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Book Review

Beneath the Surface: A Transnational History of Skin Lighteners

Elizabeth W. Williams ^{1*}

Published: March 5, 2021

Book's Author: Lynn M. Thomas

Publication Date: 2020

Publisher: Durham, North Carolina, USA: Duke University Press

Price: \$28.95 (paperback)

Number of Pages: 368 pp.

ISBN: 978-1-4780-0642-8

In *Beneath the Surface: A transnational history of skin lighteners*, Lynn M. Thomas offers a dense history of the use and meaning of skin lighteners in South Africa. Thomas rejects a simple narrative where African women and girls turned to skin lighteners out of a desire to be white. Instead, she offers a more complicated history, noting how a preference for lighter/brighter skin tapped into both indigenous and transnational understandings of femininity, beauty, and modernity.

Readers familiar with her previous work on the history of sexuality in colonial Kenya will anticipate a closely argued and exhaustively researched study which illuminates connections between racial and gendered formations, and attends both to the regimes of power produced by colonialism and the forms of resistance such regimes inspired. They will not be disappointed—this study offers a strongly intersectional analysis that understands women and girls as both the target of particularly gendered forms of racialisation, and as agential subjects who negotiated their own lives through aesthetic practices. The project is even more connected, however, to Thomas's work with the Modern Girl Around the World Research Group,¹ particularly in its attention to how consumer culture produced new definitions and practices of girlhood.

A central theme of Thomas's study is that the use of skin lighteners cannot be understood simply as a form of racial false consciousness, in which dark-skinned people use creams and tinctures to turn themselves white. Instead, she argues that 'we must also attend to intersecting political and affective formations of class, gender and sexuality, and to a variety of transregional and multisited processes' (p. 2). To do this, the author adopts an eclectic approach to source material: her sources include archival evidence of pre-colonial cosmetic practices, data from oral histories, articles and images from African periodicals, medical studies, and marketing research. In order to produce a study that attends to the transnational flow of not only skin lighteners themselves but also of attitudes towards them, she adopts a method of 'connective comparison' which 'draws attention to how 'things previously understood to be local come into being through complex global dynamics' that are neither derivative nor linear' (p. 12, quoting from *The Modern Girl Around the World*). By doing so, she is able to elucidate how global dynamics (for instance, the development of an international consumer culture, or the emergence of a transnational Black Consciousness movement) shaped attitudes towards skin tone and skin lightening practices at a local level.

¹ This work culminated in an edited collection to which Thomas was an editor and contributor, *The Modern Girl Around the World*.

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Scholars who are interested in race and gender in Africa will have an obvious interest in this book, particularly as almost all of the scholarship on the use of skin lighteners by black/African peoples has focused on the USA.² But for scholars who are not Africanists, the most valuable contribution of this study may be Thomas's concept of 'technologies of visibility'; technologies of visibility include skin lightening practices that allowed African people, particularly women and girls, to make themselves 'legible' in ways that improved their job prospects, enhanced their desirability as sexual and/or romantic partners, and, perhaps most significantly, marked them as 'modern' subjects. This last point reminded me of Aren Aizura's work on Thai gender-transition clinics, where he argues that Thai transwomen engage in aesthetic practices (including skin lightening) to access forms of 'sometechnical capital' that allow them to claim modernity. What these studies have in common is an analysis of cosmetic practices that moves beyond the simplistic notion that those who try to lighten/brighten their skin do so out of a desire to 'look white,' pointing instead to the broader meanings of skin tone within both indigenous worldviews and global discourses.

Indigenous attitudes towards skin tone, in fact, form the subject of the first chapter. Here, Thomas outlines the prevalence of skin lightening/brightening practices in pre-colonial South Africa. Using archival evidence from traders, ethnographers, missionaries, and officials, she demonstrates that several ethnolinguistic groups in South Africa showed a preference for lighter/brighter skin and used pigments to achieve this look. (Significantly, not all ethnolinguistic groups shared this preference: isiZulu speakers seem to have preferred darker skin.) Such practices, she argues, 'were tied to gender and generational beauty ideals rather than to racial designations' (p. 23).

Chapter Two examines a black South African newspaper, *Bantu World*, for evidence about the use and meaning of skin lighteners in the 1930s, when commercially produced skin lighteners became to be heavily marketed in the region. In particular, she offers a fascinating reading of the beauty contests sponsored by *Bantu World*, showing how the use of lighteners signalled African girls' and women's claims to modernity and their status as 'respectable women.'

The author turns next to a discussion of the manufacturing and marketing of skin lighteners in South Africa, which shifted from a primarily white consumer base to a majority brown and black market in the 1930s and 40s. She pairs this trend with an analysis of the increasing popularity of 'tanning' among white women during the same time period, highlighting contemporary discourses that mockingly compared white attempts to become darker to black and brown folks' desire to lighten their skin. Through this comparison, Thomas establishes that *gradations* in skin colour were much more significant than a simple black/white divide; women and girls of all skin tones engaged in cosmetic practices that altered their colour in order to achieve a 'modern' look, and—for racialised women—in order to '[attract] favourable attention and [express] gendered forms of racial respectability' (p. 97).

Chapter Four turns again to a discussion of beauty contests in South African periodicals, but this time during the two decades following the establishment of Apartheid rule in 1948. While acknowledging that skin lightening may have enabled African women to access jobs and opportunities that were generally reserved for those classified as Coloured under the Apartheid regime, Thomas argues that the belief that lighter skin made one more beautiful was a more influential factor. The beauty contests held in the pages of South African periodicals, particularly those marketed to black populations like *Drum*, *Zonke!*, and *Bantu World*, both championed the desirability of black women while simultaneously engaging in practices (including photographic techniques designed to wash out black skin) that asserted the superiority of lighter skin tones. (Duke Press deserves special praise for including so many high-quality images in this chapter, as they allow Thomas's visual analysis to shine.)

In the next chapter, Thomas offers a transnational analysis of discourses surrounding skin lightening in the 1960s. She shifts her focus to East Africa, where the use of South African-produced skin lighteners was widely condemned by postcolonial leaders. In part, these leaders were influenced by the broader Black Consciousness movement, which asserted the value and desirability of black aesthetics. However, the author shows that the Kenyan rejection of skin lighteners was even more motivated by a gendered politics that condemned women who used these products as promiscuous and rebellious. At the same time, physicians in the USA and South Africa began to raise concerns about the medical effects of skin lighteners.

While these two lines of critique remained relatively distinct in the 60s, by the 1970s they merged as skin lighteners were increasingly targeted as both dangerous and anti-black. Thomas's gendered analysis is particularly strong in Chapter Six, as she discusses how African and Afro-American women were caught between a Black Consciousness movement which marginalised issues of gender, and a mainstream feminist movement which tended to ignore or minimise racial differences. New assertions of racial pride and increased attention to the dangerous medical consequences of skin lighteners led South Africa to ban depigmenting agents in the 1990s. Yet, this ban has not eliminated the use of skin-lighteners—rather, as the author notes in her conclusion, women and girls in Sub-Saharan Africa increasingly rely on illegally imported products, often containing dangerous levels of chemicals like hydroquinone.

² An exception is Timothy Burke's *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women*.

One area that Thomas leaves relatively unexplored is the use of skin lighteners by African men. While she mentions that these products were used by men and boys in several parts of the text—and even notes that men sometimes demanded to be included in the beauty contests held in the pages of African periodicals (p. 198)—she does not delve very deeply into the relationship between skin tone, consumerism, and masculinity. While this may be a decision informed by a need to limit the scope of her argument, it prevents her from analysing how femininity and girlhood were produced in relation to both hegemonic and dissident masculinities. In particular, she notes in several places how ‘modern girls’ were castigated by African men, who saw their aesthetic practices as signs of immorality (e.g., p. 61). It would be interesting to learn how African men who engaged in similar aesthetic practices fit into this discourse.

Additionally, while Thomas’s decision to focus her analysis on the use of skin lighteners by women classified as African or Coloured allows her to provide a particularly dense history, it also leaves a few questions unanswered. As I read, I found myself wanting more information about how other racialised populations in South Africa viewed/used skin lighteners—for instance, South Asian, Chinese, or Cape Malay communities.

Finally, while Thomas pays close attention to transatlantic discourses surrounding skin colour and lighteners, her analysis is primarily unidirectional. With a few exceptions—as when she discusses Kenyan politician Tom Mboya’s condemnation of skin lighteners during a visit to the US in 1954 (p. 173-4)—her study shows how African American discourses influenced South Africans. Yet, surely South African aesthetics also influenced the USA, particularly during the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 70s. Ultimately, however, these lingering questions point less to any failings of this book, and more to its potential to prompt veins of inquiry that will be answered in future research. *Beneath the Surface* offers a densely contextualised and deeply nuanced study that significantly expands our understanding of the intertwined production of race, gender, and modernity.

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