

L. AYU SARASWATI. *Seeing Beauty, Sensing Race in Transnational Indonesia*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2013. 173 pp.

In December 2014, 14 women in central Japan filed a suit with the Nagoya District Court seeking close to 190 million yen (around 1.5 million USD) in damages from a cosmetic company, alleging that their skin had broken out in white blotches after using the company's skin-whitening products. Five days later in Canada, in response to eleven official complaints and widespread outrage on social media sites, the Toronto Transit Commission announced that it was removing subway advertisements promoting a skin lightening treatment. The advertisements featured split images of a black woman and a South Asian woman in order to demonstrate the lightening effect of the advertised treatment, implying that lighter skin is both preferable and achievable. The history of skin bleaching is often traced back to aristocrats of both sexes during the Elizabethan age, but in its current manifestations skin bleaching is practiced disproportionately by women within non-white communities.

L. Ayu Saraswati's *Seeing Beauty, Sensing Race in Transnational Indonesia* takes up the questions of how and why contemporary ideas about beauty continue to centre on ideas about whiteness and gender, and how such ideas have made their way around the globe. The author traces the circulation and impact of images about beauty from different countries and contexts to Indonesia – from the precolonial to postcolonial periods – and is able to tell a compelling story about how the circulation of non-Indonesian beauty ideals has shaped the ongoing construction of race, gender, and skin colour in Indonesia.

Saraswati tells this story first by describing and analysing cultural texts as vehicles for ideas about beauty. She begins with the epic poem the Ramayana, which was adapted for Indonesian audiences in the late ninth century from Indian predecessors. She then journeys nearly one thousand years into the future to the women's magazines which accompanied Dutch colonialism and which contained images of Caucasian white faces in order to illustrate, or extend previous ideas about, the epitome of beauty. Her counterintuitive argument about how and why the white beauty ideal persisted in Indonesia even when Japan became the new colonial power in the 1940s, and was only strengthened in the postcolonial era due to the powerful influence of American popular culture, is especially persuasive. This analysis of cultural texts, though, supports and describes only one aspect of Saraswati's larger argument.

Saraswati's more theoretically innovative contribution brings together transnational constructions of beauty with the feelings those ideas evoke in the bodies and minds of their consumers. In other words, Saraswati is contributing to a richly interdisciplinary conversation about how, when, and why human emotions are made visible within, and circulated through, these types of representations of beauty. Not content simply to analyse dramatic texts or women's magazine advertisements, Saraswati wants to understand how the images themselves, having

travelled across different geographical and political locations, land in a new emotional context to “help shape discourses and hierarchies of race, gender, and skin color transnationally” (p. 2). And because it is not only images of beauty but also feelings about beauty – what it looks like, who gets to have it, what the racial identities and skin colours of the beautiful seem to be – that are circulating around the globe, then it is also through these feelings that meanings of race, gender, and skin colour are registered within the body. Ultimately, Saraswati is making the argument that our current understandings of race, gender, and skin colour are both socially and visually constructed, the latter taking shape through a process of affective recognition and reconstruction.

Saraswati provides several explanations for why she has chosen to explore Indonesia and its cultural, historical, and aesthetic landscapes: the specificity of Indonesian racial and colonial history; the idea that contemporary Indonesians do not think through the lens of race (which she argues against, to some degree); the social implications of Indonesia’s geographic size and large population; and the ways in which ‘lighter-the-better’ ideologies seem to have taken on different shapes in Indonesia than they have elsewhere. Saraswati’s choice of Indonesia as a setting for her research is a productive one. Indonesia certainly provides the author with an under theorised cultural and historical case study.

The chapters focusing on Indonesian case studies and interview data are especially strong, and the author’s ability to move between broader cultural analysis and the specifics of the Indonesian landscape is impressive and convincing. At times, however, I wondered if an even more empirically concrete orientation might have impacted her study positively. For example, Saraswati mentions but could have built more extensively upon Arlie Hochschild’s work (1983) on “emotional labor” which set the stage for so much research on how we feel our emotions and how we negotiate those feelings, especially in more public spheres. Such an orientation would perhaps have made more concrete Saraswati’s discussion of *rasa*—the emotion that underlies and is attached to a performative event or representation. In many ways Saraswati’s engagement with more empirically-driven theorists (Anderson 1983) greatly benefitted her study, as such frameworks tend to ground discussions of cultural work in daily practices and national habits. At other moments, though, an even greater reliance on empirical connection could have better grounded some of Saraswati’s more abstract discussions. I have in mind especially Ashley Mears’ recent work (2011) on the fashion industry and on the emotional labour and “body work” that is done by models.

Saraswati’s project compellingly inserts itself into existing literatures on globalisation by insisting upon the importance of emotions within narratives of transnational contact. While I admit that I am more familiar with the sociological research on emotion, beauty, and cultural capital, Saraswati’s powerful and persuasive work takes place within a wide-ranging interdisciplinary body of research grounded primarily in the humanities. Her project is both important and ambitious, and she clearly contributes to the existing literature both

by centring her project within an Indonesian landscape and by enlarging the analytical models currently in use.

AMY E. SINGER

Franklin & Marshall College
amy.singer@fandm.edu

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JASON LIM. *A Slow Ride into the Past: The Chinese Trishaw Industry in Singapore, 1942–1983*. Clayton, VIC: Monash University Publishing, 2013. 163 pp.

Of all countries in Southeast Asia, Singapore is most haunted by its social history. Historians of Singapore have frequently used social history to invert and interrogate the triumphalist state- and elite-centric narrative of economic growth and modernisation. These scholars ask ‘For whom?’ and ‘At what price?’ about the writing of Singapore history, and Singapore’s official storytellers stammer.

Jason Lim poses such questions in his book, *A Slow Ride into the Past: The Chinese Trishaw Industry in Singapore, 1942–1983*. It draws from, and contributes to, a long tradition of Singapore’s ‘history from below.’ Indeed, it is an homage to a pioneering work in Singapore social history, James Francis Warren’s *Rickshaw Coolie: A People’s History of Singapore, 1880–1940* (2003). Lim’s book is based on his honours thesis, for which Warren himself was the supervisor. Moreover, its subject is a marginalised occupational group in the transport sector, similar to Warren’s focus in his work on rickshaw pullers. Lim is clear in the introduction, “Social history of the Chinese community in Singapore”, that the book positions itself within the wider literature of Singapore social history, specifically, of its ethnic Chinese population in the decades after the Second World War. However, Lim also engages with transportation studies. In the first chapter he situates the book alongside other works on cycle transport in Southeast Asia, making his research another testament to the significance of mobility in the history of Singaporean society (Pante 2013). Moreover, by highlighting trishaws as a mode of informal transport, which is a commonplace in Southeast Asian cities, Lim emphasises the subordinate status of his story vis-à-vis ‘the Singapore story.’