

Thomas, Lynn M. *Beneath the Surface: A Transnational History of Skin Lighteners*. Durham, North Carolina, Duke University Press, 2020.

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1 Lynn M. Thomas's new book, *Beneath the Surface: A Transnational History of Skin Lighteners* presents a history of lightening products centered in South Africa that is attentive to transnational ties. Her book asks a series of questions about why people have chosen to use skin lighteners throughout history and what these choices tell us about the politics of beauty, personal desires, social and economic transformations, and race. By tracing the history of lightening in South Africa, she demonstrates how a long history of this practice existed among Africans in South Africa. In doing so, she shows that skin lightening cannot just be explained by racism, but by an amalgamation of factors including gender, class, and sexuality (Thomas 2).

2 The book has six chapters that are both chronological and thematic. In the first chapter, Thomas uncovers precolonial skin lightening practices in South Africa and their entanglements with colonial bodily practices (23). The chapter shows how women in precolonial South Africa often engaged in forms of skin lightening. Therefore, Thomas contends that “aesthetic ideals of shininess, brightness, lightness, and ritual – not racial – whiteness” were tied to conceptions of female beauty (27).

3 The second chapter discusses the arrival of commercial skin lighteners in South Africa in the 1930s. Thomas shows how beauty contests in the newspaper *Bantu World* reveal how beauty in South Africa was tied not only to race but also to politics (73). In the third chapter Thomas discusses South African-made skin lighteners. In the 1930s and 1940s, South African pharmacists realized there was a large market for lighteners among Coloured and African communities. Thus, brands like Karoo and Bu-Tone were born (96).

4 Thomas's fourth chapter analyzes advertisements for lightening products in *Bantu World* as well as in *Zonk!*, *Drum*, and *Bona* between the late 1940s and 1970s. She argues that skin lighteners became “technologies of visibility” and that in apartheid society where nuances in skin color mattered a lot, skin lighteners were a way of gaining status (20). Thomas shows the ties between apartheid and “consumer capitalism’s message of body malleability” (149).

5 In the fifth chapter, Thomas discusses the South Africans who argued against the use of lighteners. Some people voiced concerns about the safety of lighteners, while others voiced opposition to lighteners on the grounds of race. These activists advocated for people to embrace the belief that “Black is Beautiful” and stop using lightening products (189). In her last chapter, Thomas emphasizes the role the Black Consciousness Movement played in challenging the use of lightening products. She posits that opposition to lighteners arose from transnational ties. Health concerns flowed between the United States and South Africa, while the motto “Black is Beautiful” also had its origins in the Black Panther Party (189).

6 One of the strengths of Thomas’s book is this attention to transnational ties. It does a superb job of showing how FDA regulations in the United States influenced regulations in South Africa, and how styles and ideas about beauty traversed the Atlantic. She also reveals how South Africans manufactured and advertised the lighteners sold in East Africa. Her book also makes major interventions in the field of African and gender history. While Africanist historians have been attentive to gender, Thomas’s book is one of the first to engage with topics of beauty, body, and affect in Africa (9).

7 The books also use the heuristic device of the ‘modern girl’. A concept developed by Thomas with colleagues at the University of Washington. Thomas defines the “modern girl” who emerged in the 1920s as a figure who “embraced an explicit eroticism, appeared to disavow domestic duties and used commodities” (12). It is a useful concept that underlines how women in South Africa were connected to global forces. However, while there is plenty of information about the women and girls who chose to use lighteners in the book, I wonder what this focus on the figure of the ‘modern girl’ elides. The book does mention men; however, they seem to be more of an afterthought. One wonders what prompted men to use skin lighteners and which men chose to do so? What might the use of lighteners among men tell us about masculinity, male bodily practices, and male beauty? Likewise, what might the relationship have been between lighteners and queer identities in South Africa?

8 Nevertheless, Thomas’s book is groundbreaking and opens many new paths for further research. She provides insightful analyses that allow the reader to understand both the positions of those who choose to use skin lighteners, as well as those who have advocated against them. Scholars interested in gender, African history, or the history of consumer capitalism will all find something thought-provoking in this book.