

# Get Ready with Me: The Subtle, Rhetorical Feminisms of Making Up

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**Abstract:** The cosmetic practice of doing makeup—or “getting ready”—is a site for rhetorical analysis presently underrepresented in scholarship about embodied rhetorics. Following the steps outlined in a YouTube-style “Get Ready With Me” video series, this article argues that makeup can be understood rhetorically as a form of subtle feminism, not just in the way that it appears to others once finished and on display, but in how it instantiates a particular relationship to the self in its application. This process illuminates feminist ideologies by bringing about particular visual regimes and patterns of looking, challenging delineations of public and private, emphasizing individuals’ embodied lived experiences of identity, and intensifying the presence while resisting the erasure of makeup-users by locating them within particular cultural traditions.

**Tags:** [makeup](#), [cosmetics](#), [beauty work](#), [sensory rhetorics](#), [feminist rhetorics](#), [gender](#), [identity](#)

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*Now the cherry-black lipstick's gathering dust in a drawer  
I don't need her anymore  
'Cause I got this power*

-Lorde, “Oceanic Feeling”

In pop-artist Lorde’s 2021 album, *Solar Power*, the singer trades in two earlier eras of dark defiance (*Pure Heroine*) and reckless abandon (*Melodrama*) for something beachy, sun-drenched, with songs on which she dreams of childhood in the “tall grass” and escaping to an island on “the last of the outbound planes.” Eschewing the “cherry-black” lipstick that defined her debut and sophomore albums—*Melodrama* listeners will remember that album’s anthemic first line: “I do my makeup in somebody else’s car”—Lorde declares in the lyrics above that she no longer needs a vampy lip, which provided merely a painted-on visual impact, now that she has a truer “power.” In making this statement, Lorde implies that makeup provides power, or at least an affective intensity that can approximate it, but simultaneously asserts that makeup is unnecessary when more authentic power is available.

Here, Lorde illustrates one of the fundamental paradoxes of makeup: it doesn’t matter, and yet it does. On the beach, in possession of her third-album “power,” Lorde echoes a critique in some feminist circles of makeup as frivolous and ultimately unnecessary, a concession to patriarchally-imposed beauty standards. It’s true: few would argue that even the most dramatic winged eyeliner inflects communicative situations in

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a way that could be described as rhetorical. Even at its boldest, then, makeup's real power to influence, to create change, seems to be minimal—a very minor force. At the same time, Lorde's early-career rise to international attention was no doubt partly enabled by her intentional cultivation of a made-up, goth-girl look, winged liner and dark lipstick in high contrast against her pale skin. From that perspective, makeup appears to be a small yet important tool for self-construction, one that can be skillfully and strategically used to gain visibility, prominence, and influence. Again: makeup is a small thing, besides the point. It doesn't matter. And yet it does.

Against the hard-partying backdrop of her second album, as I mention above, Lorde sings that she does her makeup “in somebody else's car.” It's a line that paints a picture of how the singer constructs herself visually, but in liminal, on-the-move spaces that don't belong to her. This lyric is not so much about her makeup's final product, the “final look,” but about what the process of doing makeup says about her ephemeral self in the world of *Melodrama*, always chasing the next fleeting taste of euphoria. Taking my cue from Lorde's en-route makeup routine, the aspect of makeup that I explore here more specifically as a form of subtle, feminist rhetoric is not makeup's “finished product,” but rather the act of doing, or applying, makeup—the process of getting ready. I propose that makeup can be understood rhetorically as a form of subtle feminism not just in the way that it appears to others once finished and on display, but in how it instantiates a particular relationship to the self in its application—a process that, in small and subtle ways, concentrates feminist ideologies by bringing about particular visual regimes and patterns of looking, challenging delineations of public and private, emphasizing individuals' embodied lived experiences of identity, and intensifying the presence while resisting the erasure of makeup-users by locating them within particular cultural traditions.

Having spent my professional life thus far writing about listening as a rhetorical force, I'm careful not to underestimate subtle communicative choices that are overlooked by many, and I see doing and wearing makeup as one of those choices. In fact, one way that makeup can be understood as a feminist rhetorical art is when we locate its subtle impact within the feminist re-readings of silence and listening of the last few decades. These lines of rhetorical scholarship bear out the idea that women, people of color, and other marginalized rhetors have often made use of alternative modalities as channels for rhetorical agency (Bokser; Glenn; Glenn and Ratcliffe; Ratcliffe). Rhetors of silence and listening take advantage of a full range of communicative tools, especially when they have been disallowed full participation in rhetoric's traditional sites of concentration: speaking and writing (Foster; Myers; Suter). Makeup falls within this set of alternative conduits: after all, the making-up process is largely non-verbal, or extraverbal, and operates in the affective range, acting upon both users and viewers before, beneath, and around verbal or written expression (Corbett). Sensory, extraverbal channels like these are often leveraged when it is not safe for their users to speak out in more direct, unsubtle ways. While often dismissed in the way Lorde demonstrates above, as something “not needed,” in its deployment as a subtle rhetorical tool in the vein of silence and listening, makeup emerges as not only feminist, but decidedly “feminist enough.”

With its sensorial, extraverted nature in mind, I aim to show in this essay how doing makeup is a form of subtle, feminist rhetoric by locating it within a particular cluster of theorists, some of whom could be said to descend from earlier scholarship on rhetorics of silence and listening initiated by the likes of Julie Bokser, Cheryl Glenn, and Krista Ratcliffe, but who build upon their contributions with more explicitly multisensory and fully-embodied approaches to self-presentation and public legibility. I analyze makeup, or rather the process of making up, by way of Tina Campt's "quiet" and "quotidian" forms of resistance in *Listening to Images* and Kevin Everod Quashie's further analysis of "quietness" as it troubles a public/private binary. Also taking up variations on these ideas are Jillian Hernandez, Melanie Jones, and Amoni Thompson, who explore cosmetic and other practices of self-presentation as embodied circulations of visual culture that link their participants not just to femininity, but to feminism, through their manifestations of cultural memory and self-possession. The writing of S. Brooke Corfman further helps me articulate the doing and wearing of makeup as a rhetorical encounter in which the body plays an active part, in a process that unfolds even after a look is "completed."

In what follows, I loosely follow the steps of a video in the "Get Ready with Me" genre of the early 2020s to structure my investigations into making up as a form of subtle feminism. I will not be focusing on interrogating "Get Ready with Me" as a genre here, or its circulation through user-generated video platforms like *YouTube* and *TikTok*. Rather, I follow its step-by-step sequence because it emphasizes the idea of applying makeup to oneself as a deliberate process, a knowing encounter with the self in which the makeup-user interacts with themselves, in anticipation of interacting with others. Come get ready with me.

## Eyeliner

Most days, I start with my eyes. That's where I apply all colors of the rainbow, especially in shimmer and metallic formulas. When you do your eyes first, you can use your concealer afterwards to help shape, or "clean up" your eye look. Sequence is important. I usually bring my eyeshadow up and out in a soft angle, then outline that shape with my concealer afterwards, creating a soft yet clean "wing" shape. I do it that way because, for the longest time, I could not draw my eyes powerfully up and out with that graphic, cat-eye liner. The outer corners of my deep-set eyes are round, with the outer ridge of my top lid pointing decidedly downwards. I learned to create a real winged eyeliner more recently, aided by liquid formulas that lay down fluidly over my features. When I get it right, I intensify the power of my own gaze as I direct it towards others, even if it's just going to the grocery store or a meeting on campus. I also often run late.

The time it takes to do eyeliner points towards a way of thinking about making up as a subtle, unspoken, yet unmistakably feminist practice of transmitting memory and identity through the body. In her book-length study, Zahra Hankir explores several communities in which eyeliner has emerged as important both visually, in its impact on others, and personally, in what it means to create that bold, "winged" look on oneself. In Hankir's account, the excavation of the bust of Nefertiti in 1912 set off a wave of enthusiasm for dramatically winged eyeliner amidst that moment's rise of "Tutmania" (16). Part of the interest in Nefertiti's

eyeliner may come from its formal, unapologetically extravagant and time-intensive nature—such makeup refers implicitly to the time it took to do, and, by extension, the relative status of the wearer. This is even more the case when we consider that cost was, apparently, not a prohibitive factor when it came to cosmetics, as makeup artist and historian Lisa Eldridge notes that in ancient Egypt, cosmetics “were not the reserve of the wealthy or high-powered,” and that “makeup palettes have been found in the most modest of graves and tombs” (76). Instead, the magnetism of Nefertiti’s eyeliner highlights the idea of time as a feminist concept. Recent research has framed much of the time women spend on refining their appearance as “beauty work,” a form of labor that is, predictably, unevenly distributed along race and gender lines (Lir and Ayalon; Lir; Kwan and Trautner; Palmer). And it is important, of course, to point out the financial, temporal, and emotional “tax” laid upon women by the expectation of beauty work. In its characteristic paradox, makeup carries feminist potential as well as pitfalls. But another perspective on makeup—thinking of it both as a process and as a final product—reframes the time spent on beauty work in a different way. In “Beauty Marks: the Latinx Surfaces of Loving, Becoming, and Mourning,” Jillian Hernandez writes of a California-based Instagram makeup artist, Selena Ruiz. Ruiz creates “mask-like” looks on herself, which Hernandez describes as “Chola-goth/Betty Boop tributes to [Selena’s] mother Gwen who passed away when she was a child” (79). Hernandez writes: “The makeup is the healing work. Beauty as a practice of mourning, a plastic play that allows one to continue to face life artfully. Recovering, but not forgetting, by transmitting the memory on the body” (79). Here, Hernandez reframes the process of doing makeup as a different kind of work, a palpable form of personal and cultural work: “a practice of mourning...transmitting the memory on the body” (79). The time Ruiz spends doing makeup tributes to her mother upon her own face takes on special significance: a communion with the memory of her mother, perhaps, whose presence may yet be written into her own features and into their shared gestures, across generations, of doing makeup. With this “transmission of memory on the body” in mind, the generous time that would have been given over to Nefertiti’s eyeliner takes on new connotations, not simply of the leisure that allowed for it, but the way the ritual of makeup palpably and visibly located the Egyptian queen in her royal and spiritual lineage. When Hernandez writes, in this vein, that her “grandmothers’ *máscara* and mascara do genealogical work,” makeup as a time-intensive practice continues to take shape as a quiet, embodied feminist art (70, italics mine). From this perspective, the intimate, behind-the-scenes process of doing makeup is as important as the finished look, and it is a process that subtly, wordlessly conveys feminist values of embodied memory and identity.

## Foundation

I used to always just grab the lightest skin-tone shade in any product range. It was usually displayed all the way to the left in a row, and marked with the lowest number, like “00—fair” or “01—light.” If we “read” a makeup range on the shelf from left-to-right, my light skin tone formed a starting point, a numerical and chromal baseline. The notion of white skin as “unmarked,” as “neutral,” precipitates within this logic, with higher numbers and deeper pigments deviating from an implicit light-skinned norm. But sometimes even the lightest shades of a foundation range showed up a confounding yellow against my skin, so I

sheered them out to make them work for me. Now I know that's because I'm what the Internet would call a "cool-toned girlie," and these days, with a recent expansion of cosmetics-industry inclusivity, my shade is not always the farthest to the left anymore, or the lowest number. But at the time, it seemed that even I was not really served by an industry whose baseline skin tone was, ostensibly, mine.

Repurposing makeup, or "making it work," can be understood as a form of quietly feminist resistance to an industry that has been willfully blind to some would-be makeup-users. Especially when it comes to foundation, a close shade-match to the wearer's skin is crucial. But even after identifying the right shade, the question remains: who can find their shade on the market? The answer to that question reveals whom, historically, makeup has been made for and by. Now, makeup artists like Pat McGrath lead the cosmetics industry, alongside Black-owned companies such as Fenty Beauty, whose 40-shade foundation launch in 2017 set new standards for skin-tone inclusivity. This was not always the case, however. A *Racked* article by Nadra Nittle traces makeup brands serving Black customers back to Anthony Overton in 1898, through to Morton Neumann, who in 1926 established Valmor Products Co., which catered to women of color as its primary clientele even as its advertising made use of colorism, with the word "brighter" a thinly-veiled stand-in for "lighter." It was not until the 1960s and 70s that Avon and Maybelline began to serve a wider range of skin tones; later, Fashion Fair and IMAN Cosmetics provided landmarks on the journey to the contemporary makeup landscape. But being "seen" by larger players in the industry continues to be a problem, and some makeup-users have had to innovate more than others while participating in the process of making up.

As a result of being overlooked in the beauty industry, Black and brown makeup-wearers found inventive ways to engage in making up. Nittle, quoting beauty entrepreneur Kimberly Smith, notes that "for far too long black women essentially 'became chemists at home,' mixing shades to make the right foundation for their skin." In the absence of lip liners in shades designed to suit their skin tones, Black and Latinx makeup-wearers used eye pencil to line their lips, topping it with a lighter gloss to create a makeshift nude shade. In *Allure*, Thalía Henao explains that this was "more than just a simple makeup hack." She continues: "This style of lip liner was part of a beauty tradition Black women had no choice but to create in a society that intentionally excluded them." Makeup-users repurposing eyeliner and mixing custom shades at home demonstrate what Tina Campt, in *Listening to Images*, might call a "quiet" or "quotidian" form of resistance, developing their own practices of beauty within the limitations of available makeup products. In defining "quiet" and "quotidian," Campt could easily be referring to makeup's undertheorized role as a sensory and feminist rhetoric when she writes: "Each term references something assumed to go unspoken or unsaid, unremarked, unrecognized, or overlooked. They name practices that are pervasive and ever-present yet occluded by their seeming absence or erasure in repetition, routine, or internalization" (4). "Pervasive" yet rendered mundane, made "invisible" by repetition or routine, makeup, too, falls into Campt's understanding of the quiet and quotidian. In a key illustration of quotidian resistance through self-presentation, Campt analyzes a photo series curated by Martina Bacigalupo but originating in the Gulu Real Art Studio, a photography studio in Gulu, Uganda. In this series of seated portraits, the sitters' faces are fully cut out, with a blank square excising their face and head. The face cut-outs could then be used in documents such as ID cards, driver licenses, and other



forms of documentation related to citizenship. This was done because a set of four full, rectangular portraits with cut-out faces incidentally cost clients less than one square photo of the face—another inventive repurposing. And yet, the remainders are powerful, with the sitters' body postures, hand placement, and choices in dress emerging as amplified purveyors of selfhood in the absence of the face. Even though dresses, jackets, jewelry, and handbags are not seen in the official identification photos, they function as small yet deliberate expressions of selfhood and wholeness. Similarly, when repurposing, or “hacking” makeup products to suit their needs in the face of exclusion, makeup-users engage in a quietly feminist practice of resisting their own erasure and, in fact, they continue to skillfully leverage makeup's tools to intensify their presence. Through the process of making up with quiet resistance, they practice a small, quotidian feminism by seeing themselves, and bidding to be seen.

## Concealer

When I do makeup, I always go in with concealer. In fact, my first makeup routine was just some slightly-dried foundation from the rim of a drugstore bottle, which I used to conceal; nothing else. Later, I'd amplify my features with black mascara and plum lips, but initially, I just wanted to hide the bumps and redness of acne. Now, I embrace the play of emphasis and de-emphasis: I soften some features with concealer, like my undereyes and the thinner skin around my mouth. After that, I'll glow up with blush and highlighter, steps I wouldn't take without creating a canvas by laying down concealer first.

Makeup is an art of subtle layering. Concealer, furthermore, needs to provide “coverage” but also hide itself, fusing with the skin so as not to appear as a distinct, noticeable membrane. The creation of layers that “hide themselves” gives rise to a quiet troubling of the delineation between interior and exterior, public and private, leading to a measure of choice and agency in what is visible to others and what is not. The very word “conceal” lends itself to one of makeup's less favorable connotations: to fake, pretend, or dissemble. To “conceal flaws” in order to “look better” often stands in contrast to makeup's more positively-framed functions, as a tool for artistic self-expression or for “enhancing” one's own features. In “Why Women Use Makeup,” the authors frame these two aims for makeup as “camouflage” and “seduction,” or what I might call hiding and emphasizing (Korichi, et al.). They further suggest that people using makeup mainly in these two ways fall into distinct psychological profiles, with anxiety and defensiveness characterizing those using makeup mainly for camouflage, and assertiveness and extroversion describing those mainly using it for seduction (Korichi, et al.). But as I mention above, attempts to camouflage and seduce often occur on the same face at the same time, in the hands of the makeup-user. Dark undereye circles and acne irritations, for instance, may be “concealed,” at least partially, while the eyes, brows, and lips are made more distinct. On the surfaces of the cheek and temple, areas may be concealed directly underneath or alongside moves to bring out color or structure through blush, bronze, and highlight. It would be more accurate to say that makeup-users camouflage in order to seduce, or that minimizing some facial features while emphasizing others occurs simultaneously. Concealer reminds us that as a process, using makeup can't be oversimplified into rigid camouflage/seduce or hide/emphasize roles when its layered nature contains many overlapping

functions.

Further, camouflage, from a feminist rhetorical perspective, can also be understood as a form of subtle rhetorical agency in self-presentation. In the use of concealer, wearers intervene into a range of contingencies: blending away a sleepless night in service of work or childcare, for instance, softening the appearance of scars, or reducing the look of melasma, often but not always brought on by pregnancy. It is a type of makeup that is used to hide, at the wearer's choice, various issues with the skin that they may wish to—or feel a need to—keep to themselves. The acne that I had as a pre-teen and teen, and which I still have, is the hormonal type. As a youngster, the deep cysts were an unwelcome, visible signal of physical maturity that I preferred to minimize.

As such, the doing and wearing of makeup complicates a public and private binary in many ways, a quiet, quotidian process that privately works to shape a public self. In *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*, Kevin Quashie continues a line of inquiry that resonates with Tina Campt's, above, further developing the idea of "quietness." In a seeming contradiction, Quashie formulates "quiet" as a form of expressiveness. But rather than being "synonymous with silence" or "the absence of sound or movement," Quashie argues that "quiet" should be "understood as a quality or a sensibility of being, as a manner of expression:"

This expressiveness of quiet is not concerned with publicness, but instead is the expressiveness of the interior. That is, the quiet of a person represents the broad scope of his or her inner life; the quiet symbolizes—and if interrogated, expresses—some of the capacity of the interior. (21)

"The expressiveness of the interior" seems, at first, a paradoxical phrase. After all, what is interior is generally not overtly expressed, or able to be seen by others. And yet Quashie formulates a "quality or sensibility of being" that is outwardly expressed but indexes, or outlines, the presence of an interior. In a key example, Quashie points to the iconic 1968 Olympic podium photograph of Tommie Smith and John Carlos, in which the two athletes raise their fists in a Black power salute, their stances and facial expressions outlining, while also protecting, their inner experiences. Like Campt, Quashie locates practices of quietness in performances of Blackness, in particular, but suggests that quietness allows Blackness to be defined not in relation to publicness, as it so often is, but rather in terms of inwardness. Concealer operates through a quiet paradigm. As an outer veil or layer applied over the skin, it comprises a form of publicness that actually turns away from self-disclosure. It provides the shape of an interior—in this case, the bare skin—without revealing what is inside it. Concealer turns the bare skin into an interior, a sub-layer.

And yet, perhaps the application of quiet as a critical framework to concealer is not a perfect fit. In some ways, makeup better resembles the way Quashie formulates silence. Drawing a distinction between quiet and silence, Quashie writes: "the expressiveness of silence is often aware of an audience, a watcher or listener whose presence is the reason for the withholding—it is an expressiveness which is intent and even

defiant. This is a key difference between the two terms...because in its inwardness, the aesthetic of quiet is watcherless” (22). I have written above that makeup relies first upon the gaze directed towards oneself in a mirror, which in turn anticipates the gaze of others—certainly not an aesthetic that is “watcherless,” as Quashie puts it. And it’s true: other, more overtly visible makeup may operate like silence can, when silence is an intentional force that anticipates and defies a watcher or listener, a non-verbal signifier that pushes back, an invisible forcefield, against communicative expectations. That is how a graphic wing or an engine-red lip operates, at times—as a loud silence, as a preemptive, wordless challenge. But concealer is different, in that it deflects the attention of a watcher, thus remaining watcherless. In a small way, concealer defies clear categories of visible and invisible, public and private, the hidden and the emphasized. It becomes a tool of subtle feminism in the way it can be used to quietly protect an interior through a makeup-user’s choice to wear it.

## **Powder**

I loved my grandmother’s powder room. I adored the tiny soaps shaped like roses and seashells arranged in an enameled dish next to the sink, and the folded guest towels in muted pastels. These pretty, yet somewhat impractical touches show how the powder room was intended as a kind of “backstage” space for guests, while the bedrooms had other, more private bathrooms that were separated from the shared living spaces by a long hallway. From one side to the other, my grandparents’ single-floor home established a gradient from more public to more private, with the powder room stationed in the middle.

In small yet remarkable ways, the spaces in which doing makeup happens ask us to rethink rigidly defined notions of space and gender. Retreating to “powder one’s nose” may, at first glance, seem like an example of the “beauty work” that women have often been expected to do, taxing both in terms of time and money (Shlomi and Lir; Kwan and Trautner; Palmer). From another perspective, however, that once again reframes makeup as a process, going to touch up makeup has served as a means for women to move into more private, “backstage” spaces, creating opportunities for backchannel conversations and alternative forms of communication. As far back as ancient Rome, makeup artist and cosmetic historian Lisa Eldridge notes, “cosmetics were usually applied in private, in a small room that would have been strictly the domain of women” (27). Indeed, at first glance, the rooms typically hospitable to the ritual of makeup reveal a politics of space and place that seems to reify conventional gender roles and their correlation to public and private spheres. And yet, makeup’s processual nature also opens spatial conduits for challenging those designations. In courtly French circles, for instance, where “getting dressed and rouging your face in front of an audience was part of a public toilette practiced by aristocratic women,” Lisa Eldridge notes that nevertheless, “there was a strong element of performance involved in the ritual, with most of the work being done beforehand and without the court onlookers” (33). Here, the stages of doing makeup point to more a nuanced gradient of public and private, interspersed with semi-public waystations, like the powder room in my grandparents’ house. In *Classic Beauty: The History of Makeup*, cosmetics historian Gabriela Hernandez, too, makes note of Marie Antoinette’s famously “public toilette” (35). She adds detail, however, that



once again points to the semi-public sites for doing makeup as communicative opportunities, in this case for women to engage in discussion unlikely to be allowed in the fully “onstage” spaces of the court. She writes: “An elaborate routine was carefully staged to allow favored members of the royal court to accompany her. In these public forums, women discussed many issues besides their looks and often invited intellectual guests to engage in conversation” (Hernandez 35). As a process, then, doing makeup can again be seen to open up possibilities for exchange outside of rhetoric’s more “official” written and spoken conduits, suggesting not rigidly-defined public and private spaces; rather, a spectrum that subtly challenges a gendered spatial binary.

Wearing cosmetics throughout the day reveals how “doing makeup” is really an embodied process that unfolds slowly—quietly, gradually—over time, and which is not finished once the wearer steps away from the mirror. Thinking about makeup this way illuminates not just the blur of public and private space that I point out above, but also time-inflected formulations of gender. The term “powder room” dates to the seventeenth century, when powder was as much a man’s concern as a woman’s, used to finish both faces and elaborate wigs (Keith; Otranto). The need for touch-ups, and thus, a powder room, further suggests that even the final “product” of makeup, a finished look, is not static—rather, makeup changes as it becomes more “lived in,” and the body continues to interact with it. In particular, the skin’s natural production of oil tends to seep through layers of makeup. Powder absorbs oils, mattifying parts of the face that tend to become shiny over time. Carried in compact form inside pockets and handbags for reapplications throughout the day, powder lends itself in particular to the sense that the process of makeup doesn’t end when the wearer lays down their tools and leaves the house. Instead, the process of makeup continues as its contact with the body is prolonged, a process further influenced by the lived experience of the wearer—their skin-type, body temperature, activity level, and environment.

The ongoing interaction of the body with makeup, as a medium, is brought further into focus by S. Brooke Corfman’s analysis of a performance by the Canadian, transmasculine artist Cassils. In Cassils’s durational performance entitled *Tiresias*, the artist stands just behind an ice sculpture carved into what Corfman describes as a “paradigmatically male torso of Greek statuary,” almost as though wearing it like a breastplate (6). Cassils’s presence speeds along the melting of the ice torso through body heat, and yet, as Corfman describes, “the redness visible on Cassils’s torso is testament that the performance is more relational, less give-and-take, when the exchange of heat is traced” (6). That is, the ice affects Cassils’s body, turning skin red and raw, even as Cassils’s body affects the ice by causing it to melt faster. Although Cassils might be said to be simply standing still, the artist’s body heat and breath continue as processes, even as the temperature of the environment, too, brings the ice to melt. “The way Cassils’s chest rises and falls against the ice,” Corfman writes, “[refuses] any sense that the performance is truly static” (14). *Tiresias* calls attention to how media interact with each other and with the environment in a constantly-unfolding way. So, too, with makeup upon the skin. Especially when it comes to powder touch-ups, we see how the body’s production of oil interacts with cosmetic media. Permeable and fleeting, makeup interacts with the individuals wearing it in highly personal ways. I have dry eyes, so my mascara usually doesn’t smudge with any production of warm tears, for instance, although I know that to be an issue for many of my fellow makeup enthusiasts.

In Corfman's reading, Cassils's performance engages deeply with themes of gender through its slow, proximal unfolding. They go on to trace how the generation of heat has been historically connected to conceptions of gender, with the ancients believing heat to be essential to men, and cold to women (Corfman 10). With this history in mind, performances of *Tiresias*—its eponymous character known in mythology for living both as a man and a woman—destabilize gender assignments by suggesting that “heat retention and exchange...becomes an experience shaped by one's specific history and experiences of embodiment, rather than reducible to an imaginary origin” (Corfman 12). Makeup, understood as a process involved in an ongoing interaction with the body, quietly yet palpably indexes what Corfman calls “specific history and experiences of embodiment” (12). The dually “preparatory-and-ongoing” nature of makeup that I describe here quietly underscores feminist values in the way that, in its own small ways, it reflects the irreducible, holistic, embodied experiences of individuals.

## Contour and Highlight

I don't care if a wet-look highlight isn't “in” anymore: one thing about me is I want a gleaming cheekbone visible from space. There's a heightened glint to it— like sun on the water, like light on the blade of a sword. Nothing “snatches” the face like contour and highlight. Makeup-wearers contour by applying a cool-toned product to the cheek-hollows, or anywhere they aim to create a deeper shadow. Then, further heightening the planes of the face, a reflective highlight is applied to high points like the upper cheekbones and temples. Through the skillful contrast of light and shadow, contour and highlight can make a face look sculpted, gorgeously-lit. Beholding such a face, as though carved from marble, viewers may feel like their hair has been “snatched” off.

Although makeup is usually just one small element of an ensemble of tools for self-presentation (which may also include hair, dress, body art, or jewelry, for instance), the cheekbone definition heightened by contour and highlight gives rise to visual paradigms that may be subtly felt and yet rarely articulated, like the optics of a “slay.” “Snatching off” someone's hair, or wig, is a term deriving from drag communities, a tradition that makes extensive use of makeup's tools for self-presentation. Indeed, Zahra Hankir notes the outsized influence of drag performance on makeup, noting that many prevalent techniques today, like “the use of hairspray to set makeup, the cut-crease eyeshadow technique, highlighting and contouring, wearing graphic eyeliner, and ‘baking’...are just a few techniques borrowed from drag performers” (247-8). In combination with on-point makeup and wardrobe, drag performers also often borrow from techniques developed by Black hair stylists to achieve hair designs so impactful they might be said to “slay.” In an essay on what she calls the “slay factor,” Melanie Jones reads Beyoncé's 2016 Grammys performance as a demonstration of “slaying,” and as an invocation of the Black Feminine Divine. According to Jones, to “slay” is about more than just a striking look—rather, it is connected to the “dark, ancient, radical warrior Goddess” and “Kali, the Hindu Goddess of war and liberation” (106). What it means to “slay” with snatched makeup, then, once again takes on implications beyond the “merely” aesthetic. Invoked among Black women, Jones further defines slaying as a “way of being in the world that encourages Black women to command the moment

and claim their power by self-possession” (106). In this context, the exaggerated, theatrical looks pulled by drag performers come into focus as forms of unapologetic visibility, and as divinely-inspired reclamations of self. When drag performers snatch their bone structure, they carve themselves from marble; drench themselves in a majestic light. Like Nefertiti’s regal eyeliner, this time-intensive process of self-construction is one through which drag “queens” claim their roles, and while the makeup itself cannot be called understated, it nevertheless brings about a certain subtle, visual paradigm in which drag performers dare, invite, and challenge the gaze of others, preparing for a slay.

And yet, inviting and challenging the gaze of others is not the only subtle visual paradigm brought into focus by the planes of the face. In another essay by S. Brooke Corfman, “Yentl and the Three-Quarter Profile,” Corfman asks how the planes of the face may “participate in gender” throughout Barbra Streisand’s 1984 classic, *Yentl*, and offers a pattern of looking that is relational in a different way. Corfman identifies one of the film’s central concerns in “Babs’ face.” Streisand, Corfman notes, famously felt that one side of her face was more feminine and the other more masculine, opting for a three-quarter view of the feminine side to be consistently featured in photographs. Corfman writes: “In *Yentl* this tension manifests in her sincere belief that her face is ambiguously gendered, that her right side is dramatically, distinctly different from her left. But a face is not one of those things that, like a vinyl record, can be held onto as an anchor.”

Corfman suggests that because a face cannot truly be reduced to—or captured by—one side or one view, flipped definitively from A-side to B-side, a face is actually created in an affective accretion, being looked at by another over time. “The more we look at a face, the more it becomes familiar to us,” Corfman writes, “and the more familiar it becomes to us, the harder it is to know what it actually looks like separate from our feeling about it.” In Corfman’s assessment, the gaze of others, especially a loving gaze, ultimately completes a face’s features, inseparable from how the gazer feels about the gazed-at. A face is not more or less feminine or masculine, as Streisand believes—rather, a face is “made” over time, through being looked at.

The planes of the face are furthermore so complex as to resist the definite, especially, as Corfman argues in the context of *Yentl* and their own transition, definite gender. During transition, Corfman writes: “I played around with makeup more as an exercise in gendered practice than because I had a strong sense of what I wanted it to accomplish.” They go on to joke: “In terms of aesthetic outcome, this was a bad idea.” Here, Corfman names a desire to participate in a “gendered practice,” not for its “aesthetic outcome” but for something else. In the context of my argument here about the making-up process as a form of subtle feminism, with its multifaceted feminist functions, we can see that perhaps what Corfman is interested in is makeup’s gestures, its temporality, the way it invites the makeup-user to see—and subtly craft—themselves, in their own eyes and in the eyes of others. Of studying their own face during gender transition, Corfman writes: “To hold all of the pieces of my face together at once was impossible. Even the face I had, right then—as soon as I looked away from the mirror, something slipped. I had to look right back.” In “playing around with makeup,” makeup-users instantiate a kind of “built-over-time” gaze for themselves, in the mirror. After all, in doing makeup, we look, look away, look back again. And repeat. Through this intermittent looking

in the process of making up, we build, layer by layer, over time, a version of ourselves. As an experienced makeup-wearer, it even becomes possible to see oneself without makeup and yet imagine its presence, mentally laying a particular shade, shape, or placement over one's own features in the mirror before implementing the look. As a knowing encounter with the self, doing makeup subtly heightens the visual regime that Corfman suggests here, in which a face is truly made through repeated looking—in this case, our own.

## Lips

Like Corfman, I notice something different about my face these days, and I wonder if it was always there, or if this is something new. When I catch sight of myself mid-speech, or when blotting lipstick, I see soft lines folding above my top lip, the kind I have seen on older women before. Has my mouth always done that? Or is my face changing, as I get older?

Lipstick, especially red, announces itself, intentional about drawing the gaze. Negotiating the difficulty of being visible in a society that diminishes their value, older women have made particular use of the red lip's small yet impactful effects on the self and others in order to show up in particular ways, more intensely, more "vitality" in their own eyes and the eyes of others. In a study of women over 50 engaging in beauty work, participants suggested that they engaged in beauty work for four main reasons: "the fight against invisibility, a life-long investment in appearance, the desire to attract or retain a romantic partner, and employment related-ageism" (Clarke and Bundon 1). Their thoughts about wearing lipstick in particular reveal much about how society positions older women. One woman reports that when she puts on lipstick before going out, she is "asserting some sort of a profile," while one woman even speaks of its ability to change her circumstances in a vulnerable medical setting, explaining: "In the hospital, for instance, as soon as you put lipstick on, they'll say 'Ah, she's feeling better.' So you can sort of kid them" (208). This woman may "kid" the doctors by adding color to her face, or, in the context of making up as a process that I have been developing here, perhaps it is really the act of attending to oneself that signals "feeling better" to others. Either way, the relationship between beauty work, or the willingness and ability of older women to apply makeup, and employment-related work is a striking one. It is no wonder that the red lip has long been associated with feminist movements concerned particularly with workplace and career equity. To be seen, recognized, and respected in workplace settings has often required strategic use of the small tools of visibility, such as makeup.

Emphasizing the mouth comes with connotations of self-regard and intensified presence when it comes to lipstick. With its wet, shiny texture, lip gloss also emphasizes the mouth through its luscious glint. Gloss is juicy, fun, audacious. Readers who remember their middle school hallways will know, like me, that the act of glossing lips in public is not just intended for its glistening, finished look—it's an act of making up that is also a performance, meant to be seen. In her article entitled "Sittin' Up in My Room," Amoni Thompson analyzes a photo series by Scheherazade Tillet called "...Sitting in the Wicker Chair" in ways that address this dual process-and-product makeup phenomenon, building upon Campt and Quashie's

formulations of the quiet and the quotidian. The photo series consists of portraits of Black girls seated in a wicker chair, inspired by the 1967 photo by Blair Stapp of Huey Newton. For Thompson, these photographs, which capture Black girls in a moment imbued dually with interiority and self-presentation to others, are opportunities to create a new “visual vocabulary” for Black girlhood. She describes one photograph in the series this way: “In the portrait of 15-year-old poet Angelina Cofer, we see her applying her lip gloss while wearing a graphic tee that reads RAISE BOYS AND GIRLS THE SAME WAY. For those of us in community with or who have once been Black girls ourselves, we know the application of lip gloss is ritual and tradition (cue “Lip Gloss” by Lil Mama)” (6). Generally, we think of doing makeup as a preparatory step, completed before leaving the private sphere to go out and interact with others. But in her portrait, Cofer is captured in the act of applying lip gloss, collapsing the act of getting ready with a more public-facing interaction. Rather than getting her picture taken after her makeup is finished and removed from the frame, here, applying lip gloss is a “getting ready” gesture that emerges as both preparatory and actually the main event. In this sense, Cofer echoes the eighteenth-century courtly rituals of toilette I mentioned earlier, generating an in-between, a semi-public, semi-private space. Invoking the same “self-possession” of “slay” that Melanie Jones draws our attention to, Thompson notes that Cofer’s seated body language is not arbitrary: “Sitting,” she writes, “becomes a generative modality to communicate Black girl self-possession and preservation” (10). Cofer’s body is oriented off to the side, her head turned to the camera for the portrait. It’s as though she is really sitting to face a makeup mirror, and simply glancing to the side for the portrait to be taken. Rather than fully orienting towards the gaze of the viewer, then, as in more traditional portraiture, Cofer makes the space and the moment her own, as Thompson writes: “Angelina’s gesture of applying lip gloss while seated and facing the eye of the camera provides a portal into the intimate life of Black girlhood, but at her own behest” (6). Allowing the viewer a playful glimpse into her process of self-crafting, Cofer, like the eyeliner-wearers I mentioned earlier, connects herself to “ritual and tradition in her application of makeup” while demonstrating a unique, combined public-and-private gesture of girlhood (6). In Tillet’s photograph, the body language of applying makeup becomes a small signal, a subtle means to convey presence and self-possession, allowing the user a way to appropriate space, choose how to appear, and, like Nefertiti’s regal eyeliner, link themselves to the “rituals and traditions” in which they participate.

## The Not-Final Look

Writing about the role of makeup in her own life, Jillian Hernandez notes that makeup is the kind of “magic you can buy at Walgreens for 99 cents” (79). Easily passed over as inconsequential or frivolous, makeup has in fact formed a relatively accessible set of aesthetic tools for self-exploration and self-presentation across a wide range of historical contexts and communities. A tool for small, everyday transformations that can be had for less than a dollar, it should be accounted for in a repertoire of subtle, everyday feminisms. Touching briefly on a wide range of sites for makeup use, this essay serves as an invitation to start—or reinvigorate—a deeper and more detailed conversation about makeup as a subtle feminist art. As fresh discourse takes shape in our field about cosmetic practices and their complex relation to feminisms, I want to underscore the importance of thinking about makeup not just as a product or “final look,” but as a process—un-



folding, continuous; a deliberate encounter with the self that doubles its significance in the way it anticipates later encounter with others. Making up is a process that is not “just” visual but broadly sensory in nature, its contexts and sites of use revealing its nuanced interactions with elements of identity. It prompts us to notice new patterns of looking, and constructions of public and private space. It heightens our awareness of how aspects of culture manifest and transmit upon the body, and how quotidian acts of visibility can function as acts of quiet resistance. Created and experienced over time, without pretending to permanence, makeup’s layering and blurring similarly disallows easy designations for exterior and interior, concealed and revealed. Changing over the course of a day in accordance with the wearer’s unique lived experience, and over the course of a lifetime as makeup-wearers grow older, the process of making up warrants our attention as scholars for its feminist potentials and pitfalls, its many contradictions. Interrogating makeup may also allow scholars to attune in new ways to other cosmetic practices or elements of self-presentation that operate in a subtle feminist paradigm, such as dress, body art, or jewelry, among many other possibilities. Makeup’s fleetingness, worn and wiped off daily, may seem ephemeral by comparison to the metals of jewelry or a tattoo worn for a lifetime. But makeup’s impermanent nature also points to its unique affordances— readily adjusted to circumstance, a little different every time. Knowing that no look is really final, we become truly ready.

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