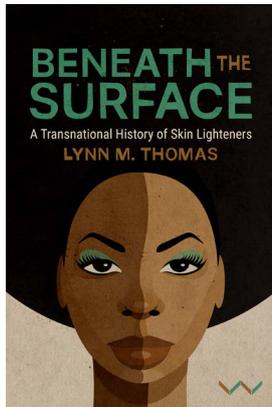




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BOOK TITLE:

Beneath the surface: A transnational history of skin lighteners



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Unravelling historical and intertwined complexities of light and dark skin

Diving 'Beneath the Surface', Lynn Thomas, Professor of History, uncovers the secrets, stories and complexities of one of humankind's greatest 'obsessions' – the 'self', particularly how skin colour contributes to that image of self. Thomas' involvement in a project called 'The Modern Girl Around the World' spurred her immersion into cosmetic advertising and her realisation of the widespread use of skin lightening products among both black and white women during the early 20th century.¹

Through multiple lenses, Thomas expresses the different human perspectives related to the skin and how these perspectives came about. By producing a critical effect through understanding the interconnectedness of human beings, emotion and consumption, over a long period of history, Thomas identifies and describes the causal changes that create consuming individuals.

In six chapters, plus an introduction and a conclusion, the reader is taken on a chronological and historical journey that unravels the practices of skin lightening, how it occurred in different geographic locations, between cultures and across cultural frontiers, including very diverse groups of people. In the chapter entitled 'Modern Girls and Racial Responsibility', female beauty and black women's application of skin lightening products are considered in the light of beauty ideals and embracing consumer culture while taking into account disrupting factors related to patriarchy, gender and culture. Another chapter is dedicated to reconstructing how commercial manufacturing and marketing of skin lighteners took place over time. Through social, political and racial interactions and triggers, the skin lightening industry transformed and reinvented itself according to the current context of human need and other issues that were significant at the time.

Thomas explains how skin lighteners operated as a 'technology of visibility' and people used them to attract favourable attention, enhance their appearance and render themselves 'legible' (even acceptable) in multiple scenarios. As a 'technology', skin lightening was deemed necessary in confronting racism, for example, in attempts to obtain official racial reclassification, or to enhance prospects in social and work settings where people with so-called 'privileged light skin' were included more readily. However, resistance to these skin lightening products, as well as to changes in skin colour to alter one's racial group, was rife from individuals, political parties, community leaders and even nations. As Thomas describes: 'The anti-racist activists framed skin lighteners as overdetermined evidence of the psychological effects of structural racism and bearing ground for what was called the modern goal, versus the term loving blackness and ethnic that rejected white beauty standards.'

The book gives a transnational account of skin lightening, but the South African content is especially prominent with examples and occurrences in our country referred to in detail. One such example relates to non-white medical school students founding the South African Student Organisation (SASO) – the all-black group from which Black Consciousness thought emerged. The leader of SASO, Steve Biko, crafted a political ideology that addressed the demands of life under apartheid with new ways of thinking. 'Black is Beautiful' was embraced by activists and skin lighteners were condemned in order to promote racial self-respect. When hydroquinone, the ingredient in skin lighteners, became a medical concern, the political and health issues became complexly intertwined. While skin lightening creams containing hydroquinone were banned in 1990 in South Africa (the first country globally to do so), products with hydroquinone (and mercury, also used in skin lightening products) are still available and used in the country today.² These products are used, for example, by individuals who have skin conditions that lead to scarring and pigmentation side-effects, as a result of ingesting certain medications prescribed to them for other health outcomes.

Beneath the Surface is the most comprehensive book regarding skin lighteners available to date and it is both interesting and innovative. It is indeed an international description of skin lightening (and brightening) presented in an historical account with a smart balance between text and original advertisements, photographs, newspaper clippings and personal accounts that bring the complicated narrative to life. Thomas evidently spent considerable time gathering material and literature from a variety of sources. With 56 pages of notes, a 47-page bibliography and a useful 12-page index, this book is nothing short of an encyclopaedic production.

During my review of this intriguing book, I dog-eared dozens of pages to return to and re-read because they contained statements that were revelations to me. For anyone wishing to read the book as a 'novel', it is recommended that personal notes are made to help navigate the content when searching to revisit items of interest.

The book has value as a postgraduate textbook relevant to the fields of history, social science, geopolitics, gender studies, geography, psychology, dermatology, and others. The layered, integrated history presented by Thomas in *Beneath the Surface* is indeed 'a landmark study' of skin colour and skin lighteners that interrogates every influencing factor from slavery and segregation to consumer capitalism, political protests and reinforced social inequities, and beyond.

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