



'Fascinating'
NIGELLA LAWSON

'Awe-inspiring'
FUNMI FETTO



Eyeliner

A CULTURAL HISTORY



'An arresting
feminist narrative'
RAFIA ZAKARIA



'A treat to read'
KASSIA ST CLAIR

ZAHRA HANKIR

ZAHRA HANKIR

Zahra Hankir, a Lebanese British journalist and the editor of *Our Women on the Ground*, writes about the intersections of politics, culture and society. Her work has appeared in publications including *Condé Nast Traveller*, the *Observer*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *Bloomberg Businessweek*, *Los Angeles Times* and *The Rumpus*, and on BBC News and Al Jazeera English. She was awarded a Jack R. Howard Fellowship in International Journalism to attend the Columbia Journalism School and holds degrees in politics and Middle Eastern studies.

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*Our Women on the Ground:
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To Teta, Mama, and Yasmin



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Preface

I must've been about seventeen; I can't be sure. But I do remember how insecure I felt. My mother had dragged me to a family engagement party, at which men and women were segregated, per Islamic tradition. We were in my hometown, Sidon, in South Lebanon. Mama had framed her hazel eyes with forest-green eyeliner on the planes of her eyelids and jet-black kohl along her waterlines. She reserved this look for special occasions such as weddings and visits to our home from family friends and potential suitors who wished to ask for my hand in marriage (Mama supported my refusal to engage with said suitors). I often watched her when she applied her makeup, which she did ritualistically, with great care and consideration, as if it weren't merely a beautification process but a moment of transcendence. With six children, a full-time job, and the world's weight on her shoulders—in a country continually teetering on the edge of collapse—she was surrounded by

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constant chaos. But her hand never wavered when she applied her eyeliner; it was as if the world had come to a standstill. Steadily, and with great precision, she would close one eye and swipe the kohl applicator along her waterlines, allowing both rims to catch the pigment. When she opened her made-up eyes, I marveled at her beauty.

At the engagement party that evening, she took off her floral hijab, volumized her highlighted hair with the tips of her fingers, kicked off her heels, and danced the night away. She encouraged me to get up and join her, extending her manicured hand, but I demurred. The entire guest list was entranced, as though she'd unintentionally upstaged the bride-to-be. I, on the other hand, was seated quietly in a corner, barefaced save my kohl, and dressed somewhat casually. When people greeted us, they commented on how much I resembled my father—which was to say, I had inherited his dark and prominent features, and looked nothing like my mother, nor did I possess her infectious energy. I could only ever dream of being so confident.



Before moving back to South Lebanon following the end of a fifteen-year-long civil war that had all but obliterated the country, my family lived in the UK, where my parents had sought safety and stability and where I was born during the 1980s. As a young girl with Levantine and Egyptian heritage living in a claustrophobic city in northern England, I learned that to “assimilate” or “integrate” with the majority-white community, I had to minimize every aspect of myself. This was perfectly all right with me,

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in theory; I'd much rather have disappeared into the background than be seen anyway, as I was naturally introverted. But as a family, we couldn't help but stand out, and not just because of how we looked. During assembly, my four brothers and I excused ourselves, as we'd been instructed by our parents to avoid singing Christian hymns; we awkwardly exited the hall daily with the school's few other Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses. (To ensure we never forgot we were Muslim, my father would sometimes wake us up at the break of dawn to pray with him. I also attended private Qur'an lessons with my Pakistani peers.) We skipped school lunch during Ramadan, and I was rarely allowed to hang out with friends. When we went swimming for our physical education classes, at my parents' request, I wore leotards and cycling shorts to cover my body, prompting stares and giggles. My mispronounced name eventually became my known name. I was once curiously asked to give my class a presentation on Islam and brought along with me a prayer carpet and Qur'an. As I shared the five pillars of the religion, my classmates mostly gawked at me, perplexed.

Even when I made a concerted effort to mingle, I was often taunted and bullied. A larger girl took great pleasure in repeatedly pushing me to the ground during recess. One afternoon when I was eleven, I came home from school with tears streaming down my face; after netball practice, I'd overheard one of my white classmates refer to my brothers and me as "weird" and call us the "P word"—a racist term used to offend people of Pakistani heritage—and two other girls had laughed in agreement. At home, I implored my mother to explain why these girls were so mean to me.

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Mama was sympathetic about this predictable reaction to my being othered. But as an immigrant who was fearful for her family's precarious situation back in Lebanon and who had experienced othering herself along with my father in incendiary ways, one of which involved a lawsuit, she also had to contend with more serious matters. She did, however, glean that my early insecurities were exacerbated by the knowledge that I was non-white, Muslim, foreign, and consequently believed to be "strange." I was merely made to feel there was something inherently wrong with me due to the religion I was born into and my heritage, when I should have been taking pride in both, she reassured me.

One of my only genuine friends at the time was May, an Egyptian who wore bell-bottoms and scrunchies and who lived in the same building complex as us. I was twelve, she was fourteen; her parents were less strict than mine, and so she had already started to wear makeup. Unlike me, she was far from timid, but we bonded over our shared heritage and Muslim background. While hanging out after school one afternoon, she was determined to "make me over." With Ace of Base blasting in the background from her stereo, she carefully drew eyeliner onto my lids and curled my lashes with mascara. When I looked into the mirror, I was both pleased and surprised; it was as if I could finally *see* myself, as if I had somehow come into focus.



We returned to Lebanon as a family in the 1990s, as my parents had decided the country was safe enough for us to live in after the end of the war, and partly also because they protectively did not

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want me to experience my teenage years in England. There, as a young adult whose insecurities had only metamorphosed, I attempted to assert control over my looks, often to my conservative father's dismay. I had the kinks and waves straightened out of my temperamental hair once a week by Fatima, a boisterous Palestinian salon owner who chain-smoked as she fried my strands with tongs. (My eyebrows were thinned out so brutally by this same woman that they've never fully recovered.) I avoided feminine clothing and high heels, for they would mean I'd take up more space in a world that already felt hostile toward me. And I dressed like my four brothers year-round, very much wanting to be a boy, knowing they were afforded certain privileges I was not.

While I wasn't inundated with filtered images of friends and influencers the way that today's teenagers are, I regularly pored over *Teen Vogue* and other Western magazines and catalogs that had made their way into Lebanon. Admittedly, at times, I wished I could look more like the blond white girls who stared back at me from the glossy pages. I once fixated on an advertisement featuring a thin, fair model whose eyes were framed with kohl. As I saw it, she embodied breezy perfection because she was everything I was not: the manifestation of Eurocentric beauty norms. (I'd later learn she was Kate Moss.)

But then, at about fourteen, I encountered her—Queen Nefertiti, *my* queen—for the first time. My father was an avid collector of *National Geographic* magazines, both old and new. Being half-Egyptian, he was also obsessed with all things Egyptology. One of the issues he'd stumbled on, dated 1961, featured a spread on Nefertiti, with an image of her bust, and a white woman peering at it. The left side of the queen's face was visible, and clearly

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missing an eye, but the eye socket was lined with kohl. I imagined that the queen—whose name, aptly, means “the beautiful one has arrived”—connected me to a larger constellation of beguiling non-Western women. In the years since, I’ve remained infatuated with her. And in 2022, I finally made a pilgrimage to Berlin to meet her stucco-coated, multicolored bust. She was as exquisite as I’d always presumed her to be, with her mesmerizing kohl-rimmed eyes, chiseled features, and symmetrical face. Years after I first glimpsed her in the magazine, I still see something of myself in the queen.



I’ve been likened to Nefertiti at least three times. First, at sixteen, four years after we had relocated to postwar Lebanon. I used to smuggle my eyeliner into school by way of my pencil case, because makeup was forbidden; I’d sometimes hide it in my bra and reapply it in the bathroom. A tall, floppy-haired boy at school who had a mild crush on me said I resembled the queen. Per my dramatic diary, he told me it was the darkness of my eyes, whose lids were weighed down with straight eyelashes and stained with black kohl, that had captivated him.

On reflection, he was most certainly attempting to impress me with his knowledge of ancient Egyptian power women. That said, I was indeed flattered, and, given my insecurities, I appreciated the name-dropping and unsolicited attention before politely rebuffing him. Thanks to my infatuation with Nefertiti, I had already taken an interest in the history of makeup and had come to the understanding that kohl went far beyond prettification. It

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carried with it stories about my mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, and ancestors before them. I saw kohl as a constant companion for the women in my family, one that protected and empowered my proud lineage.

As my interest in this remarkable product deepened, I searched for its meaning in history. There, I discovered an abundance of figures and cultural practices beyond those I knew from Western music and film. I found eyeliner in the Arab world's deserts and in the savannas of Africa, in the hair salons of Iran, and in the alleyways of Kyoto. I found it on the faces of Indian storytellers, Latin American freedom fighters, and Palestinian activists. Even the Arab pop artists I listened to wielded eyeliner as an empowering tool to express their individuality—I thought Egyptian singer Ruby's darkened eyes were particularly daring, as they deliberately enhanced her seductive aura. And so I started to wear kohl more frequently, all the while worrying my father might notice and forbid me from wearing cosmetics altogether. (It was enough that I'd already pierced my ears—*twice*.)

In the years that followed my troubled time at high school, after I enrolled at the American University of Beirut, my younger, tougher, and only sister, Yasmin, encouraged me to embrace the art of more dramatic eyeliner application by teaching me herself, and later sending me YouTube tutorials. So, I graduated from under-eye kohl to full cat eye—the blacker, the better. I created the look by applying the cheapest Western liquid liner I could find at local drugstores, usually Maybelline, to my upper lids, and kohl imported from Pakistan to Sidon's souks, Hashmi Kajal, along my waterlines. By twenty, my transformation was complete: I had swapped loose clothing for miniskirts, biology textbooks for

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Nietzsche and Edward Said, and straightened hair for a bouffant that, at various points, was auburn, jet black, and streaked with blond.

I built two worlds for myself, which I worked hard to ensure wouldn't collide. In South Lebanon, I was my parents' traditional daughter. But in Beirut, I experimented with my looks and beliefs. Occasionally the two worlds seeped into one another: I'd forget to remove my nose piercing when visiting home on weekends, or I'd casually say I believed in civil marriage. By now, I'd rejected Eurocentric beauty norms and embraced eyeliner and kohl as an expression of my identity, also by way of Nefertiti. Wearing eyeliner seemed to lend me a sense of power reminiscent of the queen's authority. My religious mother wasn't too keen on this physical and intellectual transformation: she once stopped talking to me for days after spotting a Facebook photo of me in a bikini (she's since forgiven these transgressions). So committed was I to my eyeliner that I only ever went without it when I returned to Sidon from Beirut on weekends, and when enduring tricky bouts of depression.

During my undergraduate studies, I briefly dated a socialist who asked me what I thought of Syria's military occupation of Lebanon and told me I looked like Nefertiti in the same breath. He was smoking shisha at a café nestled in the Lebanese mountains; we were sitting outdoors. It was a gorgeous late summer evening, the kind of evening Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani wrote about so wistfully. The sun had started to set. The weather was milder than usual, but there was a breeze hinting at the imminent change in seasons, and a nearby jasmine tree made itself known to us with each waft of fragrant air. I'd just removed my oversize

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sunglasses, which I often hid behind. For a moment, I was worried the socialist would think me disheveled, as my eyeliner had wilted a little in the day's humidity. When he said the queen's name, I smiled coyly, then demanded a drag of the shisha. In truth, my heart was dancing—not because of the person complimenting me, but because of what he was implying: I was not only attractive, but regal. It's a rare moment in time in which I can trace the precise evolution of my confidence. I had, perhaps, finally come of age.

The third time I was likened to Nefertiti was by a British finance bro with whom I shared a corporate elevator in central London. I had left Lebanon for college and my career, and was well into my twenties at this point, though my struggles with confidence weren't too far behind me. "You look exotic," he said boldly. "A bit like Nefertiti." This time around, I bristled at the suggestion. If ever there were an Orientalist compliment, this was it. While his gaze appeared to flatten the queen, my relationship to her reached deep into my roots and identity. Nefertiti seemed a fascinating mirror in this way: what we see in the royal wife reveals more about us than we will ever know about her.



My commitment to kohl has prevailed, to the extent that my mother never fails to ask me if I'm ill when I'm without it. On most days of nationwide lockdowns in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, I still donned a full cat eye for video conferences: it helped me maintain the illusion of normalcy. I wear eyeliner to Pilates, to the bodega, and when I'm alone at home. I even wore it

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during eight days of extreme camping in Chad, where I was researching the Wodaabe people for this book. (My eyeliner often reflects the phases of my work: when I wrote the chapter on Amy Winehouse, my wings inadvertently grew larger, until they began to touch the edges of my eyebrows.) I'm rarely if ever without the magical lines adorning my eyes, just as I am never without my culture, my ancestors, or my mother.

It's possible, of course, to assign too much meaning to one's physicality, such that beautifying oneself can become a frivolous and time-wasting mission, an exercise in vanity, or a palpable burden. But my kohl wearing has never merely been about looking a particular way (though I can't complain about its aesthetic benefits). Now, I can see my juvenile preoccupation with physical appearance was rooted in my coming to terms with a "strangeness" that was imposed upon me and that I'd internalized as a vulnerable, sensitive girl who grew up in the UK in the late 1980s and early 1990s and, more broadly, as a teenager learning to navigate new worlds.

Because I'd started to encounter Nefertiti's legacy everywhere—in ads on the billboards of Cairo; on the eyes of my Syrian Lebanese grandmother in Polaroid photos from the 1960s; on Saudi feminists; and on the Lebanese legend Fairuz—I'd also started to internalize the sheer power and reach of "weird" women, and resultantly myself. And because kohl originated in the East, I often felt as if I were traversing space and time and conversing with my ancestors while wearing it in the West. Today, kohl is, to my mind, a celebration of my identity and the glorious and profound histories swirling around it. When I stencil my eyes with black

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pigment, I am performing not only an act of self-love, but also one of self-preservation.

The question of where eyeliner fits into one's persona is the driving force of these pages. To minorities and communities of color, kohl transcends aesthetics. It's about identity and one's sense of self; power and gender; spirituality and religiosity; sexuality and coming-of-age; rites of passage; rebellion and resistance; and the relationship between mothers and daughters. Kohl is also a cause for celebration and pride, a tool laden with centuries of layered histories—of empires, queens and kings, poets, writers and nomads. Imagine that? Carrying all that history in a little tube or pencil or pot that fits in pockets and purses.

To wear eyeliner and learn about its origins is to bring not only ourselves, but also some of the world's most fascinating cultures, into focus.

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Introduction: Liner Notes



Despite its ubiquity, there's more to eyeliner than meets the eye. This seldom-examined object frames the eyes of women on the New York City subway and Bedouin men in the deserts of the Arabian Peninsula. Instagram influencers experiment with graphic liner designs, and supermodels sport wings on Paris runways. Members of the Taliban smear a form of eyeliner onto their lids to repel the sun, as do Afghan Pashtuns and tribes along the Himalayan and Afghanistan-Pakistan mountain ranges. Per religious tradition, living goddesses in Nepal decorate their eyes with the cosmetic, similar to kathakali storytellers in India, channeling tales both past and present. When they can't access retail liner, some women prisoners in the US make their own with pencil graphite and Vaseline. Fashion-conscious beatniks paired eyeliner with berets, and Russian dancers of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes donned flicks of it while onstage. Vikings wore charcoal to protect their vision during battle; even Mesopotamians may have used kohl, applying it with a stick shaped like a spatula. While they didn't use kohl as prolifically as the ancient Egyptians,

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ancient Greek women darkened their eyes with a mixture of soot, antimony, and burnt cork. The Prophet Muhammad was said to have worn a form of eyeliner, too, and spoke of its healing properties. There are traces of the cosmetic in the Old Testament, which mentions figures, including Jezebel, with “painted eyes”; two were “harlots,” though the use of eye paint was not strictly considered objectionable per the scriptures. A disparate (and not remotely all-encompassing) list of characters and contexts, indeed—such is the reach of this versatile and influential object.



After the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, eyeliner sales soared—and lipstick sales plummeted—due to the widespread use of face masks. By 2021, the global eye makeup market had surged to \$15.6 billion and was set to swell to \$21.4 billion by 2027. The growth trajectory is staggering. It comes as no surprise, however, that eyeliner and eye pencils constitute the largest market segment, edging out mascara and eyeshadow by 5 percent.

Cross-culturally, the aesthetic goal of eyeliner has, for centuries, been to beautify, enhance, enlarge, or further manipulate the shape of the eyes. The cosmetic can transform faces from exhausted to awake, take an outfit from work appropriate to date appropriate, and elevate an overall look from bare and subdued to adorned and seductive—all with a few swipes. (Commenting on eyeliner’s transformative power in her book *I Feel Bad about My Neck*, Nora Ephron wrote: “There are a couple of old boy-friends whom I always worry about bumping into, but there’s no chance—if I ever did—that I would recognize either of them. On

top of which they live in other cities. But the point is that I still think about them every time I'm tempted to leave the house without eyeliner.") Depending on the day, eyeliner wearers may be sultry or demure, rebellious or clean-cut, low-key or loud. Some are protecting themselves from evil spirits or honoring a god, while others may be treating their eyes for an infection or blocking the sun. Like ink itself, eyeliner helps us deliver messages to the world: we are confident, we belong to a proud subculture, we express ourselves, we are our own creations. There's an eyeliner style and a story for virtually every look.

The art of eyeliner application can be painstakingly precise: experts employ the care and consideration a painter or a calligrapher might use on a blank canvas. The rules are many, though malleable, and the technique can take years to perfect. The applicator must move steadily, to ensure the pigment glides seamlessly onto the eyelid or waterline. Apply too thick a line to the lid, and you risk shrinking the eye; apply lines that bleed, and you may give your eyes an undesirable raccoon effect. Different eye shapes can suit different styles—a black line on the lower waterline can make small eyes look smaller, whereas a single line along the upper lid may make them look bigger. Hinging on the angle of the upturn, wings can widen the eye—or, according to one TikTokker, even reveal whether the wearer is a millennial or Gen Z.

The slightest quiver of the wrist can mean entire lines must be redrawn, a time-consuming struggle to which few are immune. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the American politician known aesthetically for her signature dark eyeliner and red lipstick, once posted on Instagram about her botched attempt at a wing: "I just want you all to know that no matter who you are or where you're

from, no matter how much you achieve in life, eyeliner will always humble you,” she said.

Applicators come in many forms, from fingers and bones to brushes and plastic rods. Some people use their pinkies to fine-tune their imperfect lines, while others use stencils, wipes, or cotton swabs. Color and consistency are important, too. Black eyeliner can be aging, while brown, green, or blue can be more flattering. (Princess Diana famously wore blue eyeliner, likely to echo the blue in her eyes.) Liquid, gel, and cream eyeliners are best used on lids, while pencils and powders work well on waterlines. And then there’s the shape and length of the lines; the choices are endless, as Instagrammers and TikTokers have made clear. Your eyeliner can even be “sharp enough to kill a man,” declares one popular meme—and cat-eye devotee Taylor Swift.

The effort pays off. Eyeliner, of course, can make a woman appear significantly more attractive, and attractiveness, or “pretty privilege,” is meaningfully associated with a disturbingly wide range of positive social and economic outcomes (though often the woman would have to be “conventionally” attractive to benefit from this privilege). Women, especially women of color, are held to high and specific standards when it comes to their appearance at work. In the office, women who wear the right kind of makeup—not too heavy, not too light—are seen as more competent and effective leaders; a pronounced wing may be looked at less favorably than tightlining. When worn well, eyeliner can give the illusion of doe eyes, implying youth. And those with “baby faces” are thought to fare better in life as they’re perceived to be more honest, trustworthy, or charismatic than others.

Conversely, some young people wear eyeliner to appear older

or more mature. Twelve-year-olds Alice Craig and Cristina Wilson, grade-school classmates who now attend different Manhattan middle schools, gather in friends' bedrooms on weekends to trade eyeliner techniques gleaned from YouTube tutorials. Among their group, the girls explained, eyeliner is the cosmetic of choice. "It's not about looking 'cute,'" Wilson says. "Eyeliner makes you look cool and bold. It makes you look older, too. It's not like anyone will think you're fifteen. But maybe they'll take you more seriously."

"A lot of girls we know mostly use makeup to cover up things they think are flaws, or they're doing something subtle to look prettier but natural," says Craig. "I think if that makes you feel more confident, go for it. But my friends and I don't find that way of using makeup very interesting. Eyeliner is different. It's basically the opposite of subtle or 'naturally pretty.' Eyeliner shows your personality."

This is eyeliner's sheer power, unmatched by those other items in your makeup bag.



Eyeliner resides comfortably in almost every corner of pop culture, from music and theater to film and art. It's regularly employed as a transformative marker of maturity, drama, seduction, sexuality, strength, or rebelliousness. On Western screens, high-intensity eyeliner has been used to signify madness or transgression. Femme fatales such as Akasha, played by the late Aaliyah in the 2002 film *Queen of the Damned*, and Julie Marsden, played by Bette Davis in the 1938 film *Jezebel*, were made up in eyeliner (Graham

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Greene memorably described Davis as having “popping, neurotic eyes, a kind of corrupt and phosphorescent prettiness”). Twisted male protagonists like the late Heath Ledger as the Joker in *The Dark Knight* and Robert Pattinson in *The Batman* wore smudged lines. In the Netflix series *Orange Is the New Black*, several of the rebellious female inmates at a New York prison creatively and consistently trace their eyes with pigment, my favorite look being the long and thin flicks worn by the gutsy Maritza Ramos, played by Diane Guerrero. In *Game of Thrones*, the nomadic group known as the Dothraki wear eyeliner prolifically, particularly its male warriors on horseback. The troubled chess player portrayed by Anya Taylor-Joy in *The Queen’s Gambit* draws lines that grow more dramatic as she becomes progressively more unhinged; in an alcohol-induced haze, she paints floating lines a centimeter below her natural lower lashes, producing an uncanny, doll-like effect. And in the HBO show *Euphoria*, the eyeliner worn by actor Alexa Demie’s character, Maddy Perez, is distinct and bold, reflecting her tough yet emotionally volatile persona. As depicted in *The Crown*, Princess Diana, prior to being interviewed by the BBC’s *Panorama* program about Prince Charles’s infidelity, applies black eyeliner heavily to her bottom waterline, giving her eyes a somber, mournful appearance. Eyeliner, incidentally, isn’t always used on the eyes. John Waters, the American filmmaker and director, creates his trademark pencil mustache with Maybelline’s Expert Wear Velvet Black eyeliner.

Eyeliner has also served practical purposes in the arts. During the 1920s, with the introduction of “movie palaces,” films were broadcast in black and white, and directors required that cast

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members line their eyes to ensure they popped against a monochrome backdrop. In theater and opera historically performed against candles or lamplights, eyeliner was applied liberally to performers' faces to help the audience see their expressions more clearly. Some celebrities and artists have had especially intimate relationships to their liner, so much so that it became a trademark that they would be unrecognizable without. Consider, for a moment, Amy Winehouse without her graphic wings, or a barefaced Trixie Mattel.



Eyeliner speaks a universal language of transformation. But its roots lie firmly in the East, beginning with ancient Egypt, where the earliest evidence of its use dates to at least 3100 BCE, and where it was used for medicinal, spiritual, and cosmetic purposes. In Africa's ancient Land of Punt, galena was likely used as a source for kohl, as evidenced by trade between the kingdom and ancient Egyptians. People across the continent, from Berbers in Morocco and Oromos in Ethiopia to nomads in Chad, also use kohl to repel the sun and to beautify or medicate their eyes. However one refers to eyeliner in the Global South—kajal, kohl, surma, or sormeh—the cosmetic has been highly influential, and can convey messages about power, religiosity, and a commitment to moral codes.

In the Arab world and spanning swaths of Asia and Africa, some mothers still apply kohl to their newborns' eyes to ward off the evil eye, the superstition that a jealous glance or gaze can cause harm. Across South Asia and Africa, many Muslims don't look at

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kohl, surma, or kajal as makeup, but rather as an element of their faithfulness and an integral part of preparing for religious holidays including Eid and Ramadan.

Communities of color today also use eyeliner to express themselves and assert their identities in the face of marginalization and white supremacy. Ziwe Fumudoh, an American talk show host who went viral for pressing her interviewees on Black culture and politics, often boasts a signature eyeliner look. “Most hosts are like, ‘What’s your next project? How can we promote it?’ as opposed to ‘How many Black friends do you have? What do you like about Black people qualitatively?’” she told *Allure* in September 2020. “I’m asking those questions with my intense eyeliner and pigment on my face. I’m trying to contextualize these products that I have and bring them into conversations about race and class and gender. . . . Nothing exists in a vacuum. I don’t exist in a vacuum, the makeup I wear doesn’t exist in a vacuum.”

New York-based writer Elaine Louie, who’s been wearing smudged kohl ever since she was a teenager living in San Francisco, says she’s so committed to her look, she sleeps in her lines. “Back in the day, I ruined oodles of white sheets,” she says as she shares her kohl memories with me. “Now I have charcoal-gray sheets,” which help obscure residue, she adds, joking that she sometimes even reapplies it in the middle of the night.

Jokes aside, Louie, like so many of the figures in this book, and like so many people around the world, myself included, turned to eyeliner as she came of age to help enlarge her eyes, find her personal style, and boost her confidence. “It wasn’t just about how you looked,” the eighty-year-old writer, who is of Chinese heritage, says. “It was about how you felt. It was about this aura you

have. That maybe you were just a little bit exotic.” Taking it a step further, Rosana Cipriano, a resident of Rio de Janeiro, says, “Eyeliner can even bring my soul out of my eyes.”

This book embarks on a journey through time and across continents to tell just a few of these stories about our enduring obsession with a remarkable substance. Beginning, fittingly, in the East, we’ll delve into ancient Egypt to understand the original beauty icon, Queen Nefertiti, and her lasting influence on eyeliner use. Challenging the notion that beauty is an inherently female preoccupation, we’ll turn to the Wodaabe people in the savanna region of Chad. To demonstrate how sormeh has been used as a critical instrument for self-expression and political resistance, we’ll reflect on the eruption of protests in the wake of the killing of Mahsa Amini in Iran. Next, we’ll travel to Petra, Jordan, to illustrate how kohl helps communities maintain and celebrate centuries-old traditions. We’ll then get to know Mexican American cholas in California and see how eyeliner can assert cultural pride in the face of racial discrimination and marginalization. Investigating kajal’s relationship with the divine and the ethereal, we’ll wander over to India to visit Kerala’s storytellers. We’ll later explore the social implications of the eyes and eye contact in Japan, and meet a millennial geisha in Kyoto.

Back in the West, we’ll attend drag shows in New York, exploring the connection between this transformative cosmetic and gender. With a focus on Amy Winehouse, we’ll observe the phenomenon of the Western pop star, and witness how the substance can play a significant role in one’s physical and psychological development and protection—and even in one’s mental health. Finally, we’ll meet a few of the influencers both shaping and

INTRODUCTION: LINER NOTES

responding to ever-evolving beauty ideals in the age of social media.

Eurocentric beauty norms have dominated the global beauty discourse in decades past, alternately by suppressing and mocking or fetishizing and cherry-picking unique cultural features and practices found in and founded by so-called exotic societies and groups. This book is a celebration of the innovative contributions of people of color to the beauty industry and the vibrant array of beauty practices around the world.

I ask you, dear reader, to eschew the Western gaze, and to sensitively and thoughtfully expand your understanding of beauty, as well as of the relationship between beauty and power. Though these chapters attest to the rich cultural history of eyeliner, the liner itself is, ultimately, an accessory to a larger story about how we communicate our identities and desires. The story of eyeliner and how it has fascinated us through the centuries is also the story of human ingenuity, resourcefulness, aspiration, and imagination. To open your eyes to the fascinating path that eyeliner has drawn through space and time is to embark on a journey freighted with meaning—if not outright magic.

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Glossary

For the purposes of this book, eyeliner will be defined as a cosmetic or medicinal substance whose aesthetic intention is to contour or outline the eyes, with the goal of enlarging or enhancing them. Eyeliner appears in various forms, is made up of different materials, has multiple names, and has been used uniquely across cultures and time periods.

kohl: A generic term denoting eyeliner made with naturally sourced materials, including ground galena or soot. The word *kohl* comes from the Arabic *kuhl*, defined by *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* as a pulverized powder that darkens the edges of the eyelids. Besides its cosmetic use, kohl is used to cleanse or cool the eyes, and to protect them from the sun's rays, the desert sand, and infections. Kohl is widely applied by men, women, and children across swaths of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. (The origin of the word *alcohol* in English is from the Arabic *al-kuhl*. *Al-kuhl* became how Europeans used to refer to spirits around the seventeenth century because of how kohl was produced.)

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GLOSSARY

kajal: A greasy black kohl traditionally used in South Asia for cosmetic, medicinal, and spiritual purposes. Kajal is made of soot from the burning of ingredients including ghee, castor oil, coconut oil, camphor, aloe vera, or sandalwood paste. While *kajal* is a term spoken colloquially across India, primarily in the Devanagari languages of Hindi and Marathi and also Gujarati, in Bengali it's called kajol; in Malayalam it's called kanmashi; in Kannada it's called kannu kappu; in Telugu it's called kaatuka; and in Tamil it's called kanmai.

ithmid: Considered by some to be the purest form of kohl, ithmid is derived from the mineral galena, or lead sulfide, and is used by Bedouin communities and Muslims across the Middle East and North Africa and other parts of Africa and Asia. The Prophet Muhammad was said to have worn ithmid, which is why it is thought to be sunnah, or the way of the Prophet, by devout Muslims.

Western

eyeliner: Eyeliner is worn by people of all genders in the West and beyond to beautify and define the eyes. It comes in several iterations, including powder, pencil, pen, liquid, cream, and gel. Western eyeliner tends to be ultra-processed and is made of a film-forming agent (allowing the eyeliner to be deposited onto the eyelid or waterline), thickeners (enabling the eyeliner to stick to the eyelid or waterline), and pigments (giving the eyeliner its color). Eyeliner often contains ingredients like glycerin, mineral oils, and other chemicals. Western-packaged “kohl” and “kajal” aren't usually made of the materials used in authentic kohl or kajal, and borrow only their names.

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