to find things out.” (Richardson, 2002, p.417). The way I intend to “expand techniques and strategies for knowing and telling” (Richardson, 2002, p.417) is by inserting creative writing passages telling personal stories in between my academic text. My first inspiration to do so is Sara Ahmed’s *Phenomenology of whiteness* (Ahmed, 2007), who made me want to create a space dedicated to emotions, “crucial to the way in which bodies surface in relation to other bodies” (Ahmed, 2004, p.39), using my body to develop this phenomenological analysis as a “border that feels” (Ahmed, 2004, p.39) particularly relevant in this case to apprehend situations of inclusion and exclusion along the way, when inhabiting a non-white body and interrogating beauty in relation to others.

In a second phase, I realized how much it meant to me to own my positionality fully and study the Internet beauty culture from my point of view, simply because I felt I just had so much to say. The urge to proceed led me to autoethnography. I am using “an approach to research and writing that

Opening a conversation through decolonial interviews

As much as it mattered a lot to me to dedicate time and space to self-reflexivity, I also wanted an interaction, a conversation. In real life, as complex as it may be, empowerment through beauty would be nothing without conversations to lift it, acknowledge it, and encourage it between friends or strangers. A few years ago, I had the chance to facilitate a workshop about hair to help a friend who was starting her small haircare business for what the industry refers to as Mediterranean hair (dry and curly hair). The conversation was spontaneous, rich, and dignified. It brought up so many interesting, essential, sometimes painful topics to the surface, sometimes verbalized for the first time. This fond memory inspired me to create another collective conversation about beauty, adapting to the constraints of this assignment and the specifics of my research questions. This recreated conversation will take the form of written personal stories on my end, nourished, reinforced, and enhanced by quotes from the participants.

Because I am studying the Internet beauty culture, it only made sense that I collect data online somehow. However, I did not want to conduct a survey because I wanted to allow the maximum freedom to my participants, assuming that asking them to open on personal, body-related issues would not necessarily be easy nor comfortable if the setup was too rigid. Semi-structured interviews appeared to be the most suitable choice for me in this study.

Going back to the process, I did not feel confident enough to start with this part of my work right away, so I got into it only after completing my theory readings and getting a more precise idea of what I will be writing as part of my own reflection on beauty. Once I felt like my discoveries in terms of texts and authors reinforced my argument, I started thinking more precisely about what I

would need from these interviews. I realized I wanted to create a conversation to collect experiences, test my main arguments on the participants and hear what they have to say about it, broadening the scope of the exchange even more and including the participants and their critical thinking in my research. I was then able to make a list of a dozen topics rather than questions, around which I wanted the conversation to revolve.

The next step was designing my consent form (see Appendix). I had never found myself in a situation of writing a consent form or sending it to people until now. Although I completely understand and respect the point, I believe it is not necessarily the warmest start to a conversation. If I were a participant, I would find it a bit brutal to formalize the relationship between interviewer and interviewee this way. I tried to rebalance that feeling by letting the participant choose where and how they would want our conversation to happen. It resulted in various setups involving written responses and/or oral ones, either live on a call or recorded voice notes. I took some liberty with the instructions we received and asked if the participants wanted to be anonymized because I had an intuition that it would not be relevant in the case of this study, and I wanted to confirm that feeling. I will go back to these two points in further detail in the Research Ethics section below.

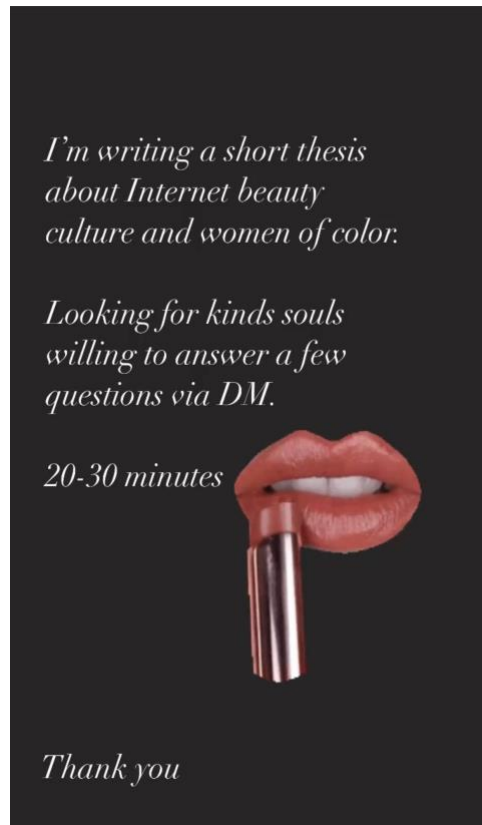
Once I was satisfied enough with my consent form, I was finally ready to start recruiting participants. As I stated earlier, I wanted to recruit participants online. Because Instagram is undoubtedly the platform, I use the most to create and consume content, I wanted to try it. On the one hand, Instagram is a place massively promoting unrealistic beauty standards; on the other, this is also where I find inspiration, empowerment, and knowledge regarding beauty. Those contradictions made me want to find my new way through the platform, curious about the results.

My Instagram account is public, meaning my content is accessible to anyone and sharable. I posted my call for participants on my Instagram story⁷, using the codes of the platform: a short message combined with a catchy visual, it was essential to keep it all casual. I also included the main concepts in my study (Internet beauty culture and women of color), indicating the amount of time participants would spend helping me. I asked for private responses per direct message.

As I posted the call for participants, I started receiving many enthusiastic reactions, so I had to take it down after a few minutes because I knew I would not have enough time to work on dozens of interviews. At that point, my study did not focus on African and African diaspora women yet (I only mentioned women of color in the call for participants). The interested potential participants all happened to be African and African diaspora women, de facto giving me the orientation I was missing. The gaps coming up from the previous research would soon confirm the importance of this orientation. The fact that all my participants happen to be African and/or African diaspora women is nothing random. In fact, it is a reflection of a positionality I have in common with a majority of my social network embodied in my Instagram account.

⁷ An Instagram story is a feature on the application that allows the user to post photos and/or videos in a slideshow format. Stories are ephemeral and disappear after 24 hours.

Figure 2: *My call for participants posted on Instagram.*



Note: 2022. [Screenshot].

Research ethics

This section will clarify several points I made earlier and justify the stands I took regarding the methodology I built for this study, the intuitions I chose to follow, and the methodological conclusions I made.

Ethical concerns regarding autoethnography

I am checking my autoethnography with some of the relevant ethical issues raised by Ellis & Bochner around this research method and methodology (Ellis & Bochner, 2011):

Reliability

One can legitimately question many things here: my memory, honesty, and the accuracy of my reporting of events. I am also aware that I am necessarily transforming facts to write about them because “memory is fallible (...), it is impossible to recall or report on events in language that exactly represents how those events were lived and felt”. I chose to deal with this constraint using:

- direct reported speech only for situations I remembered distinctly (the quotes happen to be short),
- indirect reported speech when I could not perfectly remember the detailed content of a conversation but felt confident about reporting its intention accurately.

Relationality

“What could be easier than to write your body, write yourself, and write the heartlines?” (Mackinlay, 2019, p. 70) Dealing with relationality is definitely not, since “in using personal experience, autoethnographers not only implicate themselves with their work but also close, intimate others” (Adams, 2006; Etherington, 2007; Trahar, 2009). I tried to remain vague about the identity of people implicated in bullying situations or racist encounters. On the contrary, I deliberately chose to make some people identifiable, people close to me, part of my family, knowing I have their agreement to do so. Alternatively, making them invisible would kill my arguments. Nevertheless, it is not that simple. I still struggle with vulnerability. I am intellectually convinced it is the right way to go. However, I am emotionally conflicted because I need to deal

with reticence, shame, and fear of exposure that come to me, almost like it was the twisted and scary confirmation that I am challenging a dominant narrative.

I do not want to be giving cultural excuses or explanations for that; I simply want to put down that the challenge of overcoming these feelings is, at least for me, at the very center of this empowerment journey. As I am writing these lines, I still have not decided whether I should publish this thesis publicly or not.

Ethical concerns regarding interviews

Conversations, not interviews

For some reason, I have not felt comfortable with interviews despite us learning about semi-structured interviews and the feminist input regarding knowledge co-production. I believe something about the word interview was problematic for me. I am not a native English speaker, and in French (the language I usually write in), the word *interview*, borrowed from English, has at best, a journalistic connotation; at worst, it represents the “startupization” of the language of Molière. A lot has been written about decoloniality in interviewing. However, given the practical constraints of this assignment, I am basing the following reflection only on my understanding of Riadh Ghemmour’s article *Can interview method be decolonized?* (Ghemmour, 2020) since that text felt so close to my feelings on interviewing.

Ghemmour is not undermining the contribution of Feminist scholars in challenging the power relations between the researcher and the participants and promoting values like empathy to reach, together, co-constructed knowledge. Nevertheless, Ghemmour believes it is still worth asking how we can decolonize interviews “to better suit cultural and ethical practices of transnational and Indigenous communities.” (Ghemmour, 2020). During his fieldwork in Algeria, he chose to use

the word conversation instead of interview. I have not had the opportunity to read all of those authors from top to bottom, but this approach feels right. Not only will I, in turn, describe my interviews as conversations, but I will even dare to call them beauty conversations, flipping around the diminishing, condescending, and often misogynist claim about those conversations being superficial chit-chat between women who bring nothing to the table.

Turning bias into an asset

As explained earlier, I used my personal Instagram account to recruit participants. Therefore, I know all of them; some are friends, some are acquaintances or friends of friends, but none is a stranger to me. I anticipated that situation by only excluding my closest friends from this study only because it would have been even harder to limit the duration of our beauty conversations.

I do connect with the notions of “accountability and responsibility” (Haraway, 1988, p. 590), but I would like to push this intentionality one step further. Instead of focusing on the potential bias because I know my participants, I chose to see our relationality as an asset. The Indigenous researcher Shawn Wilson defines Indigenous research as a “ceremony of maintaining accountability to these relationships.” (Wilson, 2008). He emphasizes the importance of “relationality and relational accountability” (Wilson, 2008, p.7) between researcher and participants. In the case of this study, I know my participants, but they also know me. They know that I deeply care about them and their contributions. In return, I know they also care about me and how I will use the information they share with me. We hold ourselves accountable while developing ideas “through the formation of relationships” (Wilson, 2008, p.8) and deepening existing ones.

Trusting my participants and making them aware of their responsibility

Once I had their agreement of principle and their consent form signed, I tried to be as open as possible about the participants' preferences regarding the conversation we would have. Nowadays, conversations can happen in real life or not. They are joyous chaos of text and audio messages on different platforms, mainly when aiming at involving multilingual individuals who could tend to make written responses uniform but would naturally mix languages when speaking. I did not want to miss that, so I encouraged oral interactions as much as possible. The freedom I intended to have around these conversations was meant to make them the least intrusive possible and would allow them to feel safe, trusted, spontaneous, and vulnerable.

For the participants who chose to write to me, I did not give them a deadline, nor did I want to. I let them fully appropriate the project and fit it into their schedule, only indicating my final deadline to them, which also meant that I was never sure of the final number of conversations until quite late in the process. There were two consequences to that approach:

- I did not receive all their contributions at once. However, this particular setup did not disturb me much since I welcomed every person's temporality while working on other parts of my thesis.
- I ended up working on five conversations instead of the seven I was counting on when I listed the names. That drop did not particularly impact this study because of its qualitative aspect and the constraints of this assignment but it could have been problematic in a different context.

Honoring personal struggles and empowering journeys by giving them a name

Most beauty conversations are about women struggling to fit in, feel beautiful, and accept their body features. These conversations are also about journeys of overcoming these difficulties. As written earlier, I had a feeling the participants would want their names kept as such, so I offered that option in the consent form, breaking with the data processing instructions we received. I stored the data safely, but I did not change the names. Since they all asked me to use their real first name, that is how I will be quoting them in section III.

This debate seems to be ongoing since scholars like the Botswanan Bagele Chilisa “questioning the universal application of confidentiality and anonymity in social science research and argue that in some contexts in the developing world, these codes at times protect the individual at the expense of disempowered groups or even the community in general” (Chilisa, 2010, p.621). My interpretation is that anonymizing by default could feel like symbolic violence for people who are used to being essentialized and simplified, too often presented as homogenous groups. This study is an opportunity to be considered an individual with their subjectivity. Maybe participants who want their name to appear do seek the protection intended in data protection policies and want to feel heard and seen. From a decolonial perspective, I can only respect that, and I hope my examiners will too.

Theory

When I started brainstorming about a topic for this thesis, I was thirsty for theory and, more specifically, race theory. I wanted to learn more, and I wanted to educate myself by reading

decolonial authors. Eventually, I narrowed now my topic to adapt to the constraints of this assignment. Yet, I am so pleased I took this opportunity to dig into theoretical references I wanted to know more about. In this section, I will be recounting the thought process I went through to put together a relevant theoretical frame I can rely on for the rest of this study, around four main concepts: intersectionality, phenomenology, performativity, and culture. Moreover, I will present the main arguments I came up with based on these theoretical references, to be developed in the rest of this thesis.

Intersectionality

In continuity with the rest of this course, I approached this thesis from an intersectional perspective, a lens that allows me to apprehend the topic of this thesis relationally and in dynamics. In the early days of our program, I remember feeling confused and not understanding why intersectionality provoked such hostile reactions in the public debate. After reading Kimberlé Crenshaw, Nina Lyyke, and others, I feel I have now adopted this groundbreaking tool, and I am comfortable enough to use it as a way “to resist these hegemonic discourses” (Lyyke, 2010, p. 67) in this case, the hegemonic discourse about beauty. I will be using the intersectional lens to apply the relational ontology I mentioned earlier and analyze the intersecting discrimination women of color face when it comes to beauty.

Let us go back to Crenshaw’s original metaphor of traffic (Crenshaw, 1989) and apply it to beauty. Women of color find themselves at intersections that result from a combination of a multiplicity of beauty-related factors that are actually about their body features, such as hair texture and color, skin texture and color. They are de facto “multiply-burdened” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140) in relation to the Western beauty criteria that still dominate the beauty industry. Women of color may

apprehend beauty as managing constraints rather than enhancing their features as a prerequisite to look less ugly rather than more beautiful.

Beyond Crenshaw's coinage of "intersectionality," other feminist scholars, including in the Global South, have indicated a similar approach (to intersectionality) while acknowledging the power relations they were facing. In that same way, I do not wish to limit myself to making a list of intersections or using intersectionality to mask "political differences and an unequal distribution of power." (Saadawi, 1997, p. 150) but rather to make them visible and challenge them. By working on the Internet beauty culture, I intend to complexify the original intersection of class, race, and gender. I will be incorporating elements such as geographies, nationality, and language, supposedly made irrelevant by the Internet, to nuance primary perceptions and understandings of how African and African diaspora women may perceive themselves as non-American women of color.

Performativity

After watching many tutorial videos, I have caught myself more than once talking to my mirror faking a skincare or makeup tutorial, describing every step and product I was putting on in detail. During one of my one-woman shows with myself in my bathroom, I had an illumination about the performative aspect of what I was doing, realizing that styling felt like going from one version of myself to another as if I was getting ready to go on stage. I connected this first thought to the limited knowledge I had of Judith Butler's work and the performativity of gender (Butler, 2006) and decided to explore it, drawing a parallel between performing gender and performing a woman of color identity consolidated through beauty practices like hairstyling, makeup and skincare rituals. I will be interrogating feelings of belonging and exclusion in the light of the beauty

performance and question how beauty norms are policed. To do so, I used Butler's reference to gender policing to protect the norm: "policing gender is sometimes used as a way of securing heterosexuality." (Butler, 2006, p.13). I split that dynamic in two, referring to internal and external beauty policing, two concepts I will use to analyze my beauty journey and the beauty conversations I set up online. I am also referring to decolonial writers who problematized gender as a colonial category, such as Maria Lugones and Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, to put the conclusions I will draw in the light of Judith Butler's work, into perspective.

Phenomenology

Since our introduction to phenomenology with Lisa Guntram, I have wanted to deepen my understanding of it. Despite having studied humanities in France, I was never introduced to phenomenology; I had to wait to study at a Swedish university to discover it. This topic related to body experience and beauty practices called for a phenomenological approach and analysis of lived experiences, "approaching issues concerning the lived experience of marginalization, invisibility, non-normativity, and oppression." (Guntram, 2021). I am using feminist phenomenology to "(...) understand how subjects make sense of themselves in relation to the world around them and situate that meaning accorded to one situation or body to a wider societal and cultural context." (Guntram, 2021).

My argument was initially based on research I conducted on Simone de Beauvoir. Then, I found several relatable points to be incorporated into my analysis in Sara Ahmed's *Phenomenology of whiteness* (Ahmed, 2007), among them the notion of border, the role of emotions, the "noticeability of the arrival of some bodies more than others." (Ahmed, 2007, p.150).

In a second phase, I got to the phenomenology of race via Frantz Fanon and Lewis Gordon. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon is already mentioning “a serum for “denegrification” (Fanon, 2008, p.83) and deepens the political aspect of phenomenology to tackle racism. Fanon’s writings will allow me to question the racism women of color face regarding beauty and dig into essentialization, exoticization, and fetishization. Finally, I intend to build on Gordon’s creolization theory (Gordon, 2017) and Africana phenomenology (Gordon, 2008) to draw a parallel between Africana and Black Existentialism (Gordon, 2019) and what I believe to be Africana beauty, currently performed online and in real life among African and African diaspora women.

Culture

For years now, I have heard Anglophone activists and journalists talk about “cancel culture”, “rape culture”, corporate culture” and so on. It is only recently, maybe since #metoo, that those references were adopted in other languages I am familiar with, while often being criticized as Americanization. I decided to focus this research project on what I am referring to as the Internet beauty culture, but I never had the opportunity to dive into cultural studies until now.

According to Stuart Hall, culture is “the way we make sense, give meaning to the world” (Hall, 2018, 0:55). Consequently, beauty culture is the way we make sense of beauty and attach meaning to it, which means that culture holds tremendous power over us, the way we see others, and mainly the way we see ourselves (beautiful or not, and anything in between). There are many different beauty cultures, yet they are all dominated by the Western beauty culture globally, widespread across the world through colonization and slavery. This domination was made possible through the violent imposing of “conceptual maps” (Stuart, 1997), according to which, for instance, fair skin and straight hair are the best looking.

For Hall, culture is also “a system of representation” (Stuart, 1997). For decades, the beauty culture was mainly represented in magazines producing beauty images, Hollywood movies, and other outlets where white beauty was crushing anything else. Today, things are different online since anyone can produce content like makeup videos, tutorials, and editorial photos and share it on multiple platforms accessible to anyone: this is the Internet beauty culture. Because it is accessible to all, it holds a disruptive potential I will be looking to, especially for women of color. I will be working within the frame of critical media and cultural studies, suggesting a reinterpretation of the “Présence Africaine, Présence Européenne, and (...) Présence Américaine” (Hall, 2014, p.230), a metaphor Hall adopted from Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor. Along the same lines, I will explore the idea of an imagined community (Anderson, 1983) of women of color built and empowered online through beauty.

Previous research

I was interested in beauty before it became an Internet matter. In *Beauté fatale* [Fatal beauty], published in 2012, Mona Chollet allowed me to see beauty as a capitalist industry based on profit entirely and led me to Naomi Wolf’s *Beauty Myth* (1990), in which she makes similar points, but from a North American perspective, where everything seems to have started earlier. From that reading, a few years ago now, I remember Wolf’s point about women being raised against each other in a competition for the most beautiful. Those two references, which are not academic as such, introduced me to a critical perspective on the beauty industry and encouraged me to see it politically. However, none of them incorporated the Internet beauty culture because it did not, or barely, existed when those books were written, nor did they specifically include women of color

in their argument. As I started my research for this study, it became clear that I would need to look into academic and non-academic publications to get a big picture that, at least partially, resonates with my research questions. I noticed a double level of contrast within previous research that manifests the following way:

- **Numerous US-based references**, with studies conducted in America and probably written for a North American audience, **constitute the clear majority of results related to the beauty industry, women and color, and beauty**. That research tends to be categorized according to race: “Black Beauty,” “K-beauty.” Interestingly enough, those research categories also became shopping categories visible online and in stores. At this point, there is **very little research about** beauty online or **the Internet beauty culture**. Possible explanations for this first gap in knowledge could be the relative newness of the phenomena that recently expanded during the last couple of Covid-19 years, finding a new audience on a new platform: TikTok.
- **On the contrary, non-academic pop culture references worldwide** tackle various interconnected issues I will be exploring around the Internet beauty culture. I could probably mention dozens of podcast shows (like Jennifer Padjemi’s *Miroir, miroir*), hundreds of YouTube videos (like *Busting Brown Girl Beauty Myths* videos), and thousands of Instagram accounts (like [@curlynaturals](#), [@hrachisbeautiful](#), [@curlytalks](#)) and even more TikTok videos. I will briefly mention a few relevant references that could potentially be filling the knowledge gaps to be exposed in this section.

Previous academic research

I was able to find academic introductory information about the beauty industry as such in *Beauty Imagined: A History of the Global Beauty Industry* (Jones, 2010). The book describes a pre-digital era booming industry with growing profits, led by very few powerful companies (Jones, p.2). It goes back to the creation of marketed beauty and the need to feel beautiful, targeting women as their major consumers, far from the realities in what they refer to as “past societies” (Jones, p.6) like Ancient Greece, where men were very much concerned by beauty rituals. In this book, “decolonizing beauty” (Jones, p.287) is mainly seen from a North American and African American perspective, indicating a “shift in American self-image, from being less of a “melting pot” to more of a “mosaic.” (Jacobsohn, 2006) in the 1970s with the emergence of a “new interest in products which were more appropriate for ethnicities other than white.” (Jones, p.294). The mosaic survived the 1970s to become the most common way to display makeup in stores, online, and in advertisements nowadays. In a chart entitled “The World’s Largest Beauty Companies in 2008” by revenues, Jones gives a clear picture of a Western, North American dominated global beauty market (Procter & Gamble is first, Colgate Palmolive is fourth, Estée Lauder is fifth) with European actors like the French L'Oréal at the second position, followed by the British-Dutch Unilever (Jones, p.372). The following section will compare this data from 2008 with more recent ratings.

Colorism and its consequences on women of color in the United States are present in various references. In an article by Margaret Hunter, “*If You’re Light You’re Alright*”: *Light Skin Color as Social Capital for Women of Color* (Hunter, 2002), they conclude that “skin color hierarchies that continue to privilege light skin over dark skin” (Hunter, p.190). The main victims of this

stratification in American society are Mexican American and African American women, whose features are associated with “ignorance and ugliness” (Hunter, p.190). Asian women also face discrimination. *Is Lighter Better? : Skin-Tone Discrimination among Asian Americans* (Rondilla & Spickard, 2007) tackles colorism too, focusing on the obsession with white skin among the Asian community in the US, all the way to plastic surgery. Margaret Hunter, this time in *Race, Gender, and the Politics of Skin Tone*, makes an interesting point about American cultural imperialism exporting racialized images from America in a globalized world, justifying, for instance, the recourse to plastic surgery in Mexico and South Korea. The Research Cluster for the Study of Women of Color in Conflict and Collaboration based at the University of California, Santa Cruz published *Beyond the Frame: Women of Color and Visual Representation*, edited by Angela Davis and Neferti in 2005. This group work explores the importance of visual images in the identities of women of color, seen as “a set of critical reading strategies (...) for addressing racializing, sexualizing, and gendering forms of oppression.” (Tadiar et al.p.5). It aims to illustrate “postcolonial, Third World, and transnational feminisms” (Tadiar et al. p.5), from a Chicana female soldier to plastic surgery in Peru by way of “Hybrid Hawaiians” (Tadiar et al. p.153). However, none of the 12 chapters include African women as part of what is supposed to be a broad and global reflection on the representation of women of color, and I can only ask why.

I accessed several research projects conducted about beauty in and on the African American community in the United States. Among those references, *Styling Jim Crow: African American Beauty Training During Segregation* (Kirk Blackwelder, 2003) recounts African American beauty and its professionalization within legal racial segregation, creating licensed schools to “teach” beauty. In *Contested Images: Women of Color in Popular Culture* (Garcia, 2012) beauty images

as fully incorporated into popular culture images and TV, music, and films. It shows how African American women have challenged white beauty norms and opened a conversation about “black beauty liberation” (Garcia, p.117). More on political Black Beauty in *Black Beauty: Aesthetics, Stylization, Politics* (Tate, 2009). This book thoroughly explores the current features of Black Beauty, from Black blondes like Beyoncé to browning and fake tan. Tate asks an essential question about the importance of stylization, potentially overcoming fixed beauty identities. They argue in favor of a hybrid black beauty that “is so clearly about multiplicity and the hybridity produced by stylization’s many possibilities” (Tate, p.144). Tate states that Black Beauty should not be about who is looking “Black enough” or who is mimicking white beauty, but rather about reinventing a Black beauty in motion, a “Black beauty citizenship” (Tate, p145). Interestingly enough, Tate suggests that race continues “to assign worth and value in the beauty hierarchy” “in the Caribbean, the UK, Latin America, and North America” (Tate, p.152) but oddly, does not mention Africa. I could not help but notice that the call for a hybrid Black beauty conducted within the “Black Atlantic diaspora” (Tate, p.159) does not include the African side of that same Atlantic Ocean. This observation made me want to check the references to Africa; they were very few in the entire book. On the one hand, Tate states that “Black” and “African diasporic” are interchangeable: “When I say Black here like the research participants who also use this term, I mean ‘African diasporic.’ (Tate, p.146) and on the other, African diaspora seems like a fixed definition in time and space, not considering contemporary African diasporas worldwide. Africanness seems only to be seen as a heritage, boxed in the past, not considered a space or people who could actually be part of a contemporary conversation about beauty.

Previous non-academic research

Non-academic references feel much more in tune with the times. In a study published in *Forbes* magazine (Bladt, 2019) and shared in *Vogue*, we are not talking about the beauty companies that generate the most significant revenues but the “most influential” ones (Bladt, 2019). Looking into the media value of these luxury cosmetics companies indicates a significant shift in an industry that has been digitalized in the last few years, enhancing a clear contrast with the 2008 study presented earlier. In 2019, American (Nars) but mostly French companies (Lancôme, Dior, and Laura Mercier) remained on top of the now-transformed beauty industry, active online and selling internationally.

This short overview would not be complete without the memorable mention of beauty taken online in Obama’s America by a Nigerian Black young woman in *Americanah* (Ngozi Adichie, 2013), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s bestseller. Her main character Ifemelu discovers race, uprooting, and love almost all at once. Hair becomes the main topic of a blog she starts online as her hair carries an identity she is (re)building: “Relaxing your hair is like being in prison. You’re caged in. Your hair rules you. You didn’t go running with Curt today because you don’t want to sweat out this straightness. You’re always battling to make your hair do what it wasn’t meant to do. If you go natural and take good care of your hair, it won’t fall off like it’s doing now.” (*Americanah*, Chapter 20, p. 208)

I. Effortless French beauty: a myth in decline?

I will proceed to a text and discourse analysis of two makeup tutorials, starting with *French vs. USA makeup*, interested in unpacking the rise of a new generation of American beauty products and the relative decline of the French beauty myth. In this first video⁸, the Romanian, Paris-based makeup artist and YouTuber Andreea Ali resorts to a popular format, dividing her face into two parts. On the right side, she performs what she considers American makeup and, on the other, a French one, presenting two different dominant makeup cultures and the iconic products associated with each and the differences between them. I am also guessing a good clickbait⁹ title, building on France and the US's old love and hate relationship, never hurts.

Figure 3: YouTuber Andreea Ali putting on red lipstick on the French side of her face.



Note: Ali. A. 2022. [Screenshot]. YouTube. [URL](#)

⁸ 985,983 views on May 17th, data available on YouTube.

⁹ Clickbait: (on the internet) content whose main purpose is to attract attention and encourage visitors to click on a link to a particular web page. Definition by Oxford Languages.

For obvious reasons, Andreea Ali insists on comparing without classifying these two makeup cultures. Each one comes with a different definition of beauty and a different practical approach. I did not choose to include this source in my thesis to question Andreea Ali's expertise as a professional makeup artist but rather to build on her video to better understand the current state of the Internet beauty industry, focusing on makeup. I also thought language would be more interesting to look at from the perspective of another non-native English speaker.

1. A cheeky French approach to beauty

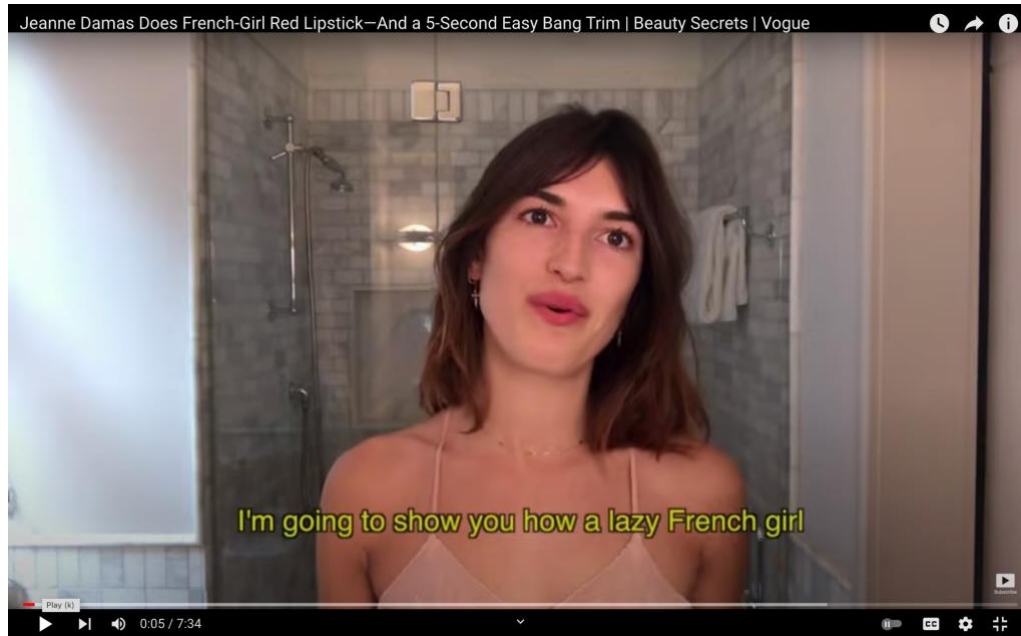
In this video, Andreea Ali describes how French women do their makeup as she imitates them, step by step. "French women are so into skincare" (Ali, 2022, 1:01) more than they are into makeup." They don't actually use foundation" (Ali, 2022, 2:16), and if they do, "they would want something super super lightweight" (Ali, 2022, 3:12). Not only do they not use primer, but they do not understand its point and the same goes for contour: "They don't do contour." (Ali, 2022, 7:43), **blush** "they think it's a little clownish." (Ali, 2022, 12:37) and highlighter "they don't want to shine" (Ali, 2022, 13:08). Because they are so liberated, "a lot of (French) women they use their fingers when it comes to applying products on the face" (Ali, 2022, 3:37). I had a disturbing déjà-vu as I was making this analysis. It reminded me of another makeup tutorial from the Vogue Beauty Secrets series, starring Jeanne Damas, a French "it girl". In this second video¹⁰, Damas personifies to perfection the description Ali made of so-called French women.

Figures 4 to 9: *Jeanne Damas putting on makeup "the French way".*

Note: Damas. J. 2018. [Screenshots]. YouTube. [URL](#)

¹⁰ 3,198,686 views, on May 17th, data available on YouTube.

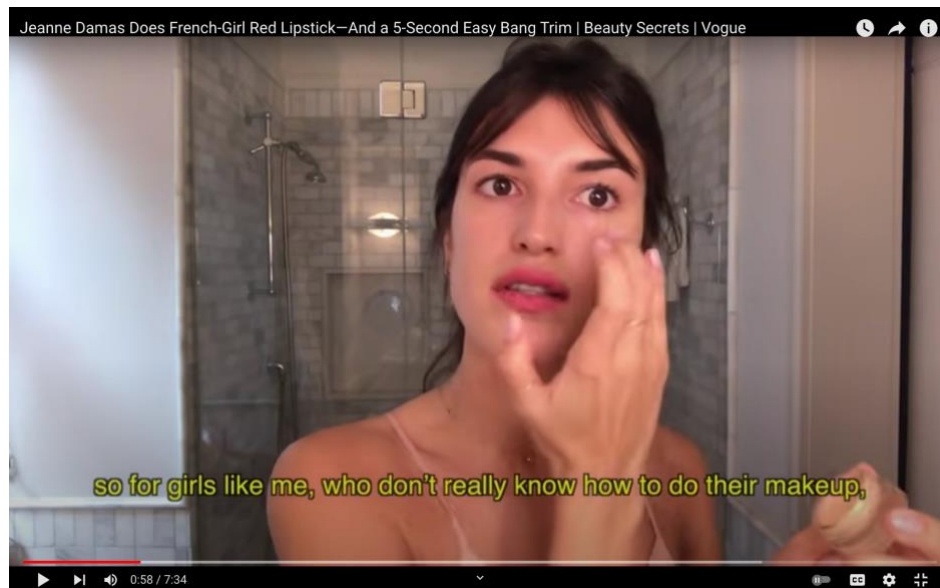
Damas is French; therefore, she is “lazy” (Damas, 2018, 0:05)



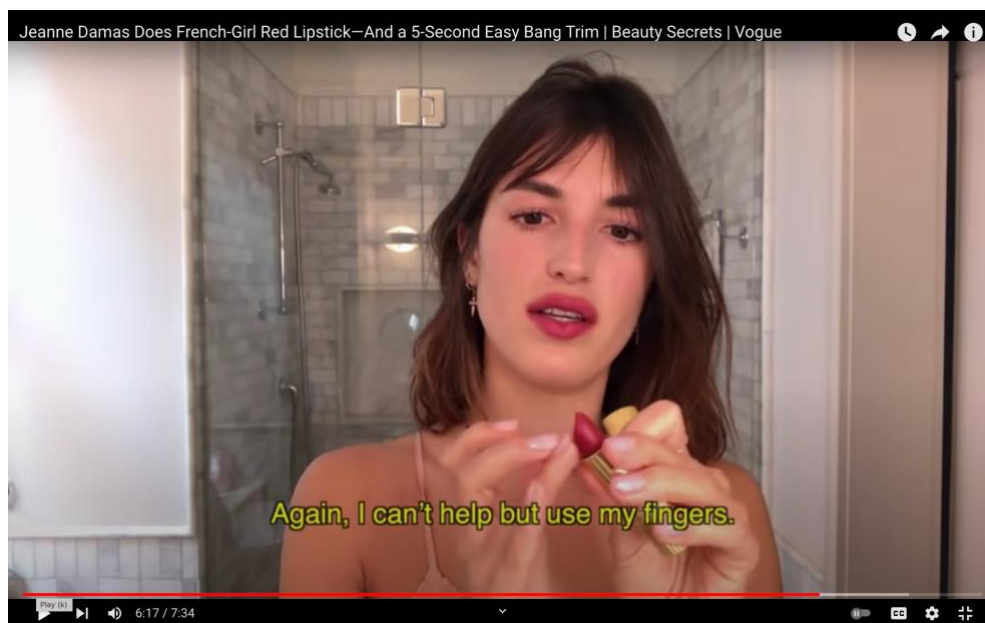
She eats croissants for breakfast (and does not get fat), but “always before lipstick though.”
(Damas, 2018, 3:28).



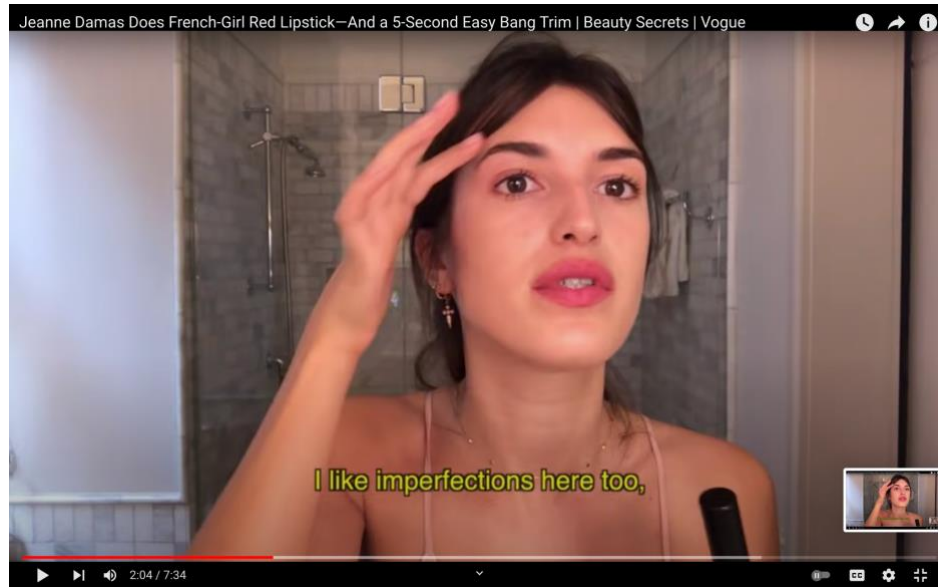
And we are made to believe that a model that owns a makeup brand does not “really know how to do their makeup” (Damas, 2018, 0:58).



As anticipated Damas just “can’t help” but use her fingers (Damas, 2018, 6:17).



She “likes imperfections” (Damas, 2018, 2:04)



She likes them a lot.



Maybe because she does not have any?

2. The myth of the Parisienne

This overlap is probably not a coincidence. According to the French-British fashion journalist Alice Pfeiffer, Jeanne Damas (and others like Catherine Deneuve, Carla Bruni, and Charlotte Gainsbourg) capitalize on the myth of *la Parisienne*, far from the average French girl (Pfeiffer, 2019). In an interview she gave the *Madame Figaro*, Pfeiffer defines the Parisian as “une femme bourgeoise, hétéro, blanche, filiforme” [a white bourgeois skinny heterosexual woman] (Forgar, 2019) which could explain why “in French culture, if you have a tan, if you have been in the sun, you look beautiful, you look more healthy.” (Ali, 2022, 8:23). Pfeiffer argues that the Parisienne has become “un objet de consommation mondialisé” [a globalized consumption object] (Forgar, 2019), an avatar invented to sell beauty products and fashion worldwide; Andreea Ali falling for it is (one among many) living proof, showing that the *Parisienne* myth is still profitable in business, notably online (Etancelin, 2020).

3. The privilege of self-love

At face value, the French beauty philosophy described by Andreea Ali seems overall encouraging and positive: “It’s not about looking perfect, it’s about making yourself look a little bit better.” (Ali, 2022, 6:09). Against the current and impressive makeup performances available online, “most of the women I talk to, they don’t want to change their face with makeup like who they are”(Ali, 2022, 6:14). Not hiding behind makeup sounds excellent, but this approach to beauty is only valid for an elite who can afford to look effortless and beautiful. Indeed, the Parisian “ne porte pas le voile et n'a pas besoin de se lisser les cheveux” [does not wear a headscarf nor does she need to straighten her hair] (Forgar, 2019). The Parisian “s'inscrit dans un modèle universaliste” [falls

within the scope of (French) universalism] (Forgar, 2019) and therefore fails women at the intersection of class and race.

4. The new language of beauty

On the American side of her face, Andreea Ali puts a strong accent on the variety of the products she uses, indicating a “difference also in terms of consumption” (Ali, 2022, 26:14) in a country where it’s all about consuming” (Ali, 2022, 26:25) and glowing (Ali, 2022, 13:12). It does not surprise that Americans own more makeup and makeup tools and therefore put on “a lot more than what I see women wearing in Paris.” (Ali, 2022, 5:09). Eyeliner, concealer, primer, blush, contour stick, blush, highlighter, bronzer, beauty blender, gloss, top-coat, glow, and nude are as many American makeup innovations as words that barely translate. The French tried, of course, in vain. Those words were directly incorporated into the language of beauty and remain in English. Their resistance to translation indicates a double-domination of the American beauty industry, producing and disseminating both makeup and makeup culture via its Newspeak. Consequently, English has become the new language of beauty, giving US-based influencers a privileged position in the Internet beauty culture.

5. Nude, not neutral

Andreea Ali never mentions race; nevertheless, it is the subtext of two points she makes about American makeup:

- The first may feel like a stretch, but it does say a lot. “US loves a good nude lipstick.” (Ali, 2022, 21:18). “when it comes to French brands (...), they do create neutral colors but never like a statement nude.” (Ali, 2022, 21:42). Neutral is not nude. There are as many nudes as there are complexions, so American brands offering “statement nude” lipsticks simply

means they sell a variety of colors, a reflection of their consumers. She refers to indie brands, mostly brands born online. It comes as the first indication of the role of race in makeup in this video.

- The second is about the unavoidable Kardashians, who have “transformed the whole makeup industry” (Ali, 2022, 25:50). Recent plastic surgery and outrageous wealth put aside, the Kardashians were, at the beginning of their reality TV show (2007), women of color with unprecedented visibility, probably more relatable than most beauty icons at the time like Paris Hilton to quote only the best-known example.

Figure 10: *Paris Hilton, a pop icon of the 2000s.*

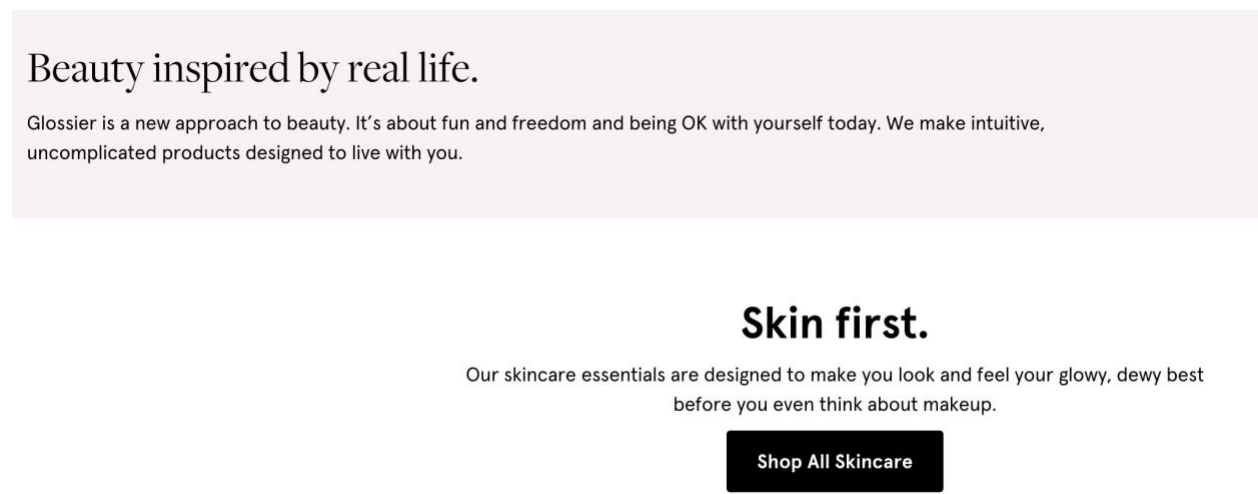


Note: Hilton. P. 2022. [Screenshot]. Instagram. [URL](#)

6. A healthy beauty philosophy?

The *Parisienne* was probably hard to identify with for women of color from the beginning. However, she could continue as long as other beauties and other products did not challenge her. As we said earlier, the Internet beauty culture did not disqualify the *Parisienne*, but it created space for others. Was it impossible? Certainly not. The American Internet-born brand Glossier is an example out of many. They managed to build their entire image on putting skincare first, minimizing makeup, and not taking it too seriously.

Figure 11: *Glossier's home page.*



Note: Glossier. 2022. [Screenshot]. [URL](#)

Glossier advocates for a pacified approach to beauty and showcasing the diversity of its customers at every step of the shopping experience.

Figure 12: *Finding the right shade.*

Select your Stretch Concealer shade



Tip: Pat Stretch Concealer over dark circles, onto pimples, or wherever you please. The formula blends in seamlessly for a natural-looking, undetectable finish. Want more coverage? Add more. It's buildable.



Note: Glossier. 2022. [Screenshot]. [URL](#)

Americans have come a long way. A generation ago, they were not looked up to them regarding beauty. Today, they are in the avant-garde of makeup, ruling over the makeup language and dominating the industry and the Internet beauty culture. I understand that French beauty lost its leading position because of its incapacity to accept and include racial diversity in its narrow model. Like on other matters, French (beauty) philosophy (about freedom and self-acceptance) is far from a reality that fails miserably at including all. Worse, it reinforces exclusion while making it all seem easy. I also believe that the current American hegemony over makeup does not only come from industrial domination. Opening to racial diversity, inventing new products but making them for all skin colors, lip colors, hair colors, and textures was a game-changer: new customers generate more profits, and money has no color. Be that as it may, the access of women of color to makeup is unquestionably at the very center of the industry's transformation globally.

II. The rise of commodified American beauty for women of color: the example of Fenty Beauty by Rihanna.

Fenty Beauty by Rihanna, launched in 2017, is considered the most disruptive event in the industry in the last few years. Its success ever since illustrates the shift toward women of color forementioned. This section is not about making an apologist argument for Rihanna but rather comparing her personal discourse about Fenty and how she got into makeup in the beginning based on the About section of the website of Fenty Beauty (Fenty Beauty + Fenty Skin, n.d.) displaying her brands' positioning, and an interview she gave to the New York Times entitled *Rihanna on Race* (Garcia, 2019).

Other famous American women of color and, more specifically, singers like Alicia Keys and Selena Gomez have respectively created their skincare brand (Keys) and makeup line (Rare). Those brands rely on those celebrities' fame and image to prosper. I was curious to make this comparison between Rihanna and Fenty specifically to check how aligned her vision and her brand's vision would be and I quickly noticed a significant gap in discourse about race.

1. Racial inclusivity, but make it sexy

The *About* section of the Fenty Beauty website is almost written like a biography of Rihanna, situating her as “a little girl in Barbados” (Fenty Beauty + Fenty Skin, n.d.), which almost sounds like the beginning of a fairy tale for the entire world to read.

The tiny island of the Caribbean and an ex-British colony is not the typical setup for international success, but it is Rihanna's, conveyed with a fair amount of pride. Her peripheral situatedness sets the tone for the rest of this statement. Makeup is progressively introduced around Rihanna's resilience, relating to the lexical field of war as “makeup became her weapon of choice for self-expression” that “powered a fearless take on beauty.”

Figure 13: *The little girl from Barbados.*



Note: Rihanna. 2021. [Screenshot]. Instagram. [URL](#)

Although we are unsure what she is fighting against, Rihanna uses makeup to fight. The singer noticed “a void in the industry” despite her “experimenting with the best-of-the-best in beauty” as an internationally renowned performer. Fenty Beauty was launched “so that people everywhere would be included.” Inclusion is framed around geographies here, giving Fenty a global ambition from the start. This focus on geography (from the beginning of the text with Barbados) reveals a tiptoeing around race even though Rihanna’s Fenty brand is built around the rhetoric of racial diversity. Fenty Beauty’s launch was so widely talked about because the brand offered an unprecedented range of brown and black shades, filling that void previously mentioned with 40 colors of foundation that would soon become 50.

Figure 14: 50 shades of foundation.



Note: Fenty Beauty. 2022. [Screenshot]. Instagram. [URL](#)

On Fenty’s website, those black and brown shades lost their color to be referred to as “traditionally hard-to-match skin tones.”, hard-to-match and previously unavailable to non-white women. Fenty starts sounding like our Parisienne from the previous section, targeting and appropriating both “universal” shades and aiming at offering makeup that can be used “effortlessly.” Playfulness and creativity are also emphasized in the last couple of sentences presented as a quote from Rihanna herself.

Figure 15: *Rihanna's advice.*



**"MAKEUP IS THERE FOR YOU TO PLAY
WITH. IT'S THERE FOR YOU TO HAVE FUN
WITH. IT SHOULD NEVER FEEL LIKE
PRESSURE, AND IT SHOULD NEVER FEEL
LIKE A UNIFORM."**

- RIHANNA
FOUNDER, CEO & AND OWNER OF FENTY BEAUTY

Note: Fenty Beauty. 2022. [Screenshot]. [URL](#)

In the selected interview Rihanna gave the New York Times, she is, on the contrary, all about race. She goes through all the main arguments developed in Fenty's About section, this time emphasizing her blackness on every occasion and identifying first and foremost "as a black woman" (Garcia, 2019). The "void in the industry" she noticed is described in more precise terms here as a "void in the market for dark foundation" and "didn't even really know how bad it was" (Garcia, 2019). Fenty wants "people everywhere" to feel included (Fenty Beauty + Fenty Skin, n.d.) when Rihanna "said she offered black women something they couldn't find on the shelves at Sephora." (Garcia, 2019). She goes back to the emotion that came with the feeling of representation her first customers experienced "finding their complexion on the shelf" (Garcia, 2019), calling it "a groundbreaking moment" (Nnadi, 2018). In this interview, "the little girl from Barbados" (Fenty Beauty + Fenty Skin, n.d.) becomes a child growing up seeing diversity with a "half black, half white" father" (Garcia, 2019) and a mother "black from South America" (Garcia, 2019). The sincerity of Rihanna's approach to diversity is way more convincing after contextualizing it as her "reality" and "not a box to tick off" (Garcia, 2019).

One could argue that the gap in discourse between these two texts comes only from their different nature. I cannot help the limits of the embodiment of Fenty by Rihanna in the sense that she, as an individual, seems more than ready to talk about race. At the same time, it is wholly erased from her brand while being the very reason why Fenty started in the first place. This paradox suggests that it is still not recommended to openly talk about race in the beauty industry, even for a brand that was literally built on race diversity and even for Rihanna's brand. If not her, then who else?

2. Racial inclusivity, but make it luxury

As I was working on this project, Fenty Beauty and Rihanna made posts on Instagram announcing their products are now available in 8 African countries, Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, Namibia, Botswana, Ghana, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

Figure 16: *Making history?*



Note: Fenty Beauty. 2022. [Screenshot]. Instagram. [URL](#)

Access is presented as a geographical issue only, an issue that just got solved by the previous announcement, sufficient to be “making history” (Rihanna, 2022). Nevertheless, the access to commodified beauty holds onto a significant financial aspect that I will examine here. In Table 1, I compare the price of a foundation (Fenty’s iconic product) in those 8 African countries, trying to get an understanding of how much that amount represents in comparison with each local gross average monthly income per capita, using data from the Word Bank from 2019¹¹

Table 1: *Price of foundation across 8 African countries, in comparison with income.*

Country	Gross Average monthly income per capita in US dollars (2019)	Price of a Fenty Beauty foundation in US dollars¹² (2022)
USA	5492,5	38
Botswana	638,3	54
South Africa	503,3	41.14
Namibia	431,7	41.16
Ghana	184,2	48.72

¹¹ See References, *Le classement des salaires par pays*, n.d.

¹² or converted in US dollars for the rest of the countries.

Nigeria	169,2	61.98
Kenya	145,8	51,17
Zambia	119,2	47.57
Zimbabwe	100	46

This quick simulation within the limitations of this study shows that, whatever the country, Fenty's foundation is systematically more expensive in any of the 8 African countries in question than in the US, despite significantly lower revenues. One can question the pertinence of a World Bank indicator such as the Gross Average monthly income per capita. Nevertheless, it is still helpful to make a trend emerge here. In the US (and the Global North in general), Fenty is not an expensive brand and belongs to the lowest price range on a multibrand store like Sephora. The product's value changes once exported to African countries, without the product changing at all. Racially diverse makeup becomes a luxury commodity in Africa, which does not seem to be a problem for Fenty, who build a business model to secure profits in those countries by selling only to the most fortunate.

3. Racially inclusive beauty remains unfair

Rihanna's Fenty brand might positively affect the self-image of non-white women in the USA and globally, but only through participation as consumers. Those consumers buy products of a singer-performer who might be from Barbados but remains a native English speaker who made her career as a global entertainer through the power of America's cultural industries. Fenty's ambition is global and has started showing notably through market openings in Africa, but only available to

the wealthiest. So partaking in this racially diverse beauty culture is highly costly and, therefore, even more, exclusive outside of America. This new accessibility comes with a price, aggravated in the Global South, and generates revenues that benefit companies from the Global North in the vast majority, not challenging existing economic power dynamics. When affordable, this new access to beauty might also entail a certain degree of North-Americanization of the language, aesthetics, and lifestyle choices.

III. An autoethnography of my beauty journey: from cosmetic misery to the utopia of Africana beauty.

In this section, I use autoethnography to document and analyze my beauty journey, to put it in perspective with the results of the beauty conversations I had with African and African diaspora women recruited online. As a matter of fact, I went through the exact same dynamic regarding my consumption of beauty products. For most of my life, French beauty was the most accessible foreign beauty industry and got exported massively in Morocco. Almost all haircare and skincare sold around me came from France. I used to look up to the myth of the *Parisienne* before it became boring for me: there were too many rules preventing me from having fun with myself. For a few years now, I have noticed a progressive decline in the number of French beauty products I own, while American, racially inclusive products from Internet brands started piling up on my bathroom shelves.

1. The end of cosmetic misery

While the French and the Americans were fighting over beauty, women worldwide were stuck in cosmetic misery. Cosmetic misery is characterized by a minimal offer of beauty products for

women of color and potentially harmful ones. It dates back to when it was both more convenient and more accepted, not to say heavily encouraged, to put tremendous efforts, time and money into blending in white beauty standards. Actually, until very recently, white beauty was “worldly” (Ahmed, 2007, p.150) in the sense that “it disappears as a category through experience” (Ahmed, 2007, p.150). Beauty practices like hair strengthening and relaxing, and skin-lightening were normalized entirely and still are, to a sizeable extent.

I never saw my mother with her natural hair in 32 years. She used to relax her hair at home, using an American relaxing product available at the supermarket. I remember a Black woman on the box and the smell of that chemical product so distinctly. They existed for kids too. Another smell I remember perfectly is the skin-bleaching cream Fair & Lovely that Ghizlane, the housekeeper that was working for us used to wear.

“I chemically straightened my hair since I was a little girl (that means my mother made the decision), as did every black girl I knew or saw. When I asked my mother why she did that, she said my hair was so thick and dry and curly that it was the only solution. Since y Erasmus year in Germany when I was 23, I keep my hair in its natural texture but ditched the flat-iron only 4 or 5 years ago. Now my haircut is extremely short, basically shaved, but back when I had longer hair, I would never have dreamed of going out with my hair undone.”
(Rabi, personal communication, May 9th, 2022).

[When I was a teenager, I had the need to straighten my curly hair, to have fair skin. I would tell myself that people would like me if I looked like that, that boys would like me. I tried chemical hair relaxation, and I literally lost my hair; I had to wear a bandana. It was a big trauma. Then I stopped caring. Beauty was time-consuming, non-enjoyable, and

painful.] (**Rana, personal communication, April 27th, 2022**). [My translation from French and Moroccan Arabic].

“My relationship with beauty rituals started very late. Everything felt like an injunction. I always loved braids, but at the same time, I felt ashamed about my hair; I hated it. Today, I need to stimulate my hair growth through injections because I lost so much hair via chemical treatments. It is really hard.” (**Grace, personal communication, May 20th, 2022**). [My translation from French].

2. Finally catching up

The rise of the Internet beauty culture finally gave me access to good quality products, all the way to clean and luxury products, specific to carnations, hair, and skin textures like mine. All I could hope for were better “maybe compatible” options for a long time.

[For years, I fought to find the right products so that my curls could resemble the ones I saw on TV. It has been a long journey. The way I felt about this changed significantly. Between teenagehood and 28, I was just looking for good-enough products.] (**Shama, personal communication, May 3rd, 2022**). [My translation from French and Moroccan Arabic].

From a “developing world” perspective, this change certainly comes with excitement and the urge to catch up with the rest of the world or the West. It comes from a deeply-rooted imposed version of what being developed means, led by the “developed countries.” This constant feeling of being late is not new and not specific to beauty; it is actually incarnated in those three letters “-ing” which

is why I usually choose not to refer to the “developing” world or countries whatsoever. Growing up with foreign TV and magazines only aggravated this feeling because of all the things we could watch and not do. It had less to do with class than with geographies, at least in the 1990s. Unavailability and rarity made all these objects, products, and activities even more attractive. Today, I believe that urge got even stronger with the impact of the never-ending content on social media and the deeper marketization of new aspects of life, like beauty and I can only imagine teenage girls in Nigeria or South Africa when Rihanna announced Fenty Beauty would soon be available for them too.

“I spent my whole childhood in Conakry, Guinea. The mainstream media there was hosted by Black people, but at the same time, I have been craving Black culture since I was a little girl. Black culture came from Africa but mainly from the US: I loved watching US “Black” TV shows and reading US Black magazines.” **(Rabi, personal communication, May 9th, 2022).**

[Of course, Rihanna! She inspires me a lot; she made me wanna wear gloss that has the color of my lips. I refrained from wearing gloss because I have big lips and thought it would look vulgar on me. Now I don’t give a crap; I love it; it set me free. This is how I became interested in makeup. Now, I feel so happy to do my beauty routines; I feel connected with my body, hair, and skin; I am trying to be extra gentle and caring. I feel powerful, beautiful, and alive.] **(Grace, personal communication, May 20th, 2022).** [My translation from French].

3. Beauty policing dies hard

One of my early thoughts about this thesis was connecting gender to beauty to explore different aspects of it like norms and “informal practices like bullying try to keep us in our gendered place” (Butler, 2011, 2:14). To prove this point, I appropriated gender policing into two forms of beauty policing.

Insider beauty policing

In my experience, what I have decided to refer to as insider beauty policing comes from family members, the immediate community, and generally, people who are still blending in for whatever reason and feel triggered to see the opposite taking place in front of their eyes.

Recently, I ran into an ex-classmate I had not seen in 15 years, who had been straightening her hair since high school. When she saw me, she touched my hair without asking. She threw a million questions about my hair at me, questions she already had the answers to, pretending to be amazed by my responses. Her questions sounded like she lived on a remote island in the Arctic and had never seen someone with curly hair before (while living in Morocco and having curly hair herself). Her questions were a not-so-subtle way to express her distress to me that I go out looking like a “broom” after what she immediately said: “I have a broom on my head too, you know.”

[My mother hates that I’m wearing my hair natural and argues that I don’t know how to take care of it, that it looks bad. She prefers when my hair is braided. There is huge pressure about that, and I realize it also has to do with generations.] (**Grace, personal communication, May 20th, 2022**). [My translation from French].

“I have very dark skin, and from a very young age, other black people used to make fun of me because of it. One family member, a woman, told me I could have been pretty, but unfortunately, my skin was too dark. Interestingly enough, those comments never once came from white people.” **(Rabi, personal communication, May 9th, 2022).**

[I don’t feel confident about my physical appearance at all, partly because of comments I got from my entourage. I never talk about that; I deliberately let people believe the opposite. Still, the truth is I really don’t love myself.] **(Rana, personal communication, April 27th, 2022).** [My translation from French].

Outsider beauty policing

Outsider beauty policing situations are as many illustrations of the narrowness of representations of women of color in mainstream culture and can lead to exoticization and fetishization, by the white gaze, but not exclusively. Outsider beauty policing resonates with what Sara Ahmed calls the “noticeability of the arrival of somebodies” (Ahmed, 2007, p.149). My Internet reality is curated, and non-white bodies are part of it. That is the result of my algorithm at work on my various applications. Nevertheless, the noticeability of non-white bodies, mine included, is still very real in public space, and it strikes me every time: “people blink, and look again” (Ahmed, 2007, p.159) while “white bodies do not have to face their whiteness” (Ahmed, 2007, p.156). The gap I now perceive between my Internet reality and real-life confuses me in going from invisible to super visible most of the time.

“I was so outside of the beauty canon that there was no point attempting to look pretty. Then, as a grown woman, I felt more pressured to look « well put together » in professional settings and everyday life.” (Meriem, **personal communication, May 1st, 2022**).

[In my previous job, when I started wearing my hair natural, my manager told me: “We’re meeting with the client, you’re gonna tie your hair, right? You don’t look very professional right now.” I was shocked....] (Shama, **personal communication, May 3rd, 2022**). [My translation from French and Moroccan Arabic].

Obviously, beauty policing did not disappear with the ability to access racially diverse beauty, and “overcoming the police function” (Butler, 2011, 2:29) is a fight on multiple and simultaneous battlefields.

Things I have been told by total strangers:

At a party: “You look so exotic; where are you from?”

“You look like a slave!”

“Good evening, Scheherazade!”

“You look like a princess of the Arabian Nights.”

At a wedding: “You look great tonight, so exotic!”

In the street: “You look like Missandei from Game of Thrones! You don’t know her? She was a slave. Don’t look so glum; she became the queen’s assistant; she’s gorgeous!”

Overall, it is a loop going back and forth between feeling too much and not enough:

- Feeling too much because not making efforts to go unnoticed results in extra-noticeability.

- Feeling not enough because of the recurrent projections of being assigned diminishing identity assignments without control over them.

4. A reflection on beauty heritage

The arrival of a new beauty culture in my life has opened a broader reflection on beauty heritage.

“My fellow Algerian women attempt to look lighter skin and straighten hair. I have turned away from these standards. But perhaps there are older rituals I need to rediscover.” (Meriem, personal communication, May 1st, 2022).

I realized that what I like the most about the beauty products I own now is that they feel scientific. I like that skin serums come in little bottles with a pipette; I can check their formulas, I enjoy learning how and where light reflects on a face, and I like experimenting with textures and colors. This list goes longer, but my point is that I like this position of learning about beauty in an area that could probably qualify as physics and chemistry. I feel empowered because I learn, I feel in control of what I am doing, and I can notice progress while sharing that so-called scientific knowledge.

Beauty presented as science feels wholly opposed to the traditional beauty rituals in my culture that I always perceived as approximate. I used to disregard those same rituals; they did not appeal to me. I did not like the smell of henna tattooing or the color. I remember that the little girls who would come to school with henna tattoos after a holiday or a wedding would be mocked and called provincial. Argan trees are endemic in Morocco and putting argan oil on the face is a traditional anti-aging Amazigh beauty ritual. Again, I disliked its smell, and I had to see it appropriated by

Western brands and sold in nice packaging to consider it for myself. The same goes for hammam skin exfoliation with black soap looked too brutal for me compared to the gentle, colorful body scrubs that smell like candy sold in the West.

“It is important for me to perpetuate some of the beauty rituals from Senegal in my daily routine today, part as a habit inherited from my childhood, part because it actually makes me happy to give space to my African culture in my very Parisian lifestyle. Those traditional beauty rituals happen to be the ones that are actually good for me, my body, and my soul. My skin and hair require care that is different from White people. The people I look up to in terms of beauty or all Black people, mostly family. Alicia Key hasn’t aged in the last 20 years, so I do the same: as little as possible and no makeup for two years now.”

(Rabi, personal conversation, May 9th, 2022).

[I accepted faster the beauty practices that were turned mainstream, were made acceptable by global mainstream culture, like wearing braids, and turbans. Getting rid of the rejection, the brutality, the shame, and accepting and loving my natural hair took me longer.] **(Grace, personal communication, May 20th, 2022).** [My translation from French].

My attitude towards traditional Moroccan beauty started changing after the West had somehow validated these beauty practices. Only then did it feel valid to incorporate them into my routines, informed of the benefits of these beauty practices that I once considered not good enough for me.

5. Curated protest beauty culture on demand

Getting knowledge on the Internet is massively disrupting how beauty culture was transmitted beforehand, within the family and the immediate community. As much as traditional beauty culture

created lasting, efficient beauty rituals like the ones I cited, it lacks knowledge on certain aspects, typically hair.

I was lucky enough not to be pressured to change my physical appearance among my close family. I never wear my hair straight, except when I was forced to like at ballet recitals. When I did, hairdressers were grumbling or complaining about my hair to me. It would require two of them to make my hair straight. The obsession with straight hair around me was so bad that hairdressers would usually straighten curly hair before cutting it, which is the worst thing to do.

[It was hard to find Black hairdressers who would be gentle with my hair, now that I wear it natural. It troubled me to realize how violence was widespread between us, beyond the use of chemicals. I just learned I used the wrong kind of brush my whole, a brush that was actually aggressive to my hair. So, the gap is not only between the West and Sub-Saharan Africa, it's a gap in self-love.] (**Grace, personal communication, May 20th, 2022**). [My translation from French].

Now I can fill those gaps in knowledge and get almost any content I want on-demand, matching my particular concerns. This curated beauty culture on demand opens more doors for me. It allows me to find new ideas and try new things in my body. I am not looking for validation, only for inspiration, which is a significant dynamic change. I have never had that many options at my disposal, and it feels liberating. The power of hairstyling and makeup allows me not to see my original features as constraints I need to work around. As long as I can afford it, I can look like anything I want, change looks and have fun, following Rihanna's advice.

[Social media changed everything. You can follow specialized accounts and find so much information about the right products and routines. It's evolving, and it's so cool! There used to be no role models, no examples, no TikTok videos to show me how to take care of my hair.] (**Shama, personal communication, May 3rd, 2022**). [My translation from French].

Despite being fully integrated into a capitalist economy, the Internet beauty culture has made room for contesting the commodification and marketization of beauty on two levels:

- A first level consists mainly of videos, “Is it worth your money,” fully integrated into the capitalist beauty economy that compares shamelessly expensive and cheaper luxury and drugstore products. Their content producers are looking for the most efficient products beyond the effect of labels and the imposed hierarchy of products based on price and brand image only.
- A second level consists of both articles and tutorial videos, calling for the use of natural/everyday products like fruits, vegetables, and oils to make one's own beauty products. This type of content is particularly relevant for haircare and newly transitioning audiences who used to straighten chemically and are now aspiring to go “natural.” When it comes to makeup, the #NoMakeup movement could also be seen as a way to refuse the highly profitable tyranny imposing on women always to look better.

6. Performing beauty

If “we’re acting” (Butler, 2011, 0:12), I believe beauty routines, repetitive in their very nature, qualify as “actions that consolidate the impression of being a man or a woman” (Butler, 2011, 0:38). So be it, but I noticed something else. Gradually, my updated beauty routines performed regularly, “through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler, 1988, p.519) and based on racially diverse beauty content and products, have not only consolidated the impression of being a woman but the impression of being a woman of color. In that case, physically putting something on my face allowed me to be a spectator and the show’s performer. Not only would I be performing my gender every day in front of my mirror, but also by race via trivial beauty practices promoted by the Internet beauty culture.

For Butler, “acting is crucial to the gender we present to the world” (Butler, 2011, 0:21). In my experience, acting like a woman of color has become crucial because I am tired of being assigned to this identity; I want to own it. To do so, I need tools, intellectual ones and more practical ones like the right conditioner, hair towel, brush, sunscreen, and so on. I believe that knowing how to deal with my body features is a necessity, especially since race has become a messy open global conversation, a conversation in which I need a stand.

7. An imagined community

“Performative means that it produces a series of effects” (Butler, 2011, 0:31). My performance results first and foremost in a feeling of belonging to a global community built online that comes to life beyond nations and countries. On the one hand, this woman of color community, built online, based on beauty practices, is very tangible. De facto, the struggle or, to the least, the

uneasiness of our beauty situation creates a bond, a sort of “I know you know” between strangers. On the other hand, this community might as well be an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983) by the same people who see themselves as part of it. I, for instance, perceive myself as part of an imagined beauty community. Maybe I am imagining this community because I need it to exist.

Belonging to this imagined community is essential to me because I realize that, at a national level, I am often excluded because of my looks and called foreign. Growing up, looking foreign was a compliment. I think it is still for many people. Especially looking European is a compliment, almost a goal. I never looked European, obviously, but everywhere I traveled, people always thought I was from Brazil or someplace in the Caribbean, “their” Caribbean. In Spain, Cuban; in France, from Martinique; in the US, from Puerto Rico. It seems that North African representations abroad are so twisted that people project straight hair only. I used to smile at these kinds of comments, but not anymore. I tend to find them hurtful because people would think I am foreign, even in Morocco. I “blame” primarily my hair for this exclusion; that would be nothing exceptional if most people were not hiding their curls to the point that they seem to have forgotten how they look with natural hair.

Last winter, I was in Morocco, and I cut my hair short, feeling confident about it and so happy about the result. One of the employees working there gave me what probably was meant to be the ultimate compliment. She said to me: This haircut fits your energy so much, now you look like an American singer, but she could not remember her name. It was nice of her, and I am sure it was meant with kindness, but in a way, she also put, literally, an ocean between us.

8. An endless becoming

Butler states that the imagined (gender) identity I was referring to earlier is “a compelling illusion, an object of belief.” (Butler, 1988, p.520) as if it was “a truth about us.” (Butler, 2011, 1:24). Pursuing the comparison, maybe white beauty could fall into this vision of unchanging truth, of beautiful by default.

[It's easier for white women to be considered naturally beautiful. As a Black woman, I can't afford to look neglected, vis-à-vis of my community.] **(Grace, personal communication, May 20th, 2022).** [My translation from French].

On the contrary, my imagined, performed identity of a “global” woman of color never felt like an unchanging truth. It always came with doubts and uncertainties. I am very aware that “it’s being produced and reproduced all the time” (Butler, 2011, 1:24) because, in my relatively short lifetime, I have experienced what it means to be out of it, considered ugly at times, beautiful at others. I have seen things change; criteria change, and definitions vary, which gives me some hindsight into my everyday performance. If we look at it from a cultural studies perspective, going back to Stuart Hill’s two definitions of cultural identity, one is a “stable, unchanging and continuous frame of reference and meaning” (Hall, 1989, p.69) and the other “is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’” (Hall, 1990, p.225). It “reminds us that what we share is precisely the experience of a profound discontinuity (Hall, 1989, p.72). When it comes to beauty, this discontinuity can be seen in all the changes mentioned here, in norms, role models, tangible access to products, and self-esteem, as “subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture, and power” (Hall, 1990, p.225) and therefore “belongs to the future as much as to the past” (Hall, 1990, p.225).

“I do identify as a Black woman, 100%. I would even say that it is how I see myself; I never identified as something else. Being a Black woman was a neutral fact for me until I was until I moved to France. Only then I realized that being Black has a meaning and is attached to many prejudices and stereotypes. It is actually funny because I am a proud Black woman, but at the same time, I never want people (White people) to set limitations to my being by seeing me only as Black.” **(Rabi, personal conversation, May 9th, 2022).**

The way decolonial scholars approached gender puts this comparison even more in perspective. Just like gender, beauty “didn’t come from heaven; it didn’t come from nature” (Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, 2020, 18:36); as Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí puts it. For Maria Lugones, “race is no more mythical and fictional than gender—both are powerful fictions.” (Lugones, 2007, p.202)

9. The triple presences, from the Caribbean to Africa

As a first attempt to grasp my imagined community, I am relying on a metaphor by Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor Stuart Hall is using “to rethink the positionings and re-positionings of Caribbean cultural identities” (Hall, 1989, p.74) around three “presences” (Hall, 1989, p.74): the African, the European and the American. Because of the limitations of this assignment, I can only touch on the original reference as I try to use this trinity according to my own positionality.

In my context, the “African Presence” embodies the territory (while for the Caribbean, the territory is American). To some extent, the African presence I experienced is an “unspoken, unspeakable presence” in Moroccan culture for the reasons I explained in the introduction. (Hall, 1989, p.74) The African presence is becoming more and more visible, but it is still downgraded overall. The

“European Presence” sounds so similar, “a case of that which is endlessly speaking - and endlessly speaking *us*” (Hall, 1989, p.76) via “the colonial discourse, the literatures of adventure and exploration, the romance of the exotic, the ethnographic and traveling eye (...) (Hall, 1989, p.76) with the particularity of geographical proximity. The European presence introduced “the question of power” (Hall, 1989, p.76) through the colonization of Morocco by France and Spain. Unlike in the Caribbean, the “American Presence” might be recent. However, American soft power has been rising along with the decline of the “European Presence” via its super-powerful unlimited entertainment industry in every sense, available on every phone connected to the Internet from this point forward.

This triple presence, African, European, and American, also applies to the description I have made so far about beauty. The triple presence reflects the Caribbean and African hybridity, “a conception of “identity” which lives and through, not despite difference” (Hall, 1989, p.80), calling for a hybrid beauty culture.

[Although my skin is white, I never use white emojis because I feel they don’t represent me. It may sound stupid, but it matters to me. When I moved to France from Morocco, I had an unconscious desire to fit in, to be the cool Arab. I didn’t want to be associated with French people with North African backgrounds because there was a lot of stigmas against them. Today, my skin color is white, but I don’t feel white, and Internet helped me see myself as a woman of color. It’s the result of a long process.] (**Shama, personal communication, May 3rd, 2022**). [My translation from French and Moroccan Arabic].

10. Africana Philosophy inspiring Africana Beauty

In writing an autoethnography, as both “a process and product” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p.273), I discovered the word Africana, which stands for “African diasporic” (Gordon, 2008, Introduction). In Lewis Gordon’s research, Africana/African diasporic is not the frozen non-inclusive assertion I exposed in the Previous Research section. On the contrary, Africana philosophy is:

- Historically and politically rooted “in the Afro-Arabic world of the Middle Ages.” (Gordon, 2008, Introduction) as Gordon “argues that much of modern Africana thought emerged out of early conflicts between Islam and Christianity that culminated in the expulsion of the Moors from the Iberian Peninsula, and out of the subsequent expansion of racism, enslavement, and colonialism which in their turn stimulated reflections on reason, liberation, and the meaning of being human.” (Gordon, 2008, Introduction).
- Geographically in motion, “on a journey from Africa through Europe, North and South America, the Caribbean, and back to Africa” (Gordon, 2008, Introduction).
- Linguistically plural, emerging from the “diasporic African community.” (Gordon, 2008, Introduction).

As I understood Africana philosophy better, I started realizing that most of its characteristics could apply to the Internet beauty culture I would want to be part of, to the community I would like to belong to.

[Internet kind of saved me, thanks to brave women of color who put themselves out there to say, I'm a queen, I'm beautiful even though I'm not white and I exist. Even if I'm not looking for my femininity in the exact same places, I'm so grateful to them for making me feel like my body has a right to exist as it is.] (**Grace, personal communication, May 20th, 2022**). [My translation from French].

Writing autoethnography seems to have liberated some mental space and inspired me to initiate a “voyage of exploration” (Wright, 2010:10) and dare dream about something that could be called Africana beauty.

- Like Africana philosophy, Africana beauty is emerging from a context of asymmetry, colonialism, and racism, as I have shown in this study.
- Like Africana philosophy, Africana beauty is also about identity and transformation, the self and the other, “freedom and bondage” (Gordon, 2008, p.14).
- Africana beauty has been emerging online, being produced and reproduced, through processes of hybridization and creolization, like Africana philosophy. It reflects an effective “hemispheric juxtaposition” that is North-South, multidirectional movements, influences, and mixtures of thought.” (Hooker, 2019)” happening online and involving African diasporas.
- Like Africana philosophy, Africana beauty could be “an occasion for self-reflection (...) has been the lived experience of a racialized double consciousness.” (Henry, 2008, p.74).

Rather than forecasting it, I am trying to consider the essence of what Africana beauty could be and thinking about it from a utopian perspective is also a way to step back from the current

commodification and marketization of beauty. This is just a start to “recognize that the boundaries of what is possible are structurally contestable” (Shafiei, 2021, p.281) and embracing utopia’s potential to inform our attempts to craft and effectuate successful (...) change (Shafiei, 2021, p.281). On the one hand, Africana beauty is a utopia, an idea to nurture, maybe a projection that could be part of the future of beauty. On the other hand, Africana beauty already exists.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

Personal reflection and limitations

As I get to the end of this research project, this section is about reflecting on the limitations of my current work and will be the opportunity to think of ways to improve it. First, I got to take a second look at Francophone authors I thought I knew, thanks to the help of my supervisor. This experience has made it clear that I have not envisioned the significance of their work so far and has helped me identify a gap in my philosophical and political education, that could not fully make room for decolonial authors. I had not anticipated the extent of gaps in previous research, which made me feel extra pressure to create knowledge and do it well. That pressure aggravated as I got to autoethnography, which made the process a little heavier than I expected.

This thesis is the most extended academic assignment I have submitted. I had a hard time envisioning the general balance of this work; I wanted to incorporate more elements. Making decisions about what to keep and what to exclude was sometimes tricky. Having learned so much from this first experience, I am confident I could probably design and execute my next project better.

I can already think of a few ways to improve this study, mainly by spending more time with the participants of my beauty conversations. After getting the participants' contributions, I would have loved to open a real-life collective conversation. Such an interaction could have allowed me to deepen my research about specific arguments I made, such as reflections on traditional beauty, insider and outsider beauty policing, and getting their thoughts about the utopia of Africana beauty I developed in the end. I believe that setting another round of individual conversations to collect their feelings about the collective one could be very rich. It would have allowed me to elaborate on beauty conversations, what they mean for self-image, why they are essential to make sense of day-to-day actions, and how they could be a channel for mutual empowerment, particularly for women of color.

As I said, my study participants reflect my socialization. In that sense, I believe their stories were an excellent addition to mine, but I can also tell that a wider range of participants would have broadened the perspective of my analysis here. On a small scale, I could already see recurring events like a hair-related accident (burnt using chemical treatment, alone or at the hairdresser). Therefore, I know I could have isolated those elements to include them in a questionnaire and introduced a complementary quantitative approach looking at how many of my participants experienced a hair-related trauma, for instance. In my autoethnography, I mentioned different beauty eras like cosmetic misery, racially diverse beauty, etc. Including older women in the study could have added an intergenerational aspect to the analysis and opened a conversation about how much beauty changed, asking the same questions to participants of different ages. If I were to conduct the same study with more participants involved, I would probably need to give them deadlines so that I can process their contributions easily.

Suggestions for future research

In this study, I worked on two makeup tutorials and wish I could have analyzed the current use and influence of the tutorial video template upstream and from a marketing perspective. Because of the significant interest I have in advertising, I would love to study this shift in terms of commercial storytelling, looking at the evolution of how we used to sell beauty products, how brands started using it as disguised advertising, and why it is efficient.

I used a definition of beauty that beauty editors usually work with, hair, makeup, and skincare, that did not include nail art or plastic surgery. I believe that nail art could have been an exciting channel to look into; once specific to certain communities, it is becoming mainstream as various big pop stars and rappers put them on. I would love to study the paradox of long nails, evoking fragility and extreme femininity on the one hand and, on the other hand, power to the women who wear them.

In a more extended research project, I could be able to explore how African diasporas perceive K-beauty's products and culture. I also had to put plastic surgery on the side. Still, it is the obvious extension of this study. All the beauty practices I evoked are about ephemeral transformation, while in contrast, plastic surgery is the ultimate body alteration and, just like makeup, is becoming more accessible. It could also be an opportunity to look at the environmental impact of the beauty industry globally.

Conclusion

In this study, I exposed what I believe to be the current trends in Internet beauty culture as I analyzed the rise of American domination of beauty, characterized by the arrival of a new generation of racially diverse products on the market, targeting women of color. I chose to look at how African women and their diasporas would benefit from a dynamic that nowadays celebrates racial diversity by monetizing it as I had identified a tremendous gap in knowledge, noticing that literature about beauty, even when focusing on women of color, tends to ignore Africa from the conversation, making it heritage at best.

I also showed that African women's geographical access to racially diverse beauty products is broadening. However, their costs remain so high that they become luxury products, reinforcing existing power dynamics between North and South. One of my takeaway points is that, in a capitalist economy, empowerment and rhetoric of diversity are part of a branding designed to maximize audience and profits. Nevertheless, this does not exclude the beauty culture we live in may empower some women, especially those women of color who recently got access to the beauty industry. Joining the global capitalist market of beauty does not need to be an end in itself, nor bad news as such. It could very well be the first necessary step to growing an alternative beauty culture like Africana beauty culture.

I assumed that my new beauty practices and my recent integration into the global beauty market and culture via content consumption and products started making me feel like a woman of color. I explained to what extent that feeling could rely on the mechanism of performativity when applied

to beauty. In the beauty conversations, I realized that other African diaspora women felt this way, validating the affirmation of a global woman of color beyond its original North American context, appropriating the term, adapting it to their context, and building on it as a source of empowerment. As I was looking for a definition for women of color, I found one in Maria Lugones' work that "no apunta a una identidad que separa, sino a una coalición orgánica" [does not refer to an identity that separates but rather to an organic coalition] (Lugones, 2008, p.75).

I complained quite a lot in this study. Not only that, but I also collected other people's complaints. Going back to Sara Ahmed, I chose to "give room to complain, to listen to complain" (Ahmed, 2019, 8:44) and to become "a feminist ear" (...) willing to receive complaints but to make use of them, to do something with them, to make them work or to make them part of our work." (Ahmed, 2022).

Autoethnography also allowed me to understand my beauty journey better and precise my positionality within the global beauty culture. It made me envision what Africana beauty could resemble. Yes, our current Internet beauty culture may be a platform to sell an infinite number of products to millions of people. However, the fact that it started including women of color has also had non-monetized positive impacts: opening conversations, deconstructing one's approach to beauty and looking at traditions in a new way, learning and spreading knowledge, putting an end to suffering and exclusion, making beauty as much about culture as about agency (Butler, 2011).

With this in mind, Africana beauty could be less about a category or standards and more about an attitude towards beauty based on "dialogue and debate (...) that provide an opportunity for further

discussion on racism, sexism, and justice.” (Hunter, 2005, p.121). In fact, I believe that women of color, and African women in particular, because of their very positionality and their thwarted history with the industry, are well placed to put beauty in perspective, to envision beauty as the performed fiction it is, a fiction they can take part in creating, with a significant role to play. They can be beautiful and speak up, “no como víctimas, sino como protagonistas de un feminismo decolonial” [not as victims, but as protagonists of a decolonial feminism] (Lugones, 2008, p.75).

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Appendix: Consent form.



Consent form -

Information about the study: This Master's thesis study is being conducted by Kenza Aloui and is supervised by Professor Madina Tlostanova at Linköping University.

- Aim of the study: I'm trying to understand how Internet beauty culture influences the participants and more specifically to what extent it creates and/or reinforces the identity of a global woman of color.
- Participation: Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and may change your mind at any time. Any data collected from interviews will be immediately deleted if you do.
- Decolonial interview: Adopting a decolonial approach to research, you will be asked to participate in a conversation rather than an interview as such in which you are free to choose if your name should be anonymized or not. Our conversation will revolve around a dozen topics formulated in questions and/or arguments to comment on. They may vary from one conversation to the other.
- Social-media-based conversation: The conversation will take place on Instagram, where my call for participants was published. You might use audio notes if you want to. If you prefer switching to WhatsApp, or Telegram for a more comfortable setup, that's also a possibility. After each conversation, the data will be stored in the university drive and deleted from my personal devices within 48 hours. You are free to do the same.
- Data protection: A data protection officer is available at Linköping University who can be reached at this email address: dataskyddsbud@liu.se. In the event of a complaint, you can also contact the Swedish Data Protection Authority.