

celebrities intensified their popularity. This period coincided with the deepening of apartheid rule to further disenfranchise Black South Africans, such that skin tone increasingly mattered for life chances and social mobility. Meanwhile, many Black South Africans had increasing access to material resources that augmented their purchasing power to afford such commodities.

Chapters Five and Six examine intersecting political and medical opposition to skin lighteners. Chapter Five looks into debates about the active ingredients used in these products and their ill health effects as well as a growing political consciousness around valuing Black beauty, including dark complexions. Chapter Six explores how growing medical concerns and antiracist protests collided to spur a decline in their use. By 1990, South Africa was the first country to pass regulations that banned the manufacturing, distribution, and advertising of skin lighteners. The Conclusion delves into their contemporary significance within and beyond South Africa, including the role of social media, new ingredients, and ongoing health debates. Each chapter logically builds on the preceding one to provide a comprehensive account and cohesive argument.

Among the many strengths of the book is its transnational and diasporic approach. It includes empirical evidence from East Africa, the United States, and Europe to contextualize the topic and the place of South Africa. For example, at various points Thomas details the transatlantic circulation of products and media between South Africans and African Americans in ways that recalibrate conventional understandings of racial politics and the global flow of goods and ideologies. She also juxtaposes tanning and lightening to offer several thought-provoking points about race, class, and leisure. While many of the key arguments are relevant beyond South Africa, a stronger explanation could be offered about whether these central claims should be applied beyond this context, given the country's specific racialized history of colonialism and apartheid.

This is an impressive book that will surely be a classic for scholars interested in aesthetics, beauty politics, and gender. It is an especially welcome addition to the literature as it centers on African history from a transnational perspective. It also has much to offer those with specialization in the history of science, medicine, and technology, as the book provides insights about the role of shifting advances in photography, developments in the medical field, and debates about regulatory policies. This text would be appropriate for teaching undergraduate and graduate students interested in gender, embodiment, and politics. On the whole, this book is cogently argued and deeply engaging. Photographs, including several in color, further enliven the analysis. *Beneath the Surface* does not offer facile answers as to the popularity and contestation of skin lighteners, but is rather focused on the subtle contradictions and distinctions that contributed to these contested products and practices.

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From Coast to Coast and Back Again

Africa and the Indian Ocean World from Early Times to circa 1900

By Gwyn Campbell. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. xv + 306. \$29.99, paperback (ISBN: 9781139028769).

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The Indian Ocean in the early modern period has been the subject of magisterial interventions from K. M. Panikkar, to K. N. Chaudhuri, M. N. Pearson and Sanjay Subrahmanyam. The defining

argument has been of a maritime world interrupted by the arrival of the Europeans with differing evaluations of the Western impact. There has been the assumption of a self-contained maritime system governed by its rhythms of trade and politics under the aegis of the monsoon winds. While the idea of the Indian Ocean allows for a heuristic coherence, new work has raised the question of what it means to partition what are, in reality, continuous oceans. Renisa Mawani has called for bringing into conversation the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Oceans. Over the past decade, the work of Jeremy Prestholdt and Thomas McDow, for example, has looked at the connections between consumer demand, capitalism, and slavery across a space from the USA to Africa through to South Asia. Alongside this thinking beyond area studies and national frames has been the call to move beyond conventional narratives from scholars like Melody Jue (blue media), Isabel Hofmeyr (hydrocolonialism), and Philip Steinberg (wet ontologies). What would it mean for historians to get their feet wet and engage with the wet archive of the ocean; to take into account the very texture of the water, the waves, salinity, and so on?

Gynn Campbell's book is more in keeping with the archival and area study framework than these more recent works, while taking on a *longue durée* of 2000 years and engaging with the environment. Michael Pearson's call to take history *in* the ocean seriously and move beyond histories *on* the ocean is heeded to the extent that winds, volcanoes, and the Ice Age act as a supplement to conventional terrestrial archival research on states, merchants, and agrarian civilizations. A further departure is the positioning of Africa centrally within the world of the Indian Ocean (Indian Ocean Africa and the Indian Ocean world move in synchrony). Earlier, scholars like K. N. Chaudhuri had suggested that Africa had little to offer to narratives of the Indian Ocean and had largely followed its own rhythms.

The interaction of humans and the environment is the significant contribution of this work, which brings in the impact of climatic and environmental factors in the making of the Indian Ocean. He speaks about four climatic phenomena that were central to this maritime world: the Intertropical Convergence Zone, the Indian Ocean Dipole, the El Niño-southern oscillation, and volcanism. Campbell argues that the Indian Ocean global economy preceded the one centered on the Atlantic by 1,500 years, with upswings between 300 BCE and 300 CE, the ninth to the thirteenth century, and the mid-nineteenth century to the present day. The first boom from 300 BCE shaped a transoceanic space based on monsoon winds and contingent benign climatic factors that allowed for voyages and the making of the Indian Ocean World system.

Within these three boom periods there was a constant flow of goods and personnel across and around the Indian Ocean, such as for example merchants from North and East Africa who settled in Bengal under the patronage of the Chola maritime empire in southern India. The Horn of Africa became central to the spice trade from Southeast Asia as well as to the trade in the fabled rhinoceros horn. The expansion of Islam from the eighth century and the encouragement given to maritime commerce by the southern Han and Song between the tenth and thirteenth century was accompanied by contingent factors like the decline in El Niño events in this period, which resulted in the Indian Ocean World seeing greater rainfall, leading to agricultural surplus and growth in state revenue and trade. South Indian merchant associations came up in the Persian Gulf, Red Sea, Southeast Asia, and Guangzhou, and Arab merchants became key to the diffusion of cotton in Africa. Campbell looks at the emergence of civilization on the Swahili coast, the early Malagasy, and the Great Zimbabwe, and locates this in a nexus of climatic change, economic growth, and increased maritime connections.

The constant correlation between human activities and environmental factors (volcanism, rain and floods, El Niño, as well as more conventionally narrated historical events, like the Mongol invasions) makes this a work of great complexity that moves us beyond monocausal explanations located in states and empires and their impact. For example, the argument that unstable environmental conditions between 1300 and 1800, a 'little Ice Age', constrained European incursion in the region takes us beyond conventional clichés of Western superiority and Eastern lassitude and stagnation. As the

book enters the later period of the nineteenth century, the narrative becomes more conventional, and the world capitalist economy becomes the central driver of the argument. Thus, a chapter on the short-lived attempts at indigenous modernization in Ethiopia, Egypt, and Madagascar falls back upon conventional explanations of the failure of capitalism in these spaces. The ocean and the environment, which played crucial roles in earlier chapters, now take a back seat to questions of terrestrial capacities and a global economy driven from Europe. The final chapter, which takes up the question of slavery, appears somewhat forced and tacked on, since none of the subtle arguments that determine social and economic processes earlier in the book make an appearance.

This is a pioneering and original intervention in oceanic studies that thinks history over the longue durée, bringing together human ambitions and the contingency of environment. However, the book remains trapped in the heuristic of a hermetic Indian Ocean world and fails to explore the connections between the worlds of the continuous oceans of the Atlantic and Pacific.

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A South African Writer

Sol T. Plaatje: A Life in Letters

Edited by Brian Willan and Sabata-mpho Mokae. Cape Town: Historical Publications Southern Africa, 2020. Pp. *xxi* + 359. \$40.00, paperback (ISBN: 978-0-9947207-6-4).

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Historical Publications Southern Africa (HiPSA), known as the Van Riebeeck Society until their recent centenary, has published a new edited volume of historical documents each year since 1918. The volume for 2020 is their fifth one of writings by black South Africans, a collection of letters authored by the prominent writer and activist Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje between 1896 and 1932. Compiled by the leading Plaatje biographer Brian Willan and edited in partnership with the Tswana scholar Sabata-mpho Mokae, the letters provide a valuable glimpse of how South Africa's momentous social and political changes during the early twentieth century were experienced and viewed by African educated elites of that era.

The book's 260 letters were located by Willan during many years of research in a wide variety of archives, libraries, and personal collections. The book begins with a concise, helpful biography of Plaatje and then presents the letters chronologically, grouped into eight distinct chapters of Plaatje's adult life. Text in Setswana and other languages is accompanied by English translations, and there are numerous informative footnotes identifying people, places, and events mentioned in the letters. The book concludes with brief biographies of the main correspondents, information about the locations of the original letters, a bibliography of suggested further reading, and a detailed comprehensive index.

Sol T. Plaatje is most often identified simply as one of the founders of the African National Congress, but his other extensive activities and accomplishments as a public intellectual have