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## **Fashioning My Garden of Solace: A Black Feminist Autoethnography**

### **Abstract**

Through the lens of Black feminist autoethnography and (auto)biographical narrative, this article makes an impactful contribution to postcolonial feminist thought, fashion and cultural studies. I consider the significance of fashion and material culture as sociopolitical strategies of presence that offer an unparalleled understanding of my unique lived experience as a Ghanaian-Cameroonian-American Black woman. By exploring the intergenerational legacy of how my mother and I actively navigate the dichotomy of hypervisible, yet unseen, this article further considers the emancipatory potential and underacknowledged legacy of Black women's contributions to aesthetic and visual culture through embodied activism located within the practice of horticulture and gardening, alongside self-fashioned identity.

**KEYWORDS:** Diaspora, Black feminism, autoethnography, fashion communication, postcolonial visual culture

### **Introduction**

My earliest memories of witnessing clothing repairs and alterations occurred in our family kitchen as a young girl. I vividly remember my mother hemming piles of school uniform for me and my siblings, in addition to stitching the life back into my unofficial after-school uniform made up of over-worn, limited-edition, grey Charlie's Angels T-Shirts, featuring Cameron Diaz, Drew Barrymore, and Lucy Liu, and a collection of navy blue windbreaker "swishy" pants. By age 13, I decided to take up the responsibility of hemming my own wardrobe, with each attempt more disastrous than the last. But my goodness, it was joyous. Joyous, tangible freedom. Joy rooted in the act of strutting down the staircase to debut my customized bedazzled looks to a family audience of four operated as an integral exploration of the embodiment of self and home (literally and metaphorically). It was freedom rooted in the act of allowing myself as a young Black girl to exist out loud and boldly. With the handy assistance of glitter, sequins, and rhinestones, I was able to be without the imminent threat of behavioral discipline that followed me at school. In those abstract moments, I became

untethered from the label of exuding “difficult behavior” by school teachers. In those gratifying but fleeting moments, I was able to channel my curiosity and outspoken nature into style and self-fashioning that would later characterize, shape, and enhance the ways in which I actively engage in beauty and fashion culture as an adult Black woman who navigates the dual embodiment of the personal and the political.

Participating in beauty and fashion culture allows me to define the terms and conditions of my own personal conception of Black womanhood. An imaginative source of untethered freedom, I am gifted with the ability to envision my body as a blank canvas. It is where I find peace from the psychological gymnastics of racism and sexism; it is where I celebrate and author the convergence of my multi-cultural Black identities. With a stroke of lipstick and a brush of mascara, I am the principal artist. Within my embodied experience of interlocked oppression, the stylization of my existence is also rooted in a social and political communication strategy of aesthetic humanization—a subjective portrait that nullifies unjust inequalities and reimagines the humanization of Black womanhood through aesthetic modes of self-expression. It is precisely within this unification of fashioning social justice through the act of presence that is unique to the experience of Black diasporic women—the quest to emancipate ourselves from global anti-Black racism, sandwiched between caricatures that hail our existence as the pitied mule of the world in tandem with the mighty matriarch; the hypersexualized Jezebel; and last, but certainly not least: the mean, coldhearted bitch (Goldman et al. 2014, 94).

Now, the emancipatory potential of material culture has often been categorically positioned as a superficial band-aid of sorts—a whimsical and egotistic distraction that undermines processes of real-time emancipatory work in the collective struggle for change (Ford, 2015). Regardless of its superfluous societal interpretations, alongside its supposed political neutrality, Black women have historically utilized the everyday act of getting dressed as a political site of activism (ibid.) that resists the racialized and gendered hegemonic gaze devoted to pointing the finger at Black women as the origin of their social, political and economic challenges, instead of unpacking the circumstances that impact their quality of life and overall life expectancy (Jordan-Zachery and Alexander-Floyd 2018, 14). In no way does this article seek to dismiss or undermine the global urgency concerning the inequalities and stark injustices that disproportionately

affect the lives of Black women. Rather, this piece of writing aims to weave an intertwined methodological dialogue between beauty and fashion culture; race and gender; and the politics of diasporic (non)belonging by positioning snapshots of my autobiography as archival activism within the framework of Black feminist autoethnography.

### **Biographical narratives as method and preservation**

Black feminist autoethnography, at its core, takes into the account the multilayered and complex experiences of Black women (Boylorn 2016). The deliberate act of writing ourselves, our histories, and the world through our eyes undeniably pushes against the traditions of social science and critical academic enquiry (Griffin 2012, 139). By embracing this legacy of life writing, I am able to preserve and further archive my voice and lived experiences as a direct act of humanization within the exclusionary walls of academia. I am able to provide other Black women scholars and early career researchers with evidence preserved in the digital repository of this precise academic journal that “intellectual activism” (Hill Collins 2013, 37) can be used as a literal and metaphorical tool to destabilize the power relations that sustain our oppression. From writing this non-traditional, yet intimate piece of life-writing, I’ve grown to accept a far more expansive definition concerning the politics of “home” (Boylorn 2016) that encapsulates my journey of self-discovery: open ended and fleeting; always changing, ever-evolving; in perpetual motion. To all the Black women who encounter this intimate snapshot of my life and times: I hope you find a piece of home within these words I’ve strung together.

Stuart Hall reminds us that with diaspora comes dislocation, and the strategic placement of discourse is fueled by the heart (Hall 1994, 223). My heart is full, yet laced with vulnerability. Sharing these personal accounts that position material culture as a means to metaphorically counteract imperial legacies of violence and invisibility have required critical, and oftentimes painful reflection. My subjective interpretations are inevitably manipulated through my default embodiment as a Black woman who operates on the margins of society. In my capacity as an autoethnographic researcher, I am confronted with the negotiation of my race and gender within and outside of academic contexts (Boylorn 2011, 180)—a conjoined manifestation that operates as part and parcel of my existence. Presenting these non-traditional narratives further contextualizes how the reconciliation of my multi-ethnic Black African heritage—through beauty and fashion culture—is intrinsically linked to

(1) how the intersecting system of racist, sexist and capitalist domination routinely interferes with my efforts to comprehensively access personhood (hooks 1993, 40); and (2) “the double movement of containment of resistance” (Hall 1981, 227) that ensues within my essence and embodiment of a socially constructed dominant African-American identity and peripheral Black African identity.

Interrogating the dichotomy of hypervisibility/invisibility and its role in dehumanizing my body, my mother’s body, and the bodies of my grandmothers across diasporic time and space is what fuels my life-writing. Discovering their community-based agricultural methods that center aesthetic modes of presence (Tulloch 2016) presents an embodied archive of Black women’s postcolonial diasporic visual self-expression. These passed-down oral histories and visual biographies provide a blueprint for understanding how my self-stylization via material culture operates as a transnational manifestation of political activism aligned with African feminisms devoted to “restoring the moral and aesthetic dignity of the African female body that colonial discourses of the lascivious and grotesque African female body compromised” (Coly 2019, 51). The transculturation of my African and western materiality functions as a sartorial cultural exchange that contributes to the technological process of dismantling familiar understandings of Africa (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004). Such efforts assert presence and reimagine freedom through self-fashioning that transgresses spatiality, alongside the unforgiving boundaries of racial, gendered, and social hierarchies (Ford 2015, 166).

### **Styling a garden of solace**

I often question my theoretical efforts to “reclaim” a narrative of Black diasporic womanhood that I had no part in conceiving; a commercialized caricature of the white public imagination (Mask 2012). But through it all, I’ve discovered a majestic level of existence that resides within the soul and consciousness of my Blackness: the convergence of the personal and political pursuit of freedom (Tulloch 2016, 163; Tulloch 2012, 8) that is stitched within the seams of my everyday autobiographical style narratives (Tulloch 2010, 276) sculpted by my mother’s gardening practice. Utilizing an intergenerational exploratory account, the following narrative recognizes the contemporary legacy of Black women’s activism through the practice of beautification, by demonstrating the importance of autoethnography in tracing the interpersonal, creative, and unacknowledged ways in which Black diasporic women navigate the dichotomy of hypervisible, yet unseen.

I map the personal trajectory of two transformative racist encounters with (hyper)visibility in childhood and adulthood while attending predominantly white educational institutions, in order to encapsulate the present joy I feel when engulfed in the embodied beauty/fashion politics of being and becoming—a means to reclaim the whitewashed picturesque genre of femininity that steers the process of being and becoming a Black woman through defaulted “zones of femininity refusal” (Tate 2018, 53). In conjunction with systemically engineered bio-political hierarchies, we are left with the haunting absences of Black femininities, despite their ever-present emergence (Tate 2009, 53; Coly 2019).

Lipstick? Check. Mascara? Check. These are my holy-grail cosmetic products of choice that I utilize to encapsulate presence as a 27-year-old Black woman driven to shed light on aesthetic progression obscured by the colonial encounter (Hall 1994, 224). In this moment in time, I profoundly affirm that my Black diasporic womanhood is not an imaginative archaeological site of rediscovery, but a reclamation and unearthing of narratives of the past (ibid.)

I’ve chosen to contextualize the snapshot of my autobiography alongside a passage from *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (Walker 1983, 408). Encountering this piece of work by Black womanist, novelist and poet Alice Walker during the early stages of my PhD journey was revitalizing and life-giving. The ways in which she reflects on the metaphorical and literal significance of her mother’s gardening practice that she witnessed growing up in rural Georgia, mirrors the transformative role of gardening within my own mother’s life, and further links the intimate correlation between horticulture, fashion and embodiment as transnational aesthetic codes of humanization, dignity and survival within the spatial imagination of Black women.

And I remember people coming to my mother’s yard to be given cuttings from her flowers; I hear again the praise showered on her because whatever rocky soil she landed on, she turned into a garden. A garden so brilliant with colors, so original in its design, so magnificent with life and creativity, that to this day people drive by our house in Georgia—perfect strangers and imperfect strangers—and ask to stand or walk among my mother’s art.

I notice that it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible—except as Creator: hand and eye. She is involved in work her soul must have. Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty. Her face, as she prepares the Art that is her gift, is a legacy of respect she leaves to me, for all that illuminates and cherishes life. She has handed down respect for the possibilities—and the will to grasp them.

For her, so hindered and intruded upon in so many ways, being an artist has still been a daily part of her life. This ability to hold on, even in very simple ways, is work Black women have done for a very long time.

My mother's ability to hold on through the creative practice of gardening continues to influence my daily sartorial practice as a Black American woman who regularly navigates the cultural politics of Ghanaian and Cameroonian diasporic identity. You see, my ancestral lineage remains nestled between two hearts: my Cameroonian mother and Ghanaian father, who both immigrated from their respective countries to Washington, D.C. in 1982 as university students. Their transatlantic journeys represent a wider cultural shift in global labor market dynamics (Sassen 1991; Dwyer 1999; Light 2004; Yeboah 2008) that were facilitated by changes in American immigration regulations (Lobo 2007; Okome 2007), and deteriorating economic, social, and political conditions in Sub-Saharan African countries as a result of structural adjustment programs supported by the IMF and the World Bank (Lobo 2007; Yeboah 2008; Frazier, Darden and Henry 2010).

Although my Black identity remains largely informed from being raised in predominately Black neighborhoods in Prince George's County, Maryland, USA, it is important to affirm that I am using academia as a space for healing; a space to fundamentally reconcile with the childhood and adolescent shame collectively felt towards my African heritage, which remains crystallized through involuntarily speaking over my mother and father in public spaces, in efforts to spare them from the alienation and isolation of being demonized for speaking with "foreign" accents.

As I sit here and reminisce, it always seemed evident that my Black African girlhood and Black American girlhood were two disjointed experiences, as such imaginative

geographic boundaries were crystal clear within representations of Africa depicted in my favorite childhood Disney movies: *The Lion King* (1994) and *Tarzan* (1999). These representations broadly communicated that African life was a wild jungle adventure and animated safari escapade—and I believed this to be true. My siblings and I had a ridiculous obsession with Tarzan to the point where we would take turns reenacting scenes from the film in our backyard by swinging from tree branches. On a crisp autumn day in 1999, while my older brother and I were pretending to be swinging from tree branches in the deep dark African jungle—like our good friend Tarzan—my tree branch snapped in half and a picnic table caught my fall. Embarrassingly enough, at my young and gullible age, I had truly internalized that by swinging from tree branches in our family backyard I was somehow tapping into the traditional customs associated with my Ghanaian and Cameroonian heritage.

Meanwhile, my African-American identity was communicated through humanized, real-life cultural experiences within my favorite television shows. From *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* to *Sister Sister*, *Moesha*, *Kenan and Kel*, and *That's So Raven*, my dominant Black cultural identity was afforded agency and authority, alongside music videos where I witnessed African-American beauty and independent self-fashioned aesthetics visualized as the norm by the likes of Aretha Franklin, Mariah Carey, Whitney Houston, and my favorite girl groups, TLC and Destiny's Child. Asserting and favoring my Black American girlhood functioned as a defense mechanism set on autopilot. This unconscious superiority complex at play was meant to switch off painful memories of witnessing my parents face discrimination for simply existing on the margins of fervent nationalism. I felt confused and fraudulent moving through the world in stark rejection of my heritage. I struggled to grapple with the systemic marginalization of my non-western Blackness and the calculated game of deliberate exile that I had mastered (Hobbs 2014). Call it a bizarre case of conflicted quadruple consciousness if you will: a Ghanaian-Cameroonian-American Black girl with a plethora of unreconciled strivings (Du Bois 1903) that rewarded me with social capital in Black America but morphed into a defunct strategy of survival from the moment I attended a predominantly white elementary school in Calvert County, Maryland.

Ah, yes. School day mornings ... Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. Each day I'd be overcome with feelings of alienation and isolation, while trying to

process the ways in which I could downplay my heightened sense of discomfort (rooted in the struggle to forge a reciprocal friendship after three years of attendance). The majority of days felt like a blur, an all-encompassing force of erasure and rejection, in which I would cope by counting down the hours until I could return home and play a competitive game of four square with my Black friends in our cul-de-sac until the fluorescent street lights came on. However, within the span of one late afternoon, while sitting in the back seat of our maroon Volvo station wagon during our drive home from Calvert County back to Prince George's County, my unspoken wish to be seen was granted. And for the first time in three years of feeling like a shell of myself, my heightened state of invisibility was disrupted through an abrupt life-changing racist encounter on Maryland Route 4. A white woman who had been tailing our car for a few minutes sped up to overtake us. She rolled down her window and proceeded to scream: "Get off the road, niggers!" and drove off cackling with glee. My mother immediately pulled into the shoulder of the highway to collect herself. Meanwhile, I was in total and utter shock that a white person in Calvert County had actually seen me as a Black girl, and further assigned an identity to my existence that was more than transparent. I was alive, overexposed, and in full living color—my identity was a hypervisible Black girl.

I believe from that racist childhood encounter onwards, curating the narrative of my Black aesthetic was performative at best. I lived within the psychological imprisonment of my social circumstances (hooks 1992; Yancy 2016, 108) that upheld respectability as the prerequisite of acceptance. But it's safe to say that it was a grand plea to be seen without the racialized and gendered stigma attached to my body as the epitome of dysfunction, the opposing force of femininity (Dunn 2008, 44). Makeup, accessories and jewelry operated as my aestheticization and stylization tools of choice, regardless of my mother's insistence that knowledge and intellect superseded the irrational pleasures of beauty and fashion culture. Cast off as trivial and insignificant, she struggled to understand my growing obsession with fashion magazines as a young adolescent woman. From *Seventeen* to *Teen Vogue*, *Glamour* and *InStyle* magazines, I was well versed in "the latest tips and tricks" required to achieve the perfect pout, along with the "must-have" mascara products of the season. I would flip through the glossy pages of these publications and tear out pages of fashion trends and product recommendations on a monthly basis. Money was an issue—I didn't have any. And my far-fetched attempts to strategically place jewelry and cosmetics into our family shopping carts never went according to plan.



My mother's greatest gift is the capability to transform pain into power through her gardening practice. Carefully crafted and designed, it's the process in which she reclaims agency as a Black African woman who navigates the dichotomy of hypervisible, yet hidden in the workplace. What she struggled to understand was that I was also searching for my own personal conception of beauty: yearning to be engulfed in the process of becoming; longing for agency through Carol Tulloch's (2010, 276) definition of style, in which she articulates as "the construction of self through the assemblage of garments and accessories, hairstyles and beauty regimes that may, or may not, be 'in fashion' at the time of use." With visions of my mother's ambitious crepe myrtle floral installations etched on my heart (illustrated below in Figure 1), I'm reminded of the joy she exudes while being consumed in her art. Her garden remains the place where she emancipates herself from structural racism, sexism, and xenophobia. In essence, it is how she nurtures a spiritual line of communication with her mother Lydia, and her grandmother Monica, who taught her the moral and aesthetic importance of horticulture while growing up on farmland in rural Cameroon. And just like Alice Walker's upbringing in rural Georgia, my mother's memories of impoverishment are also "seen through a screen of blooms" (Walker 1983, 408).

**Figure 1.**

My mother's crepe myrtle garden. Prince George's County, Maryland. Photographed by Krys Osei (2018).



### **Refamiliarizing my essence**

The second traumatic racist incident that solidified my political existence in white educational institutions occurred while teaching as a graduate trainee tutor on a course exploring the intersections of race, empire and nation at Goldsmiths, University of London. Monday, December 11, 2017 marked the final seminar of the autumn term and I was excited to soon travel back home and be reunited with family for Christmas and New Year's. But unlike previous seminars which fostered relatively fruitful discussion-based learning, this one was different and in the worst ways possible for me as a first-time educator. A white student had vocalized a so-called "foolproof" way of solving racism, in which she proposed—while making direct eye contact with me—that if darker skinned people made more of a conscious effort to racially mix with white people, that eventually, in good time, racism would be a thing of the past (as dark bodies would cease to exist in the first place).

I sat in that seminar room completely floored and thought to myself:

"Is this really happening?"

"Come again? Do you not see me sitting here as a Black woman?"

"How do I approach this situation without being framed as a cold and angry Black bitch?"

"Do you not see me sitting here as the *authoritative individual* in this learning environment?"

"What are the limits to maintaining Black respectability in a predominately white classroom?"

"Because this certainly wasn't covered during my teacher training back in September ..."

I'll never forget locking eyes with an Indian-American study abroad student soon after processing and digesting the whiplash of the white female student's racist, anti-Black (and anti-me) sentiments, that she communicated in such a nonchalant, relaxed manner. With our eyesight locked, I believe that at that moment our rage of invisibility was intertwined as one.

She pushed back and asked the white student:

“Why is it always about Black people becoming more like white people? And not about white people becoming actual Black people?”

We locked eyes again. I said “thank you” out loud and dismissed the seminar a few minutes earlier than scheduled. Later that evening at home, I briefly reflected on the incident and scribbled down the anger and disbelief pulsating through my body:

**Monday, December 11th, 2017**

What’s it like to be a Black woman?

I’ll give you 4 words: indescribable joy, indescribable pain.

Branded from birth, do you know what it feels like to associate oppression with your own reflection each and every single day by simply peering into a mirror?

Incapable of seeing your own so-called beauty?

But what is ‘beauty’?

Aside from a word that is incompatible with my existence; an unattainable set of cultural standards that leaves me feeling woefully and soulfully bankrupt.

It was really difficult to encounter such raw emotions of otherness as an adult, yet again in another predominately white education institution. The incident brought me back to my childhood memory of encountering the pain of isolation at elementary school in Calvert County, Maryland. Although there were recognizable parallels to be drawn from both experiences, the key difference was in taking ownership of my aesthetic evolution. As opposed to the hyper-consumption of material and cosmetic products as a young adolescent woman, I was greeted with the philosophical process of self-actualization: that my “autobiographical style narrative” (Tulloch 2010, 276) could indeed serve as the practice of imaginative freedom. It was precisely this encounter that uprooted my performative style of dress and embodiment and further morphed my everyday fashion practice into dressing with intent: a deliberate form of imaginary protest; a deliberate act of presence.

To echo the mighty words of Black essayist, poet, and writer Margaret Walker (1997, 3):

Call it fate or circumstance, this is my human condition. I have no wish to change it from being female, Black and free. I like being a woman ... and I have learned from

the difficult exigencies of life that freedom is a philosophical state of mind and existence...

My mother's ambitious gardens provide a visual language of resilience that I've grown to understand as her customary soul style (Ford 2015, 4) rooted in flower beds that symbolize a seasonal "baptism in freedom's waters" (ibid.) in which she escapes the violent perceptions of the white colonial imagination. From girlhood to womanhood, her radiant gardens have demonstrated the liberatory potential of intergenerational self-expression. I am grateful to have discovered a tangible method of transforming my pain into power through envisioning the act of getting dressed as a political site of reconciliation. I am grateful for the privilege to curate a new tradition of embodied anti-racist/anti-sexist aesthetics through the convergence of my western and Black African personalities. Reflecting on how my mother and I actively embody parallel yet distinct ways to assert our humanity is a spiritual endeavor. The aestheticization and stylization of our presence allows for us to flourish on our own terms as Black diasporic women. Our alternative manifestations of Black feminist consciousness stems from the dynamic legacy of intergenerational practices of beautification as activism. Our biographical narratives not only further reconfigure the notion of diaspora, geography, and spatial boundaries, but also actively counteract imperial ideologies that frame Black African women as the outcast, morally bankrupt, and undifferentiated "other who are also at the periphery of global/world-class fashion" (Ogunyankin 2016, 40).

Standing firm in my truth, the most transformative aspect of this process of self-discovery stems from deconstructing, re-evaluating and reordering my colonized geographic imagination when it comes to "Black is Beautiful"—in which, for a very long time only allowed me to perceive my Black as beautiful when viewed through the lens of my dominant and hegemonic African-American womanhood. For me, fashioning freedom within my multicultural embodiment as a Ghanaian-Cameroonian-American Black woman functions as a holistic emblem of humanization that shapes and intervenes within the everyday violence of anti-Blackness.

In closing, I'll leave you with the final passage of Alice Walker's (1983, 409) *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, in which I've inserted my own name to illustrate the legacy of Black women's activism through the liberatory practice of beautification:

Guided by my heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength—in search of my mother’s garden, I found my own.

And perhaps in [Ghana and Cameroon] over two hundred years ago, there was just such a mother ...

Perhaps my great-great-great-grandmothers were also artists.

Perhaps in more than [Krys Osei’s] biological life are their signature’s made clear.

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