

THUY LINH NGUYEN TU

Experiments in Skin: Race and Beauty in the Shadows of Vietnam.

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021. 240 pages. \$99.95 (hardcover), \$25.95 (paperback), \$25.95 (e-book).

At first glance, the lives of women in contemporary Hồ Chí Minh City and the career of Albert Kligman, a dermatologist at the University of Pennsylvania active during the mid-twentieth century, seem to have little bearing on each other. However, as demonstrated in *Experiments in Skin*, the Second Indochina War was critical to the establishment of dermatology as an experimental science and, eventually, a billion-dollar global industry. One of the many troubling ironies in the book is that many of the cosmetic products that women consume to heal and protect their skin from exposure to the increasing amounts of toxic chemicals and pollution in Đổi Mới-era Vietnam were developed by the same scientific and military institutions responsible for the chemical war waged in Southeast Asia. *Experiments in Skin* surfaces the relationships between racialized aesthetics and violence, the military and prison industrial complexes, and commercial aspirations and environmental degradation across Vietnam and the United States. Drawing on archival and ethnographic research, Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu opens up the field of Vietnam studies by analyzing not just the direct transfer of ideas, trade, and people in and out of the country but also how war, illness, and beauty resonate across historical and geographic contexts.

In Nguyen Tu's analysis, skin functions less as a metaphoric boundary between inside and outside than a "connective tissue" that absorbs the effects of empire and capitalism's entanglements (9). During the war, skin became subject to both military and commercial projects of expansion. The most common medical problems among American soldiers deployed to Vietnam

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were dermatological disorders, including a form of dermatitis dubbed “paddy foot” and acne so debilitating that military operations had to be curtailed and individuals evacuated. Although ecological conditions were blamed, white soldiers suffered in numbers far greater than their Black counterparts, let alone the Vietnamese. The unique conditions of the Vietnam War created opportunities for novel research on racial differences as well as the reification of longstanding racial hierarchies. The US Military Dermatology Research Program attempted to create, in one prominent scientist’s words, an “armor of skin” for white soldiers through skin hardening chemical treatments. This constructed whiteness as a condition of vulnerability, reinforced stereotypes about the imperviousness of Black people to pain, and shaped American sensibilities about race by rooting it in biological difference when it had the potential to be otherwise. The ultimately unsuccessful effort to protect white soldiers came at the expense of the mostly Black inmates at Holmesburg Prison in Philadelphia. Here, Kligman and his colleagues found ideal conditions for a broad array of pharmaceutical and biochemical weapons research studies that led to the development of, among others, Agent Orange and Retin-A, the still widely used acne cream. Nguyen Tu focuses less on the abuses endured by the test subjects (as they are well documented elsewhere) than on how conceptual frameworks generated by violence travel and transform to produce other forms of violence.

The women at Calyx, a Hồ Chí Minh City spa where Nguyen Tu conducted fieldwork, seem largely unaware of the shared origins of their desires for smooth skin and the “scientific fantasy of a hard, white, male, soldiering body” (16), but they confront the latter’s legacy nonetheless. Although it is positioned in relation to the ambitions of Hồ Chí Minh City’s growing elite, Calyx caters to a clientele on the fringes of the city’s economic boom, despite their central role in it. Many of its customers work at factories that bring them into contact with chemicals that burn and crack their skin. Painful rashes and other symptoms indicate exposure to not just chlorine in the workplace or dioxin in their hometowns but also poverty and ghosts who died bad deaths. Calyx’s treatment regimens are designed not simply to beautify skin but also to strengthen the customers themselves. Going beyond narrowly defined biomedical conditions, employees and clients work

together with an “ethic of speculation” distinct from the US military’s scientific experiments. Their approach is medically pluralist: they trust the efficacy of biomedicine and acupressure, apply poultices of herbs, wrap skin in silk, and trade recommendations for different pharmacists and herbal tea recipes. Doing so in a communal treatment room, they develop the physical and social connections that make living with violence and toxic environments more bearable. There is little evidence here of fantasies of the perfect skin promised by the cosmetics industry. Rather, the women operate in a mode of making do with good enough so they might continue with their work.

Experiments in Skin is a guide for scholars of Vietnam heeding the recent calls to decolonize area studies. In Nguyen Tu’s analysis, Vietnam is not presented as an Other with a rich culture and history to be deciphered with Western theories. For example, biomedical dermatology and the wide-ranging treatments at Calyx are not counterposed to each other. Rather, the way that women in Hồ Chí Minh City update and add to biomedicine to develop their own theory of skin is less a matter of an “appropriation from below” than an ongoing exchange of ideas between Vietnam and the United States. By considering the scientific contributions and innovations of the Global South, Nguyen Tu disentangles social and medical theory from its purportedly Western origins and places it in a global context. Perhaps the question at hand is not just how dermatology’s beginnings concern women in contemporary Vietnam but also how this line of inquiry can be furthered in Vietnam studies.

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