

BOOK REVIEW

## Lynn M. Thomas, *Beneath the Surface: A Transnational History of Skin Lighteners*

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Arya Thampuran

Durham University

Lynn Thomas's *Beneath the Surface: A Transnational History of Skin Lighteners* is an exemplar of academic scholarship that treats a culturally salient and sensitive issue with care, enfolded into the critical analysis of skin lighteners a carefully considered, and indeed compassionate, treatment of the complex, often divisive, issues of embodiment. A strength of the book is Thomas's ability to toggle between the political and the personal. While offering an expansive, rigorous mapping of the colonial histories, capitalist investments and translational trajectories of skin lightening, the book does not lose sight of biopolitics or the viscerality of beauty and desire – under-researched and under-represented fields in feminist postcolonial work, particularly in health care discourses. This book is an important intervention in the emergent field of skin studies, bringing a critical perspective attentive to the complex collusion of colonialism, class politics and cultural values in South Africa, its primary site of study, with a view towards its global influences and extensions (specifically the United States and East Africa). Thomas recentres the sociocultural through the distinctive prism of lived, felt experiences of womanhood. The book admirably resists reductive reasonings; the desire for light skin is not simply mapped through postcolonial or psychoanalytic paradigms as internalized racialization, as is often the case in literature on the subject, but rather illuminated through an intersectional prism as a complex – sometimes competing – set of cultural, colonial and commercial interests.

Thomas offers a rigorous history of skin-lightening products and practices, demonstrating the ways they have circulated in cultural, political and economic spaces; her corpus includes everything from political, medical and religious writing to beauty advertisements. These discourses combine to produce a multilayered, complex object of beauty – shaped by the colonial patriarchal gaze but continuously, and sometimes consciously, toyed with by female desire across time and space. Thomas captures the movement of materials from the medieval era in the anglophone world to ancient Greece, antebellum America and contemporary Asian and African contexts. There is careful attention to nuanced intra-group variations in attitudes towards skin lightening, demonstrating that beauty standards were far from universally applicable; in the first chapter, for example, Thomas gestures to how gender and generational tastes varied in precolonial times, with certain ethnic groups valuing darker skin. The book strikingly captures how the cultural valence and value of whitening manifests and morphs through history, beginning with precolonial practices involving locally sourced herbs and materials, then moving into how these practices moved across the globe, influenced by emergent geopolitical dynamics. Thomas demonstrates how the biopolitics of colonial knowledge–power

systems functioned to construct beauty standards which belied more entrenched, essentialist understandings of white superiority.

The intricate investigation of discourses on colourism are often framed through women's lived experience with an intricate layering of clinical and cultural discourses from oral history to medical texts. One particularly striking use of source material is in Chapter 2, where Thomas draws on a local South African newspaper, *Bantu World*, to illuminate pageant culture and its construction and circulation of beauty ideals. Thomas's exploration of the phenomenon of the 'Modern Girl' as a contested feminist figure is also nuanced. This figure shirks domesticity for self-expression, albeit through consumerism that often capitulates to Western forms of femininity or what Thomas terms 'cosmopolitan glamour'. Modern Girls have come under fierce censure in South African media for having 'prostitute[d]' themselves, for betraying their racialized identities by modelling themselves after white women (p. 49). Chapter 3 delves into how consumerism collides with cultural capital, a marketing of beauty standards mobilized by pharmaceutical and cosmetic companies for black South Africans. Thomas brings a potent colonial critique by unpacking how migrating market demands devalued local beauty practices and herbalism, both on economic and epistemic levels – a symptom of the persistent neocolonial cultural imperialism of the West in post-apartheid South Africa, which is an instructive site for exploring these tensions given its complex racial and cultural make-up.

This interplay between local and globalized forms of medicine is further interrogated in Chapter 5, where Thomas explores the clashes between medicine and industry, shedding light on debates on the harms of active ingredients in lightening products. Health care discourses were complicated by ground-level rhetoric from commercial bodies, often reframing medical professionals themselves as consumers, and drawing on personal testimony to discount professional ones and justify the sale of these products. These tensions and oppositions coexisted with emergent forms of nationalism in America and South Africa, reinstating beauty in blackness.

These seeds of tension over embodied expressions of identity are captured in Thomas's reflection that 'the history of beauty is a history of struggle' (p. 1). This is further fleshed out in the final chapter on embodied practices of colonial resistance in the mid- to late twentieth century through black consciousness political formations. This chapter is testament to Thomas's ability to map the personal and local onto the political and global; here, she invokes the efforts of activists who decried bleaching as a psychologically harmful practice in Fanonian anti-colonial efforts. Yet what is invoked in this section is both the beauty and burden of such labour, with women bearing the representational labour, their bodies a site of this struggle.

Thomas paints an evocative, deeply nuanced picture of the 'intersecting political and affective formations of class, gender and sexuality, and ... a variety of transregional and multilisted processes' that inflect practices of skin lightening and perspectives on beauty (p. 2). What I appreciated most about this book was this nuanced analysis backed by an immersive reading experience offered by the striking images of beauty advertisements and source material in the book, which allowed the reader to experientially access the multiple local and global media that shaped attitudes towards lightening. As a scholar interested in decolonial practice, I was particularly interested in Thomas's centring of local cultural texts and interviews with South African women, and the non-hierarchical treatment of oral tradition, popular media and medico-historical material in the same space as equally valuable sources of knowledge. I would, however, have been interested in more engagement with the influence of skin-lightening discourses with other intersections of identity, specifically diasporic influences in other minoritized diasporic ethnic or queer communities in South Africa. This is perhaps a line of inquiry that may be pursued in future responses to what is an invaluable, rigorously researched contribution to the field.