

Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's Vogue "Beauty Secrets" as Civic Education: A Tutorial in Subtle Feminist Rhetoric

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Abstract: This article explores the nuanced ways that Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez engages beauty as self-care, subtly intertwining it with her role as an American civil servant in her Vogue "Beauty Secrets" tutorial. By examining how her rhetoric challenges the politics of beauty, this article demonstrates that beauty can serve as both wellness and a quiet form of political resistance. Through three subtle rhetorical moves—reclaiming feminine agency, embracing cultural visibility, and engaging critically with beauty discourse and practices—Ocasio-Cortez redefines femininity and reclaims spaces traditionally hostile to it. Rather than offering a loud critique of feminist ideals, this analysis emphasizes the small, everyday actions that weave feminism into daily life. AOC's approach in her VBS tutorial subtly shifts perceptions of beauty from objectification to empowerment. By focusing on these small acts, this article highlights the understated power of self-reflexivity in challenging and re-envisioning oppressive cultural norms, making feminism more accessible and relatable.

Tags: [visual rhetoric](#), [feminist rhetoric](#), [femininity](#), [beauty tutorials](#), [icons](#), [popular culture](#)

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It was August of 2020, when the "new normal" of pandemic existence began to set in. Already about half the year (so far) was spent working from home, my Boston apartment now morphing from an office, gym, game room, cafe, and living space depending on the time of day. With my body so under-stimulated, I was running on overstimulation of the mind in the form of content; devouring any new television, film, books, or articles I could get my hands on. Another outlet for content happened to be YouTube, and *Vogue* had just released a beauty tutorial by Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC), the congressional avatar for many millennial women at the time ("Congresswoman"). The series typically featured actors and pop stars, so I was quite intrigued by her presence. I clicked "play" and watched her prep and powder her skin, all the while musing passionately about women's issues and the shaky discourse on feminine beauty and wellness in the mainstream. I'd watched hundreds of beauty tutorials by this point in my life, so why was I moved to tears?

In this video, AOC articulates why beauty rituals can mean so much to women and femmes (see figure 1). Often, quiet moments in the privacy of one's own bathroom or in the company of close friends, beauty practices, routines, and rituals are intimate moments we spend with ourselves in preparation to face the everyday. Largely, beauty has helped women share space and talk to each other as we otherwise have been historically divided (presumably to reduce our power as citizens). The *Vogue* "Beauty Secrets" (VBS) series

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functions as an educational genre, a behind-the-scenes display of feminine embodiment, inviting viewers to consider what it means to reproduce feminine aesthetics with their bodies. Beauty tutorials host the opportunity to provide language to perceptions of the self as well as offer strategies for construction of self, many of which can translate across identifications. Thus, I argue that AOC's beauty tutorial provides a feminist civic education by mediating the relationship between herself, her priorities, and beauty practices—much like the way women's conduct manuals mediated the relationship between women's bodies, their place in society, and their behavior.

While women's conduct manuals often reinforced patriarchal expectations and norms of deference and domesticity, beauty tutorials have the potential to empower individuals and foster agency (Donawerth). In her tutorial, AOC shifts the rhetoric of beauty from prescriptive and authoritative to descriptive and empowering, reflecting broader cultural changes and feminist critiques of traditional beauty standards. What I initially perceived as a "trivial" reframing of feminine interests, I realized instead the tutorial performance was a small, subtle, and subversive feminist rhetorical act. On the surface, there's nothing particularly subdued about the video itself—the discussion on feminist issues is direct and clear (and reductive at times), the video is featured on a public mainstream platform, the *Beauty Secrets* series is presented by *Vogue*, the foremost authority on fashion and beauty in the world, and the rhetor herself is an unabashedly vocal champion of her beliefs in the political sphere. However, the way that AOC weaves a civic education into the narration of her skincare and beauty routine is a subtle feminist rhetorical move. The move itself is brought forth through another quiet practice, that of self-reflexivity—work that is carried out from within, synthesizing the many contexts within which we find ourselves and exploring where we stand in those realities. By taking time to process what it means to be hypervisible in the public sphere and what it takes for her to feel her best inhabiting a position of power—and then articulating those insights—AOC is able to embed a feminist rhetoric that is indeed personal and political, loud and subtle.



Figure 1: The introductory text for AOC's VBS tutorial ("Congresswoman"). Image description: a screen capture from a YouTube video, with its small icons along the bottom, a blank gradient that goes from white at the top to medium gray at the bottom. In a sans-serif font in the center are the words

"Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's Guide to Her Signature Red Lip."

For Representative Ocasio-Cortez to share “beauty secrets” as a political figure and feminist activist challenges the stereotype that feminists and/or people with power should not also be interested in beauty as self-care. She demonstrates that being a feminist does not require rejecting traditional feminine interests. All the while, she maintains her ethos as a champion of women’s interests that does not wane when transferring contexts or audiences—she is known for providing other similarly transferable knowledge in other non-traditional educational contexts, including Instagram stories and Twitch broadcasts. However, the beauty tutorial is a particularly fertile rhetorical genre to engage feminist ideas as the tutorials function as sites that reflect how beauty can be collaboratively deployed as a critical language (White 153). As a result, AOC practices resistance to the feminist (and misogynist) schools of thought that perpetuate makeup as a tool of objectification from patriarchy. As demonstrated in the video, AOC employs a self-reflexive methodology of self-care to interrogate gendered and racist notions of beauty and beauty practices within a discourse of civic education. She re-places these notions in a discourse of self-care through three rhetorical moves: 1) reclaiming feminine agency; 2) embracing cultural visuality; and 3) engaging critically with beauty discourse and practices.

A Methodology of Self-Reflexivity as Self-Care

My definition of self-reflexivity as a “self-care practice” builds on, and sometimes diverges from, work in rhetorical studies. Feminist rhetoricians have typically engaged self-reflexivity in the context of research methods or pedagogy, with the goal in both cases to more ethically account for oneself and one’s positionality in relation to research, research subjects, and students. For the purposes of this article, I define self-reflexivity as a practice of self-care that produces personal consciousness by monitoring the relationship among one’s feelings, thoughts, and behaviors with one’s socio-material experiences and circumstances. As Michel Foucault argues, working from the outside-in allows us to prepare “for a certain complete achievement of life” (III, 2). Thus, this article frames self-reflexivity as a small and subtle self-care method by which one builds a foundation for authenticity, preservation, and motivation—the tenets of civic education.

This framing also reveals self-reflexivity as a small and subtle *rhetorical act* because it involves a deliberate, introspective process where feminists can critically examine their own assumptions, biases, and positionality within their discourse. Unlike overt rhetorical strategies, self-reflexivity is an introspective process that is often private and personal, making it less visible and but potentially more nuanced than other forms of rhetorical action like public protest. Self-reflexivity doesn’t always directly confront or challenge inequities in a visible manner, but the process itself can help to undermine or detach oneself from the ideological status quo. By engaging in self-reflexivity, feminists like AOC demonstrate how to complicate simplistic understandings of identity, power, and privilege, focusing on reflection and dialogue as a quieter, more persistent form of resistance. In turn, acts of self-reflexivity often yield gradual, internal shifts in understanding, which can ripple outwards to influence larger feminist practices and discourses.

Interrogating the notion of self-care through self-reflexivity also invites consideration of the ethical implications of self-care practices within rhetorical engagements. In her 1988 book *A Burst of Light*, Audre

Lorde said, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation and that is an act of political warfare” (120). While many embrace Lorde’s philosophy, others contend that self-care has been co-opted through commodification, cultural appropriation, and self-indulgence. Noting the dangers of such a framing, Sara Ahmed writes, “To think of...self-care might seem to be a neoliberal agenda, a way of making feminism about the resilience of individuals” (236). However, in *Living a Feminist Life* Ahmed echoes Lorde in advocating for the necessity of self-care for feminists. More specifically, she suggests that in order to survive, we must set ourselves up to withstand the added pressure that feminism adds to our lives—to show up, to instigate change, to hold ourselves to a higher standard of personal conduct, to hold individuals and systems accountable for their role in an unjust status quo. Ahmed continues, “Sometimes: to survive in a system is to survive a system. Some of us have to be inventive, Audre Lorde suggests, to survive” (237). Through self-reflexivity as self-care, individuals can identify the sources of stress, burnout, or emotional exhaustion as an invention tool for action. Rhetoricians are not new to the idea of invention, but this framing of self-care-as-invention invokes the material circumstances of a lived life and what it means to survive. By critically reflecting on their own needs and limits, individuals can develop self-care strategies tailored to their specific contexts and circumstances. By reflecting on the broader social, cultural, and systemic contexts through self-reflexivity, individuals can assess how their self-care practices align with principles of social justice, equity, and inclusivity. They can examine how their self-care choices may impact their ability to engage responsibly and ethically in rhetorical practices, ensuring that self-care does not become an excuse for disengagement or avoidance of challenging issues. Thus, I forward feminist self-reflexivity as a small and subtle rhetorical act because it operates on an internal, personal level, challenging and refining feminist thought and practice in nuanced ways that contribute to broader social change over time.

Reclaiming Feminine Agency

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (see figure 2), my fellow self-identified Latina¹, feminist, and millennial, became the youngest woman ever elected to the U.S. Congress. From 2019 to the present, she has served as U.S. Representative for New York’s 14th congressional district.² Amanda R. Matos, Senior Director of Constituency Campaigns at Planned Parenthood Federation of America and Harvard Kennedy School alum, writes that AOC’s internet presence “demystif[ies] the US government for the American public” (91). Much like AOC’s quest to demystify the U.S. government for the American people, her small demonstration and description of her beauty routine demystifies self-reflexive praxis as it pertains to feminine embodiment through self-care. While it may not be the outcome for every person who engages such a tactic, Representative Ocasio-Cortez finds small moments in her beauty routine to reclaim feminine beauty practices as a tool for empowerment and agency. In this section, I argue that by reclaiming the power to choose to engage with beauty, AOC models how citizens can reclaim beauty practices as expressions of autonomy rather than

1 Latino/a/x refers to individuals whose country of origin is within the Latin American territories (including Mexico, South and Central America, and the Caribbean Islands). Individuals from countries where the primary language is Spanish, like Spain, are considered Hispanic. For example, people from Brazil may identify as Latin but not Hispanic, but people from Puerto Rico are likely to identify as both..

2 The 14th district includes AOC’s hometown of the Bronx, portions of north-central Queens, and Rikers Island in New York City.

conformity to external expectations.



Figure 2: AOC of the start of her tutorial before putting any products on (“Congresswoman”). Image description: AOC smiles in front of the camera, hair in a ponytail, wearing a black crew neck shirt and hoop earrings. In the background is a tan wall and a towel bar with two taupe hand towels hanging from it.

With public speaking a central element of her position as a congresswoman, AOC speaks about beauty with eloquence and ease—one with a quintessential millennial quality especially appropriate for the YouTube tutorial form. Throughout the video, she utilizes reflexive rhetoric to synthesize her sociopolitical convictions with a demonstration of beauty tools and techniques she has adopted over the years. Early in the tutorial, AOC takes a moment to highlight the importance of these personal lifestyle choices to challenge the assumption that feminine beauty practices are an antithesis to respectable, dignified, and worthy concerns. In reference to the details of her beauty routine, AOC says,

The reason why I think it’s so important to share these things is that first of all, femininity has power...Just being a woman [giggles] is quite politicized here in Washington. There’s this really false idea that if you care about makeup or if you care, if your interests are in beauty and fashion, that that’s somehow frivolous. But I actually think these are some of the most substantive decisions that we make and we make them every morning. (“Congresswoman” 1:16-1:56)

The conversational nature of the tutorial, where AOC narrativizes her experience with feminine beauty practices and situates them in personal socio-material experiences, brings the fraught relationship between feminine beauty practices and professionalism into the public discourse. The kind of exposure proffered by the tutorial, rather than AOC’s visibility in session or on the campaign trail, comes with a sense of vulnerability. Her giggle after she says, “just being a woman,” demonstrates that she is herself negotiating her feminine embodiment and how it is perceived “in Washington.” The element of struggle revealed in her

giggle is a subtle reflection that empowerment does not require that one have all the answers, or that one be completely settled in their quest for identity and agency. However, a self-reflexive beauty and wellness practice allows AOC to take stock of the constraining aesthetic sentiments so that she can take an intentional, critical stance against them. In so doing, AOC continues to make sense of the world within herself with a firm grasp on her feminist intentions.

Feminists themselves have yet to shake negative perceptions of femininity in gender scholarship. In her response to *Femininity and Domination*, Patrocinio P. Schweickart criticizes Bartky's abandonment of femininity as a destiny of victimization. She writes, "Feminist consciousness has to involve a contradictory attitude toward femininity—not just a critique, but also an appreciation of the moral intuitions it harbors. Feminism, as I see it, is a struggle not only for the realization of women's rights, but also for the vindication of women's values" (190). Because feminism is influenced heavily by feminine values, I believe it is important to name them as such. Distancing ourselves from the origin of feminist ethics precludes us from pointing to the androcentric moral discourses that dominate and reinforce the status quo. In embracing feminine values, we must also embrace feminine style. Otherwise, we join in the cacophony of critiques of feminized appearance, rather than critiquing the system that justifies inequitable treatment on the basis of such appearances.

The history of radical feminists' rejection of patriarchal control of the body continues to permeate mainstream and academic discourse on feminine appearance. Feminisms of the 1970s were divided by ideas of lipstick as a symbol for liberation or as a symbol of women's continued oppression (Schaffer). For example, lesbian feminist scholar Sheila Jeffreys urges that feminine beauty should be redefined as a harmful consequence of patriarchy, rather than being seen as a source of empowerment. Jeffreys' life as an activist is defined by her decision to abandon both heterosexuality and her feminine appearance. "I gave up beauty practices," she shares, "supported by the strength of thousands of heterosexual and lesbian women around me who were also rejecting them. I stopped dying my hair 'mid-golden sable' and cut it short. I stopped wearing make-up. I stopped wearing high heels and, eventually, gave up skirts. I stopped shaving my armpits and legs" (qtd. in Bindel). Jeffreys' story is an example of the internalization of feminine beauty practices as a moral failure, that any self-respecting feminist sacrifices—or worse, betrays—her politics by accentuating her cheekbones or lips. This logic dismisses the reality of women's oppression to which Jeffreys refers. Getting women into the workforce hasn't solved the labor issue; women tend to take on more work in their personal and professional lives and do not earn equitable compensation to their male colleagues. Similarly, devaluing or rejecting beauty and fashion doesn't get us any more respect or any closer to ourselves. Consequently, Jeffreys discounts feminist activists who embody their identities through feminine style and those who do not find that their sexuality is a choice. Feminisms such as the brand practiced by Jeffries do not loosen the social constraints on non-male bodies; they simply adopt reciprocal constraints.

In alignment with Jeffreys, gender studies scholar Sandra Bartky theorizes that femininity is, in fact, constructed—that the outcome of femininity is construed by a "practiced and subjected body on which

an inferior status has been inscribed” (*Femininity and Domination* 71). Bartky is describing the status quo, where femininity functions in patriarchy to objectify and oppress, an assessment with which I do not necessarily disagree. Why else would we need to fight for women’s rights if women were not assigned an inferior status under the guise of weak femininity? My challenge is to reconsider the placed blame on femininity as the explanation—or justification—for women’s oppression.

Rather than dismissing femininity as merely a tool of oppression, I propose a more nuanced perspective. By reexamining femininity through a lens that recognizes its potential for agency and resistance, we can uncover the subtle ways in which it can be reclaimed and redefined. For example, AOC gives more context to her beauty ideology:

I went from working in a restaurant to being on cable news all the time, and I was really not used to that kind of a shift. And, you know, I think I initially really struggled with that. I really did. And at a certain point, I just learned that you cannot get your feelings of beauty and confidence from anyone but yourself. You, that is one of the most ultimate gifts that you have to give to yourself. (“Congresswoman” 6:36-7:14)

Here, she explicitly describes her struggle with self-regard as she transitioned from a private to public citizen. She does not claim that feminine beauty practices gave her confidence, or that cosmetics gave her ability to face aesthetic scrutiny. She rightly locates the source of beauty and confidence as one that comes from within the self and in caring for the self. This claim implies that personal validation is not invalidated by an investment in self-presentation, but that they may work in tandem. Speaking back to the frivolity she alluded to earlier in the video, AOC frames the reclamation of aesthetic care as “a gift that you have to give yourself” that is a valuable and worthy use of time.

This perspective challenges the common notion that beauty practices are inherently superficial or self-indulgent. Instead, AOC suggests that these practices can be meaningful acts of self-respect and empowerment. By framing aesthetic care as a personal gift, she shifts the narrative, illustrating how intentional self-presentation can coexist with, and even enhance, inner confidence and self-worth. Here she expounds on this idea further as she applies concealer:

And so, you know what? I just decided I’m not going to waste my time and if I’m going to spend an hour in the morning doing my glam, it’s not going to be because I’m afraid of what some Republican photo is going to look like. If I’m gonna do an hour doing my glam, it’s because I feel like it. And that’s really the difference, my body, my choice [laughs]. (“Congresswoman” 7:15-7:44)

Ending this statement with “my body, my choice” underscores that the personal continues to be political in the small moments we take to prepare our bodies for the day ahead. Invoking the popular feminist

chant from Women's and Pro-Choice marches, she elucidates the element of protest in engaging feminine beauty practices. Jane Donawerth notes the "importance for women [to claim] their bodies for rhetorical use" in terms of elocution and performance (16). For AOC, her beauty routine is not only a method of self-care, of self-love, but it is a challenge to feminine constraints in a diminishing culture. AOC locates an exigence for spending her time with herself to monitor the relationship between her feelings, thoughts, behaviors, and socio-material experiences in a beauty routine when she says, "because I feel like it." With an affective exigence guiding her, AOC contrasts the agentive nature of deciding what is the right way to present the self with the worry of how her political opposition (Republicans) are going to construe, or rather, misconstrue, her choice to embody femininity.

This juxtaposition highlights the tension between personal agency and external judgment, emphasizing the power dynamics at play in how women are perceived. By deliberately choosing to embrace femininity on her own terms, AOC transforms what could be seen as a vulnerability into a statement of strength and autonomy. Her beauty routine, therefore, becomes a site of resistance—a way to assert control over her own image while challenging the expectations and criticisms imposed by a patriarchal society. While applying glitter eyeshadow, AOC explains the deliberation it took for her to embrace a sparkly look in session:

You know, I used to think that I wouldn't be, I would be taken less seriously and as you know, as the youngest woman in Congress and as a woman of color, it's so hard to be taken seriously. It's just, you know, it's like any workplace where sometimes it feels like you have to jump up and down for anyone to listen. It's just really difficult because some people are just born in bodies that are naturally taken more seriously, you know. I used to think that glitter or shimmery eyeshadow...I would think, 'Oh man, like this isn't going to, this isn't gonna help me out, right?' Like people already try to diminish me, diminish my voice as young and frivolous and unintelligent. And so first of all, I tried the shimmer and it looks fire, it looks good. It helps me feel better. ("Congresswoman" 13:43-15:13)

Here, she makes connections among her perceived legitimacy as a congresswoman and her age, ethnicity, and feminine presentation, negotiating the interplay between her identity and socio-material circumstances. Matos observes similarly that AOC's "ability to govern is constantly put into question across party lines because of the layering of her ethnicity, age, hometown, and political ideology" (91). AOC points out that like in many other professions, when non-men³ at her intersection wish to be heard, they have to put in more effort than others. Namely, those "born in bodies that are naturally taken more seriously," as AOC says above, like cis white men. She shares that she reflected deeply on how a shimmering eyelid might impact her already reduced stature among her colleagues, but she comes to a revelatory conclusion. Congresswoman Ocasio-Cortez realizes that she likes the look of the sparkling eyeshadow, and that in appreciating her artistry, she feels better—it might not seem like a wild feat, but small choices can have big implications.

3 I utilize the term "non-men" to acknowledge that women, trans women, and non-binary people must exert more energy in order to take up space in male-dominated professions.

Through the decision to wear the shadow, she demonstrates self-care by putting her affective needs before the normative expectations placed on her.

Additionally, the fact that the colors and textures she works with stand against visual rhetorics of a “serious” or credible ethos offer a visual resistance to patriarchy. Were AOC to utilize beauty to comply with the male gaze, she would choose neutral colors and avoid flamboyant textures. The typical millennial phrase, “it looks fire,” demonstrates a degree of enthusiasm in her appearance. Finding justification for practicing feminine beauty in joy, in good feeling, is a feminist reclamation of power and a self-care act. There is agency in reflecting internal desires in aesthetics and in influencing the way one feels by working from the outside in. As a civic educator, AOC emphasizes the importance of making choices in beauty practices for one’s own reasons, reasons uncovered in a practice of self-reflexivity. By reinterpreting beauty practices through a feminist lens, AOC reclaims them as sources of power and joy. This transforms beauty from something imposed and restrictive into something that can be liberating and celebratory. And, importantly, it is a subtle challenge to the notion that beauty is inherently superficial or anti-feminist, instead framing it as a complex site of identity, expression, and invention.

Embracing Cultural Visuality

Having analyzed AOC’s approach to feminine beauty practices as a self-reflexive exercise with agentive outcomes, I turn my attention to her donning of red lipstick as a visuality of pleasure and protest. In this section, I argue that the ways in which Representative Ocasio-Cortez offers a civic education by promoting a broader understanding of beauty that includes diverse body types, skin tones, and cultural practices. Understanding beauty as a site of cultural engagement encourages individuals to use their beauty practices as a form of resistance and advocacy. By celebrating culturally specific forms of beauty, individuals can appreciate beauty practices as diverse expressions of identity. However, this small rhetorical act is not one that originated with Congresswoman Ocasio-Cortez. Powerful women throughout history have worn a red lip: Cleopatra created a red pigment from carmine beetles to wear on her lips; former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s red lipstick print on a napkin was auctioned in 2015 for two thousand pounds (Klein; Palumbo); in the early twentieth century, Suffragettes donned red lipstick as a mark of the independent, emancipated woman at a time where it was scandalous for middle-class women to be seen with visible signs of cosmetic adornment (Schaffer; Ware).

As a cultural rhetoric, Red lipstick holds meaning for Black women and Latinas. Fashion historian Shelby Ivey Christie reflects on her relationship with red lipstick, sharing, “for me, red lipstick is about shifting the narrative around what red lipstick traditionally meant for Black women. There’s a long history of hyper-sexualization that is amplified by caricatures of Black women with exaggerated red lips” (qtd. in Ware). Here, she refers to minstrel shows and mammy caricatures. Also pushing back against negative stereotypes of Black women, author of “Red Lip Theology” Candice Marie Benbow shares that she wears red lipstick “to work, church and every place I see fit to affirm my beauty and power in this world.” For Benbow, red lipstick

has been a tool for her to heal the inner 10-year-old that attempted to cut off her own lips with scissors in the bathroom—perhaps a healing tool born from a self-reflexive engagement with beauty as self-care: “There is something about a red lip that signals power, fierceness, elegance, sensuality, agency, ownership—everything people who are told they are not beautiful should not have.” In this sense, wearing red lipstick can be a small but substantive choice that asserts presence, radiates confidence, and draws from feminist history. In fact, a Harvard study yielded that the “lipstick effect” is one where those who wear lipstick experience higher levels of self-esteem, correlating positively with academic performance (Palumbo et al.). Importantly, this shows that the self-esteem afforded by lipstick is not inherently tied to external perceptions of the self.

While not a student, AOC attests to the confidence imbued in the red lipstick tube, sharing “I will wear a red lip when I want confidence, when I need a boost of confidence” (“Congresswoman” 4:56-5:01). Developing self-confidence could be understood as a feminist motivation for self-care or space of invention. As a woman with a high-pressure career and constituents relying on her for better living conditions, it makes sense that AOC would look for opportunities to augment—“boost”—her confidence. Referring to the cultural aesthetics of a red lip, AOC says, “And of course, being Latina, this is like very much our culture where we come from” (4:48-4:56). Amanda R. Matos of Planned Parenthood identifies that AOC’s red lip is but one component of her Latin pride. She goes on to frame AOC’s hoop earrings and twisted hairstyle at her congressional swearing in ceremony as an homage to her Puerto Rican heritage and Bronx roots. Culture writer Bren Lee Gomez writes that “never in [her] wildest dreams” did she imagine seeing the red lipstick and hoops combination in a political setting—and, as we know, visual representation has a ripple effect. As a Latina myself, I am aware of the simultaneous pride and burden that comes with pairing red lipstick and hoop earrings. Gomez says that the combination is “an instantly recognizable symbol of Latina culture, a look that both defines and is defined by the Latina experience” and also “bear[s] the invisible weight of both misogynistic and racially charged criticism.” Representative Ocasio-Cortez chooses to wear them both despite, and potentially because of, these implications (see figure 3).



Figure 3: AOC at the end of her tutorial, red lipstick, and gold hoops visible (“Congresswoman”). Image description: a screen capture from a YouTube video: a smiling AOC is against the same tan wall with a towel bar and taupe hand towels, but she is now in full makeup.

It is striking to see a Latina bringing this visuality into the political sphere, a choice that would not have as the same impact were she a white woman—as appropriated styles are often seen as more acceptable when worn on a “more acceptable” body. In her article, Gomez shares her experience growing up as a Mexican American woman in the United States, living through the Trump presidency that championed a wall to keep Mexicans out, and growing up with a mother who made her choose either lipstick or hoops before she left the house in fear of prejudice. “Every time she puts on her hoops,” Gomez writes, “she shows up for Latinas, and every time she shares another snippet of her beauty routine, she shows up for women.” Gomez reveals the ways in which AOC’s seemingly small and superficial choice to wear red lipstick in moments of significance can have a large impact on individuals in the audience.

In an exchange with a supporter on Twitter, AOC locates her style inspiration in Justice Sonia Sotomayor, maintaining the history of feminine empowerment through fashion and style. Supporter @AshleyAlese tweets, “As a woman of color, I’ve been told countless times to ‘tone down’ my look; that red lipstick and hoop earrings are not professional. Seeing @AOC rock her hoops & red lips to be sworn into Congress was important to ME and so many other people” (Mistry). In her tweet @AshleyAlese shows that representation matters in relation to race and gender, but also in the form of fashion and style. In her response, AOC tweets, “Lip+hoops were inspired by Sonia Sotomayor, who was advised to wear neutral-colored nail polish to her confirmation hearings to avoid scrutiny. She kept her red. Next time someone tells Bronx girls to take off their hoops, they can just say they’re dressing like a Congresswoman” (Ocasio-Cortez). Rehearsing a historical precedent in American government that discouraged a feminine presentation through the color red, AOC proudly carries on the act of defiance in solidarity with Justice Sotomayor and encourages her support-

ers to cite a new precedent that she set with feminist intention. The historical association of red lipstick with women who have fought for their rights gives it a feminist significance. By wearing red lipstick, AOC takes a small opportunity to connect with this legacy of resistance and empowerment, aligning herself at once with both a broader feminist movement and her own cultural background to shift what it means to belong.

Engaging Critically with Beauty Discourse and Practices

In the case of the tutorial, AOC discusses feminine beauty practices for the role they play in her own identity formation, connecting them both to her politics and her positionality as an American Latina from the Bronx. The problematic aspects of beauty are not lost in AOC's beauty tutorial. In fact, it is AOC's self-reflexive engagement with beauty practices that make the artifact particularly impactful in acknowledging these setbacks. Throughout, AOC demonstrates how she is herself wrestling with the politics of beauty, locating the complex ideological implications of feminine aesthetic practices in a shared experience of "getting ready." In what follows, I explore the way AOC embodies a critical engagement with beauty by exploring the "why" and "at what cost" are we engaging in the feminine aestheticization of the self. By deploying small and subtle practices, Representative Ocasio-Cortez models a critical examination of societal and cultural standards of beauty that encourages individuals to make informed decisions that align with their values and beliefs.

Viewers of AOC's beauty tutorial may converse with other audience members in person or in the comments, but ultimately must engage in internal dialogues. These dialogues may be either subconscious or conscious forms of self-persuasion via self-reflexivity. When individuals consume popular culture, consciousness is produced via internal dialogue stemming from an individual engagement with the content, rather than a small group interaction. For example, reading essays is a process of conversing with the creators of those texts, but the creators cannot actively respond to the reader's questions and ideas. Instead, readers must engage in their self-reflexivity (the internal dialogue and resulting self-persuasion) that may lead to building one's self-esteem, recognizing gender inequities, or developing a critical perspective. Representative Ocasio-Cortez prompts women/femmes to 1) consider how and why we beautify and 2) to decide how and why we engage with beauty practices each day. As a result, such self-reflexivity opens up spaces for feminist actions.

Representative Ocasio-Cortez does not take for granted the choice she makes to adopt feminine beauty practices, though the opportunity to minimize the choice is available to her. As evidenced throughout the video, it is clear that she has, or has been made to, consider the implications of her self-presentation. This is significant because it is evidence that women internalize the expectations on them to present as more or less feminine through beauty. However, AOC shows how a self-reflexive engagement with beauty allows for authenticity and rhetorical strategy. As she builds the base of her face beat under her eyes and along her nose creases, she explains why she feminizes her appearance:

Our culture is so predicated on diminishing women, right? And kind of preying on our self-esteem. And so it's quite a radical, my opinion, it's quite a radical act and it's almost like a mini protest to love yourself in a society that's always trying to tell you, you're not the right way, you're not the right color, you're not the right, you know, whatever it is. And when you stand up and you say, you know what, you don't make that decision, I make that decision. It's very powerful, but that doesn't mean we can't have fun. ("Congresswoman" 5:08-5:50)

This passage illustrates quite clearly the pleasure ("fun") and protest ("mini protest to love yourself") aspects of beauty that I assessed in the previous section, culminating in the agentive choice ("decision") in engaging fashion and beauty. However, I situate it in this section because it demonstrates that the discourses that circulate about beauty standards inform AOC's self-reflexive practice. Self-reflexivity functions as a filter through which she makes the distinction between complying with those standards and rejecting them. Fashion and beauty practices offer a moment, even if a small one, to embody an opposition to the way women ought to be, ought to look. If anything, this sentiment offers one compelling reason to enjoy a ritual of beauty in order to reflect one's interiority through aesthetics as well as an opposition to dominant ideology.

On another note, embodying a critical engagement with feminine beauty practices requires an awareness of the dangers of complicity in patriarchy and the limitations of feminine beauty practices in orienting our relationship to our bodies and ourselves. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell writes that those "who excel in producing what is beautiful and pleasing in masculine terms will not be praised for their skill but condemned on grounds of aesthetics or for a kind of 'feminine' incompetence" ("Consciousness-Raising" 50). In her tutorial, AOC presents rhetorical competence by straddling the needs of the mass audience and maintaining the nuance of feminist interpretation—defying Campbell's illustration of feminine aesthetic destiny. While drawing on a winged liner (see figure 4):

We live in systems that were largely built for the convenience of men. And oftentimes were designed with the subjugation of women and queer people in mind. And so every time we make a decision, when you make a decision for you, when you're like, you know what, I'm going to do this, I'm not going to do this thing that's expected of me...because if it's expected of me, just because it's been the norm, who has the norm been serving? ("Congresswoman" 12:30-13:05)

Naming the implications of heterosexist patriarchy, AOC again reminds viewers of the motivations that continue to uphold social systems and what it means to resist them. By asking viewers to question who the norm has been serving, she is asking them to consider how that might perpetuate the status quo. As discussed earlier, I turn toward self-reflexivity for a method to take inventory of one's personal well-being, aesthetic and otherwise. In doing so, one might encounter the opportunity to protect oneself from the damage, burnout, and personal neglect that can occur in a dedication to social justice causes as witnessed by the visible toll it takes to participate in politics and activism leveraged against women in the media. In her

recent memoir, *What Happened*, Hillary Clinton observes that “the few times I’ve gone out in public without make-up, it’s made the news.” Again, the double-bind of feminine style and appearance yields a potential distraction against the social change and political reform for which they advocate. In this case, Clinton’s choice not to mask her “tired” appearance became a feminist issue (qtd. in Ellison).



Figure 4: AOC drawing on winged liner with an eyeliner pencil (“Congresswoman”). Image description: a YouTube screen capture showing AOC very close to the camera, holding an eyeliner pencil close to her face, carefully applying eyeliner with a neutral facial expression.

In her tutorial, AOC makes multiple connections between her work as a congresswoman and the way it manifests through her body. She says, “I have not gotten much sleep last night at all [sic], welcome to life in politics. We are trying to get people healthcare, making sure that they are taken care of in a pandemic, people are fighting too much, and so I have bags under my eyes” (“Congresswoman” 00:20-00:35). Here, she speaks to the way her duties and responsibilities, and the turbulent affective nature of the job, interrupt her sleep hygiene and how it manifests on her face. With the somewhat glib “welcome to life in politics,” she implies that a lack of sleep is part of the job description. She continues, “I travel between DC and New York pretty much every single week... That’s seven days a week. That’s a lot of traveling. It is also a huge toll on skin” (“Congresswoman” 2:32-2:59). Again, she illustrates the demanding nature of congressional work on her time and presence. While not using the physical toll as a reason to reduce her commitment to her community and colleagues, she demonstrates an awareness of the bodily changes she’s experiencing as a result of her role as a representative. In this sense, AOC reflects that there is not a clear line between the personal and political as a policymaker as well as a citizen. Practicing self-reflexivity, in this case, can help AOC manage her health and hygiene to prevent exhaustion or illness. And, in turn, her cosmetic ritual functions as a small place to care for herself and tend to the consequences of her demanding position in government in a way that suits her.

The double-bind of femininity becomes a quadruple-bind when one layers the material consequenc-

es of time and money in relation to gendered presentation. The beauty tutorial itself can remedy the aspect of time by providing information on what to buy, how to apply it, and in what order to do so. In this sense, the tutorial provides a service to those interested in beauty but not interested in the trial-and-error and costly research that comes with building up a beauty routine. In the VBS video, AOC spends approximately three minutes discussing the “pink tax.” The pink tax is a gender-based price discrimination that is constituted by a markup on goods and services designed for the feminine maintenance and expression.

Representative Ocasio-Cortez refers to the luxury tax on menstruation products and the higher rates on women’s dry-cleaning services, but there are also price differences between short and long haircuts, apparel such as jeans, and razors (where pink razors marketed toward women are often more expensive and less effective). While applying eyeshadow, AOC says,

In my opinion a pink tax is not just about money, it’s also about time. And I think right here, what we’re talking about is a perfect example. If waking up in the morning and doing your makeup gives you life, then that is amazing and you should do it. But what we are also seeing all too often is that women who wear makeup, there are studies that show that women who wear makeup or regularly wear like a decent amount of makeup, kind of show up to the office in glam, also make more money. And so at that point, it stops being, these calculations and decisions, stop being about choice. And they start being about patriarchy [giggles] where if we look attractive to men, then we will be compensated more. And that, to me is, the complete antithesis of what beauty should be about. I think beauty should be about the person who is applying it. And so these things add up over time and on top of all of that we’re not even paid at the same level as men. And so our expenses are higher, our time is less and we’re not even getting paid at an equal rate. Can’t catch a break. (“Congresswoman” 10:59-12:29)

Here, AOC contrasts the way one sacrifices time for the joy in one’s practice of beauty (“gives you life”; “our time is less”) with the financial consequences of eschewing glam from one’s professional presentation (“show[ing] up to the office in glam, [are] also mak[ing] more money”). The awareness of these trends in gendered compensation adds pressure to bring the visibility of femininity to the office for one’s livelihood—or to avoid scrutiny in the case of Hillary Clinton. This kind of pressure, as AOC states, tends to overshadow the intersection of authenticity and calculation that she otherwise champions. In all cases, self-reflexivity comes with a plethora of realizations, some that result in empowerment and others that, importantly, help individuals appraise the sociopolitical and professional landscape within which they are located. As a civic educator, AOC encourages individuals to question who benefits from beauty norms, how they are constructed, and how they can impact internal and external perceptions and livelihoods.

Limitations

With all of the potential good that can come from reclaiming beauty practices as small, everyday approaches to feminist self-care, there are limitations to the change they can bring for people, communities, and institutions. For example, self-care as demonstrated by Representative Ocasio-Cortez invokes consumption and consumerism by suggesting a number of products that range in price and ingredients. On the one hand, the beauty industry is heavily commercialized, and in some cases, it exploits societal beauty standards for profit. On the other hand, the beauty and wellness industries are making an effort to eliminate toxins and animal testing. However, some of the products shown are produced by conglomerates that still engage in questionable and inconsistent ethics. Emphasizing that products are necessary elements in a network of femininity may be perceived as perpetuating a neoliberal agenda of individualism and consumerism.

Additionally, reclaiming fashion and beauty as areas for empowerment does not undo the history of these realms' complicity in systems of regulation, surveillance, and subordination. Janell Hobson writes on the ways in which beauty has been used to subordinate minoritized women: "In male-dominated culture," she writes, "all women are judged by their physical attractiveness and evaluated in comparison to particular standards of beauty based on white supremacy" (7). As a result, convincing people in "deviant" bodies that they're not beautiful is a way to take their power and maintain the status quo. Being pretty is a privilege in patriarchy, just like generational wealth is a privilege in capitalism. The life-altering potential of being seen as a beauty subject should not be overlooked. Like AOC, we might question what kind of power comes with beauty: Are those considered beautiful "restricted because they are not subjective agents of change but merely sex objects?" (Hobson 8). What do we have to gain by being called beautiful? How do we circumvent norms and standards to reclaim beauty for ourselves? How does feminism(s) shift what we find beautiful?

Conclusion

As Representative Ocasio-Cortez demonstrates, beauty can be a small and subtle tool leveraged to represent oneself confidently in pursuit of social change (as she does in a historically white and male institution that is the U.S. House of Representatives). Her beauty tutorial transcends the superficiality often associated with feminine beauty practices and emerges as a powerful tool for feminist civic education. By recontextualizing beauty routines within a framework of self-reflexivity and empowerment, AOC challenges the historical norms enforced by women's conduct manuals, which once dictated how women should navigate their bodies, behavior, and place in society. Through her tutorial, she not only shifts the rhetoric from one of prescriptive authority to one of personal agency but also engages in a subtle yet profound feminist act. This act is not merely about advocating for women's rights in a direct, overt manner; it is about reclaiming spaces traditionally deemed trivial and using them to articulate a deeper, more personal feminist narrative. AOC's approach is a reminder that the personal is political, and through the seemingly mundane act of a beauty tutorial, she provides a nuanced, reflective, and empowering civic education that encourages individuals to think critically about their place in society and how they choose to present themselves within it.



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