

Introduction

A LAYERED HISTORY

From corseting and hair coloring to tanning and plastic surgery, the history of beauty is the history of bending the material body to meet social desires. It is a history of struggle. And few beauty practices have been the site of more struggle than skin lightening. For centuries, elites in some parts of the world used paints and powders to create smoother, paler appearances, unblemished by illness and the sun's darkening and roughening effects. By the twentieth century, legions of working- and middle-class consumers had joined them, making skin lightening creams some of the most commonly sold cosmetics worldwide. This book examines the long and layered history of skin lightening from the vantage point of South Africa, a place where people have invested the body's surface with often deeply divisive meanings.

Today, despite the controversies surrounding them, skin lighteners are a booming global business. Sales extend across Asia and the Americas and through Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, and they are expected by industry insiders to reach US\$31.2 billion by 2024. Whereas for decades Japan has been the most lucrative national market for skin lighteners, it is now being supplanted by India and China.¹ Within many African countries, skin lightening is a commonplace practice. Skin lighteners are used by the world's richest—including Hollywood and Bollywood celebrities—and by the world's poorest, those living in slums on just a couple dollars per day. International and local journalists routinely run stories profiling the women and sometimes men who use skin lighteners as well as the uphill efforts of others trying to end the practice.² The sizable and growing demand for skin lighteners is striking given the known toxicities of many of these products and repeated condemnation of

them by antiracist activists. Like other potentially dangerous beauty practices, skin lightening pits the promise of bodily enhancement against the threat of bodily harm. It is a practice that seemingly defies the logic of progressive political ideologies, and that raises challenging historical questions.

What do the long history and contemporary ubiquity of skin lightening tell us about the politics of beauty? What do these controversial cosmetics reveal about the historical relationship between bodily practices and personal desires, on the one hand, and large-scale social and economic transformations, on the other? What do they reveal about the relevance of skin color and colorism—prejudice based on preference for lighter skin tones—to conceptions of race and racism? *Beneath the Surface* answers these questions by reconstructing a history of skin lighteners that is centered in South Africa, and looks outwards, most notably to the United States and East Africa. It traces the changing meanings of skin color and examines how those changes have informed racial hierarchies and antiracist resistance. At the same time, it insists that racism alone cannot explain skin lightening practices. To understand them, we must also attend to intersecting political and affective formations of class, gender, and sexuality, and to a variety of transregional and multisited processes. Peoples' everyday experiences of skin color have been produced through institutions of slavery, colonialism, and segregation as well as the collateral development of consumer capitalism, visual media, techno-medical innovations, and protest politics.

South Africa is an instructive site for considering the history of skin lightening. Compared with other parts of the African continent and even the world, it is a region that has long encompassed people with a wide range of skin tones and with varied ways of conceptualizing and caring for the body's surface. Over more than two centuries of European colonial rule, those ways became increasingly entangled. Colonialism, segregation, and apartheid heightened scrutiny to bodily surfaces by casting skin color as one of the most visible markers of racial distinctions. White supremacist rule in twentieth-century South Africa depended on identifying and dividing the population into four categories: Native or Bantu, European, Asian, and Mixed or Coloured. This racial order did not rely on a binary distinction between black and white or, as in the United States, the legal principle of the "one-drop rule." Rather, it relied on racialized geographic and linguistic affiliations while admitting—through the category of Coloured—the failure of simple affiliations to capture complex social realities. For those living within this four-tiered racial hierarchy, even slight differences in skin tone could carry significant social and political weight. That weight helped to make skin lighteners into prominent commodities in apartheid South Africa, the country with the most developed capitalist economy

on the sub-continent. Advertisements for skin lighteners became a fixture in apartheid-era popular media, with market researchers declaring them among the most common personal products used in urban African households. Activists, in turn, saw their popularity as overdetermined evidence of racial capitalism's pathological effects and made opposition to skin lighteners into a corollary of the anti-apartheid movement. Their activism ensured that today South Africa possesses—on the books, at least—the world's most extensive prohibitions on skin lighteners.

The topic of skin lighteners in South Africa and elsewhere can elicit strong, even visceral, reactions that are often racialized. People who first learn about skin lighteners from news reports and other secondhand sources—generally, white people—are frequently surprised, asking, “Why do people use them?” Behind this question lies others. Why would people want to alter the color of their skin? Why would some black and brown people want to “look white”? Why would they do so at the risk of harming their health? And, in the case of the many poor consumers of skin lighteners, why do they devote any of their scarce resources to frivolous cosmetics? These questions alternately cast skin lightening as irrational, dangerous, or trivial. For those more familiar with the practice—often people of color—public discussion of skin lightening can generate unease. In racially mixed settings, especially in the United States, skin color itself is a rarely broached topic. For scholars of race and gender, skin lightening raises knotty political and conceptual issues: issues of self-expression versus social control, informed choice versus false consciousness, and politics versus aesthetics.

This book historicizes such reactions and challenges such distinctions. Answering the question of why people have used skin lighteners requires attention to overlapping and, at times, contradictory dynamics. Rather than separating matters of self-fashioning, beauty, and affect from political and economic structures, such dynamics bind them together. Understanding this history requires a layered approach, an approach that reconstructs sedimented meanings and compounded politics. Attending to such meanings and politics adds nuance and new fields of inquiry to the study of gender history and African history. Like

FIGURES 1.1–1.7. These seven ads—four of them full-page—appeared in a single issue of *Drum* magazine. Skin lightener ads were a ubiquitous part of apartheid-era popular culture. Modeled after U.S. pictorials like *Life* and *Ebony*, *Drum* was founded in Johannesburg in 1951 and grew to be one of the most influential publications in Africa, with regional issues published in Lagos, Accra, and Nairobi. *Drum* (Central and East African Edition), June 1962.

**HER
COMPLEXION IS
FAIR AND CLEAR**

Freckles have gone. Spots have cleared. Her complexion is now fair and clear because she has been using Lemon Delph Complexion Butter that goes deep down in the skin where the dullness forms. The natural Lemon Delph bleaching action has made her skin fair and lovely. Ask your chemist for 30c worth of Lemon Delph Complexion Butter or Lemon Delph Extra Fair and have a lovely complexion too.

**FOR A LIGHTER,
BRIGHTER
DAY-NITE
COMPLEXION**
use quick acting
**SUPER ROSE
EXTRA SPECIAL
FRECKLE and
COMPLEXION
CREAM**

Contains the new complexion-aid, miracle HQX.

7/8 (75c) Tube

- CLEANS — SMOOTHS**
- CLEARS**
- GETS DOWN DEEP**
- AWAY GOES SPOTS,
PIMPLES, BLEMISHES**



Obtainable from
Chemists or Stores
and Twins,
68 Noord Street,
Johannesburg



Here is the advice of one of the loveliest Johannesburg maquettes, Miss Linda Mhlongo. She says, "For beauty, you need a clear, light skin, and for a clear, light skin you need, of course, the Two Karroo Creams. At night, you use Karroo Freckle Cream, rubbing it gently into the face and neck. Soon your face becomes much lighter, bringing out your true beauty. If any pimples or spots worry you, Karroo Freckle Cream clears up those, too. In the morning, Karroo Matt Cream, the great non-oilny cream, protects your skin against darkening in strong sunlight. Also, it is the perfect powder base. You look so cool and smart all day, if you use Karroo Matt Cream.



KARROO MORNING, KARROO AT NIGHT—MAKES YOU LOVELY, MAKES YOU LIGHT!

**"You must use the TWO
KARROO CREAMS
for a lighter, clearer, more lovely complexion!"**

PHIL HESS

**Thank
you,
Bu-Tone!**

says Miss Cecile Morgan

Your wonderful Bu-Tone Vanishing Cream has given me the softest, smoothest skin a woman can desire!

"For years," says Cecile, "I have received admiring glances from men and loads of envy from women. The reason, as I discovered, is my soft, smooth skin. Did I always have such a skin? No, I didn't. It's only since I started using Bu-Tone Vanishing Cream that my skin became so beautiful."

Your skin, too, can be as lovely
FOLLOW THIS 10-DAY BEAUTY TREATMENT



During the day: Always keep Bu-Tone Vanishing Cream handy, and apply it when you go out of doors, or before you decide to visit you—wherever you want to look particularly attractive. Regular use of Bu-Tone Vanishing Cream will give your skin a wonderfully soft glow...so smooth to the touch, so delightful to the eye. You, too, will say, "Thank you, Bu-Tone!"

At night: Before going to bed, wash with Bu-Tone Complexion Soap, and then apply Bu-Tone No. 2 Strong Cream. Bu-Tone No. 3 Strong Cream is a high quality cream made from the very finest imported ingredients and does three very important things to your skin:

- (1) Cleans away spots and pimples that spoil your complexion.
- (2) Makes your skin wonderfully light and attractive.
- (3) Makes your skin delightfully smooth and soft.

Famous beauty consultants recommend that the following morning, after you have washed with Bu-Tone Complexion Soap, you again apply Bu-Tone No. 3 Strong Cream.

Complete your beauty treatment with Bu-Tone No. 2 Strong Cream: 5/- per Jar



and Bu-Tone Complexion Soap 2/6
12/6
5/-
10/6



**Bu-Tone
VANISHING CREAM**

OBTAINABLE FROM ALL CHEMISTS AND STORES

LIGHTER, LOVELIER SKIN TODAY—THE AMERICAN WAY!

TWO-IN-ONE

ARTRA

SKIN TONE CREAM

a truly two-in-one cream
... lightens, brightens!
... is a vanishing cream, too!



NEW, FOR THE FIRST TIME you can buy lightening and vanishing cream in one tube! Think of the money you save. You need only one tube of Artra for complete beauty treatment, day and night.

LIGHTENS 24 HOURS A DAY—while you sleep, while you work or play. Artra vanishes the melanin you smooch it on. Your skin is always moist and smooth, lighter and lovelier every day. Use it at night or just before you go out.

VANISHES UNDER MAKE-UP—with Artra you need no other vanishing cream. It keeps your makeup perfect all day. And Artra starts to lighten your skin from the melanin you use it! Before to keep your skin clear, clean and soft.

BUY ONE TUBE OF TWO-IN-ONE

ARTRA SKIN TONE CREAM

the vanishing and lightening cream FOR DAY AND NIGHT BEAUTY TREATMENT



Artra is made by American scientists. American doctors recommend it! American women use Artra to make their skin a fair, smooth, beautiful, even and soft—lighter and lovelier, 24 hours a day!

New Beauty Cream

If you want a fairer, clearer, freckle-free complexion, ask your chemist for the new "Extra Fair" beauty cream by Delph. It is marvellous. It checks wrinkles, stops blemishes and coarseness, removes dark patches. In moments your complexion becomes youthfully fair and beautiful. There are now TWO Delph creams. Regular and Extra Fair. Both at 30c a tin. They will work wonders with your complexion.

SUCCESS STORY

How Itallienne Whitening Cream helped Susy achieve success and stardom.

IN SUZY'S DRESSING ROOM.

No one seems to like me. Even my boyfriend has another girl.

Later

Artra was right. My skin already had to be so smooth, lighter and softer when I started using Artra.

AT THE CLUB CAPRI

Susy has a good voice but no sex appeal. If she doesn't improve her looks she will have to go.

Her boyfriend returns.

Susy! You're a star. How did you achieve such success?

Susy's a sensation! Thanks to her new lighter glamorous skin.

(Thinks) I might stand in business. Whiting Cream. And if you're a star, glamour and sex appeal.

Susy, you are so lovely you really are the only girl in the world for me. (THINKS) I'm going to buy some Itallienne Whitening Cream too!

WIN a magnificent continental radio FREE!

You, with every tube of Itallienne Whitening Cream you buy now have the opportunity of winning an expensive \$10.00 continental radio free. Every tube is numbered and every one in the lucky winning number—just send the card to the distributor: Debraur Cosmetics, Box 188, Johannesburg, and you'll have your name entered for a chance to win. Prizes are printed on the tube, to join in this new competition. Remember, every tube has a name and every name will win these radios.

ITALLIENNE WHITENING CREAM TONES YOUR SKIN, LIGHTENS WITH AMAZING NEW N.O. 12, MAKES YOU FEEL AND LOOK LOVELIER WITH THE FIRST APPLICATION.

FROM YOUR FAVOURITE STORE

ROME—NEW YORK 75c.

H.Q. 12! Buy Itallienne Whitening Cream today for a lovelier, lighter skin tomorrow.

ITALLIENNE WHITENING CREAM, FOR THAT LOVELIER, LIGHTER LOOK PREFERRED BY ITALIAN FILM STARS

Trade Enquiries: HENNAUR COSMETICS (Pty.) Ltd., P.O. Box 1691, JOHANNESBURG.

Catherine Burns's call to compose history "in chords," this approach seeks to understand a "world of complexity and multiple layers of causation."³ People's words and actions provide vital starting points for understanding why skin lighteners are used. Yet, similar to all historical artifacts, these words and actions exist both as sources of information and as expressions of a particular time and place. Interpreting them requires situating them in relation to other evidence and finding insight in their form as well as their content. It also requires an openness to the multiplicity, ambiguity, and opacity of meaning. The history of skin lighteners reveals the importance of both surface appearances and the layers that lie beneath them.⁴

Modern Girls and Slippery Things

Take a rich, if brief, reference to skin lighteners from a letter written in 1941 by a young African woman. The letter is part of correspondence, now archived at the University of Witwatersrand, between Zilpah Skota and Mveli, her beloved husband. Mveli was a prominent member of the African National Congress, and the editor of the *African Yearly Register*, an extraordinary "Who's Who" published in 1930 that chronicled the achievements of black people in Africa, aiming to inspire those "tempted to feel ashamed of their race." Zilpah, the daughter of an African Methodist Episcopal church minister, was younger than Mveli when they met in Soweto and married in 1938. Resembling other members of South Africa's mission-educated black elite, the couple struggled to make ends meet under segregation's many barriers. Soon after marrying, financial difficulties compelled the Skotas to sublet part of their house in Johannesburg and forced Zilpah to return to her family home in the provincial town of Klerksdorp. Zilpah's letters convey a passionate longing for Mveli and a modern-girl sensibility. Around the world in this period, modern girls distinguished themselves by their schooling, their passion for romance, and their sense of style.⁵ Zilpah paid keen attention to appearances, expressing some insecurity about her own. In one letter she decided not to send a photo of herself, writing, "It's not nice I'll try to take a better one." In others she noted whether she had grown "fat" or "thin" and requested new clothes and other commodities. In her April 1941 letter, sandwiched between news of loved ones, Zilpah asked, "Can you send me one jar of Karoo [*sic*] I am already dark through the sun."⁶ At the time, Karroo was one of South Africa's most popular brands of skin lighteners.

This correspondence provides clues to the use of commercial skin lighteners in segregationist South Africa. By the early 1940s, skin lighteners—like love

letters and photos—had become routine items for some African modern girls. Zilpah's request is noteworthy given the financial difficulties that she and Mweli faced, and because of his standing as a prominent African nationalist dedicated to promoting racial pride. Widespread condemnation of skin lighteners by black nationalists was still a couple of decades away. For Zilpah, skin lighteners were neither an unthinkable luxury nor a testament to racial shame. A jar of cosmetics would have expressed her husband's care and affection, easing the emotional and material effects of her provincial stay. By the interwar period, many modern girls recognized as white in South Africa, the United States, and elsewhere had embraced tanning as evidence of a healthy and leisure-filled lifestyle that imparted an alluring, seasonal glow. Such consumers had begun to replace skin lighteners with tanning products. By contrast, for Zilpah and some other black modern girls, tanned skin was a sign of hardship endured, not privilege gained. They viewed skin made "dark through the sun" as evidence of outdoor, menial toil that dimmed and dulled their appearances. This perspective challenged the rigidity of racial thinking. It posited gradations of darkness and lightness as existing within—not just between—racial categories and as features that might be added or removed. Some of the roots of this perspective lay in the region's earlier history.

Even prior to the arrival of European colonizers, southern Africa was a place of marked diversity in skin tones. Melanin, the biochemical compound that makes skin colorful, serves as a natural sunscreen. Variations in melanin evolved to ensure that human bodies absorb the appropriate levels of ultraviolet radiation vital for good health and successful reproduction. Too much ultraviolet radiation produces the short-term effect of sunburn and the long-term effect of molecular damage that can both result in skin cancer and impair egg health, sperm production, and fetal growth. Too little radiation hinders the production of vitamin D, weakening bones and hampering the ability of female bodies to support fetal development and provide nutritious breastmilk. Humans who lived, for tens of thousands of years, in equatorial Africa or at high altitudes, places where sun exposure is the greatest, evolved to have higher levels of melanin and, hence, more darkly pigmented skin. People living farther from the equator in places with strong but seasonal sun, such as along the Mediterranean coast or the southern tip of Africa, evolved to have more lightly pigmented skin that could still become deeply tanned.⁷ When European travelers and traders first set foot in southern Africa around 1500, they encountered people who spoke Khoesan and Bantu languages, and whose skin color spanned from light tan to the richest brown. These people

sought, in various ways, to protect their bodies from the elements and to render their surfaces attractive and spiritually potent.

When the Dutch established a colonial outpost at the Cape in 1652, they further expanded southern Africa's sepia spectrum of skin tones and introduced new bodily practices and politics. Older concerns of gender, beauty, and status confronted newer ones rooted in race, class, and respectability. Colonialism brought people from other parts of Africa, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and East Asia as slaves, political prisoners, and indentured servants, whereas people from Western and Eastern Europe and North America arrived as soldiers, merchants, farmers, wage laborers, and, later, missionaries and miners. These people interacted with one another and those already living in southern Africa through often violent political and sexual relations. The children born of those relations contributed to the region's already diverse palette of skin tones. Through imperial conquest, slavery, and settler colonialism, a political order structured by white supremacy took root. South Africa's racial order emerged alongside the development of the transatlantic slave trade and as part of the elaboration of European colonial rule across much of the globe.⁸ European colonizers invested skin color and associated physical differences with fierce political meanings, using them to distinguish the enslaved and vanquished from the free, and to justify the former's subjugation. They paired pale skin color with beauty, intelligence, and power while casting melanin-rich hues as the embodiment of ugliness, inferiority, and abjection.⁹ By the time Zilpah was a young woman, South Africa's segregationist government attached differential rights and privileges to the four official racial categories.

Within this political order, where minute racialized differences in physical appearances could carry great import, some people sought to whiten and lighten the body's surface. It is useful here to distinguish between two types of preparations. *Skin whiteners* are powders and paints that contain light-colored materials, including clay, chalk, flour, rice powder, and white lead. People in many parts of Africa had long used kaolin or white clay as part of ritual and spiritual transformations while elite women from Europe and Asia used white-colored cosmetics to create refined and privileged appearances. *Skin lighteners*, in turn, are compounds, creams, and lotions—often also called “freckle removers” or “skin bleaches”—that generated a less painted effect by removing rather than concealing blemished or darker skin. Skin lighteners containing acidic compounds or ingredients like lemon juice or milk can produce real, if subtle and temporary, lightening effects by acting as irritants and exfoliants

that remove the top, tanned layers of the epidermis, revealing the lighter layers beneath. Skin lighteners have also often contained harsher chemicals like sulfur, arsenic, and, most notably, mercury.

Whether made at home or purchased in shops, skin lighteners defy easy distinctions between cosmetics and medicines. Pharmacists and doctors have prepared and prescribed skin lighteners for people who desire overall lightening. They have also prescribed them to treat dermatological disorders and hyperpigmentation, darkened patches left by sun exposure, infection, inflammation, and melasma. Hyperpigmentation tends to be more visible and long-lasting on complexions rich in melanin, providing additional reasons why some black and brown consumers and patients have turned to skin lighteners. By the early twentieth century, many biomedical experts and cosmetic manufacturers recognized the toxicity of ammoniated mercury and mercuric chloride but regarded them as the most effective lightening agents available. In addition to exfoliating the skin, mercurial compounds, through their antibacterial properties, can clear infections like acne and syphilis. Moreover, at a biomolecular level, they inhibit the body's production of melanin by interfering with the enzyme tyrosinase.¹⁰ Skin lighteners' multiple names and uses, and varied active ingredients and effects, render them fluid substances and slippery things to analyze. They continually slide between being beauty preparations and being therapeutic treatments, between being common cosmetics and caustic poisons.

Tracking the slipperiness of skin lighteners introduces a fresh set of thematic concerns to African historiography. Over thirty years ago, Arjun Appadurai's edited volume *The Social Life of Things* demonstrated how salient, and often surprising, political and historical connections could be elucidated by following and analyzing things from production to consumption. That volume explored how people invest value in things and how, in turn, things give value to human relations.¹¹ Subsequent scholars ran with these insights, producing social biographies of singular objects and commodity-chain analyses of goods like cotton, coffee, and salt.¹² The more recent flourishing of science and technology studies (STS) has similarly directed scrutiny to the social lives of things and, more specifically, to their material properties and how those properties act in the world.¹³ Tracing how things like skin lighteners move and are remade pushes African history beyond the social history of specific communities and the political history of colonies and metropolises. It opens the field to multiple geographic locales, a wider cast of characters, and a new attention to materiality.

Beneath the Surface proceeds chronologically and thematically. Chapter 1 examines how precolonial ways of caring for the body's surface encountered

and eventually became entangled with ideas and practices brought by European colonizers and immigrants from elsewhere. Chapter 2 focuses on the 1930s, when South Africa's mission-educated black elite began debating the propriety of using skin whiteners and lighteners as part of a new consumer culture. Their debates pivoted on how to define feminine beauty and racial respectability amid the influx of cultural forms and commercial products from the United States. Chapter 3 examines the growth of cosmetics manufacturing in South Africa, exploring why such companies increasingly catered to black and brown consumers. The local pharmacist who developed Karroo, for instance, did so with a white clientele in mind. By the 1940s, however, young women like Zilpah Skota were more likely to purchase his product.

The second half of the book considers what happened in the decades after Zilpah's correspondence, when South Africa became one of the world's most robust markets for skin lighteners. This vitality coincided with the unfolding of apartheid rule, introduced in 1948. Chapter 4 examines how the expansion of black consumer markets and black media—especially photo magazines like *Zonk!* and *Drum*—during the 1950s and 1960s fueled this commercial boom, helping to situate skin lighteners as tools that women and some men could use to achieve greater social visibility amid shrinking political possibilities. Chapter 5 explores how this boom fed off the accidental discovery of a new active ingredient, hydroquinone, and entailed the marketing of South African-made products elsewhere in Africa. Concerns about skin lighteners intensified in the 1970s as political and regulatory debates ricocheted between the United States, postcolonial East Africa, and apartheid South Africa. Chapter 6 examines how those debates came to a head when Black Consciousness activists and biomedical professionals in South Africa compelled the apartheid government, in its waning months, to ban skin lighteners. The conclusion considers the uneven afterlives of that achievement and today's growing global market for skin lighteners.

To reconstruct this layered history, I draw on a variety of sources. The first chapter delves into archaeological and linguistic evidence as well as travelers' and missionaries' writing and early anthropological accounts. Subsequent chapters weave together analysis of advertisements, beauty competitions and advice columns, business and marketing reports, regulatory investigations and legislative debates, medical and social scientific studies, and protest literature with attention to popular fiction, memoirs, personal correspondence, and oral history interviews. The breadth of these sources reveals how struggles surrounding skin lighteners have extended from their manufacturing and marketing to their consumption and condemnation.

Connective Comparison and Affective Consumption

I first came to this historical topic through my own astonishment: I was surprised by the ubiquity of skin lighteners in Kenyan popular and political culture in the early 1990s. Later, I realized that their postcolonial presence raised important and largely unanswered questions for the fields of gender studies and African history: questions about race, consumer capitalism, and transnational connections; and questions about visual media, beauty, and affect. Growing up white on U.S. Air Force bases and in an even more racially segregated suburb north of Pittsburgh, I do not recall ever seeing or hearing about skin lighteners. As an undergraduate, at the height of the anti-apartheid movement on U.S. college campuses, I began studying African history and reading the work of African political theorists and novelists, nearly all of them men. What I took from those texts left me unprepared to make sense of the skin lightening products that I saw for sale in Nairobi's shops and informal markets. Discussions by Jomo Kenyatta, Chinua Achebe, Frantz Fanon, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o about the integrity of African cultural practices and the power of anticolonial nationalism seemed a world apart from the advertisements in Kenyan magazines that promised glamour and success to those who lightened their skin. I soon learned that skin lighteners were not just common but highly contested commodities, and that men, as well as women, sometimes used them. Male politicians, nonetheless, condemned the use of skin lighteners as evidence of young women's embrace of debased Western values and rejection of African traditions and looks. Newspapers frequently carried editorials decrying the ill health effects of various products while letter-to-the-editor writers urged their compatriots to embrace the motto "Black Is Beautiful."

Few academics took note of these debates in Kenya or elsewhere. One exception was Audrey Wipper, a Canadian sociologist working in postcolonial East Africa in the early 1970s. Wipper, while acknowledging the physical and psychological dangers of skin lighteners, argued that male politicians' denunciations of them were a piece of broader, worrisome efforts to use urban women as scapegoats for national problems and to safeguard politicians' puritanical and patriarchal authority.¹⁴ Two decades later, Timothy Burke returned to the topic in *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women*, the first history of commodity culture in Africa. Burke examined how skin lightener advertisements in Zimbabwe during the 1960s and 1970s conflated lightness and whiteness with sexual attraction and social mobility. He described how black users hailed from the country's highest or lowest income group, those "successful or desperate

for success.” Moreover, he demonstrated that African nationalists’ criticism of skin lightening as a betrayal of African culture overshadowed alternative perspectives.¹⁵ These accounts left me wondering what the history of skin lighteners might look like from South Africa, the country where white-minority rule lasted the longest and where, not coincidentally, consumer capitalism was the most advanced, extending its tendrils north to places that included Kenya and Zimbabwe.

These questions partly inspired my participation in a collaborative project, the Modern Girl Around the World Research Group. Comprising six University of Washington faculty members, our group developed the modern girl as a heuristic device to examine the global emergence during the 1920s and 1930s of female figures who embraced an explicit eroticism, appeared to disavow domestic duties, and used commodities like cigarettes and cosmetics.¹⁶ That collaboration altered my perspective on gender in Africa by foregrounding how transnational and transregional histories had shaped twentieth-century developments. Whereas my earlier work examined the *historical entanglement* of indigenous and colonial concerns in one African locale, the collaboration pushed me to see a more varied set of forces at play, and to find analytical value in connecting similar processes across different locales.¹⁷ To produce such histories, our research group developed the method of *connective comparison*. This method draws attention to how “things previously understood to be local come into being through complex global dynamics” that are neither derivative nor linear.¹⁸ Connective comparison entails attending to developments in multiple places, and then determining when those developments are linked and when they diverge. Identification of linkages and divergences, in turn, throws into sharp relief the causal ties and grounded peculiarities that merit further investigation. Like Anna Tsing’s *friction*, connective comparison questions the simplicity of globalization narratives that presume unimpeded and undifferentiated flows between various parts of the world. Both concepts focus on when, where, and why things, people, and ideas that move gain traction, and how, in the grip of those encounters, novel formations are born.¹⁹

The method of connective comparison helped me to identify the importance of U.S. developments to the history of commercial skin lighteners in Africa, and the importance of transnational conversations to American political and regulatory debates. When I first began this project, I imagined that South Asia would be an important touchstone, given the pervasive presence of skin lighteners in India today and South Africa’s many ties to South Asia. For the period prior to the 1980s, however, I found little evidence of South Asian involvement in the trade. By contrast, American connections loomed large.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, South Africa's racial order and capitalist economy evolved in close conversation with the United States.²⁰ Government officials and businesspeople alike looked across the Atlantic for political and economic inspiration while U.S. investors and entrepreneurs turned to South Africa in search of new opportunities. U.S. companies, some of them black-owned, shaped South Africa's skin lighteners market by recognizing resonances between the two racial and commercial orders, and by exporting their products and formulas. American-made skin lighteners encountered friction and gained traction in South Africa. At the same time, local cosmetic manufacturers used cultural forms first developed in the United States to promote their own skin lighteners in South Africa and elsewhere on the continent. These forms ranged from beauty contests and photo magazines to Hollywood starlets and testimonial advertisements. South Africa, in turn, exported these forms north of the Limpopo River. To elucidate the influence of the South African trade elsewhere on the subcontinent and to compare the politics of skin lightening under apartheid and postcolonial regimes, I turn to East Africa and especially to Kenya as a case study in chapter 5. Kenya is a place where some South African companies had business connections and where I had previous research experience. The manufacturing and marketing of skin lighteners in South Africa and Kenya often followed developments in the United States, including guidelines developed by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). When it came to opposition to skin lighteners, however, influences were more multidirectional.

In addition to directing my attention toward transnational and diasporic connections, the *Modern Girl* collaboration helped me to see beauty and commerce as topics neglected by historians of women and gender in Africa. Previous studies, including my own, presented mission Christianity, colonial law, and labor migrancy as the main forces that fueled twentieth-century gender transformations. Focus on those forces, in part, mirrored the priorities of the missionaries and state officials who produced the written archives on which we have often relied. Focus on those forces also reflected social historians' and second-wave feminists' desire to challenge racist and sexist representations of African women, to document women's productive and reproductive labors, and to demonstrate African agency. Less easily captured by our archives and research agendas were new forms of commerce and media that circulated internationally and that worked to alter appearances and aspirations. Apart from dress, historians of Africa have largely ignored matters of bodily aesthetics and beauty.²¹ Yet, some time ago, Sylvia Ardyn Boone, the pioneering art historian of Sierra Leone, argued for the centrality of beauty and especially the beauty

of pubescent girls and young women to African social worlds. Forms of female initiation across the continent have consistently equated the cultivation of beauty with fertility and sexual desirability.²²

Over the past twenty years, scholars from a range of disciplines have argued for taking beauty seriously as a subject of study. One of the central insights of that scholarship is that the development of a global beauty industry has depended upon consumer capitalism's insistence on the body's malleability. Much feminist scholarship on beauty has debated whether practices like wearing makeup and high heels, hair straightening, and cosmetic surgery simply uphold patriarchal and racist structures, or whether some women find agency and empowerment through those very same practices.²³ A few South African cultural studies scholars have contributed to these debates by exploring beauty as a "peculiarly dense transfer point for relations of power," one used to include some and exclude others.²⁴ Regarding the politics of hair in South Africa, Zimiri Erasmus has importantly argued that while "'race' is always present," efforts to reduce hair straightening to aspirations for "whiteness" miss the complexity of black cultural politics and how such practices have also enabled black women to *feel* "proud," "confident," and "beautiful."²⁵

Recent anthropological research on beauty similarly combines an attention to politics with an attention to emotions. In his ethnography of plastic surgery in Brazil, Alvaro Jarrín, for one, theorizes that "beauty's value" stems from the intertwining of biopolitics and affect. Michel Foucault's conception of biopower helps explain how "the discursive contrast between beauty and ugliness" permeates the social landscape, working to produce and reproduce inequalities, while attention to affect helps explain peoples' "visceral attachment to beauty as a form of hope." Perceptions of beauty, Jarrín insightfully argues, operate as "gut reactions that are entirely social, but which are not subject to modification, at least not with ease, because they have become habitual at a preconscious level."²⁶ Theorization of the interplay between the politics of beauty and its affective dimensions is especially useful for understanding the appeal of skin lightening in the past and present.

Such theorization also opens new perspectives on the history of consumer capitalism in Africa. Archaeologists and historians long ago identified consumption and commerce as key agents of change in Africa. Consumption of mundane and luxury goods was vital to the development of centralized polities like the West African kingdoms and Swahili city-states, and long-distance trade within the continent and across the Atlantic and Indian oceans. African demand for consumer goods figured prominently in Walter Rodney's analysis of how Europe "underdeveloped" Africa through slavery and colonialism

while the fashioning of new consumer practices was central to John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff's account of the seismic transformations engendered by nineteenth-century mission Christianity.²⁷ Efforts to explain why capitalist relations of production developed relatively late on the continent have also singled out consumption. John Iliffe, for example, argued that pragmatic considerations prompted people, living in Africa's "often harsh and insecure" environments, to invest in social relations by consuming and enjoying material wealth rather than stockpiling it.²⁸ Over the past two decades, anthropologists and sociologists have posited consumption, together with the debt and disappointment that often accompanies it, as a driving force in postcolonial and post-apartheid political life. Consumer goods are essential to sustaining social ties while their conspicuous display provides sharp reminders of rising inequality.²⁹ Yet we have few accounts of how this form of capitalism that coupled consumption with new modes of manufacturing, merchandising, and marketing emerged in different parts of Africa over the twentieth century. The few historical accounts we do have focus almost exclusively on alcohol, foregrounding the consumer practices of men.³⁰

Skin lighteners center the practices of women and foreground affective consumption. Zilpah Skota requested a jar of Karroo for lightening her tanned skin while writing about whether she had grown fat or thin, needed new clothes, and looked nice in photos. Despite or perhaps because of her family's trying circumstances, Zilpah drew Mweli's attention to *her* personal needs and *her* individual appearance, affirming her own self-worth. Poor people have repeatedly stunned researchers by using their meager resources to purchase cosmetics, commodities that the researchers themselves have often deemed frivolous, unnecessary, or ineffectual.³¹ Compared with other capitalist enterprises, cosmetics companies are unusually dependent on cultivating desire and selling hope. Over the past century, they have devoted a larger portion of their revenues to advertising than almost any other type of manufacturing.³² Success in the cosmetics industry hinges on convincing consumers that seemingly small and intimate products can alter how they look and feel within wider publics. Across the globe, cosmetics marketing has championed the body's malleability and the possibility of self-fashioning, helping to deepen the entanglement of consumption and affect.³³ Skin lighteners are an especially revealing category of cosmetics through which to track that entanglement in Africa. From the middle of the twentieth century, in South Africa at least, skin lightener manufacturers invested considerable resources in elaborate marketing campaigns that sparked wide-ranging debates over beauty, respectability, and authenticity.

Antiracist Retorts and Technologies of Visibility

Barack Obama, in his autobiography *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, recounts learning about skin lighteners as a formative childhood experience. He tells a story of browsing through issues of *Life* magazine at the U.S. embassy library in Jakarta, when he and his American mother, Ann Dunham, lived there. Amid the glossy advertisements and photo spreads, the nine-year-old Obama came across a story of a black man who had paid for a “chemical treatment” to lighten his complexion. The accompanying photos showed the man’s “strange, unnatural pallor” along with his “crinkly hair” and “heavy lips and broad, fleshy nose.” Obama recalls experiencing the story and photos as an “ambush attack,” a “frightening discovery.” Raised by a liberal white mother who had swaddled her biracial son in the achievements of civil rights heroes and repeatedly pronounced Harry Belafonte as the world’s best-looking man, Obama was unprepared for the revelation that some black people might seek to pass for white and use “bleaching creams” to do so. He wondered, “Did my mother know about this?” The young Obama kept that question to himself, continuing to trust his “mother’s love,” but knew, from that point forward, that “her account of the world, and my father’s place in it, was somehow incomplete.”³⁴

This story is apocryphal. No article that fits the description ever appeared in *Life*. Obama may have read instead “A Whiter Shade of Black,” an article published in *Esquire* in 1968. That article sensationalized the work of a white dermatologist in Washington, D.C., who treated black patients suffering from the depigmenting disorder vitiligo with a cream containing monobenzyl ether of hydroquinone.³⁵ Vitiligo became more well known in the 1990s when the entertainer Michael Jackson explained that his increasingly pale skin color was a side effect of the condition. Jackson’s doctors, in fact, treated his vitiligo by prescribing creams like those discussed in the *Esquire* article.³⁶ The crucial point here is not the accuracy of Obama’s recollection but how learning about skin lighteners operated in his memory and autobiographical narrative as a decisive moment in his journey toward color consciousness and racial awareness: “my vision had been permanently altered.”³⁷

Obama’s story reveals how, by the late 1960s, encounters with skin lightening could stir visceral reactions and alter everyday perceptions. Over the past thirty years, scholars have explored race as a fundamental social and historical construction that is continually being remade and always in formation. Race importantly intersects with other social categories such as class and gender but is not reducible to them.³⁸ Thomas C. Holt, drawing on the earlier work

of W. E. B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon, pointed historians to its everyday salience: “race is reproduced via the marking of the racial Other. . . . It is at this level that race is reproduced long after its original historical stimulus—the slave trade and slavery—have faded.”³⁹ Similarly, scholars of South Africa also called for more nuanced understandings of “how race works” by exploring intimate realms of action.⁴⁰ Following such calls, historians of Africa have begun to examine the centrality of racial thinking and processes of racialization to the continent’s past and present. Significantly, they have demonstrated that European colonizers were not the only purveyors of racial discourses and that white settler colonies were not the only African locations where race mattered.⁴¹ Skin lighteners provide another way to track the history of racialization, a way that foregrounds commonplace conceptions of skin color and beauty, and influences that crisscrossed the Atlantic.

Across the twentieth century, black women writers in the United States pointed to the body and contested beauty ideals as fundamental to everyday experiences of blackness, especially for girls and women. Writers from Zora Neale Hurston to Toni Morrison have explored how dominant American ideals that equate beauty with whiteness powerfully and painfully shaped social possibilities and internal longings. Describing the anguish and self-contempt felt by a young black girl who longed for blue eyes, Morrison’s narrator in *The Bluest Eye* (1970) conjectures that “physical beauty,” along with romantic love, are “probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought.”⁴² The roots of racialized ideals of beauty go back, at least, to the eighteenth century, the height of the transatlantic slave trade, when Enlightenment science bolstered white supremacy by associating bodily features, including skin color, with intelligence and beauty and denying those virtues to Africans. As Stephanie M. H. Camp put it, “Blackness and beauty have an ugly history.”⁴³ Partly a product of this deeply racialized history and partly an antiracist retort to it, a vibrant African American beauty culture emerged. In the early twentieth century, black beauty entrepreneurs became emblems of pride and progress. They also, though, faced criticism for promoting a “white look” that valorized straight hair and light complexions.⁴⁴

Despite stirring sharp debates, skin lighteners have garnered little in-depth historical analysis. Analysts of U.S. black beauty culture have paid more attention to hair practices and politics.⁴⁵ Otherwise astute scholars have mistakenly dismissed skin lightening as entirely ineffective and, hence, inconsequential.⁴⁶ In her social history of cosmetics, Kathy Peiss countered this neglect by documenting how a variety of consumers in the early twentieth-century United States, including recent immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe as well

as African American women, used skin lighteners. Notably, she argued that they did so for diverse reasons, ranging from a desire to fade blemishes and even out skin tone to the racialized pursuit of overall bleaching.⁴⁷ Some subsequent scholars have questioned Peiss's account for casting black beauty practices, including skin lightening, as acts of political agency and resistance, while downplaying how they more often accommodated, rather than contested, racial hierarchies.⁴⁸

Although historical analysis has been scarce, interest in contemporary practices of skin lightening has grown in recent years. This growth has coincided with renewed attention to the relationship between racism and colorism, a term put into prominent usage by the writer and activist Alice Walker in the early 1980s.⁴⁹ Sociologists and legal scholars, focused mainly on the United States and Latin America, have demonstrated that discrimination based on skin tone continues to have a profound effect on income, health, and other social indicators. Color hierarchies suffuse inter- and intraracial relations. Whites discriminate most against black people with dark skin tones while blacks discriminate more against people with very dark or very light complexions than those with medium skin tones.⁵⁰ The volume *Shades of Difference*, edited by Evelyn Nakano Glenn, paired stark findings of color discrimination in the Americas, Asia, and Africa with analysis of the complexity of that discrimination. Skin color is always read in relation to other factors, including bodily comportment, dress, hair, age, gender, and even season. Skin-color hierarchies can both confirm and disrupt racial logics. Glenn's chapter and my own explored how the commercial trade in skin lighteners has shored up colorism by yoking the privileging of paler skin tones to corporate profits.⁵¹

Anthropologists have offered incisive, if divergent, answers to the question of why people use skin lighteners. Yaba Amgborale Blay and Jemima Pierre, in separate studies of skin lightening in Ghana, counter popular narratives that pathologize users. Instead of dismissing the practice as irrational or the result of "racial self-hatred," Blay and Pierre argue that people, living in economically precarious circumstances, lighten their skin for very practical and very political reasons. Many Ghanaians believe, according to Blay's trenchant analysis, that light-colored skin enables both women and men to be "noticeably beautiful," to "stand[] out in a crowd," and to look modern. Users seek to make themselves more visible to bolster their social networks, attract sexual and romantic attention, and secure and maintain marital partners. The conflation of beauty and success with light-colored skin in present-day West Africa, argue Blay and Pierre, results from the power of global white supremacy dating back to the era of the transatlantic slave trade and European colonialism.⁵²

By contrast, other ethnographic analyses foreground historical influences that extend beyond Western racism and highlight localized conceptions of dignity and personhood. To explain Indonesian preferences for lightness, L. Ayu Saraswati points to the impact of European colonialism and American popular culture but also to the effect of Indian beauty ideals, dating back to the ninth century, and the Japanese occupation during World War II. In the very country where Obama recalled first learning of skin lightening from an American magazine, the practice was already well established.⁵³ Saraswati finds that Indonesian women today use skin lighteners more to avoid shame and embarrassment than to look good.⁵⁴ Her account that emphasizes affect and a variety of cultural influences resonates with Jonathan Friedman's interpretation of Congolese *sapeurs*, poor men who famously dedicate themselves to haute couture and often practice skin lightening. Friedman attributes *sapeurs'* actions and aspirations to long-standing central African aesthetic sensibilities that equate elegant and luminescent appearances with the accumulation of "life force."⁵⁵

Similarly, cultural studies scholars have insisted that in Jamaica skin bleaching should not be interpreted as a quest for whiteness but rather in relation to the privileged Jamaican identity of "browning" or mixed race. While acknowledging the health dangers, these scholars argue that poor Jamaicans' use of skin bleaches partly disrupts essentialized notions of blackness by pointing to the unstable relationship between bodily appearances and racial identities.⁵⁶ Building on that work, Krista Thompson, an art historian, has insightfully linked skin lightening in Jamaican dancehalls during the 1990s and 2000s to the aesthetics of film and photography. Thompson examines how people use lighteners as visual technologies to make their faces and bodies more "representable" to the video camera. Skin lightening, she argues, operates as both a response to videography and a tool that enables marginalized and disenfranchised people to gain recognition in Jamaica and the United States, where the videos often circulate.⁵⁷ Together, these studies situate skin lightening as a site of disruptive politics and aesthetic expression.

Beneath the Surface places the political, economic, affective, and aesthetic dimensions of skin lightening in historical perspective. Eva Illouz calls such an approach to studying consumer capitalism a "post-normative critique." It aims to produce a "critical effect" by historically elucidating—instead of morally evaluating—the interconnectedness of things and human beings, and emotions and consumption: understanding emerges from identifying and describing the "chain of causes" that creates consuming subjects.⁵⁸ The early chapters of this book delve back in time to demonstrate how practices of skin lightening have moved between geographic locations and across cultural frontiers, appealing to

diverse and shifting groups of people. I then turn to the commercial manufacture and marketing of skin lighteners, reconstructing the history of particular companies and advertising campaigns. This examination reveals how skin lighteners often operated as technologies of visibility. People used them to attract favorable attention and enhance their appearances and, as the twentieth century unfolded, to render themselves legible in new visual media and cultural forms ranging from photos and film to magazine spreads and beauty contests. They also deployed them as technologies of visibility to negotiate deeply racialized and sharply gendered social worlds. Whereas little evidence suggests that black consumers in South Africa used skin lighteners specifically to obtain official reclassification within apartheid's four-tiered racial hierarchy, they did use them to enhance prospects in social and work settings that privileged light skin. In the mid-1980s, an activist campaigning against skin lighteners explained their appeal: "I don't know if many blacks have tried to get reclassified by lightening their skin color, but psychologically they believe that they will have more opportunities and be more successful in whatever they do if their skin is whiter."⁵⁹

In addition, *Beneath the Surface* chronicles the history of opposition to skin lighteners, and it is the first study to do so. I examine efforts to curtail their sale and use by medical professionals and consumer health advocates, on the one hand, and by antiracist thinkers and activists, on the other. Attention to these two forms of critique highlights the unique and distinct positions that South Africa and the United States occupy in the global history of skin lighteners. It also helps to explain episodes like Obama's apocryphal encounter with an American magazine article in Jakarta. By the late 1960s, antiracist activists had framed skin lighteners as overdetermined evidence of the psychological effects of structural racism. Raising her son at the height of the Black Power movement and at a distance from the United States, Dunham sought to instill in him what bell hooks would later term "loving blackness," an ethic that rejected white beauty standards and named Harry Belafonte the world's most attractive man.⁶⁰ The ethic stuck but left the young Obama unprepared for a world where people who looked like him and his Kenyan father might want to lighten their skin.

UNDERSTANDING WHY SOME PEOPLE have used skin lighteners in the past and continue to do so in the present requires a layered history, a history that attends to lighteners' slippery status as both cosmetics and medicines and to connections between seemingly disparate domains. The political and affective dimensions of skin lightening have been forged through social and material

processes that have spanned centuries and crossed oceans. Racism is utterly integral but alone insufficient for making sense of this history. Skin lighteners have proliferated through the spread of mass manufacturing, marketing, and media, and the linked rise of the modern girl, one of consumer capitalism's chief protagonists. By purchasing and using skin lighteners, some young women, like Zilpah Skota, and, later, men participated in new forms of consumption and self-fashioning. They engaged skin lighteners as technologies of visibility that simultaneously worked to challenge and entrench existing racial and gender hierarchies. Over time and as part of broader social movements, antiracist activists took aim at these forms and invested bodily appearances and affective consumption with new, liberatory meanings. It was the presence of skin lighteners *despite* the power of those movements that so confounded Obama.

To understand these twentieth-century developments, we must start earlier. How did people in precolonial and colonial southern Africa conceptualize and care for bodily surfaces? What part did whitening or lightening play as different ideas and practices intersected and became entangled on the decidedly uneven terrain of colonialism? Answering these questions requires paying attention to the significance of the body's surface as well as to what lies beneath.