

# I Come Home to Myself

by

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## ABSTRACT

I Come Home to Myself is a documentary film following Marglucy and Faduma, presenting a portrait of their individual relationships to beauty and beauty work. The documentary contrasts the varied experiences that have shaped their beauty practices as well as their negotiations with beauty work. The film also explores the different internal and external forces that influence their beauty ideals and the conclusions they arrive at.

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## **Personal Motivations**

In one of my earliest memories in America, I am scrolling through Google image results of ‘beautiful black women’. I’m sitting on our living room floor one late summer afternoon, aged fourteen, investigating the differences between my face and the faces on my laptop screen. I had been in America for a year and preparing to begin high school, now armed with this conclusion: my lips were too big. I would go on to spend two years smiling in a way that thinned my lips.

This memory would have been long-forgotten if I hadn’t come across pictures with my peculiar smiles four years later during the summer after my first year in college. This was a time of becoming. I was earning my own money for the first time, most of which went towards beauty products of all sorts. This summer marked some of my first independent engagements with beauty, from my first skincare routine to my first eyeshadow palette. Also, for the first time, I began to critically reflect on the reasons behind the effort and money I poured into beauty. What do I like and dislike? Who did I want to become? What are the boundaries I wanted to draw? The more I deliberated, the more memories started to resurface of all the small and large ways beauty had impacted my life. I found a few cultural critics whose content I began to follow since that summer and over time, discovered more corners on the internet engaging with topics of beauty.

Naturally, the matter of beauty was the first to come to mind when I thought of a thesis topic. In the four years since that summer, I had consumed a good deal of video content, articles, and a few books related to a wide variety of beauty issues. I learned about beauty as a system of structural inequality, a tool for oppression, and a form of capital. Viral moments functioned as vehicles to explore the intersection of class, race, gender, and age with beauty. Besides fulfilling my curiosity, a desire for determination and truth fueled my interest. I wanted to find ways to make my pursuit of beauty unadulterated and uncorrupted. I wanted to quell the dissonance I felt

between the joy of wearing makeup and the guilt of aspiring to beauty standards. I wanted to see beyond the prejudices that have shaped beauty practices and reach for the transcendental quality I felt it to be.

Can I imagine a world where one can opt in and out of beauty without consequence? This was my initial guiding question for the documentary, first posed in a video by Kimberly Nicole Foster. One of the main frustrations in my years of engagements with beauty topics was the focus on critiques and the relative absence of imagination for the better. Much of the early literature I sought out focused on various resistances to beauty practices or standards. I quickly learned that resistances are flawed and complicated, which demonstrated the reason behind the lack of approaches to move forward. I became more interested in individual responses to beauty and resistance. How are people balancing pleasure and guilt, choice and coercion, agency, and oppression? What are the forces that shape one's beauty ideals? How do they pursue or resist it? Why do they seek it? These became the questions that guided my exploration of the literature as well as my interviews for the documentary.

### **Literature Explorations**

Beauty and beauty standards serve as the visual rules of a racist, sexist, ableist world (Figuroa). It is a source of shame and anxiety. It is embedded in oppressive regimes that dictate the production of our knowledge and representational systems (Tate). Yet people still pursue beauty, and understandably so. Beauty is one of the only non-medical and non-sexual forms of touch (Widdows). Beauty conversations present an avenue for the community. Beauty continues to be used as a symbolic form of empowerment (Craig). Beauty practices are forms of expression, a celebration of individuality, and an opportunity for creative play. Participation in beauty has real societal consequences; the halo effect is a well-documented phenomenon that provides people with

unearned positive attributes that leads to concrete social and economic advantages. Beauty practice can be used to cope with racism (Figueroa).

Often, the burden to resist hegemonic beauty standards is put on the individual. But even resistance isn't as simple as opting out of beauty practices. The expectation and ability to resist depend heavily on class, race, gender, etc. lines (Craig). For instance, a middle-class philosopher might be expected to minimize their participation in beauty practices in order to treat others with more respect while a waitress's tips could heavily rely on her looks. Additionally, Khoo posits that resistance to beauty might actually be redirecting energy to fulfilling post-feminist hyper-independence. Individual resistance also prevents solidarity and increases judgment of your own and others' bodies (Widdows).

This literature provided a broad overview of beauty theory, but how it manifests in people's experiences varies greatly. My intention for this film is to illustrate how these complexities of beauty show up in people's lives by highlighting specific practices. I want to explore the complicated resistance and pursuits of beauty and how people's beauty philosophies and approaches have developed over time and in environments. Furthermore, a lot of feminist beauty theory did not engage with race, so one of my goals is to highlight the lived experiences of people of color, primarily of Black women and non-binary people. In her paper, Khoo describes how interviewees feel uncomfortable expressing an appreciation for beauty without also sharing their disdain. Beauty talk is usually relegated as childish and trivial. To quote Tate, "Silence is a strategy of silencing the non-normative to maintain the hegemony of the norm without appearing to be complicit in the norms re-stabilization."

## **The Process and Lessons**

### *Initial Goals*

At the beginning of this project, my goal was to juxtapose two ideas: beauty resistance through pursuit and beauty pursuit despite resistance. I wanted to look at bleaching brows as an alternative beauty pursuit and as an entry point to explore the connection of bleaching brows to gender, expression, sexuality, and more. Beauty pursuit despite resistance would look at two Muslim women and their experiences pursuing beauty despite resistance by family, religion, and culture.

### *Finding Interviewees*

For the beauty pursuit despite resistance topic, my interviewee would be Marglucy, a public health student at Columbia University. A friend that I had reached out to because of their experience bleaching their brows referred me to Marglucy. They were gracious enough to let me into their home for a week and film them. My interviewees for the other part would be Faduma and Lana, two Muslim Somali women and students at MIT and Wellesley respectively. After listening to the description of my thesis project, Faduma shared her experiences which happened to align well with my explorations as well as in relation to Marglucy's experiences. She and Lana also graciously volunteered their time to be a part of my project.

In hindsight, my method for finding interviewees relied heavily on serendipity. I was fortunate that my immediate circle of people are thoughtful and insightful individuals who have even more reflective people in their circles. Much of making this documentary has involved some sacrifice by the other party, whether it involved their time, money, or energy as already busy students. I struggled with finding ways to reciprocate or give thanks besides my words of gratitude.



At many points, I felt an overwhelming sense of guilt for taking up their time and sometimes rushed myself to finish filming as quickly as possible.

### *Pre-interviews*

Both pre-interviews were conducted over the phone. I prepared a short list of general topics based on my readings and prompted them to share a few personal experiences. The pre-interviews helped to significantly structure my interview questions and were important in helping me remember specific points during the interviews which ended up being critical clips in the documentary. Both interviews were relatively brief and kept conversational, partly because I came up with a list of topics instead of questions. This allowed me to engage in the conversation without worrying about addressing specific questions. I was afraid that asking similar questions during the pre-interview and interview would lead to shortened responses for the actual interview. On the other hand, I do wonder if I would have gathered more information with targeted questions.

Pre-interviews brought to light areas and intersections that I hadn't considered. Spirituality and detachment were one of the first experiences that came to mind when speaking to Marglucy. Even though at the time I didn't know the ways it would connect to the larger documentary, I had a sense that it contained something fruitful. It pushed me to create a set of questions related to it and capture any related information.

The pre-interviews also challenged my assumptions, a preview of a lesson I would learn when filming the interview. A perfect example is my assumptions of bleaching brows compared to Marglucy's actual experience. My interest in bleaching brows was rooted in its use as a form of resistance to Western beauty standards and as a method to create delay in the perception and labeling of gender and beauty, which I drew from my literature review. In the pre-interview, I learned that for Marglucy bleaching brows was a method of accentuating their features. Prior to the

pre-interview, I had placed a lot of importance on the act of bleaching brows in communicating resistance. The discrepancy was a hint of the flexibility and adaptability I would need when conducting interviews. It also showed me the limits of academic literature in that, as obvious as this may seem, its conclusions are not prescriptive to all the varied lived experiences.

### *Filming*

Marglucy's portion was filmed during a five-day trip to Harlem. Because I knew that this time period was my only chance to film, I had my camera on me all the time, ready to film. I was able to capture a lot of b-roll that served me well during the editing phase. However, I found that I had shot a lot of redundant footage that had similar angles or lighting. I wish that I had been more mindful about shooting a variety of angles, and in the future, I hope to come prepared with a list of shots. Additionally, focusing my camera was one of my biggest technical struggles.

The constraints of filming by myself forced me to strip down to necessities. I could only film with a square-aspect ratio if I used my external recorder. However, using it would have added a significant amount of weight to my camera and called for attention, making it more difficult to film hand-held outside. So instead I chose to tightly frame most shots. I didn't like the look of lav mics because I felt that it would subtly imply a staged experience. But the lav mics were by far the best mic option for their portability, so I ceded my inclination for convenience. The limits of my physical strength played a role in the choice of my lens and lighting. I was fortunate that many of these constraints led to happy accidents that added to the documentary better than something more thoroughly planned. Again, practicing flexibility and adaptability proved to be essential.

I was also intentional about setting myself up for success based on my past filming experiences. I made sure that I packed myself food to eat so that I wouldn't be filming hungry and lethargic. Every night I ensured that all my mics and camera batteries were charged and packed my

gear the night before. I was careful about making sure that everything I needed was packed the night before. However, I learned that all due diligence can't avert every complication. On the first day of filming with Marglucy, I broke the cord needed to connect my external recorder to my camera which prevented me from filming extended video clips. The second camera wouldn't film due to the formatting of the SD card. Precarious lighting setups would fall and change the lighting between clips. Mics would capture the sound of my lens struggling to focus.

What kept me from being overcome by these adversities was mental preparation for hurdles and imperfection. The intense worry I felt leading up to my travel to Harlem surrounding accidentally leaving behind important gear, being robbed on sight, or breaking my camera was an indication to me that I lacked mental grounding. Perhaps my most critical preparation just days before my travel involved a constant internal reassurance and reminder that not everything would go to plan. This helped me manage my expectations. Furthermore, the more these challenges happened, the more I problem-solved, and the more my confidence grew.

This specific situation also taught me that many of these takeaways are lessons that I would be relearning again and again in my future as a maker. The serenity I developed while filming Marglucy was greatly challenged when I filmed Faduma and Lana. I had scheduled my interview with them on the day of my return from Harlem. It was scheduled at 8PM on campus, so I had to haul my luggage of gear from my dorm to campus and back in the evening. The filming didn't start till 11 PM as both Lana and Faduma asked to push it back. By the time we started, I was exhausted and had little energy during the interview. I felt so defeated that I didn't even view the footage from the interview and even considered changing the documentary to focus on Marglucy alone. The encouragement of my advisor motivated me to return to the footage. With fresh eyes and a renewed spirit, I thankfully was able to appreciate the footage I captured.

This process of learning and relearning made the last portions of filming with Faduma easier. I realized that the two suitcases of gear were not necessary to bring around and had reduced my setup to gear that would fit into a tote bag. I became more deliberate about getting a variety of angles for each shot. At this point, I had started to go through the video I already filmed, so my questions and filming were more targeted. I noticed my filming tendencies and began to apply them intentionally. For instance, I preferred placing the camera close to the speaker, and I realized it was because I wanted to replicate the level of intimacy of my conversations with the subjects. So, in filming Faduma, I made sure to place the camera at my eye level and focus on the details that would capture my attention during the conversation, such as jewelry or hand movements.

### *Interviews*

For both subjects, I had one extended formal interview where we sat down and I asked my prepared set of questions. But the most fruitful audio content came from recorded conversations while the subjects were engrossed in other tasks like applying makeup or getting their henna done. Those moments left room to expand or explore different memories that naturally came to the interviewees. I let my own curiosity guide those conversations and dig deeper.

At the same time, I struggled to maintain a full presence in the interviews because I was worried about the video and audio components. Conducting an interview with two people was even more difficult, as I tried to balance asking questions without interrupting the conversational spirit I wanted to capture. I also found that I would forget to prompt for personal stories and experiences towards the second half of the interviews. I realized upon review of the interviews that I accepted generalizations as answers to my questions instead of specific personal memories where the heart and evidence of the documentary lie.

The readings helped me generate a list of interview questions and discussion topics. It gave me the vocabulary needed to articulate ideas and overall themes to explore. Examples include individual negotiations with beauty work, beauty as a tool, the relationality of beauty, and displacement of feeling and being. I found that with both interviews I was able to identify related themes and topics during the interview and prompt the speakers to share more. However, I had to take great care in ensuring that I wasn't ascribing the conclusions of the literature or my own assumptions to their experiences. For instance, Faduma's experience of colorism beginning in college was unexpected for me, and I found myself asking a couple follow-up questions that assumed otherwise.

### *Editing*

By far the hardest part of making this documentary was the editing process. I had a large number of video clips to sift through and select, a process made harder because most of the footage was both great and fitting. There were an endless amount of narratives and documentaries I could make given the breadth of the footage. I spent a lot of time in decision paralysis. Instead of thinking of a broad narrative arc, I would focus on measurable or itemized tasks such as writing brief and extended descriptions of each clip, selecting video segments, and transcribing and annotating interviews. Completing these tasks would prove to be indispensable in the later stages of editing because it helped deeply familiarize me with the usable footage available to me. It also made video clips easy to find and significantly speed up my editing process.

I didn't have an established workflow that applied to a project of this scale, so a lot of trial and error went into determining it. Tasks like the ones mentioned above came from my intuition as well as a simple desire to at least do something seemingly productive to stave off my paralysis. While those actions were critical to my editing process, other processes I tried were less

successful. After writing descriptions of each clip, I created a table with a column of broad topics and tried to categorize each select into an appropriate row. I struggled to complete this process because many clips were related to multiple topics, and the effort I was putting into classifying didn't pay off in aiding my ability to visualize promising themes. I also spent a lot of time putting related clips of Marglucy and Faduma next to each other on a Premiere Pro timeline to test explorations. However, this method was too narrow to help me discover a broader narrative arc. Even when I tried to extend this approach by compiling a longer set of related clips, I found that it was aimless because it wasn't rooted in any narrative.

What helped most in constructing a narrative was stepping away from my laptop and reflecting on what stories and messages stood out to me after reviewing all the videos. I would refer to my written descriptions of all the clips as well as my annotated bibliography to see their alignment with each other. I compared Marglucy's and Faduma's experiences to see what contrasted or paired well together. Through this process, I saw an overall theme of internal, external, and beyond emerge. On a sheet of paper, I had two columns labeled after Faduma and Marglucy and began to list clips that could follow each other based on those three sections. This process allowed me to listen to the material and let it lead me to a narrative.

On my laptop, I've stuck a note that says to 'trust that you will come to a conclusion for yourself then for others,' a quote from my advisor said during one of our meetings. One of my biggest worries has been anticipating what the audience will take away from watching my documentary. I struggle with separating myself from the documentary and assuming the role of the viewer. Because I fear that my familiarity with the footage might cloud my judgments, I overcompensate by worrying about every detail. I stressed over whether the audience would be able to take away something from watching the documentary without a typical narrative arc. I

worried that I wasn't honoring Marglucy's and Faduma's stories and identities or accidentally twisting what they had said into my own narratives. Going through a segment of my documentary with other students, sharing my anxieties, and hearing their feedback helped alleviate my concerns and most of my worries.

### *Changing Goals*

Elements of my initial goal to juxtapose beauty resistance through pursuit and beauty pursuit despite resistance were a part of my documentary but no longer the main focus. I shifted my attention to the cases of beauty work in developing identity, the external forces that shape their relationship to beauty, and different ways to move beyond it. I also decreased the scope of the project to focus on Faduma instead of both Faduma and Lana. This decision was mostly driven by scheduling difficulties, though in retrospect, focusing on two people made the documentary more balanced.

Working on this documentary, I identified this dissonance I felt between the importance that beauty practices had in defining my life and the insignificance relegated to beauty topics in general public forums. I want to convey the weight and depth of beauty of work in people's lives. I want to show two people's negotiations with beauty not to serve as a feminist solution but to be a source of inspiration and a call for the viewer to reflect on their relationship with beauty.

### **Conclusions**

The final result is a 45-minute documentary film which can be viewed at this link: [https://youtu.be/\\_4Sz7h\\_YiwY](https://youtu.be/_4Sz7h_YiwY) . Working on this project revealed to me the connections between my interests. In high school, I did a directed study on free will and determinism and their applications to morality, neuroscience, and the discussion of nature versus nurture. I think I've always been interested in the interplay of environment and natural inclinations and their influence

on developing one's tastes and preferences. I have a desire to get to the root or discover some sort of truth so that I can have control over my preferences. I'm frustrated that the environment that I didn't choose to be in and the media that I didn't choose to consume heavily determine my aesthetic tastes which then go on to shape my identities, principles, and art practice. These environments are built on racist, sexist, ableist, and classist ideologies, so it feels that I'm unknowingly inheriting these beliefs against my will. This documentary began on beauty and resistance and ended on self-expression and the influences that form it.

My interest in self-expression, taste, and identities also relates to my curiosity of meaning and its communication. I'm interested in people's approaches to physically manifesting parts of their identities and the reasonings behind them. Why do people like what they like? How do they signal their identities? What are the meanings one is able to define versus those that already come defined? These questions have traces back to my own life and the ways I try to express myself or participate in beauty work. A considerable portion of my identity, my expression, and my passion is tied to beauty work. Sometimes I'm struck by its corporeality and the reality that I'm one accident away from losing it all. I too am negotiating my relationship with beauty work and balancing agency and coercion.

From Faduma, I've learned the different ways beauty can be used to align internal and external gazes. In the first few clips of Faduma, the audience learns the different ways she uses makeup as a tool for expression such as to show her playful personality and to revel in whimsical interests and imaginations. Faduma gives the important insight that doing these actions is a way to share who you are "without taking people's time." This reasoning of using beauty practices to signal interests to people is something that I didn't come across in my readings but a sentiment that many people I've spoken to agree with, including myself. It's especially important because



Faduma is acutely aware of the ways she is perceived and the different consequences her presentations garner, yet she continues to indulge in these beauty practices. Hearing Faduma's story resonated with me because we see just the ties of beauty work to how one person views themselves and their environment as well as their mediation between the two.

I also enjoy learning the ways people translate their personalities to show physically. Faduma associates lashes with a fairy-like presentation and foundation with a vision more perfect than reality. I found inspiration in the connections she drew from childhood and her current makeup approaches. To me, Faduma's story highlights the different negotiations that surround beauty practice. Her lash application is a negotiation of pain and pleasure. Getting ready for work is a balance of showing up as herself while also appeasing unwritten professional expectations. Engaging in femininity is a negotiation between following her natural inclinations while resisting racist standards. Furthermore, these mediations clearly demonstrate that beauty isn't surface level; it impacts the way people move about this world and the humanity they are afforded. Faduma's story emphasizes the necessity of conversations on beauty, especially regarding race.

From Marglucy, I've learned a way to self-determination by centering feelings and listening to one's body to guide expression and beauty practice. I was inspired by their use of makeup to fight against their anxieties and urge for control. They use colors in the way they dress and apply makeup to reflect the emotions they feel. If Faduma's story exemplified various negotiations, Marglucy's showed ways to move beyond the ugliness that surrounds beauty work. Their experiences with racism and colorism accelerated their spiritual journey to detachment leading to their focus on souls and intimacy which is clear in every aspect of their life from their gender identity to their art practice. In this world where beauty ideals are shaped by Western and

white supremacist influences, turning inwards and letting that guide presentation is one way to escape those attributes.

The differences and similarities between the lived experiences of Marglucy and Faduma and the ones described in the literature underscored the importance of ethnography and documentary as research methods. Ground-up listening and qualitative methods add nuance that a generalized academic paper would struggle to capture. The storytelling of the documentary brings to life academic text that is often dull and can deliver a memorable illustration of the impacts or inner workings of an issue. The assumed authenticity of the documentary genre adds to its credibility. It also makes realistic the ways to move forward.

At the beginning of this project, I wanted to visualize an ideal system where one could opt in and out of beauty without any consequence in the hopes that an imagination would bring us closer to realizing that world. I naively thought that I would read Bell Hooks or Audrey Lorde, find their writings on this perfect world, and I would visualize it on film. However, after my literature review, I found no answers describing this ideal. Paper after paper I read critiques and found myself drowning in perspectives. The readings described the adverse effects of advocating for individual resistances such as preventing solidarity, encouraging judgementality, and fulfilling post-feminist hyper-independence. On the other hand, systemic approaches to address unrealistic beauty ideals were criticized for their inauthentic or misleading methods. Though the critiques were foundational in my developing a landscape of the academic literature on beauty, there was little said about how to address them.

So by the end of my literature review, I felt I couldn't deliver a project that imagined this desired world. I had to step back and turn to lived experiences, and in doing so, my hopes were renewed that I can at least inspire viewers to engage more deeply with their own beauty practices.

Through watching Marglucy's and Faduma's explorations of their environments, I hope the audience can investigate the ways they are in conversation with their environments. I hope they find inspiration in different ways they can translate their interests and personalities onto their beauty practices. I hope they find comfort in the fact that they are not alone in facing these negotiations with beauty standards and feel empowered to turn inwards to find their own answers.

This project and topic is something that I will continue to explore for the foreseeable future. I was already exploring ideas for a short editorial film that dramatized some of my memories related to beauty. In addition, during my literature review, I saved a set of articles related to African art and decolonial practices. I want to return to them and study non-western art sensibilities and principles to inform and expand my own artistic methods. I am also planning to travel back to my home country for the first time since I immigrated to the US ten years ago. I intend to film a documentary about memory, identity, and conversations with the environment.

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