

BOOK REVIEW

Fashioning Postfeminism: Spectacular Femininity and Transnational Culture

Simidele Dosekun. Urbana: University of Illinois Press (ISBN: 978-0-252-08508-6)

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Early in Simidele Dosekun's excellent book, she writes, "young Nigerian women are in the world: we are exposed to, hailed by, and in our various ways come to be active part-takers of new and transnational fashion and beauty cultures" (33). Dosekun insists on what should be obvious — "we are in the world"—because of the ubiquitous obscuring of African women's coevalness with women of the Global North as subjects of late capitalism, fully alive to capitalist modernity. *Fashioning Postfeminism* insistently interrogates temporal logics like this one, and also what Dosekun terms the "lie" (144) of postfeminism, which is that now that the aims of feminism have been achieved, there is no longer any need for it. This temporal theorization takes place against the backdrop of Nigerian women's beauty and style practices as constitutive of their postfeminist subject positions. Drawing on interviews with nineteen class-privileged women in their twenties and thirties living in Lagos, Dosekun asks, "Who is the spectacularly feminine Lagos woman, performatively and subjectively? What type of subject does she desire to be, including as read and recognized by others? How does she envision the appearance of her subjectivity?" (19). In pursuing the answers to these questions, Dosekun's superb volume brings together detailed attention to the minutiae of her participants' styling regimes with a rich and nuanced theorization of postfeminist modes of being. The result is a critical reappraisal of postfeminism that dissents from feminist scholarly orthodoxies while setting a new standard for the feminist deployment of the term in a transnational frame.

The book opens with two critically contextual chapters. The introduction, "A New Style of Femininity," offers a sense of the balance that Dosekun strikes with the book. She broadly agrees with scholars of postfeminism such as Angela McRobbie and Rosalind Gill: postfeminism, "a temporalizing sensibility," "in place of structural and politicized critique and resistance . . . offers the rationalities and vocabularies of personal empowerment, personal choice, personal responsibility and . . . personal failure" (2). Where she differs from other theorists of this sensibility is in her insistence that the category can and does encompass Black women, and indeed travels transnationally. Dosekun argues that for many theorists, identifying the dominance of whiteness in *representations* of postfeminism is "conflated with the ontological" (7), and the very

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possibility of racialized postfeminist subjects becomes impossible in criticism: “the whiteness of postfeminism is reified” (8). Against this pernicious whitening, Dosekun offers a reading of Lagosian postfeminist subjectivity as an effect of “the transnationalization of postfeminism” (14). Given that postfeminism relies heavily on an ill-defined notion of “empowered,” agentic women, Dosekun’s tracking of Nigerian postfeminism flies in the face of the Eurocentric positioning of what she calls the “global South girl” (11), who is waiting pitifully to be empowered. “Empowered *already*’ is how these women see themselves,” she writes (17), insisting upon the coevalness of Nigerian women of means with their postfeminist counterparts in the Global North and around the world. The strength and precision of the argumentation in this introduction is followed by a chapter situating her Nigerian participants historically—against the backdrop of Nigerian feminism and nationalisms—sartorially, in African cultures of dress and styles, and also in the particular urban context of Lagos. The city’s “reputation extends to a culture of lavish and decidedly consumerist merriment, of which fashionable looks are . . . central. . . . Show is a part of how one does Lagos and belonging there” (35).

Having established the specificity of the Nigerian and Lagosian situations, Dosekun moves on to four finely crafted chapters exploring themes emerging from her interviews. The analysis is heavily influenced by Sara Ahmed’s theorization of (un)happiness and Lauren Berlant’s cruel optimism: painful beauty practices promise happiness but inspire barely articulable ambivalence. “Choosing It All: From Pleasure to Self-Confidence to Pain” explores the complexities of the discourse of choice that structures the women’s approaches to self-fashioning and, in fact, their life trajectories. Dosekun here inverts Ahmed’s theorization of the killjoy—unlike Ahmed’s *feminist* killjoy figure, when participants choose not to follow feminine style conventions, they are not making a feminist choice, not trying to interrupt happiness. Instead, the refusal to conform is cast merely as another legitimate feminine choice, “a matter and means of a woman’s self-empowerment” (64). The analysis here suggests that, ultimately, “to feel self-confident under patriarchy, they are to choose patriarchy. . . .” (53). Here Dosekun’s analysis of the entrapping logics of postfeminism is first made plain.

That orientation to entrapment continues through the following chapters—“‘I’m Working, You Know’: The Serious Business of Spectacularity”—where Dosekun examines how her participants’ “celebratory framings of their knowing how to self-fashion worked to not merely rationalize but also valorize the forms and sites of power to which they were being subjected” (65)—and “Globally Black, ‘Naija,’ and Fabulous: Asserting Authentic Selves,” in which her analysis homes in on Black women’s beauty practices and the discourses of authenticity that mark them. From “Globally Black” through the end of the book, the author’s critical voice is distilled, and often exhilarating. Her interventions in this chapter, about hair practices—weaves and wigs—situate these as “technologies of blackness” (90) and not mere imitations of whiteness. Dosekun argues that “it is crucial . . . for feminist scholarship—black feminist especially—to move beyond what are reductive, ultimately violent, and also ethnographically unsubstantiated modes of always already seeing . . . that when it comes to beauty, black women are racially damaged subjects, dupes” (95). Yet though she forcefully rejects understandings of Black women’s hair practices as derivative mimicry, neither does she endorse the strained logic of unfettered personal choice that distinguishes her participants’ characterizations of their hair: “this does not mean that Nigerian women are therefore happily insulated from antiblack racism . . .” (98). Instead, her analysis—insisting upon the mutual imbrication and unevenness of transnational encounters—holds

together accounts of the physical and psychic pain associated with hair, and the recognition of Nigerian women's constrained agency. She writes, "the constitutive, historicized unhappiness of weaves and wigs for black women do not render them any less *technologies* of black femininity" (101). In fact, for Dosekun, it is precisely through this ambivalence that the women "were doing black postfeminism, being fabulously black like fabulous black women the world over" (100).

Doeskun's forceful argumentation on the subject of Black hair in this chapter is carried through the rest of the book: in the next chapter, "Not That Kinda Girl: Resignifying Hyperfemininity for Postfeminist Times," and in the conclusion, "A New Fashion for Feminism?" There is a way in which reading the book is an experience of gathering momentum, so that the stakes of the research are clarified and their political significance made increasingly apparent as we read. As she argues in the final chapter (and rearticulates to devastating effect in the conclusion), "postfeminism fails and misleads them once again" (118). The entrapments of postfeminism that are revealed in this final third of the book include the participants' constructions of themselves as a "new mode" of girly girl, one characterized by "girl power" (121), against an older, supposedly disempowered form of femininity. Dosekun shows how this works to align the women alongside masculine power rather than interrupting patriarchal social arrangements. The final substantive chapter also includes experiences at work in which the women understand that their professional worth is essentially determined by their appearance: "beauty, which they also claimed and desired, was a trap" (128). This trap is illustrated most poignantly in Dosekun's discussion of a participant who "completely lack[ed] the discursive resources to name, much less elaborate, relational values like equality or partnership between women and men" (133). Dosekun reads this as "the discursive and ideological hollowing out, unnamings and bypassing that postfeminism represents, which may leave women without a full enough scope of language, and critique, to name not only their experience but their hopes and ideals too" (133). Because Dosekun is concerned with the temporalities of postfeminism, this formulation is particularly resonant. It suggests a time before feminism provided the language and conceptual tools necessary for both resistance and world-building, and is the clearest illustration of the fallibility of postfeminist logic; we cannot be "after" feminism if feminism's complete evacuation under neoliberal logics of choice effectively renders it unthinkable. In her conclusion, Dosekun uses this implicit, temporalized impossibility of feminism as the basis for a call "for new or renewed feminisms" (144), further reinforcing the complex temporal layers that characterize her work.

This richly theoretical reading of interview data makes an intervention in the purest sense. Dosekun confidently stakes out a position in the debates on postfeminism in a genre that is frequently hesitant, hedging. The book's strengths are rooted in this clarity and singularity of voice, which leads to the original insights about temporality and transnationally traveling concepts. Too, Dosekun's work enriches the literature on beauty and self-fashioning fashion practices, which is often divorced from larger theoretical debates and questions—her folding of questions of beauty into critical conversations about temporality, transnationalism, and affect is a welcome departure from analyses that remain more narrowly focused on the fashion and beauty literature and thus inadvertently undercut the recognition of fashion's deep cultural import. In analyzing beauty and self-fashioning alongside what are typically deemed "weightier" questions, Dosekun's book performatively enacts the significance of beauty and fashion, both in the world and in scholarship.

For this reader, a great strength of the book lies in its methodological reflexivity. Although there is no lengthy discussion of methodology—and this is a refreshing choice in a book reliant on interview data—Dosekun threads brief but very consequential discussions of her own positionality throughout the chapters. She comments with a matter-of-fact humility on moments in which her line of questioning or interaction with a particular participant deployed inappropriate frames of reference around a particular beauty practice or belief—and notes the way that participants resisted her interpellations. What is more, her reflexive recounting of these moments always serves to enable a better understanding of a given phenomenon, such as when she notes that she could see the class-privileged young women she hoped to recruit as research participants gliding by as they traveled in private cars—as did she—which meant they were inaccessible to her; they were simply strangers in the Lagos cityscape. This insight is folded into a larger point about the “private and securitized space” (105) that shapes this particularly Lagosian mode of spectacular femininity. Given this reflexive orientation, in fact, it is surprising that class tends to drop out of the analysis altogether—especially given the opportunities afforded by “studying up,” or studying elites. Although Dosekun discusses the wealth of her participants, she does not fold this into a sustained examination of the relationship of class to other central questions in her study, including postfeminism and temporality.

Altogether, though, *Fashioning Postfeminism* is a superb book. Often theoretically dazzling, it effectively opens a new window onto postfeminism. It will also make a defining contribution to the newly burgeoning field of decolonial global fashion studies, effectively modeling a balance of local specificity with the transnational. And with its attention to concepts of temporality and subjectification, it will speak productively to readers interested in theoretically inflected cultural studies. All of this is accomplished through gorgeous, smooth prose distinguished by a sort of conceptual momentum that makes reading the book genuinely pleasurable.

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