Beneath the Surface: A Transnational History of Skin Lighteners


For more than a century, skin lighteners have been a ubiquitous feature of global popular culture—embraced by consumers even as they were fiercely opposed by medical professionals, consumer health advocates, and antiracist thinkers and activists. In Beneath the Surface, Lynn M. Thomas constructs a transnational history of skin lighteners in South Africa and beyond. Analyzing a wide range of archival, popular culture, and oral history sources, Thomas traces the changing meanings of skin color from precolonial times to the postcolonial present. From indigenous skin-brightening practices and the rapid spread of lighteners in South African consumer culture during the 1940s and 1950s to the growth of a billion-dollar global lightener industry, Thomas shows how the use of skin lighteners and experiences of skin color have been shaped by slavery, colonialism, and segregation as well as by consumer capitalism, visual media, notions of beauty, and protest politics. In teasing out lighteners’ layered history, Thomas theorizes skin as a site for antiracist struggle and lighteners as a technology of visibility that both challenges and entrenches racial and gender hierarchies.