COMMUNICATING IN THE BORDERLAND OF IDENTITY
CONSTRUCTION: CONGOLESE WOMEN AND MEDIATED
REPRESENTATIONS OF GENDERED BEAUTY

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
San Diego State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
Communications

by
Gloria Nziba Pindi
Summer 2010
SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY

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DEDICATION

First, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents: Severin Pindi Mbuku and Sabine Kamathe Mwamini. May you rest in peace dear dad and thanks to you dear mum for your love and devotion.

Second, I would like also to thank my dear aunts Gogo Kamathe and Charlotte Kamathe for all their affection and support.

Third, I dedicate this thesis to my siblings: Emmanuel, Emma, Noella, Chloe, Betty, Paulette, Sissy, Helena, Norah, Magaly, Sabine, Kelly, and Francine. Their love and encouragement make me stronger and more independent while studying alone in the U.S.

Fourth, this thesis is dedicated to all my sweet nephews and nieces: Dany, Angy, Addy, Joan, Gabby, Ariel, Joseph, Joel, Angelo, Quinn, Manuella, and Michelle.

Finally may my uncles and other relatives find in this work my gratitude for their perpetual support: Jacques Mika, Gerard Massumbuko, Charles Dimoke, Jose Batoto, and Jean-Paul Kadiebwe.
“One is not born a woman, one becomes one.”

Simone DeBeauvoir
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Communicating in the Borderland of Identity Construction:
Congolese Women and Mediated Representations of Gendered Beauty
by
Gloria Nziba Pindi
Master of Arts in Communication
San Diego State University, 2010

In the context of globalization, the idea that individuals can live isolated from other cultures and ideologies is challenged as people everywhere, are strongly influenced by multiple contact experiences that shape their identities. An important aspect for women is the negotiation of cultural norms of beauty that are shaped by mass media. Global mass media create cultural pressures on women to self-objectify and become preoccupied with physical appearance by presenting them with images of feminine beauty that collapse individual cultural ideologies into one global ideology. Based on the feminist theoretical assumption that gender, race, class, and cultural identity must be examined in relationship to each other, this ethnographic study examines how a group of Congolese women living in San Diego engage in a process of identity construction by localizing the borderland of the “self” between the gendered norms of beauty represented in the media of the host culture and those of their home country.

The findings reveal that female Congolese immigrants’ bodies are an embodiment tool in reproducing gendered norms of beauty in America as well as in Congolese cultures. While, the move from the Congo to the U.S. appears as a detachment from cultural norms, values, and canons of their home country, by immigrating in the U.S., Congolese women are expected to integrate the cultural and social values of this host country. Meanwhile, they cannot ignore the customs, traditions, and beliefs that constitute their African cultural legacy since they shape their identities in this adjustment process. In view of these findings, this study concludes with a call for a more systematic and critical assessment of identity negotiation in intercultural communication context.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT .................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES ............................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 BEING A WOMAN OR DOING WOMAN: REVIEW OF LITERATURE ..........</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Design ..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Migration to Adaptation ..........................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gendered Beauty and Body Performance ..................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standards of Beauty ......................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African Beauty Standards ..................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colonizing the Congo, Colonizing African Identity ..................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern African Beauty .....................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Westernized Representation of Feminine Beauty ...............</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beauty and Power ..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media and Feminine Representations of Beauty .......................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication and Gendered Norms of Beauty ........................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions ........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 SPEAKING OUT FROM PERSONAL STORIES: A METHODOLOGY OF STORYTELLING ........................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conducting Ethnography ...................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection ............................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews .................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnographic Interviews ...................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-Depth Narrative Interviews .............................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction of Interview Guide ........................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Quest of Research Participants .........................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Observation ....................................................</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3 FROM HOME TO UNCLE SAM’S COUNTRY: PERFORMING GENDERED EXPECTATIONS OF BEAUTY ..........................................................39

Discovering Women’s Lives in the Heart of Africa .................................................39

Marriage is the Best Life Choice for a Woman ......................................................40

A Woman Should not Expose her Body for the Honor of her Husband.............40

A Woman’s Body is also her Husband’s Property ..............................................41

A Woman Should be Submissive to her Husband .............................................42

True Womanhood Equals Marriage and Fertility ..............................................42

A Woman Should Maintain her African Identity Everywhere ..........................43

School is Better for Men than Women ............................................................44

Women are often the Main Victims of War ....................................................44

Performing Gendered/Sexed Body ........................................................................46

“Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder”: Performing Femininity .......................47

“Who Am I?”: Performing Cultural Beauty .....................................................50

“Like a Hollywood Star”: Performing a Mediated Self ..................................53

Performing Gendered Traditions .......................................................................57

“I Cry for Freedom”: Performing Cultural and Religious Beliefs .......................57

“From Inside Out”: Performing Tradition in Daily Life ..................................61

Performing Gendered Cultures .........................................................................64

“Mama Africa”: Performing African Identity ....................................................64

“Pocahontas”: Performing American Identity ...............................................67

“I Am All in One”: Performing a Hybrid Identity ..........................................73

Performing Gendered Institutional Roles ...........................................................75

“Nasty Girl”: Performing the Self in Family .....................................................76

“The Ugly Duckling”: Performing the Self at School ......................................78

“Ghetto Girl”: Performing the Self at Work ....................................................80

4 FINDING WAYS IN THE BORDERS.................................................................84

Situating the Self Within Borders: Interpretations and Conclusions ...............85

Controversial Beauty Conceptions: What is Beauty? .......................................86
Acceptance: Self-Perception and Social Judgment .............................................. 88
Resistance/Oppression: Disempowering the Female Body ................................ 90
Assimilation: Intersected Others .................................................................... 92
Understanding the Self from Intercultural Perspectives: Theoretical Implications .......................................................... 93
Conceptualizing Gender Identity .................................................................. 93
Constructing Identity through Socialization ................................................. 95
Negotiating Identity in Intercultural Setting .................................................. 96
Relating the Self to the American Life: Practical Implications ...................... 99
Improving the Tale “From Home to Uncle Sam’s Country”: Limitations and Directions for Future Research .......................................................... 100
Concluding Thoughts .................................................................................... 101
REFERENCES .................................................................................................... 105
APPENDIX
A ANNOUNCEMENT .............................................................................................. 110
B CONSENT FORM ................................................................................................ 113
C INTERVIEW GUIDE ........................................................................................... 118
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Participants and their Interview ................................................................. 24
Table 2. Observations and their Description ............................................................ 32
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

By completing a thesis as an international student, I learned that it is such a worthy and important accomplishment. I could not make it without supports and encouragements from many people. First, I would like to thank my thesis committee members. Dr. Patricia Geist-Martin, my professor, my mentor, my second mother, and friend, thank you for allowing me to walk through the valley of this academic journey. You have showed me the way to reach my goals with constructive critiques, useful advice, and perpetual support. I am lucky and grateful to have worked with you and I am looking forward to collaborating with you in future research. Dr. Kurt Lindemann, thank you for being such an inspiring teacher and committee mentor. Your feedback, suggestions, and guidance were a great benefit in the accomplishment of this academic work. Dr. Ramona L. Pérez, thank you for providing me with the most precious ideas with your rigorous scholarship. You have illuminated new perspectives about my research.

Second, I would like to thank the Congolese community of San Diego, and more specifically all the women who agreed to participate in this research. It would be impossible to accomplish this thesis without their collaboration. I am really grateful for their availability and contribution in the completion of this thesis work.

Finally, I say thank to all the members of International Christian Fellowship (ICF) for their prayer and support. It has been a long journey in pursuing my study in the U.S. and living in a new cultural environment where there are always challenges, but I could finally overcome these difficulties because you have always been enormously helpful to me.
CHAPTER 1

BEING A WOMAN OR DOING WOMAN:

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

When I moved to the US, I did not know that shaving was a criterion of an attractive physical appearance for women. I was not shaving my legs, nor having my chin waxed (since I have a beard). Thus, people often were shocked to see that I do not shave. I remembered one day in Chicago, a conversation about shaving with an older woman in the bus on my way back to home from school.

I was sitting in the bus looking at the windows, lost in my memories after a long day of school when the woman suddenly turned to me and said in a friendly voice “Hi!” I was surprised and automatically responded with “Hi.”

“How are you doing today?” Very cold day, right!” She continued by asking me.

I looked at her with a shy smile and said “I’m fine, just trying to adjust to the snow.” Then I turned to the windows and pursued “It kept snowing since this morning. Oh my God. This is too much.”

“That’s Chicago. The windy city.” She replied. “Oh, by the way you have a nice accent! Where are you from?” She asked me.

I don’t know why I always felt embarrassed wherever people asked me that question. I really don’t know why they were all so curious about my identity. Nevertheless, I replied politely “I’m from Congo, in Central Africa.”

“Wow! That is far away! I don’t think I ever met someone from the Congo before.” She replied looking at me with surprise.

“Ha ha ha! I am not surprised. I met many people telling me the same thing. Now, you met me.” I said laughing.

For one moment, she stopped talking and stared at me strangely. I felt embarrassed trying to understand what her gaze was trying to communicate, but I couldn’t get it. “Can I ask you something?” She said suddenly.
“Of course. Go ahead please!” I responded spontaneously hoping that she will finally tell me what I could not interpret from her nonverbal attitude.

“You have hair on your chin? Is it a beard?” She asked me with surprise.

“Yeah!” I replied laughing. Honestly, I did not know what to say. I was thinking maybe she would ask me a trivial question such as what is your native language or how long have you been in the U.S.? I was not expecting a question about hair. I started wondering why she asked me so.

“And why do you keep it? You should shave it or get it waxed.” She told me.

“No, I can’t! It is a sign of beauty in my culture.” I replied automatically. I could not understand why this woman I met in the bus would suggest me to cut what has been one of my most attractive beauty features back home.

“Wow! This is amazing. In the U.S. women won’t keep hair on their chin as a sign of beauty.” She replied. “Could you please pull that thing for me please I am getting out at the next stop” She asked me.

“Of course.” I replied with a big smile trying to pull down the bus rope for her.

“Thank you. It was nice talking to you.” she said getting out from the bus.

Although this conversation seemed banal, this old woman surprisingly indicated to me the importance of shaving for women in the US. While shaving appears as a performative act of femininity in the US, being hairy is considered as a sign of beauty for women in the Congo. Thus, I started wondering: “should shaving be part of my cultural adjustment process in the US?”

**Research Design**

In the context of globalization, the elimination of geographic boundaries creates a world that functions as an integrated global village. Unlike in the past, people nowadays can more readily move from one place to another, encountering numerous experiences. Migratory movement takes place in this context. By migrating, individuals carrying different cultural backgrounds interact with each other, and these meetings in turn may lead to eventual negotiated outcomes (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). In fact, individuals can no longer live isolated because they are strongly influenced by multiple contact experiences that shape their identities. It has been suggested that during the process of cultural adjustment, the
migrant group has to deal with cultural patterns of both their original culture and the host culture (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). This cross-cultural adaptation process enables the migrant group to accommodate cultural diversities in the host environment. An aspect of this identity negotiation for women is the cultural norms of beauty shaped by media.

Communication media often play a major role in the cultural adjustment process of migrants by presenting individuals with overwhelming amounts of information. For instance, mass media create cultural pressures on women to self-objectify and become preoccupied with physical appearance by presenting them with images of feminine beauty (Defrancisco & Palczewski, 2007). In this context, women’s identities are shaped by beauty norms depicted in the media. For instance, female migrants often engage in a process of identity construction by localizing the borderland of the “self” between the cultural norms of beauty of their home country and the host country. In this perspective, women’s bodies become a site of cultural identity perception. Holman (1999) states that the body is shaped to conform to cultural standards of beauty and identity; it can be pierced, painted, scarified, tattooed, mutilated, disguised, but it is above all the very locus of the cultural identity. In fact, notions of beauty vary by culture and race, which makes it clear that these notions are socially constructed (Adelman & Ruggi, 2008; Butler, 2007; Defrancisco & Palczewski, 2007; Ferris & Langham, 2005; Reischer & Koo, 2004). For instance, in the quest of beauty, woman engage in different gendered practices that appear more as “doing a woman” instead of simply “being a woman.” In fact, Butler (2007) states that:

To be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of “woman,” to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to a historically delimited possibility and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project. (p. 189)

In other words, cultural mandates are also deeply embedded in gendered constructs that are mediated by other social roles. Therefore, beauty as a component of cultural identity must be examined by putting in relationship notions of gender, race, and class.

This study aims to analyze how Congolese women living in San Diego, California, a metropolitan area of the United States, negotiate the borderland of self between African and American norms of beauty. More specifically, this research investigates on Congolese women’s perceptions of beauty as they are exposed to the mediated representation of feminine beauty.
This thesis begins with a review of literature that describes how issues of body performance, beauty, and cultural adjustment operate in the construction of women’s gender identity. First I explain the causes for migration to the U.S. and the acculturation process immigrants go through while adjusting to the host culture. Then, I discuss the theoretical explanations of the gendering of beauty performance by underlying the relationship between gendered beauty and body performance. Next, I look at standards of beauty as they are differently perceived in Congolese culture and American culture. After that, I examine how beauty and power interconnect in the identity construction of women. This allows me to explore the effects of mediated images of beauty on women’s physical attractiveness. Finally, I explain the communication process contextualizing the gendering of beauty performance. This first chapter also includes the research questions that guide this study.

FROM MIGRATION TO ADAPTATION

Migration occurs when people move within one community/area; from one community/area within the same country to another; or from one community in one country to another in another country. More specifically, the term migration refers to the dialectical movement of immigration and emigration. While the first refers to the process of entering a country in order to live there permanently, the second implies the process of leaving your own country in order to live in another one (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). Thus, a migrant can be perceived from both sides as emigrant or immigrant. For instance, the participants of this study are emigrants to the USA from the Congo, but they are also Congolese immigrants in the USA. In other words, participants selected in this research fall in the first category since they left their country (the Democratic Republic of Congo) in order to live permanently in the USA. In fact, Kim (1988) asserts that the term immigrants is used to refer to all long-term migrants including refugees, except when different groups need to be identified separately (p. 5-6).

Migration can be explained by many motives such as demographic, historical, economic, and structural. For instance, people can decide to migrate for the needs of better living (employments opportunities, educational, facilities, health facilities, and housing facilities), or personal reasons (influence of friends or relatives, new life, retirement, and travel experience). Nevertheless, Kim (1988) indicates that although some immigrants may
eventually return to their homeland, most immigrants are committed to the new society in the sense that it is now the setting for the conduct of their lives (p. 6). In this perspective, an essential distinction is often made between the migrants as outsiders in the host country and the natives as the inhabitants of the host culture. By crossing the cultural boundary lines, migrants become assimilated to “strangers” dealing with cultural change issues in the host culture (Cupach & Imahori, 1993; Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Gudykunst, 1993; Gudykunst & Kim, 2003; Kim, 1988; Lustig & Koester, 2010).

No matter the motives of migration, people who move from one place to another often experience a cultural change. Kim (1988) noticed that “in all the cases they are strangers who willingly or unwillingly undergo some degree of change in their original cultural change” (p. 38). More specifically, this cultural change takes the form of adaptation to the new environment. In fact, Kim indicates that “because of the necessity to make a living and attain social membership in the host society, most immigrants must be concerned with their relationship to the environment in a way similar to the native population” (p. 6). In the same way, Tyler (2001) notices that “people seeking meaningful lives for themselves, for their families, or both in new cultural settings, face issues of culminating, concluding, and redefining themselves and their realities” (p.161). This adaptation process results in different outcomes in the process of identity negotiation.

Adaption can be understood as the process of adjustment through which people from one culture deal with cultural issues of their new environment (Furham & Bochner, 1986; Kim, 1988; Lustig & Koester, 2010). This is especially the case for immigrants since they experience long-stay exposure to the host culture. By adjusting to the host culture, immigrants are also negotiating their identity in conformity to the cultural norms of the new environment they now live in. More specifically, the process of identity negotiation takes the form of an acculturation. Ting-Toomey (2005) asserts that “acculturation involves the long-term conditioning process of newcomers in integrating the new values, norms, and symbols of their new culture, and developing new roles and skills to meet its demands” (p. 221). In fact, acculturation, which appears as the result of the adaptation process for groups experiencing cultural changes such as immigrants, occurs both at the societal level including social structure, economic base, and political organization as well as at the individual level.
including identity, values, and attitudes Berry (1997). Thus, by adjusting to their new environment, immigrants’ identity is acculturated.

According to Berry (2009), immigrants’ identity is often acculturated in four ways: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. These forms of acculturation strongly depend on the immigrant’s cultural identity salience as well as his or her perspective on relationship maintenance with the dominant culture. Each of the four levels of acculturation consistently shapes the immigrants’ identity negotiation process as he adjusts to the new environment. In other ways, each type of acculturation represents the degree of conformity or maintenance of the immigrants’ identity in response to the dominant culture of the host country.

First, integration occurs when identity and relationship maintenance are both achieved in a harmonious manner. In other words, integrated individuals display a bicultural identity because they strongly identify themselves with ethnic tradition maintenance while also incorporating values and practices of their larger society (Ting-Toomey, 2005). In fact, at this stage, the host and the immigrant are cooperative such they are both respectful of differences, and come together for a common purpose (Lustig & Koester, 2010).

Second, assimilation occurs when an individual gives up their right, or is forced to give up their right, to their cultural identity and instead assume an identity that is entirely a part of the new culture, or the target culture (Lustig & Koester, 2010). In other words, Assimilated identity refers to “individuals who identify weakly with their ethnic traditions and values and identify strongly with the values and norms of the larger culture they tend to practice” (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 224).

Third, separation, occurs when an individual or group decides not to build relationships with the target culture in order to fully develop their cultural identity (Lustig & Koester, 2010). Separation is also referred as a traditional-based or ethnic-oriented identity option, which implies that immigrants identify strongly with their ethnic traditions and values and weakly with the values of the dominant culture (Ting-Toomey, 2005).

Finally, marginalization occurs when there is no maintenance of cultural identity and no attempt at relationship building with the new culture (Berry, 2009; Lustig & Koester, 2010). In this case, individuals identify weakly with their ethnic traditions and also weakly with the larger cultural worldviews of the host culture (Ting-Toomey, 2005). All these
components impact women in the negotiation of their identity through the performance of beauty standards.

**Gendered Beauty and Body Performance**

Beauty is perceived today more as a social construct than a natural component of people’s identity. Defrancisco and Palczewski (2007) state that “even though people speak of ‘natural beauties’, beauty is anything but natural and unchanging” (p. 98). In fact, conceptions of beauty are consistently shaped by numerous factors such as culture, race, gender, and class. For instance, Defrancisco and Palczewski indicate that “notions of beauty vary by race and culture, which makes it clear that these notions are socially constructed” (p. 99). It can be inferred that beauty is a gendered construct.

More specifically, the gendered nature of beauty is perceptible in the materiality of the body. Reischer and Koo (2004) assert that “if gender is a series of repeated performances, then the distinctions of gender are dependent on the quality of its enactment by the body” (p. 310). In other words, gender is a social construct that is then enacted by the body and upon the body, but the physical body itself does not determine gender. In the same way, Ferris and Langham (2005) argue that “the bodily conversation on culture reveals that appropriate body image relies not simply on the proper look for your gender, but also on the proper bodily performance” (p. 12). In this perspective, the body is no longer perceived as a natural and biological given, but it is redefined as a primary site for the construction and performance of identity.

Body is a powerful medium of identity. Adelman and Ruggi (2008) assert that “questions of body image and bodily practices are increasingly experienced and recognized as central elements in processes of the construction of identity” (p. 556). In fact, people communicate identity through their body performances. Arguing on gender as body performance, Defrancisco and Palcezwiski (2007) state that “people tend to be less conscious of how they use their bodies to express gender and how their bodies use them to generate identities” (p. 81). Very often, this identity is conceived of in terms of a feminine or masculine performance since “a person’s body does gender; sex does not simply passively possess gender traits” (p. 81). Nevertheless, a feminine identity is often associated with the female body, while the masculine performance is related to the male body.
Some scholars argue that gender performance is also a function of biological sex. For example, Reischer and Koo (2004) argue that the female body is often perceived as a "variable boundary" that performs the cultural meanings of gender of what constitutes a "feminine" identity. In the same way, Ferris and Langham (2005) state that the bodily feminine performance is predominantly perceived as female; it is completed not only by the engagement of both the mind and the body, but also by succumbing to pressures of beauty myths and appropriateness of its images as a structural component of gender. In fact, beauty has traditionally been gendered as a female trait and has historically been classified as a special category of women's experience (Reischer & Koo, 2004). From past history to the contemporary moment, women’s bodies have been targeted as a site of beauty and physical attractiveness. Reischer and Koo explicate this statement in these terms:

The ideologies that have defined woman's nature (what a woman is) and her competencies (what a woman can and should do) have historically relied on the physical materiality of the female body. This body and its “natural” physical characteristics come to count as definitive emblems of female identity, and both, in turn, support and legitimize the gendered structure of society. (p. 311)

The arguments developed above demonstrate how gender, beauty, and body performance interconnect and operate in people’s identities, and more specifically women. In fact, women’s identity is strongly shaped by the gendered norms of beauty materialized through their body performances. In the following section, I describe these gendered norms of beauty.

**STANDARDS OF BEAUTY**

Standards of beauty refer to the incarnation of the body beautiful as a canon of femininity and are perceptible in different ways such as body size and body adornment (including dressing style, cosmetics, and tattooing). For example, Patton (2006) asserts that “beauty standards encompass tattoos, piercing (belly button, chin, ear, eyebrow, labia, nipples, nose, tongue), high-heeled shoes, tight jeans, curlers, perms, straightness, diet aids, liposuction, plastic surgery, botox injections, skin lightening, and gastric bypass” (p. 31). Thus, those standards gravitate around physical attractiveness and vary from culture to culture. In the following section, I describe two culture’s standards of beauty: African (related to Congolese) and western (related to American).
African Beauty Standards

Norms of beauty are not universal; instead, they vary across cultures. In fact, “what or who is considered beautiful varies among cultures” (Patton, 2006, p. 24). In the same way, Frith (2006) asserts that “beauty is a construct that varies from culture to culture and changes over time, the idealization of beauty also shifts according to time and place” (p. 1). For instance, African standards of beauty have been strongly shaped by colonization. Moving from a traditional conception of beauty, African beauty today is more prescribed in westernized standards. In the present section, I try to describe this cultural move by focusing on the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

COLONIZING THE CONGO, COLONIZING AFRICAN IDENTITY

Many studies have analyzed the impact of colonization on African people’s identity in various aspects (Dunn, 2000; Fu-Kiau, 1986; Gordon, 2000; Kilinski, 2006). Those studies have mentioned the politic of Enlightenment as an initiative of explorers and missionaries to bring civilization to the natives. For instance, a major goal of this politic was the creation of a new identity by imposing different European cultural views. The Democratic Republic of Congo, as with other African countries, did not escape the western movement of colonization. In fact, the invention of the Congolese Other was intimately tied to the imagining of the European self since Africans were portrayed in terms of the racialized exotic other (Dunn, 2000). In this perspective, the existing discourses of the politics of Enlightenment were rooted in binary oppositions such as black/white, primitive/cultured, traditional/modern, pagan/Christian and so forth (Dunn, 2000, p. 34). As a result of such politics, African cultural practices were ignored.

Since Africans were perceived as exotic, Europeans ignored their social and cultural practices. In this context, many features of feminine beauty were simply ignored and portrayed as symbols of exoticism or barbarism. For instance, Dunn (2000) asserts that “consistent with the need to define and distinguish between Europeans and non-Europeans, explorers and missionaries to Africa would rhetorically dismiss commonalities and focus on exoticized differences such as hairstyles, facial markings, and other physical traits” (p. 31). Similarly, Belgians focused on this exoticism of the natives to construct a Congolese beauty
identity through and against Europeans. In fact, “the Belgian press was rife with articles, drawings, and photographs of the facial markings, tattoos, and hairstyles of various Congolese tribes” (p. 54). However, in her study on identity and body art, Jefkin (2004) mentions that many of the reasons for adorning, tattooing, or piercing bodies in African culture are the same: to convey beauty, wealth, status, bravery, or even to appease the spirits. Despite their worth, Europeans used those body adornment markers to demonstrate the difference between the Black and White by emphasizing the latter as the incarnation of beauty.

For Europeans, white was the incarnation of beauty. For instance, in the Belgian propaganda project, “whites were portrayed as the physical embodiments of cultural and civilization, while Africans where presented as the lack or negation of these characteristics” (Dunn, 2000, p. 204). To remedy this representation, Europeans used different strategies such as the imposition of a western dressing style. Thus, “for whites, clothes served as a naturalized marker of their western culture (and humanity), while on Africans these same clothes could only constitute a mimicry of western culture, making the superiority of western culture and inferiority of the African self-evident” (Dunn, 2000, p. 37). However, this western dressing style imposed by European people contrasted with the traditional African dressing style. For instance, Mona (1977) describes the traditional dressing style for African women as the loincloth generally called “pagnes” covering all their bodies and worn in different ways to differentiate the married woman from the one who has transitioned from puberty to womanhood. Thus, some forms of resistance took place in reaction to this politic of westernization.

In reaction to the politic of Enlightenment, many African countries started claiming their independence in the early 1950s-1960s. For many countries, gaining their sovereignty was a way to empower their cultural identity. For instance, in Congo, when former president Mobutu gained access to his leadership position in 1965, he launched a politic of authenticity. The aim of this politic was the preservation of African values after colonization in terms of a “new image.” In fact, “it was the image of a post-colonial Africa, boldly embracing the future while simultaneously grounding itself in an ancestral past” (Dunn, 2000, p. 141). This politic of authenticity affected all the sectors even cultural. The president imposed an African dressing style to all the Congolese. More specifically, women were not
allowed to dress in men’s clothes such as pants and trousers; nor were they allowed to adorn
western hairstyle such as wigs. Despite the president’s attempts toward maintaining a
Congolese traditional identity, the barriers his policies were designed to erect between
Congolese culture and European culture were not strong enough to withstand the penetration
of European influence. Thus, racialized conceptions of beauty established by the Europeans
continue to influence Congolese perceptions of beauty.

MODERN AFRICAN BEAUTY

Although Europeans strove to impose a western standard of beauty, many authors
have claimed that race and beauty intersect and remain culturally prescribed. This statement
is particularly applicable among African cultures since they share some similarities in beauty
provide an illustrative case on women’s body size perceptions. They assert that while large-
sized women are perceived in black cultures as feminine and strong physically, in western
cultures, thin women are perceived as more feminine and attractive. Similarly, Reischer and
Koo (2004) describe the celebration of female obesity in one Arab culture of Saharan Africa
while in the Western culture a thin body is aesthetically preferable to a corpulent one. In
other words, the large-sized body is a standard of African feminine beauty. In fact, “although
African women face today the dilemmas of whether to look western and slim, or African and
cuddly, large women are undoubtedly more representative of traditional African beauty”
(Smith, 2001, p. 22). Thus, for many African countries, large and healthy women are
considered more beautiful than thin ones.

Another similar trait scholars have pointed out in African black beauty perception is
the appraisal of lighter-skin. For instance, an edition of New Pittsburg Courier reports that in
many African countries (such as Kenya, Niger, and the Democratic Republic of Congo) men
praise women’s beauty in terms of lighter-skin (“Color my skin,” 2001). Thus, many African
women are engaged in the quest to bleach their skin since light skin has become a standard of
African beauty. However, Lee (2004) acknowledges that the belief that lighter skin is better
than a dark one as a standard of black beauty in most African countries remain a legacy of
colonialism. In fact, “Africans must have internalized the fact that the white man represented
perfection and so, today, they produce everything they had buried in their subconscious
minds for centuries” (“Color my skin”, 2001, p. A2). Smith (2001) states that the western looks that African women embody are frequently sneered at as one of the more pernicious manifestations of the colonization of African minds in most Black African countries. Thus, the African standard of beauty has moved from a traditional conception to a modern westernized concept that encompasses the two while playing to the tensions.

**The Westernized Representation of Feminine Beauty**

Although beauty perceptions should be evaluated within their cultural contexts, there is a predominant representation of the white female body as an incarnation of the body beautiful. Many scholars have argued on the pervasiveness of the white female as a symbol of beauty. For instance, Patton (2006) states that “the continuance of hegemonically defined standards of beauty reify white European standards of beauty” (p. 24). This body beautiful representation is often incarnated by models and beauty pageants and is characterized by western features such as high cheekbones, straight noses, relatively thin lips and, of course, slender bodies (Shaw, 2005). Similarly, Patton (2006) mentions that “in the United States and in many countries that are influenced by the U.S. (largely through mediated forms) the current standard of beauty is a white, young, slim, tall, and upper class woman, and some take extraordinary measures in order to meet such standards” (p. 30). In this perspective, women rely in various practices in order to reach the white European standard of beauty and reflect the body beautiful.

Several studies have shown that women under social pressures engage in body work (such as modification by plastic surgery or diets) and spend large amounts of money in the pursuit and attainment of beauty (Adelman & Ruggi, 2008; Defrancisco & Palcezwiski, 2007; Patton, 2006; Shaw, 2005; Twice, 2006). Depending on their race, class, ethnicity and other social attributes, all the women transform their physical appearance to make them look like the white European standard described above. Shaw gives an illustrative case with black women’s participation in a beauty contest. She says that: “all the black contestants that I have seen styled their hair in a distinctively European manner: flowing shoulder-length tresses or neatly secured buns” (p. 144). In the same way, Patton (2006) refers to the process of assimilation (such as straightening the hair or lighting the skin) as a way for black women to challenge the white, stereotypical, de facto standard against which all women are measured.
Thus, western standards of beauty are not only limited to the body beautiful, but also include all the forms of body adornment.

The relationship between body adornment and identity construction is apparent in women’s modern conceptions of beauty through various aspects such as their dressing style, cosmetics, and tattooing. For instance, Defrancisco and Palcezwiski (2007) assert that “women’s bodies are treated as objects for adornment with jewelry, shoes, purses, cosmetics, dyed or treated hair, color-enhanced eyes, and color-coordinated clothing made from fine materials that require special care and limited creativity” (p. 91). In fact, women have always been the central focus of fashion. Luzzatto and Gvion (2004) claim that “women in general are viewed as subjected to the fashion recruiting their body to the capitalist industry of cloth” (p. 46). While women may serve as a target for the fashion industry, the choices they make about their styles affect their self-perception.

Body adornment is more than a simple choice of dressing style or haircut, it shapes people’s identity, and this is especially true for women. For instance, “western dress replicates the shape of the body through a more fitted style, and its primary function, beyond warmth and modesty is to contribute to the making of the self-conscious individual image, part of oneself’ identity” (Defrancisco & Palcezwiski, 2007, p. 91). In fact, any type of adornment reflects a specific facet of people’s identity. For instance, dressing style can reveal a feminine or a masculine performance since body adornment is subject to gendered norms. Defrancisco and Palcezwiski assert that “people like to think that the way they reveal and adorn their bodies is solely an individualistic expression or practical decision, but it is intensively influenced by cultural norms, trends, gender, and social class” (p. 91). In this perspective, women are socially expected to perform a feminine gender in their dressing style.

Gendered norms of beauty have established different dressing styles for women and men. Gendered norms of beauty are manifested in representations of identity such as feminine and masculine hairstyles and clothing (Luzzatto & Gvion, 2004). For instance, dressing is one of the primary methods for signifying these gendered expectations. Kennison (2002) describes different sex dressing styles in terms of a sports jacket, slouch hat, tie, and trousers for men, in contrast to high heels and skirts for women. These distinctions
encompass even other adornment’s features. For example, Defrancisco and Palczewiski (2007) depict how tattoos, cosmetics, and piercing have become gendered:

Some products have become common for women as well as men to use, such as tattoos, body piercing, and cosmetics, but if you look closely, you’ll discover that tattoos and piercing are gendered masculine and feminine, and cosmetics are sex exclusive (even when all the ingredients are the same). (p. 92)

It can be inferred that women are socially expected to adopt a female dressing style to perform their femininity. In fact, Defrancisco and Palczewiski (2007) mention that “clothing that follows the contours of the body is most common in the clothing designed for girls and women” (p. 91). However, today’s fashion has transgressed the conservative gendered norms of dressing styles.

Modern dressing style should be understood in terms of cross-dressing. Wishman (1994) refers to cross-dressing as a set of practices that violate the ordinary expectations for the vestiary presentations of gender cues. In this perspective, a person who adopts a cross-dressing style does not conform anymore to the established norms. For instance, many women wear pants instead of a dress. Inversely, men now wear sport earrings. Zoonen (1995) states that “although it may seem that cross-dressing is simply a way of dressing up, a temporary performance, an outward appearance, it also involves a change of behavior and in many cases a transformation of subjectivity” (p. 316). Cross-dressing style allows women to perform different facets of their identity.

Nowadays, mixed dressing style gives an opportunity for women to perform their femininity in various ways in the pursuit of beauty. In fact, people who break gender norms by wearing androgynous clothing or clothing ascribed to another sex broaden their dressing style and fashion’s options (Defrancisco & Palczewiski, 2007). Nevertheless, cross-dressing style is not always well perceived in all cultures since persons who adopt cross-dressing styles may be more accepted in some cultures, and not in others. For instance, in many societies, pants are still perceived as totally masculine; thus, a woman who wears pants even in order to look fashionable may mistakenly be judged as lesbian (Luzzatto & Gvion, 2004). Thus, what might be the consequences of breaking or not meeting these gendered norms of beauty?
BEAUTY AND POWER

Although physical attractiveness is valued for both women and men, women are more exposed under the social pressures of their physical appearance than men. Defrancisco and Palczewski (2007) state that “cultural pressures encourage women in particular to self-objectify and become preoccupied with physical appearance” (p. 97). In this perspective, women’s physical appearance and self-perception is more dictated by societal views than personal appreciation. In fact, Ferris and Langham (2005) assert that “in a sense of self, a subject, is created by continual interplay between the body and its practices and the social pressures that surround it” (p. 7). Women who fail to meet hegemonic standards of beauty find that their bodies become a controversial component of their identities since they are often subject to discrimination.

The predominant notion of the body beautiful is not always attainable by all women because it is perceived as a myth by some women, while for others it is too costly a practice to entertain. However, women who fail or refuse to comply with social demands of beauty regularly experience humiliation, harassment, and discrimination (Defrancisco & Palczewski, 2007) and may be judged unfeminine and unattractive. For instance, in her study on anorexic bodies and gendered beauty, Malson (1999) describes how body size as a component of western beauty is used to discriminate against fat women. While a fat self is constructed as unattractive and shameful and is associated with introversion and lack of self-esteem, a thin self is constructed as highly desirable and is associated with extroversion, self-confidence, and happiness. In the same way, Shaw (2005) describes how black women are often excluded from the standards of beauty ascribed for their white counterparts because of their larger-sized bodies. In this perspective, “many women develop distorted body images and become frustrated with not being able to obtain the ideal figure” (Patton, 2006, p.33). This bodily gendered discrimination sometimes leads to social exclusion.

For many women, failing to meet the standards of beauty leads to a restriction on opportunities. For instance, Defrancisco and Palcezwiski (2007) assert that “body size, especially for women, tends to affect popularity, dating and marriage opportunities, educational and economic accomplishments, susceptibility to job discrimination” (p. 97). In the same way, Patton (2006) describes how African American women were excluded from
the job sphere because of their larger-sized bodies. In this context, the female body can be perceived as a site of power through representations of norms of beauty.

Scholars have argued that the female body is a site of power/resistance through gender performance. They have investigated patterns of beauty performance to understand the meanings of body appearance and the particular conflicts and struggles that give more value to some bodies than others (Adelman & Ruggi, 2008). For instance, Darling-Wolf (2004) claims that “discourses on the female body that surround global popular representations of female attractiveness are dominated by Western-influenced constructs of the body as separate from the mind, as a site of struggle, and as a fragmented object to be brought under control” (p. 326). In the same way, Adelman and Ruggi (2008) claim that “the ‘materiality of the body’ and its symbolic and cultural construction are in fact inseparable and must be understood within the context of the power relations – primarily, those of class, race, gender, and sexual orientation – of a particular social order” (p. 555). Thus, this situation has led to forms of resistance.

In fact, women have created strategies of resistance to overcome oppression they face due to their physical appearance. For instance, commenting on the African beauty contest, Smith (2001) describes how pageants organized a panel to praise their large-size body as a traditional criterion of their beauty. She states that all the pageants acknowledge that African women should be proud of their African heritage instead of being slaves to white fashions edicts, which is nothing more than a simple legacy of colonization. In the same way, Patton (2006) describes how black women in the United States launched the movement “My black is beautiful” as a counterhegemonic strategy to the white standards of beauty. This movement emphasizes the beauty differences within the black community in terms of their own creation of individual beauty standards rather than looking for outside acceptance. Nevertheless, different factors such as media, continue to perpetuate social pressure to self-objectify to gendered beauty standards.

MEDIA AND FEMININE REPRESENTATIONS OF BEAUTY

Scholars agree on the fact that media shape conceptions of beauty. In fact, media representations play a major role in women’s conceptions of attractiveness by presenting them with cultural standards of beauty. Women are exposed to various forms of images
promoting the body beautiful canon of attractiveness. In her study on mediated representations of feminine beauty, Darling-Wolf (2004) presents the media as a vehicle for the construction and the perpetuation of ideals of attractiveness and standards based on physical appearance. In the same way, Patton (2006) argues that media teach that beauty is the defining characteristic of women. She says that “the performance of beauty comes to us through a variety of mediated images that we are bombarded with daily; these messages of beauty encompass ways in which we can make ourselves look better, skin products that can tone, redefine, and take away age” (p. 39). Media often operate through advertising.

Some scholars have also analyzed the impact of advertisement in shaping women’s conceptions of beauty. For instance, Hentges, Bartsch, and Meier (2007) in their study on gender representation in commercials, demonstrate that advertisers are frequently targeting women in commercials that promote beauty products by emphasizing stereotypes on female physical appearance. In the same way, Goodman, Morris, and Sutherland (2008) in their study on women’s responses to beautiful advertising models, describe how advertising models are used as guide of what is beautiful to shape women’s self-perceptions of beauty and body image. Thus, these beautiful women attract women’s attention and stimulate them to buy the products in order to look alike. Indeed, by consuming these mediated images of beauty, women come to believe that what makes a woman beautiful comes from those representations. Commenting on the effects of media, Defrancisco and Palcewiski (2007) describe how these mediated representations influence indistinctively in these terms: “mediated images of beauty submerge racial and ethnic differences between bodies such that all women are held to a single standard attainable not only by very few women but perhaps by anyone” (p. 242). Thus, media homogenize feminine representations of beauty.

Other researchers have analyzed how cultural norms of beauty become standardized through media. In her study on beauty types in crosscultural context, Frith (2006) depicts how western representations of beauty that portray whiteness as the zenith of physical attractiveness are transferred across cultures through various types of media (such as magazines and television). In fact, media reinforce the pervasive standard of the white European feminine beauty. Patton (2006) states that “the media may promote or single out a more Eurocentric-looking model because Euro American standards of beauty are paramount and mediated standards of beauty promote adherence in whiteness” (p. 39). In the same way,
Goodman et al. (2008) argue that “society and media's current characteristics of beauty include thin body, big eyes, full lips, flawless skin, and high cheekbones and all those hallmarks of youth are considered crosscultural qualities of beauty” (p. 147). Indeed, those standards embrace all the facets of an attractive, physical appearance. Entirely new western concepts of beauty, dress, hairstyle and body image are being created all around the world through mass media, predicated on imagery of the fair skinned, slender, youthful women with European facial characteristics (Mbilingi, 1989). All those images are not harmless; instead, they strongly impact women on the construction of their identity.

**COMMUNICATION AND GENDERED NORMS OF BEAUTY**

The female body communicates facets of identities through the gendering of beauty performance. In fact, the ways we adorn, pose, sculpt, feed, ignore, and obsess about our bodies have real consequences for our representations to us and to others (Trethewey, Scott, & LeGreco, 2006). By embodying different standards of beauty, women’s bodies reveal who they are and different perceptions of their “selves” as socially and culturally gendered. For instance, in their study on “dress and identity”, Foss and Foss (1991) argue that a woman’s dressing style must communicate effectively whatever aspect of herself she wants to present on a particular occasion. They describe the case of a professional woman in the following terms:

> When I teach, I want to communicate that I’m a professional woman, a woman, an individual, interesting, confident about who I am, and contemporary, so I try to dress in ways that communicate these qualities. At other times, I deliberately dress a ‘funky’ or casual way to communicate something quite different. (p. 81)

In other words, a dressing style carries a symbolic meaning that communicates embodied identities depending on the context. Similarly, in their study on constructing embodied organizational identities Trethewey, et al. (2006) assert that “our bodies are often cast as professional regarding in relation to risks through communication that relies upon and reproduces gendered and classes notions of how bodies should appear at work” (p. 133). The idea of looking professional (“dress for success”) calls upon and reproduces class divisions since it connotes a secure, usually male, middle-class and upper-class body far removed from the taint of labor division. Thus, body performance and gender identity are strongly connected.
Scholars argue that embodying standards of beauty communicates a gender identity in terms of either masculine or feminine identity. Spence and Buckner (1995) recall that gender identity is the most central and enduring aspects of people’s self-concept as a recognition and acceptance of their biological sex (male vs female) which dictates their communicative behaviors such as their dressing style. For instance, Stewart, Cooper, Stewart, and Friedly (1996) describe the “pink and blue treatment” in babies’ dressing style as artifacts communicating stereotyped gender identity in terms of blue for male/masculine and pink for female/feminine. In the same way, Spence and Buckner assert that objects associated with men such as apparel worn by men communicates a masculine identity while objects such as articles of clothing associated with women communicate a feminine identity. For instance, in fashion, when women’s clothing is described as feminine it is assumed that the style is soft rather than tailored and emphasizes the curvaceousness of women’s bodies. In the same way, Holland (2004) presents features and practices such as long hair and make up as feminine since they are performed by women. However, gender identity is not determined only by sex differences.

Although masculine identity is associated with men and feminine identity is associated with women, a masculine or feminine identity is a function of body performance. In other words, gender identity should be evaluated by the body performance because sex does not always determine a masculine or feminine identity. In fact, Holland (2004) asserts that “to be a man or a woman depends on a chronic monitoring of the body and bodily gestures and there is no single bodily trait that separates all men from all women” (p. 184). In other words, by embodying the standards of beauty, a woman can communicate either a masculine or feminine identity and inversely for a man. Holland mentions that in some cultures, a man who has long hair is perceived as communicating a feminine identity. Similarly, woman may communicate a masculine identity by adopting a male-based dressing style. In this perspective, masculinity and femininity should be used to describe the cultural and symbolical meaning with which people in a particular context (culture, class, society, and organization) embody different social practices that depict their identities (Alvesson & Billing, 2002). Therefore, views of what it means to be feminine or masculine may change from self-definitions to ideas about body image, clothing, and other practices of beauty depending on not only the performance, but also the culture.
The female visible body is often caught in webs of communication as women constantly engage in the work of bodily physical appearance. In so doing, they constantly display information as a consequence of their embodiment even if when they are not speaking. In fact, Trethewey, et al. (2006) assert that “women treat their bodies as text to be read by others” (p.128). They use nonverbal behaviors (ways of sitting, walking, moving, and even dressing) and other performative strategies for communicative purpose. For instance, Stewart et al. (1996) describe how women dress in professional business suits to communicate self-confidence and control at work. In this perspective, the female body appears as object/subject on display of embodied information. In fact, “movements and appearances of the body send messages of intent between people” (Shilling, 1993, p. 83). In other words, the body becomes a generator of meaning that plays a major role in the communication process.

Scholars have demonstrated the body’s importance in social interaction. In fact, “body management is central to the smooth flow of encounters, the acting out of roles and, more generally, to a person’s acceptance as a full member of the interaction order” (Shilling, 1993, p. 85). For instance, the gendering of beauty performance plays a major role in interpersonal communication. In their study on nonverbal communication and physical characteristics, Stewart et al. (1996) describe how physical attractiveness affects people’s communicative behavior. They assert that people who are more attractive physically are also perceived to be more sociable. This is especially the case for women who use their physical characteristics (including hair color and length, facial and body hair, skin color and complexion tones, and so on) in various beauty practices to enhance their social competence and ability. However, very attractive women are often perceived as less effective communicators than unattractive women. For instance, in professional situation, women who are perceived as too attractive often lose their credibility in presenting their ideas to other. Thus, body appearance is an important pattern in predicting people’s communicative behaviors. The last section presents the research questions guiding this study.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The literature review offers useful insights in understanding how gendered norms of beauty shape women’s identities through mediated representations of standards of beauty.
The present study aims to extend the issue of gendered norms of beauty and identity construction by investigating how Congolese women in San Diego negotiate gendered norms of beauty presented in mediated images in constructing their identity. More specifically, this study strives to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What do Congolese women describe as gendered norms of beauty in the U.S. and in the Congo?

RQ2: How do Congolese women perform American and Congolese gendered norms of beauty?

- How are their identities shaped by this performance?
- What is problematic about these performances?

In the next chapter, I describe in detail the methodological process utilized in this study. I will discuss ethnography as the method choice for this study. The significance of participant observation, interviews, and reflexivity will be addressed as steps taken in collecting data while doing this research. Finally, the procedure of data analysis and representation will be explained in detail.
CHAPTER 2

SPEAKING OUT FROM PERSONAL STORIES: A METHODOLOGY OF STORYTELLING

In January 2009, I joined Mont Carmel, a religious African community gathering men and women from different countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Cameroon, Congo Brazzaville, Ivory Coast and other French countries. As a Christian and French native speaker of DRC, I attended this community to spend time with my brothers and sisters and to reconnect with my African cultural background. It is through this community that I connected with most of my participants. In fact, during our trivial talks about beauty, I found out that most of the Congolese women I interacted with were like me, experiencing the feeling of getting caught between two cultures.

After finalizing the focus of my research, I thought that Mont Carmel was a good place to seek participants. Thus, I contacted a group of Congolese woman I knew from this community asking them if they would like to participate in the study. I personally talked with some women trying to describe the purpose of my study and their role as participants (see Appendix A). Although everybody found my thesis topic interesting, I received two different responses: negative and positive.

On one hand, the oldest women (50 years and above) were reticent for personal reasons. For instance, most of them told me that they did not feel that much concerned about the issue of beauty because of what they consider as “their advanced age”. They thought that beauty was more a concern for younger women. More specifically, these women claimed that they do not feel the need to negotiate American beauty standards since they are not exposed to public settings in their daily life experiences. Instead, they accomplish most of their activities in private settings such as their houses. Indeed, they play a matriarchal role by holding on customs and traditions in order to teach younger women the preservation of the African tradition.
On the other hand, younger women (21 to 40 years old) were more cooperative. They recognized to be exposed to both American and Congolese standards of beauty. They were willing to participate in the study and curious to know more about how the negotiation of beauty standards affects their identity in their adjustment process to the American culture. Finally, I ended up working with eight young women of this community as key informants: Maimouna, Fatima, Maya, Fatouma, Amina, Aida, Feza, and Sifa (each participant is referred by a pseudonym, see Appendix B).

This research is designed as an investigation of Congolese women’s conceptions of gendered expectations of beauty. This chapter describes the methodological steps taken in conducting this research: method choice, data collection (interviews, participant observation, and reflexivity), and data analysis and representation.

**Conducting Ethnography**

Since the present study seeks to interpret the particular meanings of Congolese women of cultural norms of beauty, I used ethnography as a cultural descriptive approach. Philipsen (1989) states that “an ethnographic study reports people’s particularity, what essentially characterizes this people as well as what differentiates them from others” (p. 265). More specifically, this study was designed to explore the different facets of Congolese women’s negotiation of gendered norms of beauty in relation to the process of their cultural identity construction. In this perspective, ethnography appeared as an appropriate approach for investigating the meanings of different cultural patterns characterizing the process of this identity negotiation. Philipsen suggests that “for the ethnographer of communication, the main concern is expressed in the search for a culturally distinctive pattern of communication as it is rooted in a distinctive way of life (p. 265). Thus, it seems obvious that ethnography is important methodology for understanding people’s interpretations of their own lives.

Indeed, this study attempts to search for theory through an inductive process by giving priority to participants’ voices and stories. In other words, rather than beginning with a theory and examining the ways in which data support and/or refute the tenets of this given theory (i.e. deduction), the study reasons inductively, thus locating patterns of communication in data exemplars to construct a theory (Ellingston, 2009, p. 55). Ethnography, similar to as other qualitative approaches relies on this inductive mode of data
collection. In fact, “qualitative research proceeds inductively by writing field notes that reflect the significance of events and experiences to those in the settings” (Emerson, Fretz, Shaw et al., 1995, p. 151). I describe the methodology of this proposed research by explaining how I utilized interviews, participant observation, and reflexivity.

**DATA COLLECTION**

The methodological steps taken to collect data in this study include: interviews, participant observation and reflexivity. The benefit of ethnographic research in this context was that it allowed me to blend the use of these three techniques together. Just as my observations informed me and allowed me to adapt interview questions, the responses to my interviews questions opened my eyes to new perspectives related to my personal experience when working on the field.

**Interviews**

For this study I conducted twelve interviews with eight Congolese women (See Table 1). More specifically, I initiated conversations with participants to gain insights on their perception of gendered norms of beauty performance as they are adjusting to American culture. Riessman (2008) recalls that “most narrative projects in the human sciences today are based on interviews of some kind”. In this perspective, I used two types of interviews: ethnographic and narrative.

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<th>Number</th>
<th>Participant</th>
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<th>Timing (in minutes)</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Fatima</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Maya</td>
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<td>Fatouma</td>
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<td>5</td>
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ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVIEWS

During my observations, I relied on informal conversational interviews, also called situational interviews, which appear as the most informal and spontaneous form of interview occurring while the investigator is in the field (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Several times while observing in the field, I engaged in spontaneous exchange with participants on their beauty performance. More specifically, I took interesting opportunities emerging from participants’ beauty performance to exchange information and experiences with them in order to explore different issues related to my research study. In fact, Lindlof and Taylor state that “a casual exchange of remarks, or a lull in the action, might suggest that the moment is right for asking a ‘research’ question” (p. 176). For instance, during my babysitting experience in Moseka’s family, I engaged in a talk with her that elicited an interesting story “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” portraying the challenges that this woman faces with her body change after giving birth. Indeed, all the information collected through these spontaneous and flexible conversations were useful in constructing my interview questions for later occasions.

IN-DEPTH NARRATIVE INTERVIEWS

The in-depth interviews included eight Congolese women I worked with as key informants. I conducted 12 interviews ranging in length from 45 to 75 minutes. Since I was familiar and close to my participants, I opted for in-depth narrative interviews assuming that it was the appropriate method to generate useful data from them. In fact, Lindlof and Taylor (2002) assert that “the method of narrative interviews often depends on a close, long-term relationship with participants and it is not unusual for the researcher to study colleagues, friends, acquaintances, or relatives” (p. 181). Thus, narrative interviews were used to stimulate participants engage in storytelling, which generated story data.

I relied on personal narrative to allow participants share their life experiences on beauty performance and identity negotiation. These interviews allowed the participants to create a dynamic interplay between self and others by generating stories related to cultural discourses of race, class, gender, sexuality, and other politicized identities (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). These interviews provided a deep understanding of the phenomenon as each woman shared her personal story relating it to different experiences of her beauty performance. More specifically, the interviews took the form of a free-flowing informational exchange (Holstein
& Gubrium, 2002) in order to stimulate participants to express their opinions about the topic studied. The interviews were tape-recorded and then transcribed. All of the interviews transcripts yielded to eighty single spaced pages of data.

Language used to communicate with Congolese women was also a critical issue when conducting the interviews. The democratic Republic of Congo is a linguistically diverse country, and it is not uncommon to meet people who speak more than one language. Since all the participants and myself are not English native speakers, we had to agree on a common language for the interview. While we are basically all French native speakers, we also have linguistic differences based on our Congolese area of origins.

Besides communicating in French with most participants, to a certain extent I also had to adjust to this linguistic specificity with others. Fortunately, my linguistic African background allowed me to communicate with them in one of the three Congolese local languages of their choice: Lingala, Swahili, or Kikongo. All the interviews where then translated into English. In fact, the researcher is expected to speak the language of the group he is studying and engage in translation task to reflect the meaning of various stories Riessman (2008). Nevertheless, the lack of specific and appropriate vocabulary I faced in the translation sometimes created confusion and a loss of information.

CONSTRUCTION OF INTERVIEW GUIDE

The interview guide was designed to investigate the intricacies of gendered beauty performance, media exposure, and identity negotiation in participants' life experiences (see Appendix C). This interview guide took the form of a set of questions where the range of possible answers is not specified (Briggs, 1986). In other words, I used nondirective questions to motivate participants to share their experiences about their assimilation of gendered norms of beauty. More specifically, I used various types of nondirective questions.

First, grand tour questions were designed in form of “tell me a story” (Townsley & Geist, 2000) in order to allow participants provide stories revealing different events and moments related to the gendering of beauty performance and identity negotiation during their cultural adjustment process. Second, mini tour questions followed to provide more depth about parts of the larger event (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). For instance, mini tour questions elucidated different aspects of previous responses by providing specific details about
participants’ emotions and feelings. Finally, experience questions were used to get deeper into participants’ world by encouraging them to dig some incidents at greater length and highly personal (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). For instance, experience questions enriched some events by portraying them as turning points of participants’ lifestyle change.

The interview guide was also designed by grouping questions in topic allowing maintaining a sequence reflecting the dynamic of the major points of the study: gendered beauty performance, media exposure, and identity negotiation. While I had no preferred order to ask these questions, I tried to adjust them to each participant’s experience. Basically, the interview guide was organized in three parts. The first part included all the questions of the study. Questions 1 -10 were designed to investigate participants’ conceptions of beauty; to identify practices and ways used to embody this beauty conception; to analyze events, circumstances and moments characterizing this beauty performance; and finally, to examine what is communicated through this embodiment process. Questions 11-13 were designed to examine the influence of mediated beauty images on Congolese women self-perception. Questions 14-18 were designed to examine how Congolese women negotiate their identity through standards norms of beauty as part of their cultural adjustment process and how power plays a role in this process of identity negotiation. The second part of the interview guide was designed to gain participants’ identification, and more precisely their cultural background. Finally, the third part was designed to wrap-up each interview.

IN QUEST OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

This research was conducted with female Congolese living in the United States of America, and more precisely in San Diego. Although different women were involved in this study, I worked specifically with eight Congolese women as key informants. I focused more on the way in which the gendered norms of beauty operate in the process of their identity construction. I conducted twelve interviews with the eight participants. Each of them was randomly assigned a pseudonym: Maimouna, Fatima, Maya, Fatouma, Amina, Aida, Feza, and Sifa. In the following paragraphs, I describe the circumstances of research participants’ quest. Indeed, I introduce each participant and contextualize their interview process.

I started my first interview with Maimouna. I knew Maimouna back home. We used to be neighbors and attend the same church as well as the same English language school.
Although we were not really close back home, our relationship strengthened when we met here in the US. Maimouna moved in the USA in 2007 to pursue her studies. In her early twenties, she is currently a college student living with all her family. Besides Mont Carmel activities, her family and I also meet during some Congolese events such as birthday parties, weddings, or barbecues. My first interview with her took place at my house. We spent a wonderful afternoon together that day and she provided me with useful information for my thesis. However, after the first interview round, I realized that I needed additional information. Through email exchange and phone calls, she decided again to drive over to my place for the second interview. Finally these combined interviews gave me a better picture of her life experience as it pertained to my research study.

Fatima was the second person I interviewed. In contrast to Maimouna her sister, I did not knew Fatima back home. In fact, when I met her sister back home, she had already moved to another African country. Like her sister, she moved to the US in 2007 to pursue her studies. In her mid- twenties, Fatima is actually a college student and part-time job worker living with all her family. Fatima and I met for the first time at Mont Carmel church. We are good friends. Through the process of working with her as key informant, we became even closer. I conducted two interviews with her. The first interview took place in Fatima’s parents house. My Congolese male friend offered to drive me to her place. We had a wonderful African diner all together with her family and afterward the interview took place in the veranda. Three weeks later, we arranged an appointment for a second interview in a small coffee shop located in her college area. I found out through these interviews fascinating facets of her personality that would have remained unknown to me.

The third person I interviewed was Maya. Maya has been living in the USA for about eight years. She is married to an African American man and has two kids. In her early thirties, this woman’s life is caught between household chores and school. Since she was overwhelmed by her daily life activities, Maya has offered not to be interviewed at her house to avoid any disturbance. I have always felt closed to Maya. She is one of my good friends in San Diego. We always keep in touch and talk openly on different subjects. Thus, our friendship was already a good prerequisite for our interaction. I conducted two interviews with her on two separate weekends. For the first interview, Maya came over to my place a Saturday afternoon. We spent the afternoon together and the interview took place in the
dining room. After this first interview, I found out that I needed to gain more insights on some of her fascinating tales. Thus, a couple of weeks later, I contacted her and we set up another appointment for a second interview again at my place. I found out through these interviews the intricacies of beauty performance, student life, and marriage life that this woman carries in her daily life experience.

Fatouma was the fourth person I interviewed. I have known Fatouma so far for about two years. Our relationship has even switched from a simple friendship to one of family. Fatouma has been living in the US for about nine years. In her early thirties, this single woman is a full time worker in a retail store. Fatouma was pleased to participate in my study. However, the most difficult to deal with was to find the appropriate time and location for the interview. In fact, it was difficult to harmonize both our schedules. I was overwhelmed by my school work while she was too busy at work. She was not only too busy with her job, but also she often came back home late. Thus, her availability did not match mine. This is why we often keep in touch by phone calls. Finally, after different negotiations, we were able to set up an interview appointment. The interview took place at a restaurant close to her work during her break time. Because of this schedules incompatibility, I was not able to get more interviews from her. Nevertheless, this woman’s life story revealed useful insights for this study. Through the process of working with her, she introduced me to two more women: Amina, her cousin and Aida, her coworker.

My fifth interviewee was Amina. She is Fatouma’s relative. Amina has been living in the USA for about a year and half. This married woman in her mid-thirties with two kids is actually pursuing her studies in a college. Amina lives with Fatouma with all her family. I often meet her and her adorable kids when I go to visit Fatouma time to time. It happened to me to babysit her kids once in a while. Although I am not as close to her as to Fatouma, we developed a good friendship. Indeed, Fatouma helped a lot to facilitate and get her involvement in my study research. I was quite surprised by Amina’s devotion. She was really opened about her experiences. She accepted my two interviews’ appointments. Both interviews took place over her place at a two weeks interval. We arranged them during the time her boy is at school so we would not be disturbed.

Aida was the sixth interviewee of this research. She is Fatouma’s coworker. In her mid-thirties, Aida is a married woman with no children, who has been living in the US for
about three years. I was introduced to Aida by Fatouma one day I went to visit her at her job. I meet her time to time when I go to visit Fatouma to their work as well as at different Congolese events. Although we are not really close, we kept in touch and have this good relationship of African sisterhood. Thus, this relationship allowed me to get her participation in this study. Nevertheless, we had some difficulty arranging the interview because of our opposite schedules. It was a pretty much similar situation to Fatouma. Thus, we ended up with the same resolution: a one hour interview during her break time in a restaurant close to their work.

Meanwhile, I also sought participation from my personal relatives. More precisely, I worked with two of my cousins Feza and Sifa as key informants. While both have been living in the US for about 20 years, they actually have different lifestyles. Thus, my seventh interviewee was Feza. Feza has been living in the U.S. for about twenty years. In her early thirties, Feza is a single woman who had decided to privilege her brilliant studies and successful career to the detriment of a marriage life. She lives alone and refuses to depend on anyone. Our interview took place at a coffee shop closed to her office. Through her interview, I found out a memories of past events recalled in the present that have strongly shaped her independent spirit.

Finally Sifa was the eighth and last interviewee. In contrast to her sister, Sifa decided to switch her professional and academic ambition to a marriage life. In her mid-thirties, she is currently married to an African American and has one child. Nevertheless, she is a part time job worker in a shopping store. Because of her busy schedule, I was able to conduct only one interview with her. This interview took place at her house where she invited me to spend the afternoon with her family Sunday afternoon. She asked her husband to take their kid out for a walk so we will have more time to exchange. I was really fascinated by the experiences of this young mother and worker during our talk.

While interviews were useful in getting inside the specific details related to participants’ experiences such as their feelings, their hidden identities, and their cultural views on the gendering of beauty performance, participant observation provided me a firsthand view of the phenomenon studied.
**Participant Observation**

Participant observation is a vital part of ethnographic methodology. I spent approximately 115 hours over eight months hanging with participants in different settings to gain insights of their daily experiences related to my research (See Table 2). In fact, participant observation is both a data collection and analytic tool designed to enhance the quality of data obtained during fieldwork as well as the quality of the interpretation of data (Dewalt, Dewalt, & Wayland, 2000). In the same way, Weinberg (2002) claims that “observational fieldwork involves quite basically placing oneself in direct personal contact with the social group one is intent to study as they go about their affairs (p. 135). Fieldwork was one area where I spent a lot of time conducting this study. More specifically, my observation was based on the following rubrics:

1. **Context?** (description of the location/place/setting and circumstances where the phenomenon occurs)
2. **Date and time?**
3. **Activity/what is going on there?**
4. **Who is involved? Who are interacting?**
5. **What standards of beauty are the participants performing?**
   - African/Congolese
   - American/Western
   - Both
6. **Which beauty standards do participants perform?**
   - Dressing style
   - Hairstyle
   - Body shape
   - Body care (cosmetics)
   - Other
7. **Which verbal and non verbal practices do the participants associate to these embodiments?**
   - Which conversations occur during this performance/interaction?
   - What assumptions are made?
8. **What do the participants communicate through these embodiments?**
What types of identity are they communicating? Why?

I carried my outline with me in various settings where my fieldwork took place. I used it as a guiding tool while observing participants’ experiences of beauty performances. This allowed me to keep track of sequential phenomena occurring during different events and to identify the most important patterns for further analysis. More specifically I did my observation in three settings (See Table 2).

Table 2. Observations and their Description

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Observations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Cultural events</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Barbecue at the beach</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wedding party</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Birthday party</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Graduation party</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prayers at Mont Carmel</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Family Visits</td>
<td>Fatouma’s family</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maimouna and Fatima’s family</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moseka’s family</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Beauty adventures</td>
<td>Shopping with Fatouma</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shopping with Amina and Fatima</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hairstylist with Amina</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

First, I spent time with my participants during different cultural events organized by the Congolese community of San Diego such as birthday and wedding parties, barbecues, and prayers (See Table 2). Those events revealed to me different realities of Congolese culture. In fact, Dewalt et al. (2000) state that “participant observation is a method in which an observer takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of people being studied as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their culture” (p. 260).
By watching my participants as well as listening to their conversations, I was able to see and analyze their lifestyle in adjusting to the American environment. For instance, during the barbecue that took place at the Coronado beach, I learned that many Congolese women often decide to shave their bodies while going to the beach in order to avoid criticism.

Second, I visited my participants in their home. I visited Fatouma’s house and her family five times. Her relatives and more specially Amina became familiar to me and agreed to become a participant in my study. I also visited Moseka’s family three times. While she disagreed about being interviewed, she allowed me to observe her during my visits. I took this opportunity to watch her beauty performance and engaged in informal interviews. In fact, participant observation places the ethnographer at the scene, where combination of direct observation and informal interview provide the evidence from which rich ethnographic accounts may be constructed (Johnson & Sackett, 2000). Finally, I visited Maimouna and Fatima’s family twice. I spent time and interacted with their parents and siblings. For instance during one of our conversations, I found out that their mother was the one who always pushes Fatima to use make-up to enhance her femininity.

Third, I got involved in my participants’ beauty adventures such shopping or going to the hairstylist (See Table 2). I sought these opportunities as a participant observer to spend time with them and carry out activities as a member of the community with which I am working (Dewalt et al., 2000). I watched their dressing style and checked their tastes in clothes. I watched different tips they use to enhance their beauty: jewelry, wigs, make-up, and so forth. I conversed with them about their beauty performance. Hanging with my participants in those different settings provided me a better understanding of their beauty conception. For instance, while shopping with Amina and Fatima, I learned that their different tastes of dressing style were connected to their opposite religious and cultural beliefs.

In all those settings, I acted as a participant observer at different degrees. First, I performed the role of an active participant observant. First, Dewalt et al. (2000) assert that “active participation is when the ethnographer actually engages in almost everything that people are doing as a means of trying to learn their cultural rules of behavior” (p. 262). For instance while visiting Maimouna and Fatima’s family, I helped to make the meal. Before the diner we prayed and later on I took part to their family prayer. This is how I found out that
religion was part of their family culture. Second, I also played the role of a moderate participant. In this case, I was present in the scene of the action but did not actively participate or interact, or I only occasionally interact with people in it (Dewalt et al., 2000). This was mostly the case when I involved to participants’ beauty adventures. For example, while they asked my opinions about their tastes in clothes, I tried to remain neutral in order to avoid any influence that would alter their personal beauty conceptions.

During my observation time, I wrote down different patterns characterizing Congolese women’s conceptions of beauty. In fact, Dewalt et al. (2000) assert that “if you didn’t write it down in your field notes, then it didn’t happen” (at least so far as being data for analysis) (p. 270). These scratch notes were then transcribed as narratives for further analysis. In fact, Riessman (2008) describes narratives as stories collected through different techniques including observation fieldnotes. She states that:

The term narratives in the human sciences can refer to texts at several levels that overlap: stories told by research participants (which are themselves interpretive), interpretive accounts developed by an investigator based on interviews and fieldwork observation (a story about stories), and even the narrative a reader constructs after engaging with the participant’s and investigator’s narratives. (p. 6)

Thus, scratch notes were written as stories to identity moments that constitute the heart of the phenomenon studied. After transcription, all the observations and field notes yielded over seventy single spaced pages of data. I did not conduct this study as a passive spectator, my own positionality was used to enhance communication with my participants and introspection was used to reflect personal feelings and thoughts that occurred while conducting this study.

**Reflexivity**

My position as a female migrant living in the US for almost two years and facing the same realities during my cultural adjustment process facilitated the establishment of a common ground with the participants and help to gain their cooperation. Madison (2005) recalls the impact of researcher’s positionality by suggesting that “she should use the resources, skills, and privileges available to her to make accessible and to penetrate the borders and break through the confines in defense of the voices and experiences of subjects whose stories are otherwise restrained and out of reach” (p. 5). Thus, I used my personal
experience to stimulate a deep collaboration with my participants and also strived to be reflexive by turning back to myself in order to examine the possible impact of my participants’ stories on my own experience as I was conducting this study.

Journaling was used as a way to practice reflexivity. In fact, I engaged in daily recording in a personal journal my feelings, comments, and thoughts as I was conducting the research. Dewalt et al. (2000) mention that keeping a set of chronological and daily notes in a journal is a practice of the contemporary ethnographer. Thus, the journal was a good way for me to keep track my interaction with the participants and my personal involvement as the research progresses. For instance, I recorded my feelings of happiness, frustration, and mistakes after interacting and interviewing with my participants. Reflexivity allowed me to understand that my weaknesses and strengths as well as my success and failures were connected to the multiple positions and interpretations I engaged as a researcher in the field. All those feelings, emotions, and self-reflections were included in the text and left to the audience to relate or refute.

Also, by keeping track of a personal record, I was able to understand the ways in which I have impacted my participants’ life as well as how they have impacted mine. For instance, I found similar experiences of identity negotiation between my participants and I. This discovery inspired me to write down personal stories illustrating my own experience of beauty performance as I am adjusting to the American culture. More specifically, these authoethnographic narratives took the form of evocative representations connecting the author with the audience emotionally through re-creation of the research experience (Richardson, 2000). They were included in the study as my own reflections and discussions of what I was thinking at those particular moments of writing.

**DATA ANALYSIS AND REPRESENTATION**

On my desk lab, I had over one hundred fifty single spaced pages of data. I had also my journal containing “thick descriptions” of my field notes and other useful information about my thesis such as inspirational quotes, personal ideas, participants’ contact information. All those documents were used to analyze and interpret the data.

I examined my data by applying a thematic analysis. Thematic approach interrogates “what” is spoken in the content of the narratives (Riessman, 2008). I tried to see what is said
in the stories shared by the participants to identity recurrent patterns related to the gendering of beauty performance. In order words, I examined the narratives by looking for plots connected to the topic of study. Emerson et al. (1995) state that thematic narrative “requires selecting only some small portion of the total set of field notes and then linking them into a coherent text representing some aspects or slice of the world studied” (p. 170). I applied thematic analysis through three steps.

First, I read carefully the pile of over hundred single spaced pages emanating from field notes and interviews transcripts to identify plots for analysis. More specifically, I applied an open coding and in vivo coding process as suggested by Lindlof and Taylor (2002) by underlining and marking chunks to be analyzed. At this primary stage, I had not yet indentified different categories.

Second, after examining the selected chunks, I was able to recognize recurrent patterns that are labeled in themes or concepts. I decided that these concepts could temporarily be used as categories for further analysis. Thus, I wrote categories of possible issues in the margin of the transcripts and field notes. For instance, the following categories were handwritten in the margins of Fatima's first interview transcript: “acculturation,” “hybrid identity” “American identity” “African identity” “beliefs” “social integration” “family influence” “school pressure” “media pressure” and “liberal”. To label these categories I relied on the special terms used by participants as symbolic markers of their speech and meanings (Charmaz, 2006).

Finally, I interpreted different categories emerging from the coding process by relying on grounded theory. More specifically, I engaged in focused coding by confronting all together categories, data, and theories (Charmaz, 2006) to refine these multiple categories in bigger themes. Ellingson (2009) describes this coding process as follows:

The steps of grounded theory research includes coding data, developing inductive categories, revising the categories, writing memos to explore preliminary ideas, continually comparing parts of the data to other parts and to literature, collecting data, fitting it into categories, noting where new data does not fit and revising categories (theoretical sampling) and continually refining the typology using constant comparative analysis. (p. 53)
For example, I put all the three categories “African identity”, “American identity”, and “hybrid identity” in the theme of “Gendered identities”. This process provided me refined and specific themes constituting tracks that I follow in to represent data.

Results of this study were primarily represented through narratives. More precisely, results took the form of ethnographic narratives to illustrate the meaningful interactions embedded in their personal experiences. There is no universal transcription, a rough transcription can be retranscribed depending on the issues that the researcher aims to represent (Peterson & Langellier, 1997). I transformed complex verbal exchange of information into an object that would serve as a representation of the reality I aimed to depict through participants’ voices and stories (Riessman, 2008). Thus, I decided what was to be included or excluded in the representation based on the topic studied. In so doing, I represented these stories in a more subjective way in forms of impressionist tales where by I privileged the use of words, metaphors, phrasings, imagery, and most critically, the expansive recall of fieldwork put together and told in the first person (Van Maanen., 1988, p. 102).

Integrated to these stories are also excerpts from rough transcriptions to illustrate participants’ opinions and experiences. Riessman (2008) states that “the same stretch of talk can be transcribed very differently, depending on the investigator’s theoretical perspective, methodological orientation, and substantive interest” (p. 28). In contrast to stories, those excerpts take the form of realist tales in terms of representing events objectively as they appeared in the field (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Van Maanen, 1988).

In the next chapter I present the findings of this study. I present stories of participants by supporting them with excerpts from their interviews as well as notes from my fieldwork. I also integrated stories of my personal adjustment and identity negotiation experience. Issues of gendering beauty performance and identity negotiation surfaced in the stories of the participants as specific moments related to their personal experiences in adjusting to American culture. The analysis of data revealed four gendered issues at the heart of these moments of experience: gendered sexed/body, gendered traditions, gendered cultures, and gendered institutional roles.

The first section “Performing Gendered Sexed/Body” describes participants’ conceptions of beauty performance and media effects on this performance. In the second
section “Performing Gendered traditions”, I present stories portraying the performance of cultural and religious beliefs (such as stereotypes and stigmatization) related to the female body in Congolese culture. The third section “Performing Gendered Cultures” depicts the various types of identity performed by Congolese women through their beauty experiences in the U.S. Finally, in the last section “Performing Gendered Institutional Roles”, I describe the performance of beauty within organizations as well as the challenges that participants faced in these settings. Overall these four categories represent the results in terms of facts of participants’ identity as they position themselves between Congolese and U.S. gendered expectations of beauty.
CHAPTER 3

FROM HOME TO UNCLE SAM’S COUNTRY: PERFORMING GENDERED EXPECTATIONS OF BEAUTY

There are a variety of intersections between beauty, media exposure, and identity negotiation. Female Congolese immigrants experience these intersections through performances of gendered expectations of beauty as they are adjusting to the U.S. environment, which they commonly refer to as “Uncle Sam’s Country.” In this chapter, I explore these performances through the voices and stories of these women. More specifically, this chapter explores communicative process of Congolese women negotiating their identities through gendered norms of beauty. In doing so, this chapter strives to answer to the following questions: What do Congolese women describe as gendered norms of beauty in the U.S. and in the Congo? How do Congolese women perform American and Congolese gendered norms of beauty? How are their identities shaped by this performance? What is problematic about these performances? To describe identity issues confronting Congolese women through beauty performance, I provide first an overview of gendered expectations for women in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). This synopsis is useful in understanding what rules and norms women are socially expected to perform in Congolese culture. Then, I will present the results of this research through a combination of interviews data, participant observations experiences, and my own reflections.

DISCOVERING WOMEN’S LIVES IN THE HEART OF AFRICA

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the promotion of women’s human rights and gender equality is often not seen as a priority (Wango, 2010). Women face various challenges in daily life in different sectors that impede their emancipation. More specifically, the living conditions of Congolese women are characterized by various forms of oppressions that are preponderant in three sectors: family, education, and workplace. These oppressions
are embedded in the political system, society expectations, customs and traditions, and warfare (Culture of the Democratic Republic of Congo, n.d.; Wango, 2010). Any Congolese woman faces these realities at same extent. These realities shape Congolese women’s self-perception depending on their personal life experience. The following narrative aims to provide an overview of gendered expectations for women in DRC. I present these expectations in nine claims coming from various sources (Culture of the Democratic Republic of Congo, n.d.; Duke, 2003; Dunn, 2000; Fu-Kiau, 1986; Les & Muganda, 2008; Shapiro & Tabamashe, 2003; Wango, 2010). Thus, these claims will be tied to the main findings of this study.

Marriage is the Best Life Choice for a Woman

The family lifestyle of a Congolese woman is connected to her marital status. Most Congolese women feel daily pressure of marriage. In fact, like in most sub-Saharan African countries, marriage appears universal and occurs at relatively young ages since the normal age range for getting married varies from 19 to 29 (Shapiro & Tabamashe, 2003). By engaging in marriage life, the woman is expected to accomplish all her domestic tasks. In DRC, sex-roles stereotypes have strongly influenced the division of labor since men are often related to public sphere activities while women are expected to accomplish tasks in the private sphere. In fact, most political, religious, and economic institutions have male leadership (Culture of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, n.d.). When men occupy a primary place at the workplace in offices; women are relegated at a secondary place with housework and childcare.

Home is the First Office for a Woman

In Congolese culture, the man has control over the family. Men are the head of the household and make financial decisions on behalf of the entire family (Culture of the Democratic Republic of Congo, n.d.). Because of this privileged position, a man is supposed to be treated as king even for the smallest thing. The responsibility of the households falls more squarely on the shoulders of woman since they are often considered as the family’s guardian (Culture of the Democratic Republic of Congo, n.d.). For instance, the wife always wakes up first early in the morning to make the breakfast for all the family, prepares
everything for her husband before he goes to work. She stays home all the days doing all the household chores such as cooking, cleaning, washing dishes... And in the evening, she makes the dinner for all the family. When the husband comes back from work, his wife is supposed to help him remove his clothes (suit, shoes, etc.) and give him food. It is inadmissible and also degrading for a man to do household chores such as cooking or washing dishes.

**A Woman Should not Expose Her Body for the Honor of Her Husband**

By engaging in a marriage, Congolese women are also socially and culturally expected to commit themselves to the customs and traditions required by their environment. For instance, since marriage and childbearing are both considered as key milestones in the transition to adulthood (Shapiro & Tamabashe, 2003), a married woman is supposed to reflect this change in her physical appearance. She should keep her body covered. In fact, Congolese women dress in clean crisp clothes and colorful outfits, but they should wear only long skirts, never pants (Culture of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, n.d.). A Congolese woman should always cover her legs and chest. Similarly, she should not put on clothes shaping her body. Instead, she is expected to wear traditional African clothes (called ‘maputa’) to appeal to the beauty conception of “African woman.” Indeed, she is not supposed to use heavy make-up or put on too much jewelry. Nor is she supposed to have tattoos and piercing on her body. All these requirements are completed in honor of her husband as well as African culture.

**A Woman’s Body is also Her Husband’s Property**

According to black African culture, the husband has the power over his wife’s body. More specifically, in Congolese communities anyone older than you, including your husband has authority over you, and you would never of disregarding what they say (Wango, 2010). For instance, a husband can forbid his wife to wear such type of cloth while appearing in public in order to avoid being criticized. He can beat his wife or force her to have sex without her consent and all of this is often considered understandable in the name of love. Most women have accepted these practices as the status quo and even if they have been sexually attacked they will tell you “this is just Congolese life” (Wango, 2010). While all these
practices are denounced as oppressive forms of domestic violence by numerous associations, they remain customs and traditions that are supposed to be transmitted from mother to daughter within the family. It is the family’s responsibility to ensure that their daughters also reflect the same cultural and social expectations in their daily life.

A Woman Should be Submissive to Her Husband

To resist to marriage constraints, some women dedicated themselves to a professional life. Those Congolese women strive to convince people that they are more than simple mothers. They believe that multitasking lets them improve themselves. Because they are often dependent on their husbands and other males for their livelihoods, they found some independence through gardening, preparing meals, and generating small crafts (Culture of the Democratic Republic of Congo, n.d.). According to them, the image of successful life is a combination of different factors among which are marriage and work. Generally, those women not only focus on their maternal tasks. Instead, they are determined to play the role of ‘worker’ in a company or run a small business besides the role of ‘mother’ they play in their house.

Even by doing so, those women still face challenges of customs and traditions. For instance, in some Congolese tribes, a woman can’t work unless she gets her husband’s authorization. In Congolese culture men have been treated with respect and have been given position of authority more often than women (Culture of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, n.d.). The husband often refuses because he is convinced that by working his wife is being exposed. This is especially the case for jobs that require physical attractiveness such as receptionist, secretary, journalist, etc. because women who engage to these types of work are often regarded as courtesans (Culture of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, n.d.). To escape to this marital pressure, other women prefer not to get married at all.

True Womanhood Equals Marriage and Fertility

Some Congolese women believe that professional success precedes conjugal success. They believe that they are independent from the society’s expectations and they should choose by themselves what is good for them. They feel responsible for their lives. For instance, those women care more about their professional career to the detriment of their
conjugal life. In other words, they prefer to sacrifice their wedded life to the profit of their professional success. They prefer to stay single and focused on their work instead of getting married and giving birth. This category encompasses women with a higher level of education and this educational attainment also justifies the lower level of fertility characterizing them (Shapiro & Tambashe, 2003). Those women believe that getting married will limit their ambition because they’ll have to obey to their husbands, who may be, will not allow them to work. However, the social pressure place upon women to marry makes single women to be considered as prostitute because of their professional status (Culture of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, n.d.). Thus, these professional women can escape from the cultural constraints of a husband, but they still face some challenges embedded somehow in African culture.

**A Woman Should Maintain Her African Identity Everywhere**

Congolese women are subject to various dressing style policies. Those policies aim to protect African culture by applying the campaign of authenticity launched since 1970s in which African names, customs, and styles of dress were given primacy over the Europeans (Duke, 2003; Dunn, 2000). For instance, women who have the opportunity to work at the public sphere, and more specifically at governmental positions such as parliament or presidency, are not allowed to come at work in pants, shorts skirts, trousers, or other sexy clothes (such as strapless top). Instead, they should only wear ‘maputa’, the traditional African loincloths; otherwise they cannot have access to work. This requirement is part of many enterprises internal policies and procedures.

In the same way, most schools have set up a number of policies regardless of female students’ physical appearance. For instance, in some Christian colleges, there are people standing at the main entrance checking the appropriate dressing style that glorifies God before allowing women to get in. Girls are not allowed to come to school with jewelry and make-up. This principle was borrowed from Congolese churches that require also decent dressing style for women. Similarly, some universities have hired police officers to check female students’ dressing style. According to those universities, those policies are purposively fixed in order to protect female students subject to sexual harassment since they
are the one who stimulate their professors’ sexual appetite by dressing sexy clothes that show every single shape of their bodies.

**School is Better for Men than Women**

In the DRC, women do not have equal access to education. In fact, “returns to education are greater for males than females, inducing parents to provide more schooling for their sons than their daughters” (Shapiro & Tambashe, 2003, p. 172). In the Congolese educational system, men are privileged to the detriment of the woman because they are supposed to work in order to financially support the family. Some families refuse to pay school fees for girls. Parents are inclined to invest more heavily in sons than in daughters because they culturally expect greater future flows of remittances from their male offspring (Fu-Kiau, 1986; Shapiro & Tambashe, 2003). To improve the educational conditions of Congolese women, Unicef launched in 2005 a campaign on “Girls to school”. However, women are still victims of discrimination on the educational setting. For instance, a few of those who have the opportunity to study are considered to be in illegal competition with men since education is seen as a male privilege. Thus, intellectual women are often marginalized and judged negatively by people who claim that by studying they fail to accomplish their maternal task.

**Women are Often the Main Victims of War**

The war that has been devastating DRC over the past ten years, and more specifically the east part of the country (Kivu), has strongly impacted the living conditions of Congolese women. The war has made the life of women more precarious. In fact, women and children are reported to be the first victims of this tragedy (Les & Muganda, 2008, Wango, 2010). Armed groups attack women and rape them. Some women are kept as slaves for soldiers. Thus, women’s bodies are being used as weapons. To illustrate this calamity, I selected “Baptized”, a monologue added by Eve Ensler in 2009’s Vagina Monologues play to highlight sexual violence in the DRC.

Eve wrote this piece after interviewing eight year old, Noella at Panzi Hospital (a hospital located in a camp refugee in Kivu, the eastern part of DRC). After the interview, Eve tried to hug Noella and she squirmed away. Eve realized then that Noella probably hadn't
been hugged since she was raped by a group of Militia every day for two weeks straight. The rapes had destroyed her insides and given her fistula so she had no ability to hold her pee. Eve hugged her anyway and held her on her lap and after that, there was no turning back.

“Baptized”

Look out your window
The dead live everywhere.
Think of your luxuries as corpses.
Count the bodies:
30 hacked children for a new play station,
20 tortured women so you can text photos from the party,
50 amputated men, waving their missing hands, as sweet Andrew mindlessly bounces his rubber ball.
I held an eight year old girl in my lap,
Who had been raped by so many men
She had an extra hole inside her.
When she accidentally peed on me,
I was baptized.
It isn’t over there,
The Congo.
It’s inside everything you touch and do,
Or do not do.

As demonstrated in the opening narrative above, Congolese women face numerous challenges where their body remains the focal point of various cultural, religious and social conceptions. All those conceptions constitute a huge part of their cultural leg and background that cannot be dissociated from their migratory experience in the U.S. By moving in the U.S., Congolese women strive to escape from all these contingencies and hope for a better future. In fact, while Congo appears as a milieu where those women do not have a space to express themselves, the U.S. provides them various opportunities where they can accomplish themselves. Among those opportunities are: access to education, access to their rights, access to workplace, freedom of speech, etc. Inevitably such change of lifestyle can only impact their identities as women in various ways.
In the following section, I will unfold the intricacies of gendered expectations of beauty from Congolese culture and American culture as they are experienced by participants in Uncle Sam’s Country. I will use interviews, participant observation, stories as well as reflexivity to explore the communicative process of this beauty performance. The findings of this study reveal that Congolese women perform identity through four gendered practices: gendered sexed/body, gendered traditions, gendered cultures, and gendered institutional roles.

The first section “Performing Gendered Sexed/Body” is intended to describe how participants use their female body to communicate various conceptions of beauty related to their femininity as well as the effects of media on their beauty performance. The second section “Performing Gendered traditions” demonstrates how participants’ beauty performance is strongly shaped by their African cultural leg in terms of beliefs, stereotypes and stigmas related to the female body in Congolese culture. The third section “Performing Gendered Cultures” depicts different facets of identity performed by Congolese women in assimilating both African and American gendered norms of beauty. Finally, the last section “Performing Gendered Institutional Roles” is designed to unfold the performance of gendered norms of beauty within organizations and the challenges that Congolese women face through this performance.

While I present these practices in a specific order, one does not necessarily occur for the first one to be communicated. Instead, the four practices are all interrelated and operate in synergy as participants negotiate their identity by positioning themselves between Congolese gendered expectations of beauty and American ones.

**Performing Gendered/Sexed Body**

Data collected in this study revealed that beauty is an important component of Congolese women’s identity negotiation process in adjusting to the American environment. The following section describes the eight participants’ conceptions of beauty performance and different media effects related to this performance. More specifically this beauty performance is expressed through the way in which participants use their bodies, feel and act in their bodies in order to communicate facets of their femininity rooted in their female
identity. The concept of gendered/sexed body is used to refer to the intricacies of body performance, feminine identity, and female status.

Three stories are provided to illustrate the main findings. I begin with “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder” extracted from fieldwork observation in Moseka’s house, to explain how different conceptions of beauty shape the performance of femininity. Then, I move to “Who am I”, an autoethnographic narrative piece to demonstrate how these conceptions of beauty are culturally based. And finally, in the last one “Like a Hollywood star” based on Maya’s interview, I illustrate the effects of media on participants’ beauty conceptions.

**“Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder”: Performing Femininity**

Beauty is generally evaluated from an outside perspective on the basis of different criteria. However, at the very fundamental level of their beauty conception, participants presented beauty more as an inner component of their self. For instance, Aida manifested more interest for the qualities that she carries inside than outside:

> To me beauty is not physical. It is more immaterial. I mean beauty is all about what a woman has inside. A beautiful woman is worthy and warmhearted. Beauty is more interior than exterior. Beauty is not about external or physical appearance.

Similarly, Fatima presented beauty as a state of mind:

> To me, being beautiful depends on self-perception. In other words, beauty is more a state of mind than a matter of physical appearance. If you feel comfortable in your body and you perceive yourself as beautiful, then you are beautiful no matter what.

The statements above demonstrate that beauty is not universal. In other words, each woman has her own standards of beauty and can feel beautiful and attractive based on her personal life experience. The following story, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder”, portrays how Moseka’s beauty experience is connected to her married life. I found out during my observation fieldwork that maternity was the turning point of her beauty conception. This woman is dealing with controversial feelings due to the biological changes that have affected her body since she has given birth.

Moseka has been in relationship with Kasongo for about 20 years, but they have only been officially married for 6 years. She moved to the USA especially to join him for this big event that strongly impacted her life. During these 6 years of marriage she gave birth to two
beautiful children: a five year old daughter and a three year old boy. As a mother in her early forties, Moseka is having difficulty dealing with the physical changes that her body has experienced since she gave birth. She also thinks that the older she is getting, the fatter she is becoming. Unlike the Congolese cultural belief ‘a woman’s body is also her husband’s property’, Moseka believes that she is the one who has the right to decide on her physical appearance. To me is was quite amazing to find out that a Congolese woman could challenge the cultural expectations of her African tradition, but I understood also that the U.S. was for Moseka this land of opportunity where she was given the opportunity to do so. I discovered the difficulties she was facing with her physical appearance during a babysitting experience.

It was a Saturday night and the couple asked me to take care of their two kids because they had to attend an important church event that evening. After putting the kids in their bed, Moseka asked me to help her get ready for the event. Having no aesthetic skills, I just proposed to help her brush her hair and tie it in a ponytail. Then I sat on the bed watching her.

I was watching her getting dressed in her bedroom. She took a long time to decide what to put on. She was standing in front of the closet checking one cloth after another when I asked her:

“What are you looking for exactly? Do you need any support?” I said hoping that I could be useful. “You have been standing there for a long a time; you’re going to be late. I bet your husband is already on his way home. He is going to make fun of you again with his joke ‘women are always late because Eve was created after Adam’. I quipped.

“You are so funny, Gloria.” She replied, joining me in laughs. “But, I take all my time because I am looking for the appropriate clothes for the shape of my body.”

“Come on. You always look gorgeous in any type of clothes: pants, dress, skirts, etc.” I said complimenting her innocently.

I don’t think she received my comments as a compliment. Instead, she started complaining about her body shape.

“I look too fat. I wish I could lose weight. I am really disappointed.” She said with nervousness.
I was really surprised. Honestly, I did not know what to say. I was not expecting this conversation. The first words that came out my mouth spontaneously were “Why do you want to lose weight?”

“I want to look more attractive, to feel more beautiful. To put on my old clothes again. I want my old body back.”

So she had an old physical appearance that appealed more to her beauty conception that has changed over time. I was now curious to know what caused this physical change. Moseka was not a stranger to me. I was pretty close to her and her family. She trusted in me, otherwise she would not allow me to take care of her kids. Based on this trust, I decided to gain insights of this change.

“What happened? How did you gain weight?” I asked her promptly.

I knew that this could be a sensitive topic for many women, especially married one, since they often feel uncomfortable talking about their physical appearance. But I was hoping that she would open up to me.

“Everything started when I gave birth.” She said. “It is so weird how women’s body can be subject to change over age and especially after maternity.”

I could notice the nostalgia on her face when she was describing herself before giving birth.

“Before giving birth, I used to be healthy but not that fat, I was beautiful and more attractive I loved myself so much”. She stopped and looked at her body suddenly and then continued.

“Now I keep gaining weight more and more…I am so disappointed. I look too fat and when I look at the mirror I don’t like that woman I see: big belly, flat breast. I did all my best to lose weight, but nothing work. As a Christian, I was even expecting to, to loose weight by fasting, but it does not work. I don’t like the way I look now. I don’t feel beautiful anymore”.

Her voice sounded sad like a woman mourning something very precious she had lost, but could not get back despite all the efforts she has been making. I wondered if her husband shared her opinion. I was curious to know if the way she perceived herself was different from how her husband perceived her.

“But your husband still loves you the way you are, that is the most important thing.” I said trying not to dramatize.
“Of course, I still get compliments from my husband. He kept telling me honey you look gorgeous, you look beautiful, etc. To be honest, I don’t really trust him because I believe that he just does so to calm me down”. She said longing for her lost beauty.

Suddenly, her phone started ringing. It was her husband. He was waiting for her in the car. So she just grabbed a long straight non fancy dress, the type of clothes that will obviously not show the shape of your body. She sneaked in the bathroom to put it on very quickly and then came back in the bedroom to pick her bag before leaving.

“You look gorgeous. Enjoy your night.” I told her.

I understood what she personally faced as a woman with her body change. As a woman, I could emotionally connect myself to her to a certain degree. Unfortunately, it could probably not be the same level of connection because I haven’t given birth yet. Nevertheless, I remain struck by the fact that beauty remains a matter of self-perception. For a woman like Moseka, it is obvious that beauty was not in the eyes of the beholder, rather that the feeling of being beautiful was solely in the mind of the beheld. The way she perceives herself matters more to her than the way her husband perceives her. Unlike the expectations of her husband, she believes that her physical attractiveness depends on her self-perception.

Although the story above shows that beauty remains in the eye of the beholder, participants also acknowledged that beauty can socially be evaluated depending on cultural conceptions.

“Who Am I?”: Performing Cultural Beauty

Based on their bicultural living experiences in the Congo and the US, participants presented two distinct beauty standards specific to each culture. On one hand, the American beauty conception was depicted as artificial and predominantly white European; on the other hand, the African beauty standard was depicted as more natural. Fatouma compared both conceptions as follows:

Being a beautiful woman according to American culture is being thin and slim, tall, flat belly. American beauty standards praise more the artificial than the natural. You’ll see woman with fake boobs because here men like boobs, fake nails, fake eyelashes, etc. In contrast black African beauty is more natural. African culture praises curves and butt.
I personally experienced these gendered beauty conceptions in my cultural journey. The following piece, “Who am I?” is a personal story that portrays my identity struggle’s experience in negotiating African and American beauty standards. While American people find me more beautiful slim, my African fellows believe that I should be healthier to look more attractive. In order words, for Congolese people I should gain weight to conform to the black African beauty conception and thus maintain my African identity everywhere.

Being slim in my country made me unattractive for African men. They often told me “your shape does not belong to African culture, you should move to western countries where all the women are so thin and everybody wants to look like a top model”. In their understanding, I should try to take some drugs to make me fat like other women were doing in order to look more attractive.

Although I was feeling comfortable in my own body back home, I couldn’t avoid people’s judgments, which strongly influenced my appearance in public. I didn’t want to adjust to the African version of plastic surgery by taking traditional pills to make me fat, but I couldn’t also erase in my mind the fear of being judged negatively about my physical appearance by other people because I failed to meet their perception norms of beauty. I came to be convinced that my physical appearance was an obstacle in many ways such as getting married (most of my ex-boyfriends complained about my slimness), and being considered more responsible as Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA). In fact, I remember that during my GTA experience in DRC, male students were gossiping about dating me since my physical appearance made me look too young. I was judged as a “non attractive and unfeminine intellectual woman” in the academic sphere. All these judgments based on stereotyped perceptions created a conflict of identity in me because I was more assimilated into the predominant western’s standards of beauty. Thus, I always wondered “Who am I?”

A white woman in an African land.

Moving to the United States in January 2008 was apparently a great opportunity for me to overcome this identity crisis since American norms of beauty are considered also Western. I thought that I will finally feel comfortable in my body individually and socially. In fact, American society’s norms helped me to overcome my identity crisis in some way since larger-sized women are not a reference of typical beauty. Nobody complains about my physical appearance in America. Nobody reminds me that I look unattractive because I am
slim. All my American friends compliment me about shape and tell me: “What is your secret? How do you do to maintain you shape?” I often reply with a shy smile: “Nothing special. I am not on diet. I even don’t exercise. Believe me.” They always look impressed. However, whenever I meet African men (either from my home country or other African countries), their best advice is “you should gain weight, do not worry about looking slim as all those American girls, you’re an African woman and you have to be healthy”. I had not expected to face the same discourse in the United States. Thus, I still wonder “Who am I?” A black woman in a Western land.

Therefore, I understood that moving to the United States was more an escape from my identity crisis than its end. In sum, I can never escape geographically from my physical identity crisis; instead, I should learn to manage it by taking in account all its components: my origin (Africa), my race (black), and my biological sex (female).

For most participants, gendered beauty standards are culturally and socially performed to enhance their femininity. While these beauty standards appear components of participants’ attractiveness, they are differently performed according to each participant’s tastes. For instance, a group of women associate femininity with skin care and hairstyle. Aida expressed her opinions as follows:

To me hair is the most important feature of femininity. I believe that a beautiful hairstyle is worthier than 10,000 dresses. This hairstyle should be associated with a beautiful radiant skin to make your face shin. This is why I care more about my hair and my skin because I believe that when they are both clean, I am attractive. They make me feel more feminine.

Like Maya, other women believe that their femininity remains in the maintenance of their beautiful African shape. She shared the following tale:

One day, I went shopping. I was in Wal-Mart when I met two white women. Then, one of them looked at me and said suddenly “OMG, what a wonderful body shape, what a beautiful butt…If my husband sees you, he is going to be like damn” I found out later on in our conversation that she was married to an African man. Thus, I received her compliment as a praise of my African body shape.

Other women claimed to improve their feminine appearance by embracing various dressing styles. In the following excerpt, Maimouna describes her tastes for clothes:

There is neither a masculine, nor a feminine dressing style for me. I feel comfortable wearing any type of clothes. I wear both men and women clothes. Also, there is no African or American dressing style for me. I don’t have any
taboos or cultural beliefs about my dressing style. I just want to look beautiful and feminine. It doesn’t matter to me: American pants or trousers, African loincloths, etc.

Participants’ cultural journey is marked by a constant negotiation of beauty standards of African and American cultures. This journey experiences revealed that this negotiation process is strongly influenced by media.

“Like a Hollywood Star”: Performing a Mediated Self

The results of this study revealed that participants were exposed to mediated images of beauty that strongly shape their self-perception. In fact, media shape participants’ beauty conception in various ways depending on their tastes and personal experiences. For instance, stories and voices of participants revealed that they rely on American media to get some beauty tips in order to enhance their physical appearance. Aida described her media exposure experience as follows:

I really feel influenced by mediated images on beauty and more specifically those related to hairstyle and body care. I really like African American hairstyle. African American women take care of their hair in so various ways. I don’t like keeping my natural African hair. Thus, I get different hairstyle from media shows and magazines.

In the same way, Maya said that she improves her physical appearance by self-identifying to female stars depicted in magazines and TV shows:

I like watching desperate housewives. Gabrielle Solis is my favorite character. I like her dressing style. She is so sexy and hot. She always looks attractive. I like American next top model too. I am inspired by the way those girls and actresses take care of their physical appearance, their body, their hairstyle…

While all participants acknowledged being exposed to mediated images of beauty, they disagreed about conforming to those beauty standards for various reasons. On one hand, some participants said that it is important to self-objectify to mediated beauty standards for a better social integration. For example, Maimouna claimed that media has strongly impacted her cultural adjustment process:

I feel like addicted TV, and especially advertisement. Those people always show something new to enhance your beauty and look attractive such as losing weight, being slim, using make up. And, since I live in such environment I cannot escape from this pressure. To be honest, I think that these images influence me so much. This is why I started embracing some of the American beauty standards: dressing
style, hairstyle, and body care. I feel as if I had to conform to those standards to fit in the box.

In the same way, Fatima claimed that it is almost impossible to escape from media since they are part of her daily living:

Mediated images of beauty are everywhere. They push us, especially women, to self-objectify with fashion and dressing style in order to look beautiful and attractive. It looks like you have to conform to those images they bring to you. And it is very hard to escape from such pressure. I feel so overwhelmed by those images and it is difficult to resist to the temptation. Even if you don’t want to, you are pushed to espouse this beauty culture.

On the other hand, other participants refuse to self-objectify to mediated beauty standards because they do not meet their expectations. For instance, a group of participants complained about the fact that American media promote more the European standard of beauty and do not take in account their cultural specificities. Amina shared the following tale:

When I arrived in this country I had some serious skin problems. I had acne and I was looking for a good product to stop it. I started using different products I saw on TV, but none of them work for me. I thought that what they suggested for white women will work for me too. However, I forgot that I was black. I forgot that skin color matters. And I learned this from a dermatologist. Thus, I was able to solve my skin problem later on by using specific products only designed for black women. Thus, mediated images of beauty do not always present you what you really need.

Similarly, Fatouma claimed that beauty standards depicted in media were artificial and too expensive to afford:

I don’t think that what we see on TV shows and magazines, I mean what we watch in the media should be considered as the standard of beauty. Most of those images praise an artificial beauty. Beauty varies according to race and culture. This is why I believe that it not compulsory for me to conform to those beauty standards. I am free to do so or not. Besides, everything is not necessary. For instance, I watch the show “before and after make over” where they give women some tips about their beauty. However, I don’t think I will buy all those dresses one day because they are too expensive.

Although participants expressed divergent opinions about self-objectifying to mediated beauty standards, their experiences revealed that they could not always escape from the same pressure socially. In fact, participants’ stories showed a strong connection between media exposure and social pressure. In other words, participants acknowledged that the same pressure they feel from the media about their physical appearance is also omnipresent to their social environment since most people they interact with carry the same cultural values. ‘Like
a Hollywood star’, is a story describing how Maya’s beauty conception has been influenced by media.

Maya has been married to an African-American man for about 8 years. She has two kids: an eight year old daughter and a six year old boy. She preferred that our interview takes place at my home so she will not be disturbed by her daily activities. We were sitting in the living room when she started talking about her life:

“Playing the housewife role, mother role and the student role is not easy. I am busy all the week from Monday to Friday with my household chores, taking care of my kids and my darling. Not to mention my school work. I don’t have to take care of myself.” She told me.

“I don’t really know how you combine these both activities. It is already hard for me to be a student. I think that I would die if I had to take care of a family besides this.” I replied laughing.

“You are so funny, Gloria.” Maya replied to my comments joining me in laughs.

“But you look so gorgeous today.” I complimented her.

It was true that she was looking gorgeous. Her strapless red dress was underlying the beautiful darkness of her skin color. She had tied her hair in a ponytail that was underlying the shape of her face. No heavy make-up: light mascara and light lipstick.

“Thank you. You’re so sweet. Today is Saturday. I often try to catch up on with myself during the weekend.” She replied.

“Oh. That is a smart strategy. And how do you take care of your body? I asked her trying to get some insights about her beauty performance.

“Pretty much everything: pedicure, manicure, hairstyle, shaving, etc.” She said.

“So it sounds like a weekend routine for you.” I pursued the conversation. “But have you ever been in any circumstances where you failed to accomplish this weekend task?

“Yes of course. There is no problem when it is just between my husband and me. He knows that I am quite busy, so he can understand. Look for instance, my husband likes my vagina unshaved. He says that it is sexy. But, the problem is when you have to face people out there without shaving your legs, your underarms, or any bikini area.” Maya said with embarrassment.
I became more curious about this shaving experience since it appears to be a very controversial issue to her.

“And what problems does it cause to appear like that in public?” I asked her promptly.

“Criticism.” She said before starting a tale. “Look, one day I forgot to shave my bikini area and I had to go to the swimming pool with my kids. I hadn’t realized that my hair had grown so fast until I came out from the water and see hair laying on my wet body. Hair was even visible on my intimate parts.”

It seems that remembering this scene made her uncomfortable and embarrassed.

“And how did you feel?” I asked her.

“I was so ashamed. I felt as if everybody around was looking at me and telling me “what a dirty girl”. But, in reality nobody talked to me like that way.” She replied.

“And why did you feel so embarrassed if nobody noticed?” I asked again.

“It was just a psychological burden of social pressure. You know what came in my mind that time. The media scandal episode about Julia Roberts. There was this big picture of her in all the magazines and TV with growing hair in her underarms. She has been criticized so much: nasty, dirty, disgusting…Do you remember it? She asked me.

“Of course I do. It was such a polemical issue.” I replied trying to encourage her to pursue her tale.

“So you know what I am talking about. I don’t think Julia did it on purpose. But, see how people interpret it. So that day I just felt like everybody around was staring at me with this big picture reminding me that I failed to my duty.”

“So, you felt like a Hollywood star? I told her trying to picture this story as a movie scene in my mind. “And what did you do then? I asked her.

“I did not stay there longer. I just packed all my stuff, picked up my kids and went back home.” She said.

While Congolese women are already struggling to adjust their physical appearance to the American standard for a better social integration, they cannot at the same time escape from the influence of their original culture. The same conceptions their bodies were subject to back home (such as cover your body for the glory of God and do not expose your body for the honor of your husband) operate like flashbacks in their memories and impact their
identity negotiation process in this cultural journey. Thus, they also strive to communicate these conceptions in the U.S. through their body performance.

**Performing Gendered Traditions**

Beauty standards performed by participants carry symbolic meaning that communicates a number of gendered traditions connected to their cultural background or religious beliefs. These beliefs appear gendered because they are based on various images and clichés of the female body as it is perceived in Congolese culture. In other words, those gendered beliefs take the form of cultural values and social stereotypes associated to the female body and embedded in African tradition and customs. Two stories portray these gendered traditions: “I cry for freedom” and “From inside out.” The first story based on my shopping experience with Fatima and Amina describes the cultural and religious beliefs related to participants’ beauty performance. Then the second story extracted from Fatouma’s interview demonstrates how these beliefs impact participants’ daily life.

“I Cry for Freedom”: Performing Cultural and Religious Beliefs

The results of this study showed that embracing different norms of beauty was for participants a way to display their cultural and religious beliefs, which appear to be strongly rooted to their personal experiences of adjustment to the American environment. More specifically, these cultural and religious beliefs were represented in participants’ descriptions of their dressing style and body adornment. The following story, “I cry for freedom” represents a shopping experience I had with two Congolese friends during my observation fieldwork. While Amina portrays the image of the traditional woman who strives to conform to the cultural rule ‘a woman should not expose her body for glory of God and the honor of her husband’, Fatima appears more as a modern woman challenging the cultural norm ‘a woman should maintain her African identity everywhere’.

It was one of those beautiful and sunny days in San Diego, Fatima, Amina, and I were getting ready for a shopping adventure. A common best friend of three of us was getting married soon, so we were looking for something appropriate for the wedding party. Our first stop was the Poway Plaza Mall. We started checking from shop to shop: Rave, Express,
Sears, Target, etc. As we were walking from shop to shop, I noticed two different tastes between my two friends. Fatima has a taste for fancy, sexy, and strapless dresses while Amina looks for the kind of clothes that would not expose her body shape. This difference of taste caught my attention. I wanted to know more about their different tastes. Thus, I instigated a banal conversation to gain insights on the situation.

“So, what are you planning to wear at the party?” I asked the girls.

“I want a gorgeous dress. A strapless, hot, and sexy dress. I am looking for something that can shape my body”, replied Fatima spontaneously.

I noticed that Amina was nodding her head while Fatima was describing her dress with excitement. Her reaction made me pay more attention.

“And what about you Amina?” I asked her.

“Girls, you know that I am a married woman and besides Christian. So I don’t think I can show my body even at a party. I just need a beautiful dress, not a showy one.” She replied.

While Amina was trying to look serious, Fatima could not stop laughing at her.

“Come on Amina, like you, I am a catholic Christian woman too. Being Christian does not mean that you cannot look attractive or sexy. We are young and beautiful. We should enjoy our youth. Besides, don’t forget it. This is not Africa where people negatively judge you for your dressing style or even dictate you what to wear. This is America, the country of freedom. Who cares?” Fatima explained on an hilarious tone of voice. Suddenly she stared at me and said: “What do you think about this, Glo?”

“I don’t know. I think that people are free to make their own choices.” I said with a shy smile. Honestly, I did not know what to say. I felt like caught in between their discussion. I preferred to remain neutral and listen quietly the remaining of their conversation.

“To be honest, I don’t really think God cares that much about our physical appearance. To me Christian identity is more about inside than outside. And even the bible says so. I see Christian people here going to church in what we would call “sexy clothes”: short skirt and dresses, pants, trousers. But, some of our churches back home will never let you in while wearing pants or trousers. This is unfair. The problem is that very often people mistakenly understand things. You may be Christian or no, it does not matter. It is more a
cultural issue. We all know that back home people always check your dressing style. And they do so not only for religious purpose. It is all about an African culture rooted in tradition and customs. This is why I cry for freedom.” Fatima said pursuing her argumentation.

“You are right, African culture is kind of conservative. A woman’s body is considered ‘sacred’. It is true that as an African culture it is not respectful for a woman to show her body. Such dressing style is often attributed to western culture. This is the way we were all raised up back home. Nevertheless, for me especially, it is not only a matter of African culture; it is more about my Christian identity. I am a Christian and as a Christian woman I am supposed to carry my identity every where. And I believe that it is not inappropriate for a woman to show her body.” Amina replied.

I have always been in close relationship with those two women, but I had never paid very much attention to the way in which their different cultural and spiritual backgrounds could affect their identities. Thus, for one second I decided to step back and look at them through my ethnographic lens. Every sign on their bodies that had never spoken to me suddenly started speaking. Similarly, any comment on beauty that randomly occurred in our trivial talks, now meant something different to me.

Slowly, I came to understand that I had in front of me two women sharing a common religious and cultural background, but communicating distinct beliefs through their body.

With her short trousers, her strapless top, her cute anklet, her two extra piercings on each ear, Fatima represents this very liberal Congolese woman, who had found in America, a way of escaping from the contingencies and constraints related to African culture. In contrast, Amina is this very conservative woman, who could just not dissociate her American life style with her African identity. With her African braids and her long dress, she portrays the image of Congolese women who always carry their cultural and religious beliefs in their physical appearance wherever they are.

The conclusion drawn from the story above about the dialectical image conservative vs liberal portrayed by Fatima and Amina, corroborates with different opinions provided by participants about their perceptions of body adornment features (such as jewelry, make-up, tattoos, and piercing) to enhance their beauty. On one hand, some participants were very reluctant to rely on different body adornment features to improve their beauty for various
reasons. For instance, Maimouna claimed tattoos and piercing to be against her religious beliefs:

I don’t think that tattoos and piercing can enhance my beauty. Maybe I could rely on them to enhance my beauty if I were not a Christian. I am a Christian and to me those things are demonic. They open up the door to hell. I just can’t use them. It does not matter. In America or Congo, I just can’t.

While Maimouna avoids tattoos and piercing because of her religious beliefs, Aida prefers not to be negatively perceived or stigmatized as a lesbian by Congolese people. She expressed her opinion as follows:

I do not consider tattoos and piercing as important patterns of a woman’s beauty. For someone like me, coming especially from an African conservative culture, tattoos and piercing have a negative impact on a woman’s identity. As a Congolese woman, I cannot have my body tattooed or pierced because people will judge me negatively. Even if here in America people do not care, I can still not do that because Congolese community will judge me so badly. For instance, a woman with heavy make-up and too much jewelry is considered like a loose woman. A woman wearing an anklet is stigmatized as a lesbian. And a woman with tattoos and piercing is considered as a “bitch”. You can’t avoid those stereotypes in Congolese culture.

On the other hand, other participants rejected those stereotyped and stigmatized beliefs. In the following excerpt, Fatima strives to defend her personal image:

I don’t think that I am bitch because I got my ears pierced. I don’t think that any woman with piercing and tattoos should be considered so. It is a matter of personal choice and conviction. I love piercing, but I can only have them on ears no where else. I see women here with piercing on nose, navel, tongue even clitoris…OMG (laughing). But, I cannot do that even on my nose. It is not that I care about what people are going to say about me or how they will judge me. No, none of that. It is just because I am afraid. Those are sensitive and intimate body parts. Similarly, I won’t mind getting my body tattooed. Tattoos can be used for different purposes beyond beauty. For instance, I can have Jesus name or face tattooed on my body to communicate my Christian identity. What wrong with that?

All those beliefs on woman’s body vacillating between cultural legacy and religion also impact participants’ daily life.
“From Inside Out”: Performing Tradition in Daily Life

The stories and voices of participants revealed that cultural and religious beliefs they face obstructed their self-accomplishment. The following story, “From inside out” portrays Fatouma’s experience. The story depicts how Fatouma’s body became her husband’s property just after getting married and what gendered expectations she was supposed to perform as a married woman, more specifically the Congolese cultural norm ‘a woman should be submissive to her husband.’

I have known Fatouma so far for about two years. Our relationship has even switched from a simple friendship to one of family. However, we haven’t seen each other for a long time. I was busy with my school, while she was totally overwhelmed with her job. As she walked toward me in the restaurant where our interview was supposed to take place during her break time, I noticed how much weight she had lost. Hugging her, I innocently said:

“Wow…You lost weight a lot…Looking for some good shape”

She suddenly looked at me with a sad face.

“I know Gloria…Everybody has been telling the same thing since a while. I am trying to gain my weight back slowly…I’ll be fine.” She replied.

These simple words that I considered as a compliment ended up being the heart of our conversation. After taking a seat that was just facing mine, she pursued her tale:

“You know it is not easy, Glo. Look, I remembered recently when I came back from for my divorce process, a friend came to visit me and told me that he was so surprised how skinny I looked. He compared me to those white top model women people see on TV and magazines. After that he said something like “You see how important is for a woman to be close to her husband…Singleness is not easy…See how you lost weight”.

I could notice through the tone of her voice that she seemed to be quite upset about all those comments on her body shape. This reaction awoke my curiosity as I wanted to know more about her disappointment. My curiosity became satisfied slowly as we pursued our conversation.

“Then, you should be happy to look like a top model…Do you know how many people are trying to do so, but no results.” I told her.
“That is not the point Glo. You don’t get it. I didn’t like what he said because he was trying to remind me that marriage is the best way to keep my body in good shape.” She replied.

I think that Fatouma was right. In fact, a common belief in black African culture is that marriage should always lead to happiness. And one of the signs through which people can evaluate this happiness from both partners, and especially women, is by how much weight they have put on. All the comments above made about her body could easily be connected to her sad story of marriage. As a close friend, I pretty much know her divorce story better than anyone else. Everything we talked about during the interview was strongly connected to her past life story. Without a look back to this story, I couldn’t understand her experience. I was quietly listening to her sharing this experience again.

“When I came to the USA nine years ago to join my ex-husband, I was only 25 years old. I looked slim and skinny. You remembered looking at some of my pictures from back home. I really looked like a top model.” She said.

Yes I absolutely remembered how many times during our friendly conversations she shared with me her enthusiasm for her experiences in getting involved in a modeling career while showing me her pictures.

“I got different opportunities for a top model career. One day, I was walking in the street and a woman stopped her car. She got out and started talking to me about her business fashion. She wanted me to become her model. She gave me her business card and asked me to contact her as soon as I made a decision.” She said with proud. “But as you know, I couldn’t make it right.”

Yes, I knew that she lost this career opportunity because of her husband. Her ex-husband would never permit such a thing to happen. He believed that as a married woman, she couldn’t engage in such career even if she wanted it.

“I had never called the woman. I could not. When I got back home and told my husband the story he called me “skinny bitch”. According to him, in African culture, it is denigrating for a married woman to do this. Like many African men, my ex-husband believed that a married woman should never publicly expose her body since it belongs to her husband”. That day, I just realized that by getting married my body became his property.” She stopped. She looked revolted.
Honestly, I did not know what to say to show my sympathy to her. Nevertheless, I agreed with Fatouma on the fact that her ex-husband did not allow her to work because he believed that modeling was one of these works that expose a woman’s body.

“I had no longer control over my own body. He has to decide about everything concerning my body from my dressing style to my hairstyle. He even forced me to eat a lot, so I could put on more weight and be the “healthy Congolese woman” he wanted me to be. He was convinced that by pushing me to gain weight, everybody will praise him for taking care of her wife.”

Fatouma lived this painful marriage life for 7 years where she lost total control of herself. Even if people perceived her as this “healthy beautiful large-sized body Congolese woman” from the outside, she was unhappy and totally destroyed on the inside. I remembered again her nostalgic voice commenting on some of her pictures where she still looked fat:

“You know Glo, people often think that looking healthy in a marriage is being happy. This is not always the case. I can testify about this. When I was still married everybody was admiring me because I looked so healthy. Even when I sent pictures back home, people were so happy. However, nobody knew that my marriage was a disaster. No one could understand that I was being verbally, physically, and sexually abused by my husband. I lost my life as well as my dream of a top modeling career. Even today it seems still unbelievable to many. Although I look so skinny today and I might look unattractive to many, I feel much better inside. I am free and feel more peaceful inside.”

It is obvious that as a married woman coming from an African tradition, Fatouma could only conform to the cultural norm ‘a woman should be submissive to her husband’ to preserve her marital status. However, once she got divorced, she was able not only to take control of her own body, but also to decide what she thought was best for her life.

Caught between two world’s views (American and Congolese), Congolese women experience a dialectical tension: who am I by wearing maputa in the U.S.? To whom am I assimilated by doing so? In this perspective, the selection of appropriate and specific beauty standards by female Congolese immigrants is not inconsequential anymore; instead, each beauty standard they embrace socially and culturally communicates a particular type of
identity performed. Thus, these beauty standards appear as ways through which they strive to let their bodies speak culturally about their identities.

**Performing Gendered Cultures**

Congolese women displayed different facets of their female identity. They appeared in three major ways: African woman, American woman, and hybrid woman. These three types of identities operate in synergy through their experience of beauty performance. Thus, each identity type is connected to the performance of a specific culture. Indeed, these three identities are the result of acculturation as they are adjusting to the American environment. The following stories represent my attempts to explain how each of this identity is performed by participants. The first story “Mama Africa” based on a shopping experience with Amina portrays the performance of African identity. The second story “Pocahontas” inspired by Feza’s interview illustrates the American identity performance. Finally in the autoethnographic narrative piece “I am all in one”, I describe the hybrid identity as a combined version of African and American identities.

**“Mama Africa”: Performing African Identity**

African identity emerged as the first form of self communicated by participants. This form of identity is primarily rooted in participants’ Congolese origin. While this identity is not necessarily perceptible through participants’ physical appearance, it is expressed by the way in which they define themselves. Maya described the way she perceives herself as follows:

I don’t identify myself as an American woman. One might consider me as an African American because of my physical appearance. I am married to an African American and also I am an American citizen. However, I consider myself as an African woman, and more specifically a modern African woman. I am Congolese by birth and I like my culture. I am proud of carrying this African identity.

Like Maya, many participants perceive themselves as African. However, those participants claimed that their African identity is associated to their physical appearance since it communicates two distinct facets of this identity. On one side, some participants said that they wanted to communicate an image of traditional African woman. Aida expressed her opinion as follows:
My physical appearance makes me look as an African woman. I am Congolese by birth and even if I live in America, I consider myself as an African woman. More specifically, I would say that I am a traditional, Christian and conservative African woman. I grew up in Christian and conservative environment that had a huge impact on me. I do not want to loose all those values and beliefs because they are part of my African identity.

One the other side, participants described themselves as modern African woman. For instance, Fatima depicted herself as this African woman opened to modernity:

I consider myself as an African woman, and more specifically a modern African woman. I am Congolese by birth and I like my culture. Nevertheless, I am not a traditional African woman because I do not totally espouse all those traditional beliefs in my beauty conception. I don’t reject all of them either. I try to look for a kind of balance between authentic and modern.

Although participants define their African identity in distinct ways, dressing style remains the common and primary beauty standard through which they perform this identity. In fact, for participants African dressing style is the main symbol of their African identity. In such a culturally diverse milieu as the U.S., Congolese women are sometimes easily assimilated to African-American by their skin color. Stories of participants revealed that an African dressing style is a line of demarcation between African identity and African-American one. The following story, “Mama Africa”, describes Amina’s performative experience of African identity through dressing style. By adorning an African traditional dressing style, Amina strives to conform to the cultural norm ‘a woman should maintain her African identity everywhere.’

My phone was ringing. I looked at the clock on my table 6:00. It was too early, and I did not want to get out from my bed. I wanted to sleep more. Thus, I decided to ignore the phone, but it could not stop ringing. Who could call me so early on a Sunday? Could it be someone back home? I had no urgent plans for the day. After listening to message on the voicemail, I found that I had to accompany Amina, my Congolese friend, to the hairstylist.

It was a beautiful sunny day, as I was getting ready for the appointment; I decided to put on a strapless top with short trousers. I grabbed my ethnographic journal in my backpack hoping to get some interesting insights on the field. On my way to her house, I was thinking about what other Congolese people would tell me if they had to see me dressed up like that. However, Amina was cool, thus she did not show any surprise when I showed up to her house. In contrast, I was the one to be surprised by her dressing style. It was the first thing
that struck me when she opened the door. She was wearing one of those beautiful African
clothes: traditional Congolese loincloths with its top and a scarf on her head.

“Hi! You look so gorgeous. Wow! ‘Mama Africa’.” I told her with admiration.
“Thank you, American girl.” She replied with a big smile.
“American girl? Why are you calling me like that?” I asked her.
“Haaa…And why did you call me ‘Mama Africa’? She said, staring at me.
“Because of what you are wearing.” I told her.
“Same with you. If I look African with these clothes, you look American with yours
too. So let me celebrate my African culture.” She replied laughing.

We left then her house. On our way, we talked about different things: our family back
home, her job, my school work, etc. However, Amina’s utterances on “celebrating African
culture in the USA” were still echoing in my head like a musical chorus. I became really
curious to find out if this cultural celebration was also perceived by people around us.

We were standing and waiting for the bus, while two old women suddenly started
talking to us.

“These are very beautiful clothes.” One of them told Amina, “It is really nice. Where
is it from?” She pursued looking at her with admiration.
“Thank you. This is an African dressing style. These are traditional Congolese
clothes.” Amina replied, with a shy smile.
“Oh. And how do you call it?” She asked. Obviously, she seems to be really
interested and wanted to know more.
“We call it ‘Maputa’.” Amina replied again with a joyful voice referring by maputa to
the traditional Congolese term form loincloths.

“Ma-pu-ta.” The old woman was trying to repeat awkwardly emphasizing each
syllable like a kindergarten kid. “Oh so you are from Africa? And which part of Africa is it
again”. She pursued while Amina and I were listening to her repeating the word.
“I am from the Congo. My name is Amina and this is my friend, Gloria.” Amina said
while introducing me to the old woman.

“Oh you are both from Congo.” The old woman said looking at me strangely.
I do not know why, but for some reason I felt uncomfortable. Suddenly, I
remembered what Amina told me about my American dressing style. I felt as if the old
woman doubted about my African origin because of the American image communicated through my dressing style. Then, the bus arrived. I could notice how people were looking at us curiously in the bus, as we were walking in aisle to find seats in the back.

“Did you notice how people are looking at us? What is going on?” I asked Amina.

“I think they are curious about my dressing style. You never put maputa here Gloria. Just try one day and you’ll see how curious people are about it. They keep looking at you and asking questions, just like that old woman.” Amina answered me with an amusing voice.

“Just look around you, how many black people do you see dress up like me.”

She was right. No one in the bus looked like her. She was really unique. However, many women in the bus were black and just looked like me: American.

“So, this is how you celebrate your African identity.” I said trying to tease her.

“As you can see, your skin color cannot always speak about your origin, but, your dressing style can.” She said.

The story above demonstrates that African identity is essentially performed by a typical African dressing style. To the opposite side, it also shows that an American dressing style is associated to an American identity. Nevertheless, stories and voices of participants revealed the performance of American identity to be principally associated with other beauty standards.

“Pocahontas”: Performing American Identity

The second type of self communicated by Congolese women through beauty performance is an American identity. An American identity is primarily associated with the performance of three beauty standards assimilated to western culture such as skin bleaching, hairstyle, and shaving.

Participants claimed that skin bleaching was a beauty practice that denies African culture. For example, they all agreed on the fact that beauty remains in the natural color of your skin. For instance, Maya who keeps her natural dark skin color told me:

A beautiful woman is supposed to keep her original skin color. Keep it natural. She can be dark or light skin, but it does not really matter. However, I hate bleaching skin because I believe that women who do so are complex about their bodies and also they are fake. Not to mention that it can lead to negative effects such as skin cancer.
Like Maya, Fatima also rejects skin bleaching because she believes in the natural beauty of her original dark skin.

For me, a woman should not necessarily look light or dark. She just has to keep her natural skin color. A woman should not correct her skin color. I hate that. I say so because so many women have been bleaching their skin and I don’t think this is a good thing. I totally disagree with all those women who bleach their skin.

As mentioned in the examples above, participants reject the practice of skin bleaching. More specifically, they do so because they consider skin bleaching as an appraisal of western standard of beauty. Fatima pursued her argumentation as follows:

For me those women who bleach their skin have a complex about their skin, you know. They cannot accept themselves the way they are and they think that by changing their skin color they will look more beautiful and attractive. I will call it a complex of inferiority. I do believe that those women bleach their skin because they feel inferior to white people. And this is related to our culture. Even back home, people believe that light skin is better than dark skin. In USA or Africa, many people still believe that lighter skin women are more beautiful than darker skin one.

While participants rejected skin bleaching, they embraced the performance of western hairstyle. In fact, during my observation fieldwork, I noticed that most participants did not keep their natural dark and ‘kinky’ African hair. This hairstyle performance is illustrated in the excerpt below:

I noticed during the barbecue that none of the women has her natural African hair under this heavy sun. Most of them have their hair straighter. The woman who was making sandwiches had her hair permed or probably relaxed by chemical products. Similarly, the young lady who was cooking brochettes had her hair relaxed and dyed. The two women who were putting the drinks in the cooler were both wearing wigs. A couple of women had extensions styled in different ways: short or long, curly or straight. Other women had their hair braided with locks of different colors: black, brown, and even blond.

Participants recognized that these hairstyle practices appeal to the European beauty standard, but they did not see any inconvenience in performing them. For instance, Fatima explained her opinion as follows:

I am a very open-minded person you know. I can wear African American wigs or white European wigs. You know, I won’t feel uncomfortable wearing blond or red hair extension with my dark skin. I do not care what people think about me as long as I feel beautiful. I don’t mind.

In the same way, Aida confessed to imitate African-American women’s hairstyle. She shared the following tale:
One day, I was taking a walk in the mall during my one hour usual break. I was just window shopping when I crossed an African-American woman with this beautiful hairstyle. I was like hypnotized by the beauty of hairstyle. The front of her hair was braided and she had extensions in the back. I really admired her. I could not resist to the temptation. Thus, I approached her and complimented her about her hair. Of course, that compliment was a good way to ask her where she had her hair done. What I did. She was very nice. She gave me all the information, even the price. It was kind of expensive ($150). A week later, I went to the same place and had my hair done just like her. Beauty always has a price.

For some participants, the performance of American identity takes the form of a simultaneous assimilation of both skin bleaching and hairstyle. In other words, those participants performed these two beauty standards as two inextricable realities of their lives. The following story, ‘Pocahontas’, describes Feza’s experience of American identity performance through skin bleaching and hairstyle. While the image Pocahontas is culturally associated to the incarnation of an Indian princess, Feza assimilates it to the performance of a white beauty standard because of the way it is depicted in mass media. More specifically, Pocahontas has been reinvented as white through media as a symbol of modernism with her long straight hair, skinny body, lighter skin, and straight noise.

Feza is one of those dark skin Congolese women. Although her skin looks dark, no one by looking at her could imagine that she used to bleach it unless she says so. Many like me would probably be surprised by such revelation. She unexpectedly shared her experience to me during one of our interviews in a coffee shop. We were sitting in a small table in a Starbucks coffee while a lighter skin woman passed by. She was a beautiful African-American woman probably in her early twenties with long straight hair. She must probably be a mix of white and black.

“Did you see that girl?” Feza told me.

“Yes, I did. Why?” I asked her with surprise.

“I bet that you would agree with me that she is pretty. Isn’t she? Everybody is staring at her.” She said with a sarcastic tone of voice.

“Yes, you are right. She looks pretty. So what?” I replied. I was trying to be as neutral as possible.

“I used to be like her 10 years or so ago: light skin, long blond hair.” Feza said with regret.
“Oh! Really.” I said without hiding my surprise. “How come?”

“Yes. I was like her before when I used to deny my African identity. I did not like my dark African skin. When I first arrived in the U.S., I was not happy with my skin color because everybody I saw around me in and in the media was light. Thus, I started bleaching my skin to look more attractive.” She stopped her confession for one second and looked to her skin color arms. I could not understand what she was feeling exactly at that moment. Then she pursued.

“Oh my God. I also used extensions and wigs of different colors. Sometimes I had blond long hair like Foxy Brown or Beyonce. I called myself ‘Pocahontas’ because of my long hair. She started laughing. “I wanted to look like a white woman. To me, looking American meant whiteness.”

The picture of the woman that Feza just presented to me and the one of the women I had in front of me were totally opposed. She looked so different today, I was really curious to know what happened in this identity crisis experience.

“Then, what happened after that.” I asked her.

“After doing all those things, I felt quite satisfied with my self-perception. I thought that I was more beautiful with a lighter skin and blond hair, but I did not know that I was lying to myself until I met Dan.” She pronounced this name with a smile and voice that were echoing good memories.

“Dan is my ex boy-friend. He was an African-American. It is because of him that I rejected my whiteness conception of American identity. He used to call me ‘my African princess’. And he wanted to see the African identity in me. He wanted me all natural. At the beginning I could not believe him because his way of thinking was so opposite to society’s beauty criteria. I felt like I did not deserve him.”

So, Dan was the turning point of this identity process. At the heart of this identity crisis was hidden a simple love story that affected this woman’s life so much. Feza pursued her story with enthusiasm.

“Slowly, I stopped bleaching my skin. I cut all my hair and kept them natural for 3 to 4 years. I had no make up all those years. I was even bald for my graduation, can you believe it? She made a pause and started laughing. “Many people around me could not understand what happened to me. Even my mum thought that I turned lesbian. But, all those people did
not understand that I was trying to reconnect to my African roots. By looking natural, I wanted to go back to my origins. I took the risk to accept myself the way I was even if people would deny me. I wanted to be me.”

“And what were the results? Were you finally happy with your new physical appearance?” I asked her with curiosity.

“I was absolutely happy with the way I looked. It was the same for Dan. He told me that he liked my dark skin and my natural hairstyle. He is the only one who made me feel comfortable and pleased with myself. He just liked me and accepted me the way I was. Thus, I did not care too much about what other people might think about me.” She said with the same enthusiastic voice.

For one second, I decided to scrutinize the woman in front of me in order to see if she was really portraying this natural beauty. Yes, she looked pretty natural: she had dreadlocks, no make up, and no jewelry.

“Even if Dan and I are not together anymore, this relationship strongly impacted my life even today. He was my best love ever.” She said with a sad voice.

“Did you keep in touch?” I asked her.

“I wish. I had him back in my life, but it is too late. He is gone forever.” She pursued with the same sad voice, lost in her memories.

“If you could not keep him as a lover, you could try to keep him as a friend.” I suggested innocently.

“You don’t get it, Glo. Dan passed away. Two years ago.” She replied me with a cold voice.

I was shocked by this revelation. No word came out of my mouth except “I’m so sorry” to show my sympathy to this woman longing her best love.

“It is ok. Do not worry. I am fine. Dan is gone, but his spirit still lives in me. I am who I am today because of him. I try to stay natural in order to love myself the way I am and I try not to conform to all those beauty standards. I believe that being natural is what makes me so special. Thanks Dan.”

She closed this chapter of her life story like with a nice smile on her face like someone talking directly to Dan.
Finally, shaving is the last practice used by Congolese women to perform an American identity. All participants agreed that a hairy body was perceived as nasty in the U.S. while it was a sign of beauty in most African culture, included Congolese. Thus, they have to shave different parts of their body (such as legs, arms, underarms, face, and bikini area) to reflect this American identity. Maimouna explained her opinion in the following excerpt:

When I moved in this country I did not know that my hairy body would be a controversial issue of my identity. In Congo, people used to compliment me for my hairy legs, my hairy arms, my beard, and my sideburns. Hair was part of my beauty. But here, keeping my body hairy means losing my beauty. Thus, I have to shave it to look American. This is a big paradox.

In the same way, Maya shared that hair was a part of her feminine identity in the following tale:

When I was a teenager back home, there was a boy chasing me in our neighborhood. He wanted to date me. I was under 15 and I thought that it was too young for me to start dating men. But, this guy told me that I was already a woman since I had hair in my underarms. He said also he liked my hairy body and suggested me not to shave it because it made me look sexy. I did not get it at that moment may be because I was too young. But later one, I found out that he was right. I was so complimented by men for my hairy legs, arms and my sideburns. They kept telling me that my hairy body made me beautiful and sexy. However, here in the USA, I have to shave my legs, underarms, arms, face and so on to look beautiful and sexy.

While skin bleaching and hairstyle were associated to the denial of African identity, shaving appears more as result of social pressure. By shaving their legs, arms, underarms, or bikini area, some participants try to adjust to the cultural norms of American society. Maya described this social pressure as follows:

I know that it is not always easy since many of those beauty standards are not part of our African culture such as shaving. It might also take time for some people to finally assimilate those beauty standards, but I don’t think that I can personally escape from this social pressure. In my own case, I have to recognize that it was a big deal to start shaving because I could not stand that a hairy body was considered nasty and dirty. But, I finally decided to shave any visible part of my body (such as legs, underarms, arms, and bikini area) while appearing in public places such as party, school, beach, etc.

However, other women claimed to feel comfortable with their hairy body and take the risk to appear in public without shaving their legs and arms. Aida expressed her position as follows:
I think that negotiating all those norms of beauty is a part of my cultural adjustment process to the American culture because I had to learn about all those things to feel comfortable in society. It was not easy at all. I tried to resist at the beginning. It took me a long time to accept some of those cultural norms. Even today, there are things that I still not do such as shaving. I don’t shave my legs and arms at all even in summer. I think it is too demanding. I just shave my underarms and some intimate parts. I am a hairy person and I know that when I go out without shaving people look at me strangely, but honestly I do not really care. I feel comfortable in my own body.

While participants performed either an African identity through their dressing style, or an American identity through hairstyle, skin bleaching, and shaving, all those beauty standards often operate simultaneously in their life experiences.

“I Am All in One”: Performing a Hybrid Identity

Although participants claimed to communicate either an African identity or an American one, their beauty performance revealed that they incorporated both identities at various levels. In order words, it was difficult if not almost impossible for some women to categorize themselves as specifically African and not American and vice versa. Thus, most participants recognized to be mix of both African and American identity depending on the beauty standards they performed. Sifa described her hybrid identity as follow:

I am mix of Africa and USA. I am in the middle. For instance, I can describe my crossdressing style as American. I can wear pants and trousers although they appear to be masculine in my African culture. I wear short skirts and dresses even if they are not part of my African background. However, I absolutely don’t wear African loincloths. I don’t like them and I don’t feel comfortable wearing them.

Similarly, Fatima described her hybrid identity as the result of acculturation:

I have a principle. When I go somewhere for the first time, I always watch what people do and then I try to adjust my own values and cultural beliefs to those of my new environment. And what I learned from this experience is that you can never be the same by doing so. I mean it is almost impossible to escape from acculturation since it is just a part of your cultural adjustment process. Although I perceive myself as a modern African woman, I am conscious that I also carry this American identity in me in various ways such as my hairstyle. Yes, I keep my dark African skin, but I would say that my hairstyle is definitely not African. It is more American, and more specifically African American. I can wear traditional African braids, dreadlocks, wigs, etc. I can perm my hair…those things are not African at all they were borrowed from western culture.
Like Sifa and Fatima, I also feel being the product of both African and American cultures. In fact, it is not easy for me either to identify myself either as African or totally American. Curiously, people around me also perceive these different facets of my identity. The following piece, “I am all in one”, is an autoethnographic piece describing different steps and facets related to the negotiation process of my hybrid identity in adjusting to the American environment.

April 2008: “I saw your pictures honey, you look so great, so gorgeous, I’m so happy for you. You gained a lot of weight. This is absolutely wonderful for you, don’t you think so” That was my mother’s reaction during one of our conversation on the phone four months after I arrived in the USA. I should have replied “I have no idea, mum” Instead, I just laughed on the phone. Actually, she was right, after moving in America I gained some pounds. All my fellows back home were happy because by gaining weight I was perfectly meeting the African standards of feminine beauty. Meanwhile I remembered a conversation on my body size with my classmates at Depaul University watching some pictures that I took back home a couple months before moving in the USA. We were having lunch in one of our favorite restaurants ‘Chipotlet’, just across the university. “Wow, this is you really? You look so gorgeous, so thin. I like you like that”, said my best Indian friend. “Absolutely! I totally agree with you. She looks like a top model, I love it!” pursued my other friend from Chile. They were both clearly implying that I should care about my shape, or may be even lose weight to look slimmer and meet the western standards of feminine beauty.

What is to be beautiful? Looking like a slim White American woman with a flat belly or like a large-sized body black African woman with real curves.

August 2009: “Hey, has your skin color changed? You should even look lighter. That is obvious. You’re in the USA” That was my aunt on the phone. If it was not her commenting on my skin color, it would be my youngest sister: “I really liked your last summer pictures at the beach! You got the western tan! You looked so light, so great. You look like those gorgeous African American girls we see on television.” And I always tell them “your skin color does not change just because you moved in the USA; can you imagine that most of those women bleach their skin to meet the western standards of beauty? It seems so unbelievable, right!” However, they would never believe me.
What is it to be beautiful? Keeping an African black skin dark like the night or switching to a light/white skin tone like a ripe banana.

October 2009: “You cut your hair? It looks great” how many times I listened to this at the beginning of the month while I still had my short curly hairstyle. And then, a week later, I was getting ready for a conference. I was so overwhelmed that I did not have time to have my hair done. Thus, I opted for the “emergency African American hairstyle”, a wig. It fitted me so well that almost everybody I kept giving complimenting me “your hair looks so great, you changed it again?” I was laughing inside, if only they knew that it was “fake hair”. If only they knew, how uncomfortable I was feeling with this wig? Sweeping, itching…All of this, in the name of beauty. Feeling so uncomfortable with a wig, I finally decided one week later, to go back to my preferred hairstyle “extension”. I like extension. I have always loved extension since they look more real to me. This created another surprise again: “wow, you look so beautiful, you dyed you hair, I love it”, said my roommate as soon as I got in the house. “Who are you exactly? You kept changing your hair every time: short, long, straight, curly, braids, etc. Oh my God. Sometimes you look African, sometimes American, and even Jamaican with you braids.” “I am all in one”, I replied her laughing.

What is it to be beautiful? Keeping my black, kinky, nappy, creepy, and dark African hair or getting it straight, dyed, and permed?

By embracing different beauty standards in the U.S., Congolese women expected to enjoy their freedom of being who they wanted in institutional settings in contrast to the Congo where they were dictated how to appear to school, at church, or at work. However, the journey experience of participants revealed that the negotiation of different beauty standards as well as identity types described above generated some major impacts in participants’ social life in public settings. The image they communicated through their beauty performance has influenced their interactions within American institutions.

**Performing Gendered Institutional Roles**

Institutions emerged as an important sphere where Congolese women face different challenges of identity negotiation as they are adjusting to American environment. Congolese women communicated various facets of their gendered identity within family, school, and workplace. These three institutions appeared as spaces where participants performed
challenging roles in communicating with people in their environment. The following three stories illustrate the performance of these roles. The first story “Nasty Girl” inspired by Maimouna’s interview presents the challenges that participants face in their families. The second story “The Ugly Duckling” based on Sifa’s interview portrays segregated practices on the educational setting. The last piece “Ghetto Girl” extracted from Feza’s interview illustrates discrimination at the workplace.

“Nasty Girl”: Performing the Self in Family

The first institution of Congolesse women’s beauty performance is family. The stories of the participants revealed that family is a location that genders its members by providing them cultural and social beliefs through interpersonal relationships. In fact, by communicating with their relatives Congolesse women acquire information that constantly shapes the way they perceive their physical appearance. More specifically, this exchange of information occurs within the nuclear family. For instance, participants claimed their beauty conception to be strongly influenced by the interaction they have with their close and direct relatives such as husbands, parents, brother, and sisters. Despite being 31 years old, Feza mentioned what follows about her mother’s influence:

My mum has always something to say about my physical appearance. She wants me use make-up, put on wigs and extensions (she does not like my dreadlocks), wear sexy clothes. She wants me act like those fake women in the media. She thinks that I should take care of my body according to American beauty standards. To me, making-up equals faking up because it means making something that is not. I don’t want to pretend. I want just to be me. Sometimes I feel so unknown and rejected by her. I wish she could appreciate me more from inside than outside: my thoughts, my heart, my personality, etc. I want her to accept me the way I want to be.

In the same way, the story below, “Nasty girl”, describes the shaving experience of Maimouna, a 23 years old girl, as a result of her family interaction. I knew Maimouna back home. We used to go to the same English school. She is a very hairy woman. I was myself quite surprised when I met her here in San Diego to notice that she has no more hair on her body. This means to me that she was now shaving her body. In fact, she had no hair on her legs, arms, and face. All her sideburns were gone. I found it through her story that she came to the decision of shaving her body because of her family.
“When I moved in the USA, I was quite surprised to see women’s body without hair since hair is a sign of beauty Congolese culture. Not to mention all those advertisements in the media. I was not shaving at all. I had hair on my legs, arms, face (sideburns), and my beard. I did not really feel concerned until my family here in the U.S. got involved. Being judged by my own relatives really changed my mind.” Maimouna said.

I can totally understand what she feels because I have been judged by people too in the U.S. for keeping my body hairy, and more specifically my beard. However, those people were so closed to me. They were those strangers you meet everywhere such as while enjoying the sun at a park or sitting in a trolley on your way home after a long day of school. They could also be closed to you such as curious classmates or friends, but never family members. Maimouna was right critics might probably sound different when they come from our relatives.

“One day my family and I were invited to join an African barbecue at the beach. I put on short trousers and a strapless top. As I was coming out of the house ready to leave with my brother, he started looking at me so strangely. He looked so threateningly at me that I felt embarrassed. I thought that I did something wrong. And with a frightened voice, I asked him “are you ok?” He told me “I am fine, but as I can see you are not”. “What do you mean by that” I replied. Then he told me “Mai, you don’t listen, you never listen. How many times should I tell you that you have to shave your body, and especially your legs? You cannot go out like this! It is nasty and disgusting” It was not the first time that my brother was saying so. Nevertheless, I was quite upset.”

As we pursued our talk, I found that what really made Maimouna felt so embarrassed was not only what her brother said but also her mother’s reaction.

“I didn’t know what to say. I looked at our mother expecting some help. I was hoping that as a woman she can understand that I feel comfortable in my hairy body because I had never seen her shaving either. However, it seems that she was on my brother side. She told me “Your brother moved here long time ago before you. He knows more than you about American culture. You should listen to him. You are not old like me you know. I don’t show my body. But, for you it is important to shave otherwise people are going to judge you as a dirty girl”
I understood that Maimouna’s relatives (mother and brother) were asking her to shave in order to help her better fit in the American beauty standards and thus avoid any type of criticism. Although Maimouna did not agree with this beauty standard, she shared that she has to conform to it because she believed all her family wanted what was best for her.

“To be honest, I prefer the way my mum talked to me. She was presenting fact in terms of suggestion or recommendation, but my brother was giving me directives and commands. Anyway, that day I finally decided to start shaving. I believe that my family knows what is better to me.”

While Feza and Maimouna felt the pressure from their families, other participants’s experiences revealed that pressure could also come from people who are not necessarily close to you such as classmates.

“The Ugly Duckling”: Performing the Self at School

Education is the second institution of Congolese women’s beauty performance. Stories of participants revealed that education is a gendered location that has strongly shaped their self-perception. More specifically, participants claimed to have experienced peer pressure to self-objectify with American standards of beauty by interacting with their classmates. Fatima described her experience as follows:

Sometimes I feel like competing for a fashion show at school. In my college, everybody wants to look attractive. Girls want to dress up. They want to conform to new fashion, with new hairstyle, etc. And I am one of them. I feel as if I had to do the same even if when I don’t want too. I am Congolese and so I am coming from a conservative culture. For instance, they are those kinds of clothes that I cannot wear in Congo here such as shorts stuff. However, I can wear them here like at school just in order to look like all American students. The pressure is so intense that you can’t even escape from.

While school appears to be this location of beauty performance, it is also the place where participants felt rejected by their classmates because of their black African identity. In fact, participants’ complained about being excluded from some groups which selection was based on nationality and skin color. The following story portrays Sifa’s experience of segregation during her high-school studies. If Sifa was not given equal access to education in the Congo because of the cultural norm ‘school is better for men than women’, she was also discriminated in the U.S. not as a woman but because of her ethnic identity.
I had never paid attention to the particular shape of some features of Sifa’s face such as her cheekbones, her noise, her lips, and her black skin. To me, she looked like any other black woman. No one could even tell if she was black African or African American. However, I found out through the interview that this 27 years old woman had a hard time to get accepted by her classmates who claimed her physical appearance to clearly be African.

We were sitting face to face in the small table of the dining room of Sifa’s house. I was listening quietly to her story while drinking my cup of tea. I could notice how uncomfortable she felt before she starts sharing about her high-school adjustment experience.

“So can you tell me a little bit more about this hard school integration experience?” I asked her with a compassionate voice.

“Before coming in USA, I did not know that I was black, and besides black African. I mean, I knew that I was black, but not that my skin was so dark to the point that it was a particular sign of my African identity.” She stopped and took a deep breath.

“Your skin looks beautiful; you have one of these beautiful and natural dark skins.” I complimented as an encouragement.

“You can be right. My skin is beautiful back home, but not here in the USA. In Africa, I was totally surrounded by black people. We were all black together: light or dark skin. But, it seems to me that here too much darkness is a big problem. In high-school, my classmates used to make fun of me. They were like “you are too dark even darker than normal African-American people where are you coming from exactly? So to them, even an African-American could not be as darker as I am.” She looked very sad.

“And how did you react to such comments.” I pursued quietly.

“I really felt offended. I was so revolted. I started blaming myself for my dark skin color. I looked for ways to fix this. This is why I started bleaching my skin in order to be accepted by others. I thought that with a lighter or at least brown skin I could look more attractive to them.”

She stopped and nodded her head with a sad smile. Then, she stood up and disappeared for a while and then came back with a pack of pictures. There were her high-school pictures. We started looking at them together. I could notice the difference. She looked so lighter skin in some of those pictures. It was unbelievable. As she was passing me the picture one by one, she pursued her story.
“Oh My God! I was so stupid. I could maybe manage my skin color, but I forgot that I could not manage the remaining. Everything cannot so easily be fixed on your body you know.”

She was staring at me and no word was coming out her mouth. I wish I could understand what she means by this silence, but I could not find the missing piece of the puzzle. Thus I asked her “what do you mean by that?”

“Apparently my skin color was not the only thing that exposed my African identity. My classmates also complained about the shape of my cheekbones, my big and flat African noise, my big African lips, etc. There was no way to fix that except by relying on plastic surgery. Unfortunately, I did not have enough money to afford it.”

I stopped taking notes for one second and I looked at this woman in front of me. None of those features on her looked specifically African to me. Who knows? Maybe my own African identity makes me also blind about this.

“Because of all of this, I looked like a stranger to my classmates. They would not select me in their group. I felt very lonely. I had no friends. I felt like an ugly duckling. It seems to me that I had to adjust my physical appearance to the white European beauty standard in order to fit into this educational environment. That was the only way to get their acceptance.”

While facing discrimination at a young age at school, participants face similar challenges when trying to integrate the workplace.

“The third institution of female Congolese immigrants’ beauty performance is the workplace. Stories of participants revealed that work is one the institutions in which Congolese women face gendered challenges of discrimination based on their physical appearance. In fact, participants claimed to have been discriminated against for either failing to meet specific beauty standards (such as skin color, dressing style, hairstyle, etc) required by the job market. In the following story, Feza described how she struggled to integrate the job market because of her physical appearance. While Feza had more job opportunity as a woman in the U.S. in contrast to the Congo where men occupy the public sphere, she was still discriminated as a woman in the U.S. because of her physical appearance.
Feza got her bachelors’ degree in journalism and mass media in 2006. However, she entered the market world a long time ago. She has been working since she was 17. Working as a student was for her not only a way to keep a balance between theory and practice, but also a way to gain money in order to survive. Feza had done different types of job, but even today, this woman in her early thirties could not forget how those job experiences strongly shaped her identity. The following story describes some of those job experiences.

“One day I had a job interview at a bank. It was supposed to be my first work experience in a bank. I tried to look attractive and beautiful by imitating the American dressing style presented on TV. I put on a spaghetti strap with a sexy skirt for the job interview. I was interviewed by three members of the staff committee. The interviews went well, but I understood through the interviewers’ questions, comments, and looks that something was wrong with my physical appearance. Thus, I was not surprised that they did not call me back. It simply meant that I did not get the job. I didn’t know that my dressing style was not appropriate for this job experience. I felt so stupid. I realized that your physical appearance influences the way your boss perceives you at work. I learned from this experience that there are dressing style rules from workplace. Now, I always wear a suit for my job interviews”

Feza missed a job opportunity by failing to understand that beauty standards depicted in the media are always contextual. However, her future work experience demonstrated that performing professional dressing style was not the only identity challenge at the job market. A lot has to do with her race and especially her skin color.

“I remembered being once discriminated against because of my skin color. I think that I couldn’t get a job because my skin was too dark.” She said with a sad voice.

I listened quietly trying not to break the flow her story as she was emotionally remembering these sad memories.

“I was looking for a job and I sent a couple of resumes to different places. One day, I got a phone call for the job interview in a marketing enterprise. I put on one of my most beautiful suit. I still had the same dreadlocks. I tied them in a strong ponytail to make show the shape of my face. ” She laughed showing me her hair and then pursued her story.

“I was sitting at the reception room waiting for my interviewer when I suddenly saw an old woman walking toward me. She called me by my name. I stood up with a big smile
and held out my hand, but she didn’t even shake it. She totally ignored it. I was really shocked.” She stopped her story, nodded her head and took a deep breath.

“OMG, I am really sorry. Did she at least smile at you too?” I said to show my sympathy.

“No, she didn’t. She was so cold even during the interview. I could tell from her attitude and her gaze that she couldn’t stand me. She politely tried to explain me during the interview that my physical appearance did not match their profile. She was absolutely not expecting a black woman with such a dark skin like mine, besides with dreadlocks. To her I probably incarnated the perfect ghetto girl. It was the worse experience of my life.” She stopped for her while lost in her thoughts.

“I was so revolted. I had so many qualities in me: personable, sociable, kind, smart, etc. But, this old conservative and country woman was judging me from outside. Can you imagine that I almost forced her to shake my hand at the end of the interview! After that experience, I decided not to involve anymore in those kinds of job that expose my physical appearance.”

Through the following job interview experience strongly affected Feza’s identity since she realized that her physical appearance could not be dissociated from any type of job relying on external body perception. While she experienced discrimination on the basis of her external beauty, she gained job recognition on the basis of her internal beauty. In the following excerpt, she describes what she calls “my best work experience ever”:

I was personally recruited by this old, white, conservative, and nice lady in a newspaper. She was so nice to me. She did not care about my race or my physical appearance. It was the only job where I could go in jeans and even sweater. The most important thing was my work performance, not my physical appearance. I was not working at a marketing or advertising department. However, I had an important position even though I was behind the scene. My image was high. I was very happy. It was the best work I ever had.

The results from this chapter raise several questions: What is beauty? How do Congolese women find their ways in the borderland of two cultures (American and Congolese)? What reasons might explain their assimilation of certain norms and the rejection of other? What are the implications of this identity negotiation process in their practical life? In the final chapter, I attempt to answer to these questions, provide interpretations of these findings, offer
theoretical and practical implications, identify limitations of this study and suggest future
directions for the research.
CHAPTER 4

FINDING WAYS IN THE BORDERS

On January 6th 2008, I reached the ground of Uncle Sam’s country after a long trip of almost two days from the Congo. As any international student or any sojourner I was supposed to experience a cultural adjustment process. During this study abroad experience, I had to deal with cultural patterns of both my home country and my host country. By interacting with American people, I realized how different the living styles of both countries are. For instance, I learned that while you can cheerfully greet someone in Congo by giving him/her a kiss on the cheek, this act appears too intimate in the US culture. Instead, in the U.S. you greet someone cheerfully by hugging him/her, which in turn is considered too intimate in Congolese culture. I also learned that women in the U.S. are supposed to shave their body (legs, arms, underarms, and bikini area) to avoid criticism in public settings such as beach, parties, etc. However, my African background taught me that being hairy was a sign of beauty in the Congo. I noticed that women could wear pants and trousers in the U.S. while in the Congo there were still prescribed dressing styles for men and also for women. All these cultural differences affected my feminine identity.

My cultural adjustment was marked by a series of confusing episodes in negotiating the borderland of my identity between American and African world views. Caught between these two cultures, I strived to understand the new nature of my identity. In May 2009, I decided to investigate how other women from my country experienced this cultural change and how it affected their identities as the focus of my thesis research. Thus, I sought my female Congolese fellows, talked to them, listened to their stories. During one year of fieldwork and by sharing our experiences, many revelations touched my heart. The stories of Congolese women not only represent the realities of people adjusting to beauty standards, but also the challenges they face as women in integrating into the American society.

This thesis was designed to analyze how Congolese women living in San Diego negotiate the borderland of self between African and American norms of beauty. More specifically, the present study aimed to extend understanding of the issue of gendered norms
of beauty and identity construction by investigating how Congolese women in San Diego negotiate gendered norms of beauty in constructing their identity. Ethnographic research enabled me to understand lives of female Congolese immigrants as well as the different stories emerging from their experiences of beauty performance. This method also helped me to reflect upon my own experience. I analyzed twelve interviews with female Congolese women, over hundred and fifteen hours of participant observation, and the notes I wrote reflecting on my experience. The research undersigned to answer the following research questions: What do Congolese women describe as gendered norms of beauty in the U.S. and in the Congo? How do Congolese women perform American and Congolese gendered norms of beauty? How are their identities shaped by this performance? What is problematic about these performances?

This research found that female Congolese immigrants’ bodies are an embodiment tool in reproducing gendered norms of beauty in America as well as in Congolese cultures. While the move from the Congo to the U.S. appears as a detachment from cultural norms, values, and canons of their home country, by immigrating in the U.S., Congolese women are expected to integrate the cultural and social values of this host country. Meanwhile, Congolese women cannot ignore the customs, traditions, and beliefs that constitute their African cultural leg since they shape their identities in this adjustment process. Thus, their identities result from the management of two world’s views, each culturally shaped by different beauty conceptions and socially characterized by discrimination in failing to meet these beauty requirements.

In this last chapter, I first discuss the significant conclusions that can be drawn from the results. Then I describe theoretical implications of the identity negotiation process of Congolese women. Next, I also suggest practical implications resulting from the findings of this study. Finally, I provide limitations of this research and directions for future research.

**SITUATING THE SELF WITHIN BORDERS: INTERPRETATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

In this section, I discuss the main findings drawn from the representational stories of Congolese women’s beauty performance and identity negotiation presented in chapter three. More specifically, four conclusions emerged from the results of this study: controversial
beauty conceptions, feeling of acceptance, resistance/oppression, and assimilation of intersected others.

**Controversial Beauty Conceptions: What is Beauty?**

In analyzing the stories on beauty performance of Congolese women, I realized that it was difficult to come up with a precise and common definition of beauty. When I talked to participants, I found that controversial conceptions of beauty were emerging from their various experiences. These different conceptions offer insights about the crucial concept guiding this research: “what is beauty?” Although a multitude of answers can be drawn from the findings of this study, I focus on five controversial issues.

The primary controversy emerges from depicting beauty as natural or artificial. Participants struggled between describing themselves as naturally beautiful and relying on artificial tips to improve their beauty. For instance, Maya explained, “a beautiful woman is supposed to keep her original skin color. Keep it natural. She can be dark or light skin, but it does not really matter.” In contrast to this natural conception of beauty, Maimouna confessed that her beauty was somehow artificial. She said, “Beauty is not natural. To some extent women always rely on different tips to enhance their physical appearance. For example, I use eye contacts to make my eyes look brown, I wear heels to look taller, and I use pads bra for my breast.”

The second tension is based on the conception of beauty as a state of mind or beauty as body performance. On one hand, some Congolese women like Fatima believe that beauty has more to do with the individual’s state of mind than a body performance. Fatima explained “To me, being beautiful depends on self-perception. In other words, beauty is more a state of mind than a matter of physical appearance. If you feel comfortable in your body and you perceive yourself as beautiful, then you are beautiful no matter what.” On the other hand, beauty remains for some participants a cultural and social construct performed through body. According to participants the mental desire to perform gendered norms of beauty in order to improve physical attractiveness is materialized through embodiment and enactments. For example, Feza shared, “Anything I considered beautiful in my mind was supposed to be reflected in my physical appearance and vice versa. For instance, when I started bleaching my skin, I considered myself as white in my mind, not black anymore.”
A third tension on beauty conceptions results from defining beauty based on internal or external qualities. Some Congolese women believe that beauty cannot be evaluated through physical appearance; instead the most important features of a woman’s beauty remain the qualities she carries inside. For instance, Aida said, “To me beauty is not physical. It is more immaterial. I mean beauty is all about what a woman has inside. A beautiful woman is worthy and warmhearted. Beauty is more interior than exterior. Beauty is not about external or physical appearance.” In contrast to Aida’s opinion, an attractive physical appearance is still an important criterion of femininity for many Congolese women such as Maya. She said, “For me a beautiful woman is a woman who takes care of her body. She looks good, smells good, no body odor. She keeps her body fresh every time, no sweeping. Most importantly, she keeps her head clean.”

The fourth controversial beauty conception is associated with beauty performance as a woman’s duty or not. The findings of this study suggest that performing gendered norms can take the form of task for some women. By assessing “Taking care of my body is a weekend duty for me: pedicure, manicure, hairstyle, shaving, etc..” Maya implies that these activities are part of her weekly to-do list. Thus, failing to accomplish this task can lead to social sanction. She explained “It is a problem when you have to face people out there without shaving your legs, your underarms, or any bikini area. You cannot avoid their criticism.” Similarly during my visits in Fatouma’s family, I noticed that taking care of her body was a duty for her before going to work:

Fatima was getting ready for work. I was sitting on the bed in her bedroom watching each step of this performance. First, she put on her uniform: a dark pant with a blue top. Then she started styling her hair in a nice ponytail. After that she decided to take care of her face. She put on a light make-up: foundation, eyelashes, and slip sticks. It was the third time that I witnessed the same scene again and again. I started wondering if this was not a daily duty for her each day of the week she had to work.

In contrast, after dealing with different beauty experiences, Feza came to the conclusion that beauty performance should not be a duty for a woman because it was too demanding. She told me, “Performing beauty standards on a regular basis, I would even say on a daily basis is so demanding. It is just too much. It is overwhelming. God is a perfect artist. He shaped me according to his own beauty standards. Thus, while should I make myself suffer to fit in some kind of box?”
Finally, the last controversy is contained in the quote “beauty is in the eye of the beholder or in eye of the beheld?” This quote illustrates that Congolese women find different things beautiful and the differences of appreciation depend either on their self-perception or on the compliments they receive from other people. For instance, my observation experience in Moseka’s house revealed that beauty was in the eyes of the beholder. By sharing her tale of beauty performance, Moseka claimed that beauty was a personal matter. She said, “I don’t like the way I look since I gained weight after giving birth. I still get compliments from my husband. He kept telling me honey you look gorgeous, you look beautiful, etc. To be honest, I don’t really trust him because I believe that he just does so to calm me down”. Similarly, after loosing weight, I could not believe it when my American friends told me after looking at my old pictures of the Congo “You look more beautiful so slim.” For me these words were not compliments because I was not feeling good in my own body.

Conversely, Feza acknowledged herself as beautiful through the compliments she received from her boyfriend Dan: “I was absolutely happy with the way I looked. It was the same for Dan. He told me that he liked my dark skin and my natural hairstyle. He is the only one who made me feel comfortable and pleased with myself. He just liked me and accepted me the way I was. Thus, I did not care too much about what other people might think about me.” All these beauty conceptions are somehow influenced by personal or social perceptions.

Acceptance: Self-Perception and Social Judgment

This study demonstrates that Congolese women perform standards of beauty in order to reach acceptance. Congolese women face the dilemma of being who they want to be or being what they are socially expected to be, as well as doing what they want to do or doing what they are socially expected to do. The following excerpt explains Feza’s dilemma:

My mum has always something to say about my physical appearance. She wants me to use make-up, put on wigs and extensions (she does not like my dreadlocks), wear sexy clothes. She wants me to act like those fake women in the media. She thinks that I should take care of my body according to American beauty standards. To me, making-up equals faking up because it means making something that is not. I don’t want to pretend. I want just to be me. Sometimes I feel so unknown and rejected by her. I wish she could appreciate me more from inside than outside: my thoughts, my heart, my personality, etc. I want her to accept me the way I want to be.
More specifically, this feeling of acceptance results from a tension between personal judgment and social judgment. On one side, Congolese women struggle with the feeling of accepting themselves the way they are. To reach this level of self-acceptance, they decide to not conform to beauty standards that do not meet their personal needs. For instance, Feza once shared, “Slowly, I stopped bleaching my skin. I cut all my hair and kept them natural for three to four years. I had no make up all those years. I was even bold for my graduation, can you believe it? I wanted just to be me.” However, by taking such risks, these women become subject of criticism and often experience social discrimination. Feza pursued, “Many people around me could not understand what happened to me. Even my mum thought that I turned lesbian. But, all those people did not understand that I was trying to reconnect to my African roots. By looking natural, I wanted to go back to my origins. I took the risk to accept myself the way I was even if people socially denied me.”

On the other side, Congolese women feel pressure to conform to standards of beauty to be socially accepted. Ting-Toomey (2005) asserts that conformity to social norms aims positive outcomes including the feeling of being understood, the feeling of being respected, and the feeling of being affirmatively valued (p. 228). In the same way, self-objectifying to beauty standards appears as an important way for Congolese women to avoid social discrimination and criticism. This case is illustrated by Sifa’s high-school experience; she started bleaching her skin in order to gain her classmates acceptance. She told me, “I started bleaching my skin in order to be accepted by others. I thought that with a lighter or at least brown skin I could look more attractive to them and we would become friends.”

I also experienced a dilemma of self-perception and social judgment while struggling with my body shape in the U.S. Although I strived to accept myself the way I was, my African fellows would make me feel uncomfortable in my own body by reminding me that being slim was not the appraisal of an African identity. For instance, one friend told me one day “Oh my God, you lost too much weight Gloria, you need to catch up, don’t follow those American women. Be healthy. That’s the African beauty.” While Congolese women face the pressure of social judgment, they also have to deal with social sanctions if they do not conform to beauty standards.
Resistance/Oppression: Disempowering the Female Body

The experiences of Congolese women reveal different layers of resistance/oppression through the performance of gendered norms of beauty. As we witnessed in the narratives presented, participants communicated forms of resistance in different ways. A predominant form of resistance is the rejection of beauty standards depicted in the media. For instance, Fatouma shared, “I don’t think that what we see on TV shows and magazines, I mean what we watch in the media should be considered as the standard of beauty. This is why I believe that it not compulsory for me to conform to those beauty standards. I am free to do so or not.” In the same way, Congolese women resisted the social pressure of conforming to some American standards of beauty such as shaving. Aida nonverbally communicates a form of resistance through her hairy body. She once shared, “I don’t shave my legs and arms at all even in summer. I think it is too demanding. I am a hairy person and I do not really care about what people think. I feel comfortable in my own body.” Like Aida, I don’t shave my legs and arms either because I believe that by doing so I would loose a part of my African identity. As mentioned by Defrancisco and Palczeswiski (2007), “even tough nonverbal communication often is unconscious, when people decide to challenge social norms, they do so quite intentionally” (p. 101).

Another form of resistance is present in participants’ responses to cultural and religious beliefs characterizing the African conception of the female body. Narratives show that the U.S. is for some Congolese women the appropriate milieu to reject the burden of cultural and religious beliefs they used to face in the Congo. Fatima once shared, “I am a Catholic, Christian woman and being Christian does not mean that I cannot look attractive or sexy. This is not Africa where people negatively judge you for your dressing style or even dictate you what to wear. This is America, the country of freedom. Who cares?” Similarly, rejection of stereotypes and stigmatization appears as a form of resistance communicated in the experiences of participants. For example, Fatima said, “I don’t think that I am a bitch because I got my ears pierced. I am not a lesbian because I wear an anklet. Nor am I a bitch because of tattoos.” These utterances demonstrate a break from the African tradition and a shift into American culture. I noticed the same patterns of resistance while observing participants at Mont Carmel church:
It seems to me that women in the church did not really care that much about covering their bodies. It was obvious that Congolese women did not respect the cultural and religious beliefs of covering the body. While we were sitting in this house of God, they had a dressing style that did not conform to the spiritual context. For instance, Maimouna was wearing a short dress with longs boots, but half of her legs were uncovered. Similarly, Maya had tight pants that shaped her curvy body.

Narratives also reveal that oppression lays in the forms of resistance communicated by participants. Clair (1998) asserts that “quasi-forms of resistance and oppression merge into a self-contained opposite that is expressed through discursive practices” (p. 127). More specifically, oppression and resistance operate like two facets of the same reality. While resistance is expressed as a personal rejection of beauty standards, oppression takes the form of social sanctions in reaction to this rejection. For example, participants who refused to comply to the gendered norms of beauty as social requirement faced discrimination. This is the case Feza who lost a job because of her dark skin. She said, “It was difficult for me to get some jobs after I stopped bleaching my skin. One day during a job interview, a woman politely tried to explain to me that my physical appearance did not match their profile. I was convinced that she was absolutely not expecting a black woman with such a dark skin like mine.”

I found in this study that Congolese women can be victims of gender society expectations based on the stereotyped and dialectical role of men privileged and powerful vs. women oppressed and weak. For instance, Fatouma’s life story reveals that her body has totally been disempowered by an abusive ex-husband. She shared her struggle in these terms:

I had no longer control over my own body. He had to decide about everything concerning my body from my dressing style to my hairstyle. He even forced me to eat a lot, so I could put on more weight and be the “healthy Congolese woman” he wanted me to be. He was convinced that by pushing me to gain weight, everybody will praise him for taking care of his wife.

In reaction to these practices of oppression, Fatouma decided to break the silence by engaging in personal activism. More specifically, this activism took a form of social change in order to empower her female body. In fact, Renegar and Sowards (2003) assess that “activism is inherently individual and individual actions can have profound impact in the creation of social change” (p. 347). Thus, in order to fight for her survival, Fatouma decided to get divorced, which allowed her to gain back control over her body. She mentioned,
“Getting divorce set me free. Although I look skinny today and I might look unattractive to many, I feel much better inside. I am free and feel more peaceful inside.” By deciding what beauty standard is convenient or not for them to perform, Congolese women strive to communicate different facets of their gender identities.

**Assimilation: Intersected Others**

Last but not least, I found that Congolese women could be assimilated to three types of women. First, Congolese women can be assimilated to white American women through the practice of skin bleaching. In fact, participants recognized that skin bleaching was for them a way to perform whiteness. For instance while sharing her skin bleaching experience, Feza said, “I wanted to look like a white woman. To me, light skin meant whiteness. Looking American meant whiteness.” Second, this study also shows that Congolese women associate themselves as African-American women. A number of beauty standards performed by Congolese women come from African-American women. For instance, Aida asserted that African-American women incarnate the best models of hairstyle performance for Congolese women. She said, “My hairstyle is definitely not African, especially not traditional African. I would describe it more as African American. I like wearing wigs, extensions,… I also like perming my hair…Those practices are definitely not African. I get all these tips from African-American women. They are my first source of inspiration.” Finally, Congolese women identify themselves with other black African women. Amina told me, “Although maputa make me look African, they do not confirm that I am Congolese. Unless I say so, people might think that I am from any other black African country where women also wear them such as Zambia, Ghana, Nigeria, etc.”

The performance of whiteness and blackness demonstrates the intersected identity nature of Congolese women. Defrancisco and Palczewski (2007) acknowledge that gender is not a separate part of identity but it is related to all other parts of a person’s identity since one’s identity and how one expresses it are determined by a number of intersecting factors. Similarly, each of the above three facets displayed by Congolese women is connected to their gender identity, which is characterized by different features: sex, race, social class, status, etc. In other words, those facets constitute what Carlson (2004) calls “a self of other selves.”
In the following section, I suggest theoretical implications of the thesis findings. Some communication theories, especially those related to intercultural communication, offer insight about the identity negotiation process of Congolese women.

**UNDERSTANDING THE SELF FROM INTERCULTURAL PERSPECTIVES: THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS**

When looking for the theoretical connections that emanate from the stories of female Congolese participants, I found that cultural dimensions in the field of communication could explain what the findings of this thesis reveal about Congolese women’s identity negotiation process. While there are a variety of implications of the findings, I focus particularly on three dimensions: conceptualizing identity, constructing identity through socialization, and negotiating identity in intercultural settings. The discussion of each of these theoretical implications enhances our understanding of how identity performance operates for immigrants in intercultural setting, specifically in the context of cultural adjustment.

**Conceptualizing Gender Identity**

The term identity encompasses a range of definitions. As used in this study, identity appears as an individual’s self-concept. Ting-Toomey (2005) defines identity as “the reflective self-conception or self-image that we each derive from our family, gender, cultural, ethnic, and individual socialization process” (p. 212). In the same way, Lustig and Koester (2010) assert that ‘identity basically refers to our reflective views of ourselves and other perceptions of our self-images at both the social identity and the personal identity” (p. 212). Similarly, the results of this study reveal that for Congolese women, the perception of the self occurs at two levels in terms of how they appear to themselves and how they appear to the others. More specifically, this study shows that Congolese women conceptualize their gender identity at three levels: personal, social, and cultural.

First, Congolese women define their identity based on unique characteristics, which differ from those of others women in their cultural environment. In fact, personal identity encompasses those unique attributes and features (such as personality, intelligence, abilities, talents, preferences, and other personal traits alike) that define our identity as we associate with our individuated self in comparison to those of others (Lonsdale & North, 2009; Lustig
& Koester, 2010; Ting-Toomey, 2005). Similarly, preferences for the traditional African dressing style of loincloths or ‘maputa’ appear as a unique characteristic of Congolese identity for participants. The fact that Amina wears maputa to celebrate her African identity in the U.S. environment demonstrates that by doing so, she strives to distinguish herself from not only white women, but also African-American women. She said, “As you can see, your skin color cannot always speak about your origin, but, your dressing style can.”

Second, Congolese women describe their identity as a consequence of membership in particular groups within specific cultures. Lonsdale and North (2009) assert that “social identity’ refers to those aspects of one’s self-concept defined by the different social groups we are members of, or identify with” (p. 319). Similarly, in this study participants strongly claimed their belonging to the African, Christian community. For instance, Maimouna, once told me,

I don’t think that tattoos and piercing can enhance my beauty. Maybe I could rely on them to enhance my beauty if I were not a Christian. I am a Christian and to me those things are demoniac. They open up the door to hell. I just can’t use them. It does not matter. In America or Congo, I just can’t.

This group membership includes aspects such as cultural or ethnic identity, gender identity, social class identity, age identity, religious identity, professional identity, etc. (Ting-Toomey, 2005) as various facets of Congolese women’s self-perceptions.

Third, Congolese women consider their gender identity rooted in their ethnicity. This conception of the self can be associated to cultural identity as it refers to one’s sense of belonging to a particular culture or ethnic group. According to Ting-Toomey (2005), cultural identity can be understood as “the emotional significance we attach to our sense of belonging or affiliation with the larger culture” p. 214). It is obvious that in this study cultural identity remains an important issue of identity conception for Congolese women. For instance, Aida claimed her ethnic identity as follows:

My physical appearance makes me look as an African woman. I am Congolese by birth and even if I live in America, I consider myself as an African woman. More specifically, I would say that I am a traditional, Christian and conservative African woman. I grew up in a Christian and conservative environment that had a huge impact on me. I do not want to lose all those values and beliefs because they are part of my African identity.
By defining herself as a Congolese woman and identifying herself to the African culture, Aida demonstrates how cultural identity operates both at a personal and a larger level. In fact, cultural identity is employed broadly to include related concepts such as subcultural, national, ethnolinguistic, and racial identity as well as an individual’s psychological identification with a particular group (Kim, 2007).

All the above three aspects should not be considered separately in conceptualizing Congolese women’s self. Instead, cultural, social, and personal identities are interdependent in a person’s self-conception. In fact, social and personal identities are embedded in cultural identity and vice-versa. For instance, Congolese women’s gender identity is strongly linked to their culture’s preferences for gendered beauty as well as to their social group and their personal characteristics and traits (Lustig & Koester, 2010). In this perspective striving to answer to the questions “who I am” and “who are you?” appears for Congolese women as a result of the struggle between an individual’s perception of being “different” coupled with the inability to blend in with either the dominant cultural group or their ethnic heritage group (Ting-Toomey, 2005). Thus, Congolese women construct their identities based on this interdependence.

Constructing Identity through Socialization

In this thesis, I found that identity is constructed through a socialization process. Lustig and Koester (2010) explain how the socialization process has tendency to teach people through families and new media about which groups they should identify themselves as members or not. Congolese women construct their identity by internalizing the cultural value patterns they acquire through family and media. More specifically, those patterns can encompass: culture, traditions, heritage, language, religion, ancestry, aesthetics, thinking patterns, social structures, age, gender, work, ideology, social class, place (neighborhood, region, and nation), common interests to name a few of them (Lustig & Koester, 2010). For instance, Maimouna’s shaving experience is the result of family socialization. She told me,

To be honest, I prefer the way my mum talked to me. She was presenting fact in terms of suggestion or recommendation, but my brother was giving me directives and commands. Anyway, that day I finally decided to start shaving. I believe that my family knows what is better to me.
In this perspective, family appears as the fundamental communication system for cultural legacy. In other words, family remains the primary system where people acquire some of the beliefs and values of their culture such as rules related to their parents, grandparents, sibling and extended relatives that contribute to the initial blueprint of their formation of role, gender, and relational identities (Ting-Toomey, 2005).

Media also play a major role in the socialization process of Congolese women. As they rely on beauty tips represented in the media to enhance their femininity, Congolese women internalize the cultural values as well as the social practices depicted in these images. Ting-Toomey (2005) asserts that “it is through the pervasive cultural value patterns as filtered through the family and media systems that the meanings and values of identities such as ethnicity, gender, and identity types are defined” (p. 212). Aida once shared,

I really feel influenced by mediated images on beauty and more specifically those related to hairstyle and body care. I really like African American hairstyle. African American women take care of their hair in so various ways. I don’t like keeping my natural African hair. Thus, I get different hairstyles from media shows and magazines.

Thus, the culture depicted in the media shapes identity as it is constructed through beliefs, values, norms, and social practices. In this perspective, all mediated images on physical appearance, individual unique attributes racial straits, skin color, gender, language usage, self-appraisal, and other-perception factors enter into the cultural identity construction equation for the receiver (Lustig & Koester, 2010; Ting-Toomey, 2005). While constructing their identities, Congolese women have also to position themselves in interacting with American people.

**Negotiating Identity in Intercultural Setting**

There are different theories and models of identity negotiation in intercultural context. However, to explain the identity negotiation process of Congolese I focus particularly on two models: communication theory identity (CTI) and identity negotiation theory (INT).

First, the communication theory identity (CTI) as described by Hecht, Warren, Jung, and Krieger (2005), presents cultural identity as “a relationally-driven negotiation process in intercultural communication where every signed or agreed-upon cultural contract has a direct impact on one’s identity because identity attributes (such as core symbols, meanings, labels)
are bargaining chips (267). More specifically, there are three cultural contracts: (a) ready to sign-in, (b) quasi-completed, and (c) co-created (p. 267-268). First, in the ready to sign-in type, contracts have already been established and are non-negotiable. Thus, the individual enacting this type of agreement expects others to conform to the individual’s perspective and ways of communicating. In the second type, the quasi-completed, there is room for partial negotiation of identities between encounters and their relation coordination too. Finally, the co-created type is a completely negotiable contract where difference is valued and relational partners seek communication satisfaction.

Although each participant negotiates her cultural identity to varying degrees, I found in this research that Congolese women as a minority group living in the U.S. fall either in the quasi-completed contract or the co-created type. In fact, Congolese women strive to realign their worldviews, communication styles as well as behaviors by embracing American standards in order to fit in the majority box. These two forms of cultural contracts can be considered as the result of acculturation for a better adaptation process. For instance, Fatima shared once,

I have a principle. When I go somewhere for the first time, I always watch what people do and then I try to adjust my own values and cultural beliefs to those of my new environment. And what I learned from this experience is that you can never be the same by doing so. I mean it is almost impossible to escape from acculturation since it is just a part of your cultural adjustment process.

Second, in describing the identity negotiation theory, Ting-Toomey (2005) asserts that “competent identity focuses on ways to obtain accurate knowledge of the identity domains of the self and others in the intercultural encounter” (p. 217). In this perspective, people who interact seek to fulfill three specific needs: (a) the need to feel secure that things are as they appear, (b) the need to feel included or actually be included, and (c) the need to experience a certain amount of predictability and to trust the responses of others (pp. 217-218). Similarly, the findings of this study reveal that by adjusting their cultural identity to the majority American group, female Congolese immigrants expect these three needs to be fulfilled. For example, I understood that different beauty standards performed by participants can be associated with specific feelings of security, inclusion, or trust. Sifa told me,

I started blaming myself for my dark skin color. I looked for ways to fix this. This is why I started bleaching my skin in order to be accepted by others. I thought that with a lighter or at least brown skin I could look more attractive to them.
Ting-Toomey (2005) suggests that in order to meet those human needs intercultural encounters should master the three components of intercultural communication: (a) knowledge, (b) mindfulness, and (c) identity negotiation skills (pp. 226-227). Congolese women face each of these three steps in their identity negotiation process. First, the identity knowledge component implies that the person adjusting to the new environment is expected to understand and respond to the identity domains of his or her host. Similarly, Congolese women strived to identify different beauty components characterizing American women’s identity such as shaving legs, adorning an American dressing style, maintaining a slim body shape, etc.

Second, the mindfulness component refers to the awareness of the differences and similarities existing between both cultural groups and the readiness to shift one’s frame of reference. At this step, Congolese women were able to establish boundaries of beauty performance between American and Congolese cultures. For example, Maimouna explained the cultural differences of hairy body in both cultures as follows:

When I moved in this country I did not know that my hairy body would be a controversial issue of my identity. In Congo, people used to compliment me for my hairy legs, my hairy arms, my beard, and my sideburns. Hair was part of my beauty. But here, keeping my body hairy means losing my beauty. Thus, I have to shave it to look American. This is a big paradox.

Finally, the skill’s component refers to the ability to perform those behaviors that are considered appropriate and effective in given cultural situation. This study reveals that the gendered norms of beauty embraced by Congolese women are appropriate behaviors to perform in different settings. For instance, Maya shared her frustration about appearing in public swimming without shaving her body, and more specifically her bikini area. She told me “I was so ashamed. I felt as if everybody around was looking at me and telling me “what a dirty girl”. Thus she had to shave to feel secure while appearing in same public settings. She pursued “That day, I decided to check my body more carefully before going in a public swimming pool again.” Similarly, I have to confess that sometimes I feel insecure going out with my unshaved legs because I am afraid of being criticized by people.

The findings of this study provided a lot of interesting knowledge on Congolese women’s beauty performance, cultural adjustment experience, and their identity negotiation process. This knowledge encompasses many issues that might be useful not only for
academic research, but also for practical life. In the next section, I present the practical implications that can be drawn from this research.

**Relating the Self to the American Life: Practical Implications**

Four major implications connect the finding of this study to practical life. These implications are directed to four different groups of people who can be considered as the beneficiaries of this thesis. While anyone can also benefit from this research, I primarily focused on female Congolese women living in the U.S., other African immigrants, American people, and the U.S. government.

First, the findings of this thesis provide useful information for female Congolese immigrants living in the USA. The stories told in this thesis are helpful for improving their cultural adjustment process to the American environment. They may relate to different experiences depicted by participants in this study. In taking in consideration different challenges (such as discrimination and segregation) that participants faced as well as their feelings and frustrations, Congolese women can gain some tips to foster their adaptation process to the American environment. For instance, through the experiences of participants, female Congolese immigrants can understand the cultural reasons and motivations for shaving different body parts while appearing in some public settings in the U.S. such as beaches, parties.

Second, the results of this thesis can also be helpful for other immigrants who are finding their ways between two cultures and specifically for African people who can learn how their identity is an integrative part of their cultural adjustment process. In fact, most black African countries often share common cultural values. For those immigrants whose cultural values are similar to those of participants of this study, this thesis might help to walk through the process of assimilation in the U.S. In other words, by identifying their experiences to those of participants, African immigrants can find useful information for their new lifestyles in the U.S. In fact, the different gendered expectations of physical appearance might also be critical for other participants. For instance, they can understand that everything which is depicted in the media about improving their physical appearance should not always be taken for granted because it is simply advertisement.
Third, the USA remains the most culturally diverse country in the world where people interact with people from different cultures on a daily basis. By addressing issues of culture, ethnicity, and identity negotiation, this thesis provide useful knowledge on cultural differences that can foster communication and understanding between Congolese people and people from other cultures living in the USA. In fact, people who interact with female Congolese immigrants can gain a better understanding of their world views such as the various practices of tradition and customs related to their African background. For example, people can understand why some Congolese women keep their bodies hairy or covered to preserve the values of their African identity.

Finally, a growing concern in the US is immigration. Immigrants contribute to the nation’s economic development. However, little is know about the living conditions of Congolese people as part of the big African Immigrants community. Learning about Congolese culture can help the government to identify problems impeding their cultural adjustment and thus, improve their social integration.

**IMPROVING THE TALE “FROM HOME TO UNCLE SAM’S COUNTRY”: LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

This research provided useful insights explaining the complexities and intricacies of Congolese women’s beauty performance, cultural adjustment, and identity negotiation process. However, it has limitations that need to be pointed out and improved upon in for future research. In the following section, I present the limitations of this study and provide directions for future research.

First, the findings of this study revealed that the negotiation of identity was circumscribed in an interactional context at different levels such as husband and wife, mother and daughter, brother and sister, etc. However, this study only focused on women’s opinions on these interactions. It might be useful to consider opinions of other people taking part in this negotiation process by investigating interactions within families and the perspectives of these other individuals.

Second, language was a barrier in conducting this thesis. As I mentioned early in chapter two, I conducted some of my ethnographic interviews with participants in five
different languages: English, French, Swahili, Lingala, and Kikongo. While my African cultural background helped me to adjust to my participants’ linguistic diversity, I lost part of my data because of translation. Inversely, being a non English native speaker, my limited linguistic repertoire created confusion and a loss of information because of the lack of specific and appropriate vocabulary I sometimes faced in the translation. To remedy this linguistic problem, further research should consider integrating professional translators as part of the research community.

Finally, this study focused only on women whose age ranged from 21 to 45. While most of those women claimed that their beauty conception was a cultural legacy of their mothers, this study did not investigate the transmission of those cultural values from generation to generation. Thus, further research should be conducted on elder woman (50 years old and over) to examine the matriarchal role they play in the preservation of Congolese cultures values in the U.S. environment. For instance, research could investigate the evolution of gendered norms of beauty in Congolese culture from generation to generation by relying for instance on oral history (Briggs, 1986) in order to understand the cultural meanings of beauty from past, present, to future. In the next section, I conclude this thesis with some personal thoughts.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Six months ago when I was talking to my mother in Congo on the phone, I shared with her the struggles of my academic life. I told her that studying abroad was so hard for me because I was feeling lonely. I confessed to her that things were not always easy for me and I believed that if she were here in the U.S. with me I would find more support in my academic goals. To motivate me in my academic life, she sent me by email a poem in Swahili titled “Mama Yangu Mupenzi”, which means “My Dear Lovely Mother.” This poem is as an expression of her long distance support. After reading the poem the first time, I could not swallow my tears. It reminded me of all the sacrifices she has made as a woman to help me reach my academic dreams. However, I realized also that this poem resonated with my thesis topic since it praises the internal beauty of African mothers.
Mama Yangu Mpenzi  
*(Dear Lovely Mother)*

*Nakukumbuka sana mama.*  
*(I think about you a lot mum)*

*Buyana bwako mama, Ni bunguvu.*  
*(Your beauty is your strength)*

*Unapoamka asubui mapema,*  
*(Early in the moorning)*

*Ukjielekeza kanisa (ao nyumbani kwa Mungu).*  
*(You go to Church)*

*Nakukumbuka tena mama.*  
*(I think about you again)*

*Unapotoka kanisani,*  
*(Once you come back from church)*

*Una tupeleka shuleni,*  
*Hata bila kula.*  
*(You bring us to school even without eating)*

*Nakukumbuka sana mama.*  
*(I think about you a lot mum)*

*Buyana bwako mama,*  
*Ni kujikaza.*  
*(Your beauty is perseverance)*

*Wakati unapoenda shambani,*  
*Jua kali bila hata kula,*  
*(When you go to the plantations on a sunny day)*

*Unalima, unapanda mimeya,*  
*(You soar and roar)*

*Kiisha unavuna na unaviyisha,*  
*(You roar and keep roaring again)*
Several times when I was working on this thesis, I felt disappointed about my work because I could not feel confident in my ability to complete it. In the middle of the writing process of this thesis, I doubted myself. I wanted to stop, but I realized that it was too late to give up. Each time I felt down, I read this poem and felt comforted. Each word of this poem
constantly resonated in my mind like a musical chorus and taught me to rely upon my internal beauty in order to move ahead: strength, courage, and perseverance.
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APPENDIX A

ANNOUNCEMENT
ANNOUNCEMENT

My name is Gloria Pindi Nziba. I am a graduate student at the School of Communication in San Diego State University. As a requirement of my master's study, I am conducting a research on "Communicating in the Borderland of Identity Construction: Congolese Women and Mediated Representations of Gendered Beauty". This study aims to analyze how Congolese women living in San Diego negotiate standards of beauty. More specifically, this research investigates on how Congolese women’s perceptions of beauty are influenced by images represented in the American media. As a woman you are probably interested in beauty. Besides as a Congolese woman, you have probably noticed differences in beauty conception between American (USA) culture and Congolese culture. In fact, as a Congolese woman living in the USA for about two years, I have myself realized how my identity as a woman is being simultaneously shaped by standards of beauty I carry in my African background and those represented in the American media. Thus, I would like to know how you negotiate those cultural differences and what this negotiation process communicates about your identity. If you ever experienced the same situation, you might be interested in participating in my thesis research.

- Participants will be interviewed at times and places they are convenient.
- Participants will be observed at different settings related to beauty according to their availability.
- Participation will occur during August 2009 and March 2010.
- Participation will remain anonymous. No risk or danger associated with participation.

It is very unfortunate that I cannot pay you for this participation, but by participating to this study you may gain numerous benefits in terms of…

- Learning what research has talked about people like you and what social scientists have discovered about people who are caught between two worlds
- Discussing about issues of beauty that might not be encouraged to think about, but very crucial for a better understanding of yourself self
- Having the opportunity to have a better understanding of the Congolese woman self's perception as adjusting to a new cultural environment.
This study focuses only on Congolese women living in San Diego and it is voluntary. If you don’t want to answer to any of the questions I ask, you don’t have to. Taking part to this study is up to you. No one will be upset if you don’t want to participate. If you decide to participate, remember that you can change your mind and stop any time you want. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed with your permission. I welcome any questions that you have about this study, or any general questions. Anything that you ask me about this study, I will try to answer. If you have any questions, please contact me at 6197641102 or email to glopindi@hotmail.com.

Thanks for your collaboration.

Gloria Pindi Nziba
6571 Green Gables Ave
San Diego, CA 92119
APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM
San Diego State University

Consent to Act as a Research Participant

*Communicating in the Borderland of Identity Construction: Congolese Women and Mediated Representations of Gendered Beauty*

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Before you give your consent to be a volunteer, it is important that you read the following information and ask as many questions as necessary to be sure you understand what you will be asked to do.

**Investigators:** Research will be conducted by Gloria Pindi Nziba, under the direction of Dr. Patricia Geist-Martin, San Diego State University, School of Communication.

**Purpose of the Study:** This study aims to analyze how Congolese women living in San Diego negotiate standards of beauty. As a woman you are probably interested in beauty. Besides as a Congolese woman, you have probably noticed differences in beauty conception between American (USA) culture and Congolese culture. I would like to know how you negotiate those cultural differences and what this negotiation process communicates about your identity.

**Description of Study:** Screening Procedures: To participate in this study, you must be a female Congolese woman, 21 years of age and above living in the USA for at least a year. If your responses indicate that you are eligible, you will be asked to participate. If you are not eligible to participate, the information obtained from you during screening will be omitted from this study.

If you choose to participate in this study you will be asked to participate in one or more interviews and/or observations. You can decide whether to participate in either an observation, an interview, or in both.
Observation: Observations will be arranged by you and the researcher based on his availability and where you are located. I will observe your beauty performance (for example your dressing style or your hairstyle) for no longer than one hour. Observations will happen no more than three times a month, not until March 1, 2010. Observations will take place at different places such as your home, a beauty shop, etc. During observations I will be looking for:

- Types of beauty standards performed? (African, American, Both)?
- Verbal and non verbal practices used to embody these standards? (Dressing style, Hairstyle, Body shape, Body care (cosmetics), or Other)?
- Which conversations occur during this performance/interaction?
- What is communicated through this beauty performance?

Interviews: Interviews will be arranged by you and researcher based on his availability and where you are located. The interview will be no more than one hour and will take place to different places such as your house, my home, at a coffee shop, etc. You may be asked to participate in more than one interview if additional information is needed (such as some clarification or more details). Each interview will take no more than one hour and no more than three times a month, not until March 1, 2010. Those interviews will be audio recorded with your permission. If you do not to choose to be audiotaped, you can still participate in this study by allowing the researcher to take hand notes. You will be asked questions like:

- When you think about something you like to do to enhance your beauty what is it?
- Can you describe any circumstances where you felt that your conception of beauty has been influenced by images represented in the media?
- Can you describe in which ways your conception of beauty has been influenced by American culture since you moved to the USA?
- What challenges of beauty have you faced as a Congolese woman in adjusting to American culture?
- How negotiating both Congolese and American beauty standards shape your identity as a woman?

Risks and Discomforts: By participating in this study, you may experience some discomfort due to the impact that beauty standards may have on your self perceptions. For instance, you may feel that you do not fit into some standards of beauty and feel saddened during the interview. Such awareness might result in slight psychological discomfort due to the nature of the questions. To minimize this potential distress, please remember that you may
discontinue participation either temporarily or permanently. The researcher will also provide you with information to receive free counseling from SDSU’s health services.

**Benefits of the Study:** Participating to this study may contribute to a better understanding of Congolese woman’s self-perception and how adjustment to a new cultural environment impacts your identity. You may gain a better understanding of yourself from your participation. I cannot guarantee, however that you will receive any benefits from participating in this study.

**Confidentiality:** Confidentiality will be maintained to the extent allowed by law. Research files will be stored at the residence of Gloria Pindi Nziba for at least three years. A fake name will be randomly assigned to you. The Participants have the right to review all interview transcripts and audio recordings prior to submission to professor, conferences, or publication. All tape recordings of interviews will only be heard by researcher and will be destroyed after transcripts occur. Gloria Pindi Nziba, Dr. Patricia Geist-Martin, and participants are the only people allowed to access research (participants only able to access their information, not other participants’).

**Incentives to Participate:** There are no costs to you for participating in this study. You will not be paid to participate in this study.

**Voluntary Nature of Participation:** Participation in this study is voluntary. Your choice of whether or not to participate will not influence your future relations with the researcher or San Diego State University or Gloria Pindi Nziba. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and to stop your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are allowed.

**Questions:** If you have any questions about the research now, please ask. If you have any questions later about the research, you may contact Gloria Pindi Nziba (telephone: 6197641102, email: glopindi@hotmail.com).
If you have any questions regarding your rights as a human subject and participation in this study, you may contact the SDSU Institutional Review Board at 619-594-6622 or irb@mail.sdsu.edu.

*Agreement:* You indicate that by participating in this study that you have read the information in this document and have had a chance to ask any questions you have about the study. Participating in this study also indicates that you agree to be in the study and have been told that you can change your mind and withdraw your consent to participate at any time. You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records. You have been told that by completing the survey you are not giving up any of your legal rights.
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW GUIDE
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Opening: Thank you for volunteering to participate in this research. This interview is for my thesis which is about Congolese women living in San Diego and the negotiation of beauty standards. As a woman you are probably interested in beauty. Besides as a Congolese woman, you have probably noticed differences in beauty conception between American (USA) culture and Congolese culture. I would like to know how Congolese women negotiate those cultural differences and what this negotiation process communicates about their identity. I hope that you as a participant will also learn and benefit from this study. Our conversation will be based on various questions ranging from your general background information to those that will recall your feelings or emotions as well as reveal your personal experiences. Please feel free to let me know if you don’t understand a question or if you don’t feel comfortable answering a question. I would like to remind you that this conversation will remain confidential and anonymous. Your name will not be indicated in the interview. I will use pseudonyms. Also, besides taking notes, I will tape-record the interview with your permission so that I might be able to represent your words as closely as possible. Do you have any question before we start?

I. Questions

1. When you think of standards of beauty what comes in your mind?

2. How do you describe what it is to be a beautiful woman?

3. Do you perceive yourself as a beautiful woman?

4. When you think about something you like to do to enhance your beauty what is it (or what are they)?

5. What do you try to communicate to people about yourself by doing that?

6. Have you ever been in a situation where you felt that you had to imitate someone hairstyle, dressing style, skin color, etc.? Can you describe this situation?
7. Can you think of any circumstances where you felt that your conception of beauty has been recognized?

8. Sometimes what makes people feel beautiful is when they are complimented. Can you describe a time back home someone complimented you about your body?

9. Is there a specific time you recently felt that someone told you something good or bad about your body? How did you feel?

10. Are there moments you recently felt pleased or uncomfortable with your physical appearance? Can you tell me something about this experience?

11. People sometimes rely on media to get some beauty tips. Can you describe any circumstances where you felt that your conception of beauty has been influenced by images represented in the media?

12. Do you consider these images as standards of beauty?

13. Are there moments where you felt to be under the pressure to conform your physical appearance to those images to look attractive?

14. Can you describe in which ways your conception of beauty has been influenced by American culture since you have moved to the USA?

15. What challenges of beauty have you faced as a Congolese woman in adjusting to American culture?

16. How negotiating both African and American standards of beauty shape your identity as a woman?

17. What do you think your physical appearance culturally communicates about your identity?
18. If you met a Congolese who just arrived in the U.S., what suggestions might you make to her about the beauty standards in U.S.?

II. Demographic/Background Meanings
a. Nationality: Are you from the Democratic Republic of Congo? (a) yes (b) no
b. Sex: (a) female (b) male
c. Race: (a) black (b) hybrid (c) white
d. Age: (a) 21-30 (b) 30-40 (c) 40-50 (d) 50-60 (e) other
e. Status: (a) single (b) married (c) divorced (d) widow
f. Length of stay (sojourn): (a) under 5 years (b) over 5 years

III. Wrap-up
• Is there anything else I should know about your experience on adjusting to negotiating beauty standards?

• Would you like to receive a copy of my research findings?

Closing: Thank you very much for your time. You have provided me a lot of good information. Let me know if you have any question before we end this interview. Have a good day.