

Thomas Lynn M., *Beneath the Surface: A Transnational History of Skin Lighteners*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2020, 352 p.

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We may be admonished not to judge a book by its cover, but we can suspend that ground rule for Lynn Thomas' *Beneath the Surface*. The interior of a hair salon, exuding ruby red nails, glamour posters, lightened skin and tight braids — stills from Ng'endo Mukii's 2012 short film, *Yellow Fever* — stares back at us, and it is clear: beauty is a serious site of historical inquiry. And skin lightening, one of beauty's most controversial practices, is perhaps the most serious of all.

Thomas reconstitutes what she terms the "layered history" of skin lightening in South Africa, midpoint of the twentieth century's color line. Though the book ranges further afield, notably to the United States and Kenya, the key question driving Thomas's investigation is why and how skin lightening emerges as a popular practice among black South African women. Her answer is that skin lightening was a powerful "technology of visibility" in the South African context, where "minute distinctions in physical appearance could open or foreclose social opportunities" (p. 46). To be clear, the practice was rarely about "passing," or moving across South Africa's racial categories. Its effect was more subtle, Thomas tells us. Women realized that the use of skin lightening products could evoke racialized ideals of respectability that had real material consequences for them. At the same time, however, as the first commercial products marketed directly to black South African women, skin lightening creams rendered them "visible" to an emerging system of consumer capitalism. Herein lies the paradox: skin lightening was a "technology of visibility" both for aspirational socio-economic mobility and for commercial exploitation, for agency and oppression, at one and the same time. These are Thomas' layers: the importance of surface appearances, and the multiple meanings that lie uneasily beneath them (p. 6).

Only a historian of Lynn Thomas's caliber can do justice to these braided plotlines without sacrificing the individual strands. The book begins by situating skin brightening in pre-colonial practices, both of locals and of European settlers. Following the abolition of slavery in the British colonies (1833-34), colonial elites leaned on skin color as a marker of distinction, which led to a racialization of skin brightening practices. Mission schooling and experience in



domestic service diffused an ideology of respectability that promoted lightness as its signifier. In Chapter Two, a version of which also appeared in the *Journal of African History*, Thomas shows how “modern girls” used skin lightening products to emphasize their faces and upper bodies in beauty contest photos submitted to the *Bantu World* newspaper in the 1920s and 1930s. In doing so, they directly countered colonial imagery that had focused its sexualized gaze elsewhere on black women’s bodies, while also drawing the ire of some middle-class black men, such as the writer R. R. R. Dhlomo, who read such self-fashioning as indecent and a mark of “racial shame” (p. 74). This is a theme that Thomas continues to explore in later chapters: black South African men’s disregard for the tangible material consequences that skin lightening could have for black women. At the intersection of race, class, and gender, skin lightening was contentious territory.

Chapter Three details how, by the 1930s, white South African pharmacists began marketing skin lightening products to black women. They were inspired by the success of such products among African American women, influenced by American marketing techniques, encouraged by the high price of imports and protected by the South African government. Yet it would take “the elaboration of apartheid rule” following the 1948 election of the National Party for South Africa’s “skin lightener boom” to fully take off (p. 98). Chapter Four explores how new media outlets for African audiences, including *Zonk!* and *Drum* magazines, stimulated both the marketing and consumption of skin lighteners by sponsoring beauty contests. In an example of Thomas’s thoughtful and complex argumentation, she underlines how such contests “both challenged and breathed new life into racial orders that sought to deny black beauty” (p. 135).

Of course, critiques of skin lightening were ever present, but only latterly did medical concerns regarding the active ingredients come to the fore. Chapter Five addresses these emerging critiques. In 1939, the United States’ Food and Drug Administration (FDA) had released guidelines that discouraged the use of mercury, but it was in 1973 that the FDA actually banned mercurial skin lighteners. The South African government “followed the lead of the FDA” (p. 183), with the result that hydroquinone-based products surged ahead of mercury-based competitors during the 1970s.¹ By this time, a parallel critique was gaining traction. African nationalists, civil rights movement and Black power activists opposed skin lightening on antiracist grounds. Yet in Chapter Six Thomas concludes that these twin “condemnations” of the practice — the antiracist and public-health minded — “remained strikingly distinct” (p. 189). Her trenchant observation is all the more surprising when we are reminded that the South African Student Organization led by Steve Biko, the intellectual force of the Black Consciousness Movement, was an organization of *medical* students. By the 1980s, however, political and medical critiques of skin lightening cosmetics had fused. A new generation of anti-apartheid activists contested the negative consequences of such creams on the mind and the body. In 1990, the South African government banned skin lighteners altogether. Despite such regulations, the practice remains widespread in South Africa (evidenced by the short 2012 film

¹ In a postcolonial twist, the owners of the Twins Products brand, a hydroquinone beneficiary of the mercury ban, would later fund Johannesburg’s Apartheid Museum (p. 221).

Yellow Fever) and elsewhere, with every major continent contributing to a global market estimated at just over \$30 billion (p. 1).

The triumph of *Beneath the Surface* is primarily methodological over historiographical, if the two can be so simply parsed. Thomas succeeds in bringing together a wide array of approaches to historical writing, including the histories of emotion, consumer capitalism, medicine, technology, and critical race and gender studies. Important precursors — especially Timothy Burke's 1996 classic *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption and Cleanliness* — inspire her questions, but Thomas ultimately answers them on scale that is more globalized than it could have been a quarter century ago. The analytical space of the book is structured by the movement of people, ideas, objects and their archives — not by territorial borders or the colony-metropole frame. Thus, African American millionaire, Madame C. J. Walker, and the Johannesburg daily, *Bantu World*, share the same paragraph (p. 73). And while South African print media serves as perhaps her most generative source, Thomas effortlessly weaves FDA regulatory and medical archives into her analysis without weighing down her page-turning prose. Enhanced by gorgeous reproductions of newspaper advertisements, *Beneath the Surface* is sure to appeal to a wide audience, and to easily (and rightly) find its place on course syllabi.

The book sidesteps dense literature review and theoretical engagement. Rather, its historiographical contribution is best understood as a model for the directions a new historiography can take us. By taking seriously the widespread practice of skin lightening that had long been ignored, avoided or dismissed, Thomas in fact gives us piercing insight into the gendered and "layered history" of race, respectability and self-regard in South Africa. The result, *Beneath the Surface*, is a deeply social history of a singularly fraught commodity.

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