

An Aesthete Thinks About Herself For Too Long: An Auto-theoretical Conversation on Behalf of Aesthetics and Its Importance in Our Society

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Abstract

This is an auto-theoretical essay on the importance of aesthetics and its nuances concerning identity. Autotheory is a literary practice in which the author presents a theory and uses autobiographical evidence to support it. There is a disregard for aesthetics on a societal level. Aesthetics are defined in this essay as personal tastes that are core to a person's identity, whether that identity is true to the subject or what they feel they should aspire to be. When thinking about aesthetics, there is a common belief that aesthetics are a superficial aspect of one's identity. While aesthetics is mostly visually based, this essay argues that aesthetics evoke deeper meaning based on the already established identity of the subject. Through the dissection of identities and their nuances, this essay discusses how aesthetics play a deeper role in identity and community building. This essay also breaks down certain connotations of aesthetics, especially concerning femininity and Blackness. There is a notion that women should care about how they look because they are expected to present 'acceptably.' If aesthetics concerns how subjects present themselves, this essay argues that there is a negative view of aesthetics due to its association with femininity. When analyzing femininity through the context of Blackness, aesthetics are now something that a Black female subject should aspire to, whether she wants to or not. This essay argues that the intersectionality of Blackness and femininity means that certain aesthetics can be imposed onto others. Aesthetics are integral to how subjects want to or feel they should express themselves. It is worth discussing because it can show how or why certain aesthetics are adopted or rejected. This essay also notes that an acknowledgment of one's aesthetic can allow for a deeper understanding and appreciation of the subject's self. Due to the unconventional nature of auto theory, this essay does not follow traditional essay rules in terms of format, voice, and language.

Keywords

Social media, journalism, Instagram, ethnography, resistance



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ISSN 2817-2051

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A quick aside for the uninitiated, like myself before writing this piece; “autotheory” is a literary technique that combines autobiography and theory. Author Laura Fournier notes that it “integrates autobiography with theory and philosophy in ways that are direct and self-aware” (Fournier, 2022, p.7). Fournier further explains that auto theory is a popular literary device in feminist, BIPOC or Black, Indigenous, People of Colour, and queer writing. She says, “I suggest that auto theory can be approached as a practice that artists, writers, critics, curators, activists, and others tend towards as a way of coming to terms with ‘theory’ – whether as the ‘master discourse’ of theory and philosophy...in relation to their experiential, affective lives and embodied, relational practices as human beings in this world” (Fournier, 2022, p. 6). In essence, Fournier suggests that the practice of engaging in theory in a self-aware manner may be a way for subjects to understand theory in relation to their lived experiences. She also states that it is an artistic practice where “feminist, queer, and BIPOC...spaces...live on the edges of art and academia” (Fournier, 2022, p. 7). Typical ‘subjects’ of theory (aforementioned female, queer, and subjects of colour) exist on this interesting plane where their art can be viewed as academia.

With that being said:

Everything you are about to interact with is part of an aesthetic, autotheoretical performance. I even hesitate to call this academic writing. The things I’m talking about, the thoughts I’m expressing, the memories I’m presenting, the people I choose to reference; all are meticulously chosen and presented to fit an aesthetic I’m [*attempting*] to emulate.

[*Lucky you!*]

I. Aesthetics in the Mundane.

My favourite colour is pink. [*It makes plain things look pretty.*]

I was born in February of 2000, making me an Aquarius [*the better of the two types of Aquariuses.*] and born in the year of the dragon [*the coolest of all the Chinese zodiacs!*]

My top four movies on Letterboxd are In a Mood for Love (dir. Wong Kar Wai, 2000), the Love Witch (dir. Anna Biller, 2016), the Grand Budapest Hotel (dir. Wes Anderson, 2014), and Kiki’s Delivery Service (dir. Hayao Miyazaki, 1989)

[*The posters for these movies are red and pink, but the one for Kiki’s is blue. I want to change it, but I want a Miyazaki/Studio Ghibli movie to be in my top four.*]

I read books under 200 pages. [*I like how the smaller, thinner books look in my hand.*]

I find that I have an extremely difficult time wrapping my head around the concept of ‘aesthetics.’ I know that all of the things I like can fit into the ‘Shae Box.’ I know what movies I like, what coffee or tea I like, what style of clothing I like. My problem comes when I think about other people. I see women, or even anyone, my age and I can understand that they, too, fit their own personal aesthetic [*some people are really good at making it seem like they don’t even think about their aesthetic, like it comes naturally to them. Very jealous.*] I think my confusion comes when I interact with literally anyone else. I was listening to “Kiss of Life” by Sade and I found myself realizing that the music she makes was carefully thought out. It’s silly, but at that moment I realized that Sade puts a lot of effort into her Look. Her Look matches the type of music she makes. That’s what I was having trouble with. I couldn’t imagine someone like Sade staring at her closet for a long time, wondering which shirt to wear. I couldn’t imagine her putting rings on, then taking them off, then putting different ones on. Sade just...looks like that. Then I started thinking about the type of men I see on my commute. They all look the same. I can see a man on a train and can tell what type of man they are [*I’ll admit; I only really think this in the morning when people are going to work. But, walk with me.*] It’s funny to me because I think of these men the way I think of Sade. I can’t imagine them deciding which button-up shirt to wear that day. I can fathom them always ordering a black coffee, but I can’t imagine them Liking that black coffee. I can’t imagine them thinking of that black coffee as part of their personality. They just drink black coffee.

I think my dilemma here is the label ‘aesthetic.’ I went to middle school and high school at the time of the ‘art hoe’ movement on Tumblr [*13-15 year-old me having a Tumblr was definitely something I was proud of.*] The ‘art hoe’ movement consisted of mostly young girls and women who seemed to carefully and meticulously curate what they liked. Art hoes had mustard yellow backpacks and wore earth tones. They had round thin framed glasses and curly hair. They painted. They called dogs ‘doggos’ and were open about their struggles with anxiety. Most importantly, they were aesthetes: “[a] person who has or affects to have appreciation to arts and beauty” (“Aesthete”, Oxford Dictionary). I wanted to be an aesthete so badly. Not only that, I wanted to look like an aesthete. I wanted someone to look at me and think, “she must be an aesthete.” This is [*kinda*] where my obsession with aesthetics [*and the Idea of it*] began. I found that I started to like things solely for the aesthetic. I created a new Tumblr page and only reposted things with the colour pink in them. I painted a cheap phone case with the word ‘Wilde’ for Oscar Wilde [*the founding father of The Aesthetic*] on it. I started painting. I took pictures of buildings and plants and lights. THAT was what ‘aesthetic’ was to me.

Interesting to note: the ‘founding father of aestheticism’ [*or, I suppose the one who Tumblr felt should be the face of it*] was a queer man (“Aestheticism”, Britannica). Also interesting to note: the ‘art hoe’ movement was started by a young, gender-fluid, Black artist [*Their name is Mars!*] (Frizzell, 2015). In fact, the very intention behind the ‘art hoe’ movement was to empower and uplift “participants of colour in this movement” (Frizzell, 2015, para. 2). But participants of colour weren’t part of the

images I was seeing online. Gender-fluid participants weren't part of the images I was seeing online. I [*against my own will, to be frank*] was shown a very co-opted, watered down, white-washed version of the 'art hoe.' And *that* was who I wanted to be.

[*Something tells me that this version of events will dictate how I view myself and the world around me. Hmm...*]

It's hard for me to separate the idea of an aesthetic, and curating one, from femininity. Like I said, the 'art hoes' that I aspired to be when I was younger were all women [*as we learned, this was intentional*]. Of course, there was a type of man they would date but that was also a 'part of The Aesthetic.' I find that a lot of the things that aesthetics are concerned with somehow relate to femininity. [*Walk with me.*] Carefully and femininely choosing what you're wearing, painstakingly and womanly-y picking out jewelry to go with the 'vibe,' making your shoes go with your girly little bag. It's all 'girl' things. Girls don't think about anything else! [*Duh!*] So, of course, a big, strong, important, testosterone-filled, black coffee-drinking man isn't thinking about what he's going to wear to the office today. He doesn't have taste; that's for women.

I think people don't realize [*or maybe don't want to admit*] that they care a lot about their aesthetic. Even the people who claim they don't care, the ones who 'just threw this shirt on' or 'will just have a green tea, with a dollop of honey' care about their aesthetic. I think people like to say they like things, just as much as they actually like those things. I like coffee with a lot of sugar; therefore, I like to say I have a sweet tooth. I like movies with stylistic cinematography; therefore, I like to say I like 'pretty' movies. Everyone does this! [*Or maybe I'm projecting!*] It's funny because everyone is too concerned with their own lives to take a moment to realize that they care a lot about what they like. Not only that, they like that what they like is part of who they are.

Honestly, I even feel silly talking about this. But trust me, aesthetics aren't just nice things to look at. Humans are visual creatures, and sometimes they like to pretend they're too intelligent [*or too masculine*] for that.

[*Walk with me.*]

II.

Aesthetics in Womanhood.

Cleanser, toner, essence, serum, serum again, eye cream, moisturizer, sunscreen. All of these are Korean skincare brands [*they work better.*]

At night, two cleansers, retinol, and no sunscreen.

When I'm feeling gross, a sheet mask.

If I bother to remember, a clay mask.

[*But only if I have the energy.*]

Primer, colour corrector, setting spray, concealer, setting spray, setting powder, eyebrow pencil, eyebrow gel, blush, setting powder. [*This is called 'no makeup' makeup.*]

Depending on my mood, clear lip gloss, clear lip gloss with black, blended lip liner, tinted lip gloss, tinted lip balm, or regular lip balm.

If I'm going out, I wear foundation, contour my face, put on my fake eyelashes, and apply lipstick.

[*But only if I have the energy.*]

Ring one on my middle finger, ring two on my thumb.

[*Wait...*]

Ring one on my middle finger. Ring two is also on my middle finger. Necklace. Bracelet one.

Bracelet two. Rings on my left hand. Bracelets on right arm.

[*But only if I have the energy.*]

Earlier I mentioned that I couldn't separate aesthetics from femininity. I'm sure that's what makes people not really understand how central aesthetics are to our lives. Women [*derogatory*] are the only ones who are concerned with aesthetics. They are the ones who wake up in the morning and decide to look nice. Men don't decide to look presentable. If they do, it's because they must have an important job or are simply an important person. Women, no matter how important or unimportant they are, must look Nice. They must fit The Aesthetic [*whatever that is*].

Don't worry. It's not any of our fault. There's this [*funny little*] thing called 'socialization.'

"Social Learning Theory, most closely associated with the work of psychologist Alberta Bandura, is an outgrowth of the behaviorist tradition, which defines learning in terms of stimulus and response" (Kretchmar, 2009, p. 2).

So, the story goes like this: you are a young boy, and you love playing with dolls. Your father, however, doesn't like that, so he ignores you. You love your father, and you don't like this negative reaction, so you stop playing with dolls. You are a young girl. You like playing in the mud with your male friends. Your mother doesn't like this, so she scolds you. You love your mother, and you don't like this negative reaction, so you stop playing in the mud with your male friends.

[*Congratulations! You have been socialized.*]

There are, actually, many "agents of socialization" (Kretchmar, 2009, p. 5) or things that would cause a child to learn through stimulus and response. Family, peers, and media, to name a few. You are constantly [*whether you like it or not*] being socialized based on your perceived gender. Not only are you being socialized, but you are being rewarded for doing it well (Schwarz, 2017). You're a girl, you dress up and your female friends, your family, and [*hopefully*] the person you like compliments you. You've done socialization correctly. You have performed your gender correctly.

You see, this is where I'm coming from when I say, "men don't decide to look presentable." Men aren't socialized to think [*and I mean Think*] about what they look like. At least, not in the way that women are. I argue that women are socialized to look like women, but men are socialized to act like men. Are there expectations in behaviours for women? Yes. Are there expectations for appearances in men? Yes. Women are socialized to be more docile and agreeable. Men are socialized to be stronger and physically bigger [*than women*]. Everyone is encouraged to be well groomed, but men have far fewer steps. Being a manly leader has more emphasis on how you act rather than how you are dressed. So, yeah, you wear your best suit. You drink your coffee black because a leader doesn't need silly additions like sugar or syrups or cream. But you also have assertively spoken to your staff. You took control of the room. Maybe you lost your temper but at least your coworkers know not to mess with you. You acted like the man you were socialized to be.

And your lovely female coworker who you can't remember the name of took the time to get dolled up for work. What a treat. Is she a hard worker? I guess. But damn she looks good.

It's incredible to think how closely women are tied to the idea of aesthetics [*did I say incredible? I meant insufferable*]. So much of a woman's perception is tied to how she looks. I think about it any time pop culture followers are surprised that a conventionally attractive female celebrity does something bad. I think about it when men who care about their personal hygiene are perceived as gay. I think about it when Black women tell stories about how people thought they would be bitches before they spoke to them. [*I think about it when my mood suddenly dampens when I don't like how I look.*]

That is where I'm coming from when I say, "I can't separate aesthetics from femininity." Women, femmes, people who were assigned female at birth; we're socialized to care [*a lol*] about what we look like. My personality takes a backseat to my appearance. This is why, when I want to be perceived as someone who has their life together, I get dressed up and take extra steps in my skincare routine. This is why, growing up, if I saw a man who really cared about his appearance, his masculinity was questioned. Or, if a man really, *really* cares about what he's wearing, he gets suspicious glances and eyebrow raises.

But, even when a man partakes in an aesthetic, the skater-boy, the hipster, the musician, I don't think he's *actively* trying to look like that. He just *looks* like that.

He wasn't socialized like that. I was.

[*Like I said, we're all encouraged to be well-groomed. Just don't do it in a girly way.*]

It's funny; I still find myself feeling a little guilty when I feel bad about not putting on makeup in the morning. You see, I wear makeup for myself [*no one else...?*] and I want to look pretty for myself [*no one else...?*]. If I don't wear that makeup, then I don't feel pretty. Once again, I want to look pretty

for myself. But newsflash: it's not just for myself. I feel self-conscious not because I'm not pretty but because I'm worried whether other people will find me pretty. I tell myself that I've done a good job decentering men, but I still feel disappointed when I don't get complimented on the street. I feel like I've failed [*to be a woman is to perform, amirite?*]. I think I feel worse, though, when I don't get complimented by women. We've all realized that we won't appear presentable to fit The Aesthetic anymore, and perhaps there's a new Female Aesthetic [*the one where we look pretty for ourselves.*] that we are striving towards. So, why do I still feel guilty?

I think the idea of even fitting into an aesthetic [*could be*] patriarchal. We couldn't look good for ourselves without being told that we must look good for men. We couldn't wear makeup for ourselves if we didn't wear makeup for men. The patriarchy did a damn good job of conditioning women to think of Them when they are alone. Even when we couldn't give less of a fuck about them.

But...I don't do that. So, what, I have a moment where I desire romantic attention. Does that mean all the work I've done to decenter men is now futile? Does my favourite lip gloss that I bought for myself automatically belong to this Imaginary Man I'm trying to impress? [*Why don't we walk outside the Shae Box for a second.*] Do women who dress nice to get the romantic attention of other women not fit into this? Is what they are doing futile? What about women who don't experience romantic attraction at all? Are they, themselves, futile?

[*Stepping more outside the Shae Box*] There are women on this Female Aesthetic Scale who intentionally don't present in a typically 'feminine' way. I'm not just talking about 'tomboys' or women who dress more gender-neutral. Women who truly, and intentionally present in a [*I guess we can call it*] masculine sense.

Women who are butch, or a woman who is LGBTQ+ and embraces identity markers that are associated with traditional expressions of masculinity ("Butch", Dictionary.com), make a conscious effort in their aesthetic to embrace 'traditional masculinity.' I think this is an interesting case [*and further proves my point on how important aesthetics is*] because, while they were socialized as women, a man has been removed from the equation. They aren't dressing specifically for the attention of men. They aren't presenting as masculine so other socialized males can reward them for performing their gender 'correctly.' I feel it would be a bit reductive to say they are dressing specifically to attract women [*because a woman wouldn't have to specifically present as masculine to attract a woman*] but the butch aesthetic is very prominent and relevant in the queer women's space. In a book called *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, author Sue-Ellen Case is theorizing on butch-femme dynamics. She notes "...as Nestle describes it: 'none of the butch women I was with...ever represented themselves to me as men; they did announce themselves as tabooed women who were willing to identify their passion for other women by wearing clothes that symbolized the taking of responsibility'" (Cleto, 1999, p. 195).

That's the point. They aren't presenting as men. They are presenting as 'masculine' women. The 'masculine' in this case is completely removed from A Man and is now a part of a woman. This is 'masculine' that resonates with some queer women and is central to her queer identity.

[I, also, think she may just like how she looks. Isn't that the point?]

Speaking of an aesthetic that is central to a woman's queer identity [*and stepping out even further from the Shae Box*], we introduce a new aesthetic: the Stud.

Women who are studs, or Black masculine identifying lesbians (Chesson, 2021) exist in an interesting plane of combining Black female identity and queer female identity.

I think people who are not Black were socialized to view Black women in a specifically masculine way. Black women are socialized to be viewed as sexual deviants, out of control, angry, and uncivilized. "Black femininity became synonymous with ruthless seduction and rage and resulted in the labelling of Black women as un-feminine and non-human" (Gammage, 2021, p. 9).

Labelling Black women as un-feminine. [*Hmm...*]

I think that's what makes the Stud Aesthetic such a powerful thing. Like how the butch aesthetic exists separate from A Man, the stud aesthetic exists separate from white people. Studs are a uniquely Black, queer, woman aesthetic. "Many studs have unknowingly formed their masculinity (and femininity) in the sacred spaces where their cishet family and friends were allowed to be their full selves...Places, where everyone wore their absolute best to dance, eat, talk shit, and commune after what may have been a heavy-laden week" (Chesson, 2021, para. 5).

So, while a stud may not be presenting specifically as A Man, she is presenting in an intentional, Black masculine aesthetic. An aesthetic that is specifically relevant to her Black identity. An aesthetic that does not exist in relation to an Imaginary White Person.

[I, also, think she may just like how she looks, too. See what I'm getting at here?]

Going back to when I said the idea of fitting into aesthetic [*could be!*] patriarchal; I think aesthetics like these reassure me that all this aesthetic talk isn't entirely futile. At least I know there are women who adhere to an aesthetic separate from the eyes of A Man.

I have moments, though, where I go back and forth on the Female Aesthetic Scale. On one side, I do my skincare routine because I want my skin to be healthy. I use lip liner because it compliments my lips. I wear perfume because I love how it smells on me. On the other side, I wear shirts and pants that compliment my figure. I think about how attractive a good-smelling woman is. I view myself, outside myself, and wonder if I am approachable to men.

The problem [*if I should call it that*] isn't just that aesthetics is tied to femininity. I think it's that now so much of what I do has so much meaning behind it. Honestly, I hate that I think so much about this. So much of what other women and I do [*yes, that includes studs and butches, I fear*], has so much nuance behind it. There are classes and schools of thought dedicated to this. And it's going to keep going. As long as there's a patriarchy, as long as there's a makeup and fashion and overall beauty industry, as long as there's femininity and masculinity, as long as there's socialization, it's going to keep going. As long as young girls starve themselves or fatten themselves up to put that fat in a more desirable place, it's going to keep going. But I've done the work. I've unlearned dressing for men, now my red lipstick is a radical feminist choice. I've unlearned superficial choice feminism, now I wear red lipstick because it looks nice. And, you know what, I'm a woman who experiences romantic attraction. So yes, I wear the red lipstick for men. But wait, I don't wear red lipstick for men. It's actually super feminist of me to wear red lipstick. Who am I kidding, feminism isn't red lipstick. It's for me. And the men I like. But wait-

[*"Male fantasies, male fantasies," Margaret Atwood says. "Is everything run by male fantasies? It's all a male fantasy." She smiles while I look in the mirror, picking at my face, staring until I see something wrong. "You are your own voyeur"* (Atwood, 2011, p. 441).]

III.

Aesthetics in Romance.

A\$AP Rocky, an American rapper. Dominic Fike, an American musician. Kento Yamazaki, a Japanese actor. Riz Ahmed, a British actor. Steven Yeun, an American actor. Skepta, a British rapper. Depending on the day, Shawn from Boy Meets World [*but only the seasons when he's dating Angela*].

When someone asks me what I'm looking for in a partner, physically, I name these men.

[*They don't look the same. But they match a ~vibe~ I'm going for. "Pretty Boys" I like to call them.*]

It's weird to think of another person as 'fitting into your aesthetic.' That's what a type is, essentially. Let's say that, rather than another person fitting into your aesthetic, you find someone who compliments your aesthetic. Opposites attract. Sometimes they don't.

I find that I have to think a little harder about whose aesthetic I fit into because my aesthetic is seen through a filter. A filter of black skin. A guy [*non-Black or Black*] can say he wants a woman he can go to a café with, but that doesn't always mean a Black woman. Or a woman of colour. Women of colour are their own 'type' that some men go for.

I feel weird admitting this, but I used to be a bit more radical with my opinions on racial preferences. [*Don't get me wrong, they're still racist.*] Now, I find myself not being as concerned with them as much, in regards to others. When I was younger, if a man didn't date Black women, there was something

inherently problematic about him. I didn't really consider the idea of racial fetishism because racism was something that was outwardly negative. A non-Black man wanting to 'try' a Black woman out wasn't racist to me, because how could a racist see a Black woman in a romantic way? It wasn't until high school, and entering university that I really let the idea of fetishism sink in. Before, I understood the issues with only seeking out Black women but *[to be frank]* I didn't care because I wanted to be desired. If that desire came from my Black skin, then all the better. I think my de-radicalization of racial preferences came when I saw Black men who dated white women. When I was younger, I was exposed to a lot of Black men who would seek out white women because "Black women were too ghetto." They wanted 'submissive' white women who would give them light-skinned daughters. It made me mad. I mean, how could it not? Black women aren't ghetto; your mother is a Black woman! That white girl's family would probably hate you! I would go into tangents about how backward that line of thinking was. I would find myself getting frustrated. Are they being dense on purpose? You don't really think white women are 'less ghetto' than Black women, do you? I would look into myself *[I would project my perception of myself.]* I'm not 'ghetto' *[not that there's anything wrong with that!]* in a traditional sense, so what do you mean you don't want a Black woman for that reason?

And then we went about our day. This Black man *[whoever he is]* is dating his white girlfriend and I'm minding my own business. He's not checking for me; I'm not checking for him. I'm not his type, so he does not pursue me. And thus, I live peacefully. He does too.

My de-radicalizing of racial preferences *[kinda]* stops at Black men and white women. It's such a specific case, ya know? There are still Black men who have this "I hate Black women" mentality, but then there are Black men who are simply just dating white women. There are non-Black men who date women of their own ethnicities, or women outside of their ethnicities. *[Those ones kind of worry me a bit.]*

Whether you or I like it or not, people will notice that I am Black *[Humans are visual creatures!]*. I'm okay with not fitting into a certain men's aesthetic. But if I do, how can I know that it's not superficial? Are you a man who dates Black women, or a man who Dates Black Women?

I read this reading by bell hooks where she talks about 'eating the other.' She spoke about how white college students talked about sleeping with every race of woman they could. She said, "To these young males and their buddies, fucking was a way to confront the Other, as well as a way to make themselves over, to leave behind white 'innocence' and enter the world of 'experience'" (hooks, 2014, p.368). She said that fucking the Other would change them in some way. It was a life experience for them. A crazy time in college. *[Oh dear...]* That, weirdly, sounds like many of the sentiments that Black women had in my early internet days. "A Black woman will change your life," they said. And that's what I thought. I had to change someone's life. My Black womanhood was *[supposed to be]* magical. These non-Black men expected this of me too. Hell, these Black men expect it. It's almost like a Black manic pixie dream girl. She takes you down the aisles of the beauty supply

store and tells you which products do wonders for your hair. If you're Black, she's someone you can rub shea butter onto and help her unbraid her hair. If you're not Black, she can teach different 'Black trends.' If you're white, she can make fun of you for not being able to handle spice. She's always doing something for her man. She raises your social capital. If you're Black, you two are a Black power couple, saving the sanctity of the Black community. If you aren't Black, you can say you've 'tried' a Black girl.

Am I even capable of that? Am I ready to be part of a Black power couple? Am I prepared to teach someone about my hair? Do they even want that? Will I be okay if they don't?

[Notice how all my problems started with the internet.]

I think about the Black women on the internet and their white partners. "Haha," they say. "I say I hate white people but then I go home to my white boyfriend." I cringe a little bit. I wonder if they have the same thought processes that I had. They had to have, right? I think you must, in order to make jokes like that. Do they also toss and turn thinking about what it means to be The Black Girlfriend? Are they afraid of being turned into a Black manic pixie dream girl?

[Notice how all my problems started with the internet...]

I'm giggling thinking about how earlier I said that I was frustrated that everything I do has nuance to it. It really does. It doesn't matter if a man is Black or not, I still have to wonder if he would date a Black woman. If he is non-Black, I have to wonder if I'm something he's trying out. Someone for fun, not to take home. If he's Black, I have to wonder if I'm expected to uphold traditional Black family ideals, upholding the Black patriarch and giving him an heir. Sometimes, I wonder how other women of colour feel. Sometimes, I wonder if it's even possible for me not to be fetishized in this way. Sometimes, I wonder if I'm my type's type. If the men I named would go for a woman like me. Sometimes, I wonder if it was really beneficial to read about all these nuances before I entered the dating scene. Maybe I'd be less afraid.

[Maybe I'd learn my lesson the really hard way.]

IV.

Aesthetics in Revolution?

I've never been ashamed of my African identity [*not once*]. But, when I watched Black Panther (dir. Ryan Coogler, 2018), I think it changed my relationship with my African-ness. It was [*something magical*] seeing Africans portrayed in a complex and beautiful way. As *All the Stars* by Kendrick Lamar ft. SZA plays at the end credits of the film, I leave the theatre a different person. I am the Ethereal East African.

The Ethereal East African has her flag in her Instagram bio. She reps her country proudly. She posts about whatever's going on in her home country. She makes inside jokes with other Ethereal East Africans. She has impeccable bone structure, supple skin, and an amazing physique. She is proud to be East African.

[I'm glad I can see myself in her.]

I was speaking with my sister about seeing people walk around with a Palestinian keffiyeh. (“A[n] Arab kerchief, worn as a headdress” [“Keffiyeh”, Oxford Dictionary]). We pointed out that we both thought it looked cool. I remember feeling guilty. People wearing Palestinian keffiyehs aren’t wearing them to Look Cool. It’s a show of support for the Palestinian people.

I can’t remember how old I was [*I was definitely young*] but I remember seeing the phrase “being beautiful is revolutionary.” As a young aesthete and an aspiring social justice warrior, this was right up my alley.

In a very specific context, I think this phrase is really meaningful. There was never a time that I felt ashamed about my cultural Sudanese clothing [*I can attribute this to going to a middle that was most Middle Eastern and South Asian, and by the time I got to high school, xenophobia was soooo 2014*]. Sudanese clothing is beautiful. And I think, being a person of colour living in the West, that can be a really revolutionary thing to think.

I was constantly fed a certain Aesthetic. As long as I stuck by it, I would be safe. And I watched my young peers of colour be ridiculed for matching the Aesthetic of back home. Deviating from the Western Aesthetic [*whatever that is, I think They don't even know*]. I think that’s why I feel so moved when I see people wearing their culture clothing. Something so simple feels so important. I think that’s why certain movements have a Certain Look.

If I think of a Black American activist, they have an Afro, sunglasses, and gold jewelry. It’s simple. An Afro is revolutionary because Black people, globally, are dictated by their hair. Relaxers, perms, and hot combs all exist to ‘tame’ the Black hair. Sunglasses evoke imagery of the Black Panther Party members in the United States. An organization created to uplift a historically battered community. Gold jewelry is often present in Black American aesthetics. Stacks of gold rings, gold chains, gold teeth jewelry [*grillz, for the cool kids*]; all are meaningful to the look of revolution. These are deviations or responses or results of being a part of a dominant Aesthetic. Creating your own aesthetic and demanding that it is beautiful or cool or nice to look at means a lot [*well, to me it does*].

I find myself going back and forth [*as I have this whole time; thanks for walking with me!*] on this idea that Aesthetics can be revolutionary. Why is my finding a Sudanese thobe [*amply cut, colo[u]rful, often highly*

decorated robes worn by women..." (Campbell, 2024, para. 2)] pretty so important? It's meant to look pretty anyway.

I can argue it's not. I think to do that would be a little irresponsible though. Sure, I call it pretty. It doesn't mean anything. But, I am part of a diaspora. I am part of a population that experiences oppression based on skin colour. [*My country was part of the Muslim ban that Trump enacted, go figure.*] So, once again I call it pretty. It's not pretty because it's different. It's not pretty because it 'deviates from the norm.' It's pretty because it's meant to be. It's meant to be pretty in Sudan, and I will make it pretty in Canada.

[*So, yes. I think the keffiyeh looks pretty cool.*]

V.

Aesthetics in the Self! or The Power of Like

I like pop, rap, and R&B. I'm starting to enjoy jazz music. I like music in English, Spanish, Japanese, and Korean. Sometimes French. Sometimes Portuguese [*one song in Russian; thanks Tik Tok!*]. I like love songs performed or written by women. I like listening to male musicians I find attractive.

I like saying I like these things.

I like Jordan Peele, Wes Anderson, Hayao Miyazaki, Boots Riley, and Sofia Coppola.

I like saying I like these people.

I like being Sudanese. I like Sudanese food. I like Sudanese cultural clothing. I like the landscape of Sudan.

I like saying I like these things.

I like 'pretty boys.'

I like saying I like these things.

I like the 'clean girl' aesthetic. I like vanilla-scented things. I like dainty gold jewelry. I like no-makeup makeup looks.

I like saying I like these things.

I like being socially aware. I like being a feminist. I like being an ally. I like being intersectional. I like trying to decolonize myself.

I like saying I like these things.

I think people need to be aesthetes sometimes. Don't overanalyze what you like and what you don't. But, think about how central they are. Humans are visual creatures [!!!] I don't think it's out there to say we like pretty things. We like things that make us feel good.

We need to step outside ourselves for a little bit. Aesthetics are so fun because they're so personal. They can mean so much. And sometimes, they don't mean anything. They exist to look pretty. As a woman, I definitely relate to existing to look pretty. [*I'm growing, though.*]

Everyone likes things. I think everyone also likes saying they like things. The things they like *are* them. Everything you like, everything you've liked about someone else, everything you dislike, it's you.

[It's not shallow to say that you like to say you like things. You've taken time to decide what you like. You've incorporated yourself into what you like. That's you! You like saying you like you.]

[I think everyone would benefit from saying they like themselves out loud, more often. I know it benefitted me.]

[*Things that helped me get my point across, or*] **References**

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