



THE  
SAMUEL DUBOIS COOK  
CENTER ON SOCIAL EQUITY

# Hank & Billye Suber Aaron Young Scholars Summer Research Institute

3<sup>rd</sup> Year Cohort

Research Papers

Summer 2019

# **The Toxic Spring of Organic Beauty: The Unintended Effects of the Green Beauty**

## **Industry**

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### **Abstract**

Organic cosmetic products have increased in popularity in Western nations causing businesses to launch campaigns to increase the demand for these products. To obtain the organic ingredients to produce these products, cosmetic companies exploit resources from countries that have large populations of People of Color (these countries are commonly referred to as “developing countries”). These businesses take advantage of countries with weak labour laws and create a parasitic interdependence with said countries so that they seemingly have no other choice but to provide resources for Western beauty commodities. Cosmetic companies also use child workers to extract resources for their products. This paper analyzes the history of marketing in the beauty industry and how this motivated consumers to buy organic products, then inspects cosmetic companies outsourcing and countries that are harmed in the process.

### **Introduction**

Businesses have been rebranding and fueling an infatuation with “green beauty” since the 1970s. Instead of purchasing ready-to-use products, women started to make their own beauty products. “The origin of the organic beauty industry dates back to the second world war when product rationing and shortages were commonplace and homemade beauty remedies were an

easy and cheaper choice” (Connelly 2). The popularity of these products sparked a curiosity in American and European consumers, concerning the ingredients that are used in personal care commodities that are not branded as organic and or natural. Concerns such as these have motivated a change in the beauty industry, and with organic and all natural products on the rise, the question is : *where and how are cosmetic companies getting these natural resources?*

## **Terminology**

In my analysis and according to Kotschwar, “the term green beauty describes a cultural trend where environmental and eco-conscious themes co-exist within the specific context of beauty, personal care, and fashion,” (Kotschwar 9). *Majority World Countries* is a more appropriate term used to refer to developing countries or third world countries. Wylie explains how the term Majority World is also suitable: “The term Majority World reflects the view that most countries in the world live in circumstances with different resources from those in the Minority World (CITE). Minority World is used in preference to the terms ‘developed countries’ and the ‘Global North’,” (Wylie 1). The terms, “developing countries” and “third world” are inappropriate because the term “developing” places Western countries on a pedestal compared to the rest of the world. This contributes to the narrative that these countries are not as civilized or as valuable. In fact, third world countries was originally used to refer to countries that were neutral during the Cold War, but now its’ meaning implies these countries inferiority to the Western world. In this research paper the terms cosmetic product and personal care product are

used synonymously. Also a product is considered organic if plant based grown without pesticides and processed without chemicals.

### **Thesis Statement**

- Western obsession with “green beauty” motivates cosmetic companies to exploit People of Color in Majority World Countries for their human and natural resources.

### **Research Questions**

- How does Western obsession with ‘natural’ products impact the exploitation of Majority World countries?
- How are Western frames of mind/fixation towards organic products influenced by beauty companies?

### **Methodology**

Most of the research surrounding the impact of organic cosmetic companies is specific to certain countries. An article that was used for research and analysis is “Shea Butter: A feminized subsidy from nature” which is a study of shea butter in West Africa through a feminized lense while looking at the effects of globalization and shea butter demands. “The Organic Beauty Industry a Gendered Economic Review ” and “Green Beauty: Going 'Green' with Personal Care

Products in 21st century american culture” provided historical context for the term green beauty and the organic beauty industry. They also reviewed marketing tactics used by the beauty industry. Other research analyzes exploitation methods used by these companies which includes, but is not limited to, child labour and monopolization in order to get natural resources.

## **Background**

During World War II, most women stopped wearing makeup, and if they continued to do so, it was typically only lipstick. The reason behind this is because the government used images like Rosie the Riveter to encourage women to join the workforce. In turn, red lipstick became a standard image for working women. According to Connelly, about 80 to 90 percent of adult women were purchasing lipstick at that time (Connelly 21). Although lipstick was extremely popular, it was not producing the same amount of profit prior to the war. Consequently, the beauty industry became commercialized so that they could reconstruct after their major loss in revenue.

Soon after the commercialization of the beauty industry, women began to question the branding of make up as a necessity. Women continued to question the materials going into their products and where they were coming from. Due to this, women started to seek out brands that didn't pressure gender norms on them and the majority of these brands were organic and eco-friendly brands. Eco-friendly movements gave a large push towards organic personal care products and “green beauty”: “There were many motivations for consumers to leave the traditional beauty industry, as it seemed it had been built upon and embraced only harmful

business practices...organic beauty companies attracted many new consumers because their ingredient integrity was justifiable as was their social justice and pro-environmental agendas,” (Connelly 21). The switch to environmentally conscious products was seen as an extremely beneficial move for those who were invested in environmental conservation; even so, there is still harm done by companies even if it may not be to the environment.

### **Exploitation Strategies**

In order for cosmetic companies to be considered eco-friendly, most of the ingredients must be organic. The only ingredients that cannot be organic are non-harmful chemicals that are used to preserve products. Plant-based organic products must be grown without the use of pesticides and processed without excessive chemicals. Some resources are exclusive to certain regions and countries, and countries with labour laws that are supportive of workers tend to increase the production cost. Because of this, cosmetic companies turn to other countries to meet production demands, and beauty companies take advantage of Majority World Countries in many ways.

### **Child Labour**

Countries in Asia, particularly India, have a valuable mineral called Mica. Mica is usually found in rural areas in India, and the environment around Mica is very dry so not many people live there. Mica is also very difficult to obtain because it can only be found in caves. Since the caves are small, children are sent inside to gather the Mica: “In India, child labor is employed to

extract Mica, the mineral that adds a shimmer to beauty products such as blusher, eye shadow, lipstick, and foundation,” (Chelliah 1). In India, child labour is the most common means of exploitation. By using children, companies are able to pay their workers extremely low prices.

### Female Workers

Countries in West Africa are also being exploited for chocolate and shea butter: “The chocolate industry has struggled to stamp out widespread child labour in farms across West Africa,” (Chelliah 1). Women in West Africa harvest shea nuts and turn them into shea butter which is used in several many self-care products: lotions, shampoos, conditioners, and body washes. Once the popularity of shea butter rose in the 80’s, women saw it as an opportunity to make a living. The women, once done making the shea butter, would then sell it to a third-party who would sell it to cosmetic companies: “They then sell to more capitalized merchant middlemen and wholesalers, typically men, who distribute the butter regionally or on the export market” (Elias 44). Fair trade organizations subsequently started paying women directly: “International women in-development (WID) projects are promoting new technologies to improve exported shea butter quality made from West African women’s groups. The idea is to encourage cosmetics firms to purchase shea butter directly from the female producers, thereby building a marketing relationship based on ‘fair’ trade. With the middleman’s profits eliminated, women’s incomes are expected to rise” (Elias 1). This is an example how products get the certification to brand and sell as equitable because they pay their workers fairly.

Although this certification may look like a positive thing, because the women in West Africa have a new source of income, it has actually caused an issue for the women. To

understand why this is a problem, it is important to examine how making shea butter works. Shea trees are not planted commercially; women harvest shea nuts from trees that have always been present in their communities. In most West African cultures, only women are allowed process the nuts that come from the tree into shea butter. This is due to cultural beliefs, and in a few West African countries it is illegal for men to harvest the shea nuts. Making shea butter was not a primary source of income for women in the community at first, but as the profits increased, for some women it became so. Due to the increased pay of the women, some men in the community saw this as a chance to monopolize the shea butter market in the region: “women are being made to share shea revenues with male household heads...a quarter of households surveyed in a village known for its shea production. In an additional 7 percent of the households, the male family head claimed the entire value of female shea nut sales” (Elias 52). Cosmetics companies are concerned about what their consumers think of them so, in turn they give these women money thinking it will fix problems and improve the company's reputation. These companies offer solutions that are not considerate of how the people in these countries operate and this has happened in the past as well: “History has shown that female-controlled crops can become the purview of men upon an increase in economic value, all the while maintaining women’s role in their labour-intensive processing steps” (Elias 53).

### **Ethically Sourced**

Exploitation of Majority World Countries is not a new concept, nor is it solely an issue with the beauty industry. Many nations are susceptible to exploitation because of their abundance



of natural resources. Along with this, many Western companies have historically inserted themselves into these countries. Due to the concerns of ethnic groups, and the well-being of people in these nations, laws have been passed to protect the workers in these countries from exploitation and the over-extraction of natural resources. Organizations have made certifications to show consumers which companies are active supporters of the laws that protect natural resources. This has become the primary way that “green beauty” consumers recognize if their products are sourced ethically. However, again, labels such as these do not look factors beyond fair wages and environmental benefits. These labels ignore any other issues caused by green beauty companies

## **Conclusion**

Cosmetics companies need to be held responsible for the problems that they cause in other countries. Although it may be disguised as good will or good intentions, there are still people who are constantly being hurt by unethical businesses. Consumers have been misled about many things in regards to the products they purchase; however, in a strive for transparency about where we get our products from and how they are being made, other countries have been harmed. Even with an effort to improve cosmetic companies involvement in Majority World Countries, said improvements have shown to be fruitless. We, as a society, should care about these countries because their contribution of labor and resources is what keeps other businesses, industries, and economical structures standing. Ethical and financially advantageous work should be in place for Majority World Countries. Consumers, in the past through the power of their

dollar, have caused beauty companies to change what's in their products, and if they were successful, we can demand businesses to make a change today.

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