

Lynn M. Thomas
Associate Professor, History and
Adjunct in Women Studies
University of Washington
Box 353560
Seattle, WA 98195-3560
USA

e-mail: lynnmt@u.washington.edu
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“The Modern Girl, Cosmetics Debates, and Racial Respectability in 1930s South Africa”¹

During the 1930s, a debate raged in the black South African weekly *Bantu World* over school-educated unmarried young women, often referred to as the “modern girl.” Some writers praised the black modern girl for her wit, fashionable appearance, and self-assuredness. Others questioned her comportment and consumer habits, arguing that she was too self-indulgent, too reluctant to marry, and too concerned with imitating her “white sisters.” One of the most contentious issues surrounding the modern girl was her use of cosmetics. *Bantu World* writers debated whether African young women who used cosmetics were betraying their “race” by applying “artifice” or were adopting fashionable and hygienic practices that contributed to “racial uplift.” Within white-dominated segregationist South Africa, the modern girl both emerged through and posed challenges to categories of race and respectability.

This paper will analyze cosmetics debates and advertisements together with *Bantu World*'s first beauty contest to reveal the emergence, by the early 1930s, of a black modern girl imbricated in the transnational flow of ideologies, fashions, and commodities. Before my research assistants and I began examining southern and West African periodicals from the 1930s, I thought that such a black modern girl only became visible in sub-Saharan Africa during the

¹ For collecting and discussing with me sources in and related to this paper, I am indebted to research assistants Phoebe Ayers, Catherine Brueckner, Glorya Cho, Betsy Fomon, Ian Foster, John Foster, Breona Gutschmidt, Katrina Hagen, Mara Hobler, Kristy Leissle, Teresa Mares, Rebecca McColl, Kristen McTighe, Jamaica Morris, Helen Schneider, Kacie Sisel, Alexis Wheeler, Stella Yee, and Kasa Zipfel. Within this paper, I use the term black as an umbrella term to refer to South Africans who thought of themselves or were viewed by others as non-white, coloured, African, Malay, or Indian.

post-World War II period. The modern girls that I had in mind were the cover girls, beauty pageants winners, and lovelorn letter-writers who appeared in the pages of the popular magazine *Drum*, founded in Johannesburg in 1951 [slide #3 tennis cover girl (1951) and slide #4 Karroo (1953)]. But as this paper will argue, a modern girl produced through the entanglement of southern African gender and generational relations, Christian missionary education, new urban styles, and African American affiliations appeared nearly twenty years before in *Bantu World*.

In contrast to other contemporary black newspapers, *Bantu World*'s white financial backers and black journalists sought to promote black consumption and newspaper reading by carrying extensive advertisements and developing a large, nationwide circulation. *Bantu World* was first published in 1932 out of Johannesburg, the economic capital of southern Africa following the mineral (diamond and gold) revolution of the late nineteenth century. According to Les Switzer, *Bantu World* quickly became "the arbiter of taste in urban African politics and culture and by far the most important medium of mass communication for the literate African community." Although this literate community only amounted to an estimated 12.4% of the total African population of over six million in 1931, it was a vocal group. *Bantu World* embodied the concerns and aspirations of the *Amarespectables* (respectable people), mission-educated African Christians who worked mainly as clerks, teachers, domestic servants, nurses, and clergy, and who sought, under increasingly difficult circumstances, to achieve middle-class status.² Amid the competing ideologies that shaped interwar black politics, including liberalism, trade unionism, communism, Garveyism, and African nationalism, *Bantu World* advocated a "progressive yet moderate" agenda.³ This political agenda insisted in the face of white racism on

² *Amarespectables* was a Xhosa-English hybrid term with *Ama-* being the Xhosa prefix for people.

³ Les Switzer, "Bantu World and the Origins of a Captive African Commercial Press" in Les Switzer (ed.), *South Africa's Alternative Press: Voices of Protest and Resistance, 1880s-1960s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 189-212, quotes from 190-191 and 198; Tim Couzens, "A Short History of 'World' (and other Black SA Newspapers)," *Inspan Journal* 1, 1 (1978): 69-92.

the importance of *Amarespectables* to South Africa's future.

The English root of the Xhosa-language term *Amarespectables* suggests the importance of respectability to this group's self-presentation. Vivian Bickford-Smith has argued that respectability emerged as an ideological force in South Africa during the 1870s and 1880s when Cape colonists began to embrace the Victorian virtues of "thrift, the sanctity of property, deference to superiors, belief in the moralising efficacy of hard work and cleanliness" together with whiteness, the English language, and support for Empire as the hallmarks of English ethnicity.⁴ While in this earliest formulation, respectability was tightly aligned with whiteness, black elites and political leaders from Cape Town to Kimberley soon claimed this ideology as their own, structuring their lives by its tenets and deploying it to counter white racism and promote "race pride."⁵ In her study of black Baptist women in the United States, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham insightfully elaborates respectability as a double-edged component of racial self-help ideology. She explains how respectability enabled the black middle-class both to "counter racist images and structures" by conforming to the "dominant society's norms of manners and morals," and to condemn aspects of black poor and working-class life and turn them into objects of reform.⁶ Similarly, mission-educated black South Africans engaged notions of racial respectability to oppose racist structures that denied their worth, and to advance particular gender, sexual, and class politics within their own communities.

⁴ Vivian Bickford-Smith, *Ethnic Pride and Racial Prejudice in Victorian Cape Town* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), quotes from 39.

⁵ Brian Willan, "An African in Kimberley: Sol T. Plaatje, 1894-1898" in Shula Marks and Richard Rathbone, (eds.), *Industrialisation and South Change in South Africa: African Class Formation, Culture and Consciousness, 1870-1930* (White Plains, NY: Longman, 1982), 238-58; Bickford-Smith, *Ethnic Pride*, 203; Vivian Bickford-Smith, Elizabeth van Heyningen, and Nigel Worden, *Cape Town in the Twentieth Century* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1999), 43.

⁶ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), quotes from 187 and 195; also see 14-15 and 185-229.

The modern girl gained prominence as *Bantu World*'s male investors and journalists simultaneously sought to cultivate women reader-consumers, and to delineate an urban black femininity that would distinguish *Amarespectable* young women from the "disreputable" female figures of the prostitute, beer brewer, and *shebeen* owner.⁷ In the eyes of *Bantu World*'s male journalists, the black modern girl threatened racial respectability when she appeared too white and promiscuously lowbrow. By analyzing *Bantu World*'s first beauty contest and cosmetics debates and ads, this paper will explore how male journalists and letter-writers articulated concerns about racial respectability through the modern girl. It will also examine how some school-educated young women sought to negotiate both a fashionable and a racially respectable appearance. As we shall see, African American ideologies, entrepreneurs, and commodities played an important role in these negotiations even as these American elements were reconfigured amid the particularities of South Africa's racial hierarchies.

Cultivating Women Reader-Consumers

Bantu World viewed feminine beauty as key to attracting readers and increasing its early circulation figures of 6,000 copies per week.⁸ A few months after the paper's launch, *Bantu World* introduced a women's page, under the masthead "News of Interest to Women of the Race." Although portions of the paper regularly appeared in the languages of Xhosa, Zulu, Sotho, Tswana, Venda, Tsonga, and Afrikaans, the women's page, like the front page, always appeared in English to ensure an audience that better cut across ethnolinguistic divides. On its

⁷ On "disreputable" women, see Laura Longmore, *The Dispossessed* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1959); P.L. Bonner, "Desirable or Undesirable Basotho Women?" *Liquor, Prostitution and the migration of Basotho Women to the Rand, 1920-1945* in Cheryl Walker, (ed.), *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1990), 221-50;

⁸ These early circulation figures were double those of previous African papers including *Imvo Zabantsundu* and *Ilanga lase Natal*, Couzens, "A Short History of 'World'," 77. By 1946, *Bantu World* circulation figures had climbed to 24,000 per week. Switzer, "*Bantu World*," 190. According to South Africa's 1936 census, Africans numbered 6.6 million in a national population of nearly 9.6 million.

inaugural women's page, *Bantu World* announced a beauty competition, inviting "All African Ladies" to submit their "best photos" and promising cash prizes. In an accompanying article, "The Son of Africa," probably editor R.V. Selope Thema, explained the three motivations behind the beauty competition: to prove that "there are beautiful women and girls in Africa"; to promote "diligent perusal of enterprising Bantu newspapers"; and to encourage "careless or lazy [ladies] to give a little more attention to their toilet." According to this logic, the beauty competition would foster race pride, a female readership, and conscientious consumption.⁹

Bantu World's beauty contest, from its emphasis on defending black womanhood to its title of "Miss Africa," reveals African American connections and models. As others have documented, black journalists in interwar South Africa were deeply influenced by the works of Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, and others.¹⁰ They were also familiar with the African American press; on occasion, *Bantu World* reprinted articles from Du Bois's magazine *The Crisis*. Such publications likely provided the inspiration for *Bantu World's* beauty contest, promoted as the first in a black South African newspaper. Since the early 1890s, African American newspapers had sponsored such contests to boost circulation and combat racist denigrations.¹¹ The influence of black American thought can also be seen in *Bantu World's* decision to crown the winner "Miss Africa" as opposed to "Miss

⁹ "The Son of Africa," "Great Progress! The Bantu World Calls to the Women of the Race" and "Competition," *Bantu World* (22 October 1932), 10. This pen-name is probably a play on the book by G.A. Gollock, *The Sons of Africa* (????) that profiled great men of Africa. This book was discussed in *Bantu World* (5 November 1932), 10 together with the companion sequel, G.A. Gollock, *Daughters of Africa* (London: Longman, Green and Col, 1932). Tim Couzens, "Pseudonyms in Black South African Writing, 1920-1950," *Research in African Literatures* 6, 2 (1975): 226-31.

¹⁰ Tim Couzens, "Chapter 3: 'Moralizing Leisure Time;: The Transatlantic Connection and Black Johannesburg (1918-1936)" in *The New African: A Study of the Life and Work of H.I.E. Dhomo* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985); James T. Campbell, "T.D. Mwelik Skota and the Making and Unmaking of a Black Elite," unpublished paper presented to the University of the Witwatersrand History Workshop, 9-14 February 1987; Amanda Denise Kemp, "'Up from Slavery' and Other Narratives: Black South African Performances of the American Negro (1920-1943)," Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1997, especially chapters two and three.

¹¹ Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen? Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 46-55.

Bantu” or “Miss Native,” the latter being terms more commonly used to refer to South Africa’s indigenous populations in this period. As James Campbell has insightfully argued, black South African writers’ use of “Africa” drew on Garveyite notions that linked the term with “an heroic past, an undifferentiated racial identity, an essentially unitary culture.”¹² The men behind *Bantu World* viewed attractive and carefully groomed women as contributing to a project of racial uplift that would connect a “heroic past” to a politically progressive and commercially vibrant future.

The nearly fifty beauty competition photographs displayed in *Bantu World* between November 1932 and March 1933 constitute an unparalleled visual archive of interwar *Amarespectable* young women. Contestants wore refined clothing ranging from high-collared and long-sleeved blouses to more modish open necklines with jewelry and cloche hats [**slide #5, BW 11/12/32, 12**]. The photos are largely studio portraits of women’s upper bodies and heads. Posing in Victorian style, the women face the camera, most with a somber and dignified expression.¹³ Through his re-discovery and analysis of turn-of-the-twentieth-century black South African family photographs, Santu Mofokeng has suggested the multiple meanings embodied in such portraits. Urban blacks typically commissioned these photographs for private display in family albums or on sitting room walls. Mofokeng argues that today, such photos serve as a reminder of a nascent mission-educated African elite that, in subsequent decades, would be crushed through the hardening of racial capitalism and the elaboration of *apartheid*. Such images, according to Mofokeng, also persist as a powerful counterpoint to the photographic work of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century anthropologists and others who, influenced by

¹² Campbell, “T.D. Mveli Skota,” 6.

¹³ A few submissions were full-length shots taken outdoors or in studios, some included more than one woman and one included a man. For an insightful analysis how men responded to the magazine *Drum*’s early beauty contests, see Lindsay Clowes, “‘Are You Going to be MISS (or MR) Africa?’ Contesting Masculinity in *Drum* Magazine 1951-1953,” *Gender & History* 13, 1 (April 2001): 1-20.

social Darwinism, sought to document racial difference through dehumanizing portraits of naked or sparsely-clothed Africans.¹⁴ Mofokeng's reflections suggest the visual economies as well as the class and racial politics through and against which the *Bantu World* beauty contest portraits took shape and continue to resonate today.

The photograph that won the contest, garnering more than twice as many reader-votes as its nearest competitor, is a stunning modern girl image [slide #6, *BW* 3/25/33, 10; slide #7, **close-up of Ndobe**]. With her cloche hat, string of pearls, relaxed neckline, and fur wrap or feather boa, Mrs. Flora Ndobe of Cape Town looks like she had just stepped off the streets of Harlem or shared the wardrobe of a Hollywood film star. I would contend that it was the foreign, specifically American, resonance and over-the-top glamour of this photo that made it so popular with *Bantu World*'s reader-voters. In particular, the fur wrap or feather boa stands out as a dramatic prop. Discussing the use of props in African studio photography, Jean-Loup Pivin writes, "their purpose is not to reveal an image of a desired future, but to *be* the future. Thus the photograph is not a wish or ambition, but a proving ground that makes you become what you are, both socially and within yourself."¹⁵ Reader-voters most likely appreciated Ndobe's photograph for its beauty and audacity in enacting American glamour. In South Africa, as in other contexts dominated by white racism, the black or non-white modern girl caused excitement and anxiety by remaking dominant cultural styles as her own and walking the thin line between mimicry and mockery.¹⁶

¹⁴ Santu Mofokeng, "The Black Photo Album" in *Anthology of African and Indian Ocean Photography* (Paris: Revue Noire, 1998), 68-75 and "Trajectory of a Street-Photographer: South Africa 1973-1998" in *Democracy's Images: Photography and Visual Art After Apartheid* (Umeå, Sweden: BildMuseet, 1998), 42-45

¹⁵ Jean-Loup Pivin, "The Icon and the Totem," 28 in *Anthology of African and Indian Ocean Photography*. On props in South African photographs, see Mofokeng, "The Black Photo Album," 69.

¹⁶ Zine Magubane sees a similar combination of mimicry and mockery at work in the figure of the black male "swell" or "dandy" who caused whites on South Africa's diamond fields so much concern during the 1870s by appearing able both to avoid manual labor and to enjoy "superfine" clothes, cigars, and wine. Like the black Modern girl, the swell or dandy had important American resonances. He emerged through South Africa's engagement with

Apart from her clothing, what defines Ndobe's modern girl-look and distinguishes both she and the second-place finisher, Miss Elizabeth Hlabakoe, from the other contestants are their teeth-revealing smiles. In the article announcing the competition, "The Son of Africa" had impressed upon potential contestants the importance of smiling:

Smile sweetly while the camera clicks and post the result to the Editor of this paper The trouble with some of our ladies is that they do not know how to smile. Yet what a glorious transformation a smile can give to your features! Practise it in front of your mirror every morning before or after meals it does not matter when.¹⁷

The full-smile modern girl look advocated by "The Son of Africa" and endorsed by *Bantu World* reader-voters had been promoted in the United States and around the world since the 1920s in toothpaste and cosmetic advertisements, and by film stars.¹⁸ But in the editorial that accompanied the competition results, Thema insisted that such external signs of beauty were not as important as altruism. He wrote, "[While the] Bantu race is certainly proud of its beautiful women . . . it will be more proud of women who take interest in the welfare of the people, and whose purpose in life is to serve the community in which they live."¹⁹ What ongoing *Bantu World* debates about the modern girl make clear is that the emergence of a group of school-educated urban young women committed to community and racial betterment could not be disentangled from the cultivation of new looks and consumptive practices, including smiling for the camera.

minstrelsy, an American form of entertainment first imported by British colonists. Zine Magubane, *Bringing the Empire Home: Race, Class, and Gender in Britain and Colonial South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 154-168.

¹⁷ "The Son of Africa," "Competition," *Bantu World* (22 October 1932), 10.

¹⁸ On this look as a distinctly American one, see Barlow et al., "The Modern girl Around the World," 16. See also Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*, 201 for the contrast between 1930s photos of smiling American sorority sisters putting on a "glamorous, made-up look" and somber members of the Daughters of the American Revolution. For a discussion of the smile as the most important piece of "apparel" for spreading joy, see Mrs. P. Melato, "'Pass on a Smile'," *Bantu World* (6 July 1935), 12.

¹⁹ "Bantu Women and the Community," *Bantu World* (25 March 1933), p. 4.

The men behind *Bantu World* featured photos of beautiful young women to promote race pride and to enhance the commercial success of their newspaper. But they also worried that excessive attention to appearance could lead to racial disrepute. It was this ambivalence that suffused their writings on the black modern girl.

Using Face Powders

In February 1933, in the middle of the beauty competition, a *Bantu World* headline announced “Daughters of Ham Take to Powdering their Faces.” [slide #8, *BW* 11 Feb. 1933] This headline evoked the Old Testament story (Genesis 9: 18-25) of Ham whose father Noah cursed his children into slavery after Ham saw him naked. In South Africa as in the nineteenth-century southern United States, some whites viewed blacks as the descendants of the “sons of Ham” and evoked Noah’s curse as biblical justification for their racial and social subordination. The *Bantu World* headline playfully reworks the epithet by substituting “daughters” for “sons” and linking it to a contemporary practice that seemingly questioned the immutability of South Africa’s racial order – face powdering.²⁰ The article’s author “Tommy” describes how face powder caused him to mistake a young black woman in Cape Town for an Italian; it was not until she inquired in “faultless vernacular” (most likely Xhosa) about the winner of *Bantu World*’s beauty competition that he recognized her as non-white. Tommy explains what happened next: “My sportsman-like reply, ‘Doo-doo, you are probably one,’ complacently induced this charming creature to come across towards me as the eagle soars and together we had

²⁰ On white South African evocations of the “sons of Ham,” see Andre Du Toit, “No Chosen People: The Myth of the Calvinist Origins of Afrikaner Nationalism and Racial Ideology,” *The American Historical Review* 88, 4 (October 1983): 920-952, esp. 927-31. For a nineteenth-century example of a black intellectual, Tiyo Soga, embracing the story of Ham as biblical proof that God ordained Africa for blacks, see D. Williams, (ed.), *The Journal and Selected Writings of the Reverend Tiyo Soga* (Cape Town, 1983), 178-82 quoted in Les Switzer, *Power & Resistance in an African Society: The Ciskei Xhosa and the Making of South Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1993), 162.

a jolly chat, indeed.”²¹

What is most striking about Tommy’s account of this flirtatious exchange is the young woman’s ambiguous racial status. Her face powder and pink cheeks caused Tommy to mistake her for an olive-skinned European while her interest in *Bantu World*’s beauty competition, expressed in a vernacular language, suggested an African identity. Furthermore, her request that Tommy attend her birthday dinner in “one of Malay Camp’s ‘aristocratic’ tenements” signaled mixed race or coloured connections.²² Ambiguous and hybrid racial affiliations were a common feature of modern girl representations and performances the world over.²³ While Tommy found such racial play both intriguing and charming, other black male journalists, as we shall see, could find it alarming.

It is quite possible that Tommy’s “pink-cheeked damsel” was Mrs. Flora Ndobe, the winner of the beauty competition. **[slide #7, close-up of Ndobe]** Her curiosity about the competition suggested to Tommy, at least, that she was an entrant, and Ndobe was one of only two competitors to hail from Cape Town. Moreover, Ndobe’s photograph features a light-colored and luminescent face that may have been powdered and that would have placed her on the paler side of South Africa’s color spectrum. At this point, seventy years later, it is probably impossible to determine if Ndobe was, in fact, Tommy’s “pink-cheeked damsel.” What these

²¹ Tommy, “Pink-Cheeked Lady and Tom: Daughters of Ham Take to Powdering Their Faces,” *Bantu World* (11 February 1933), 3.

²² “Malay” and “coloured” were and still are among several terms used in South Africa to refer to the descendants of mixed marriages and sexual liaisons between Europeans, southern Africans, and enslaved peoples brought from Southeast Asia, South Asia, Madagascar, West Africa, and East Africa during the Dutch colonial period. The category of “coloured” has a complex and politically fraught history in South Africa. It emerged over the nineteenth century, largely to designate the ex-slave population of the Cape. After 1948, South Africa’s *apartheid* regime deployed “coloured” along with “white”/“European,” “Bantu”/“African,” and “Asian” as one of its four racial categories. Beginning in the 1970s, Black Consciousness and other progressive political activists rejected these categories, arguing that all non-whites should identify as black.

²³ Tani E. Barlow, Madeleine Y. Dong, Uta G. Poiger, Priti Ramamurthy, Lynn M. Thomas, and Alys Eve Weinbaum, “The Modern Girl Around the World: A Research Agenda and Preliminary Findings,” *Gender and History* (forthcoming in August 2005); Idem, *The Modern Girl Around the World*, forthcoming.

two female figures, however, certainly shared was the modern girl trait of attracting attention by “combin[ing] and reconfigur[ing] aesthetic elements drawn from disparate national, colonial, and racial regimes to create a ‘cosmopolitan look.’”²⁴ In this case, those regimes stretched from Harlem to Hollywood to Italy to the Western Cape.

Not all black modern girls who used face powder attracted such favorable attention.. Beginning in March 1933, R.R.R. Dhlomo, one of the most important black writers of the period and the “Editress” of *Bantu World*’s women’s page, launched a campaign against white powder and, to a lesser extent, red lipstick. [slide #9, *BW 4 March 1933*] Through the voices of various literary creations, Dhlomo argued that these cosmetics looked foolish on faces that were “black as coal” and that “indiscriminate aping of European women was doing Bantu girls more harm than good.”²⁵ According to Dhlomo, while there was nothing inherently wrong with lipsticks and powders, they did “not suit dark skins.”²⁶ The use of white powder, in particular, Dhlomo wrote, was motivated by the shame of being black and the desire to look white.²⁷ Suggesting other racial role models, he reminded readers that “some of the most beautiful of Eastern women have been admired for their dark olive skins.”²⁸ Readers wrote letters in support of Dhlomo’s campaign. One noted that black women’s “imitative” habits were not reciprocated by “European ladies” as they never wore *imbola*, the red ochre or clay used to color skin, clothing, and blankets.²⁹ At times, *Bantu World* with its moderate political agenda situated white women as

²⁴ Barlow et al., “The Modern Girl Around the World,” 3.

²⁵ Miss Roamer, “Beautiful Bantu Women Need No Lipstick or Powder to Aid Nature,” *Bantu World* (4 March 1933), 10.

²⁶ R.R.R.D., “True Beauty,” *Bantu World* (29 September 1934).

²⁷ In one column, Dhlomo noted that the ability of black skin to hide “vivid blushes of shame” was “the only occasion when a black skin made a white one helpless with envy.” Also see, “What R. Roamer Sees About Town,” *Bantu World* (22 April 1933), p. 8.

²⁸ The Editress, “Disappointing Make-Ups,” *Bantu World* (23 June 1934), p. 10.

²⁹ Messrs. D. Mogoje & P.J.G.M., “Swanee Should Be Supported: Powder and Lipsticks Disfigure Bantu Women,”

appropriate role models. For instance, in announcing the beauty competition, “The Son of Africa” had encouraged women to “get into the open and face the world with your men, unashamed, undaunted, determined to emulate your white sisters in all that is noble, true and good.”³⁰ According to Dhlomo and his supporters, however, using face powder was not a practice worthy of imitation; rather, it was unsightly racial mimicry.

In part, this *Bantu World* campaign against face powder and lipstick needs to be seen as a piece of class-inflected debates about natural versus artificial beauty that took place in a variety of contexts. Many contemporaries in other parts of the world would have shared letter-writer L.T. Baleni’s sentiments that “the original meaning of the word ‘Beauty ‘ . . . [is] ‘Natural Beauty’” and not the “modern meaning of ‘artificial beauty’” achieved through “powders and paints” as well as short haircuts, gowns, and high heels.³¹ In her history of American beauty culture, *Hope in a Jar*, Kathy Peiss examines how concerns about the moral dangers of artifice animated discussions of cosmetics from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. The most dramatic transformation in U.S. beauty culture over the twentieth century, according to Peiss, was the shift in cosmetic usage from being “a sign of disrepute” to being “the daily routine of millions.”³² In 1931, the year before *Bantu World* commenced, the Port Elizabeth office of the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency compiled the results of an investigation into cosmetic usage in South Africa. Suggesting a growing consumer market, the report noted that urban “non-

Bantu World (9 June 1934), p. 10. On *imbola* as a Xhosa signifier of “happiness and faith” and the “the colour beloved by the ancestral spirits,” see Patricia Schonstein Pinnock, *Xhosa: A Cultural Grammar for Beginners* (Cape Town: African Sun Press, 1994), 28.

³⁰ “The Son of Africa,” “Great Progress! The Bantu World Calls to the Women of the Race” *Bantu World* (22 October 1932), 10.

³¹ L.T. Baleni, Western Township, “Unnecessary Expense Incurred by Women Striving for Beauty,” *Bantu World* (30 September 1933).

³² Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America’s Beauty Culture* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998), 4.

Europeans” (including Africans and coloureds) tended to “echo” the social life of Europeans. The report, however, limited its discussion of make-up to European and coloured women, explaining that they tended to use face powder, rouge, lipstick, and face powder sparingly: “its free use usually draws forth unfavourable comment.”³³ As in other cultural contexts influenced by notions of middle-class respectability, such “unfavourable” remarks most likely impugned the woman’s class standing and sexual morality. At one level, then, condemnation in *Bantu World* of black women’s use of make-up was in keeping with broader notions of middle-class respectability in South Africa, the United States, and elsewhere.

Politically-moderate black male leaders of the 1920s and 1930s like Dhlomo wanted to distinguish their *Amarespectable* daughters and wives from the female figures that dominated black urban landscapes and seemingly defied male control.³⁴ From their perspective, wearing cosmetics – like drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes, sporting short skirts, or attending raucous dances – placed *Amarespectable* modern girls perilously close to the morally disreputable world of prostitutes, beer brewers, and *shebeen* owners. Dhlomo explored the dangers of this world and its “loose women” in *An African Tragedy*, published in 1920 as the first novel written in English by a black South African. Dhlomo’s novel chronicles the destruction of a rural male labor migrant in Johannesburg at the hands of a prostitute and *shebeen* owner, all the time contrasting this domineering urban female figure with the migrant’s obedient and Christian wife who remained in rural Zululand.³⁵ In the decade that followed the publication of *An African*

³³ “Report for Lehn & Fink,” Sept. 1931, J. Walter Thompson Co. (Pty.) Ltd., Port Elizabeth, South Africa, Marketing Reports, reel #225, J. Walter Thompson Collection, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University, 2 and 9.

³⁴ Kathy Eales, “Patriarchs, Passes, and Privilege: Johannesburg’s African Middle Classes and the Question of Night Passes for African Women, 1920-1932” in Phil Bonner et al., (eds.), *Holding Their Ground: Class, Locality, and Culture in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century South Africa* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1989), ??-??; Kemp, “‘Up from Slavery’ and Other Narratives,” esp. chs. 2-3; Natasha Erlank, “Gender and Masculinity in South African Nationalist Discourse, 1912-1950,” *Feminist Studies* 29, 3 (2003): 653-71.

³⁵ R.R.R. Dhlomo, *An African Tragedy* (Alice: Lovedale, 1920).

Tragedy, black urban populations across South Africa increased dramatically with the number of Africans resident in Johannesburg nearly doubling. Within this context, men like Dhlomo could no longer count on *Amarespectable* wives and daughters to remain in rural areas, sequestered from corrupting urban influences. Rather, they sought to promote a black urban femininity that would recognize the authority of *Amarespectable* fathers and husbands. Policing black women's use of cosmetics was one element of broader efforts to elaborate class-specific notions of gender propriety in new urban landscapes.

Yet, as Peiss and other scholars of U.S. beauty culture including Noliwe M. Rooks, Ingrid Banks, and Maxine Leeds Craig have argued, concerns about natural versus artificial beauty have taken on a unique salience when directed at black women living in contexts dominated by white racism. Critics have often denounced black women's use of facial cosmetics and hair straightening products as demonstrating both their rejection of "natural" aesthetics, and their acquiescence to Eurocentric and racist beauty standards.³⁶ As we have seen, *Bantu World* writers frequently paired accusations of artifice with arguments that black women were misguidedly mimicking white women. In a letter-to-the-editor, for example, M.F. Phala singled out the use of face powder as evidence of how "Bantu people" were not "proud" of their skin color.³⁷ Unlike white women, black women criticized for using "artificial enhancers" were vulnerable to charges of racial shame as well as sexual disrepute.

For Dhlomo and his supporters, black women's desire to use face powder could not be disentangled from South Africa's skin color hierarchy that had emerged through the long history of European colonialism, dating back to the mid seventeenth century at the Cape. Over the

³⁶ Peiss, 41-43; Noliwe M. Rooks, *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996); Ingrid Banks, *hair matters: Beauty, Power, and Black Women's Consciousness* (New York: New York University Press, 2000); Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen? Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

³⁷ M.F. Phala, O.F.S. Koffiefontein, "The Bantu and Colour," *Bantu World* (29 December 1934).

course of Dutch and, after the early nineteenth century, British colonial rule, whiteness and light-colored skin became associated with civilization, cleanliness, intelligence, and power.³⁸ As elaborated by colonial, segregationist, and, later, *apartheid* government policies, this color hierarchy privileged people deemed of European descent while subjugating, with increasing harshness, those deemed of coloured, Indian, and African descent. By the 1930s, one's designation as "White," "Coloured," "Asian," or "Native" largely determined where one lived, what school and work opportunities were available, whether one could vote in elections, and whether one needed a government pass to move in and out of urban areas. Through the history of European colonialism, skin color clearly gained tremendous political importance.

Fragmentary evidence, however, suggests that within some precolonial African communities skin color may have carried aesthetic and political weight. Some mid twentieth-century ethnographies of relatively remote southern African communities mention preferences for "light-skinned girls" or "light brown skin," suggesting a local predilection for light- (not white) colored skin that may not be entirely reducible to colonial racial hierarchies. Within these contexts, light brown skin may have been a long-standing beauty attribute.³⁹ While such preferences may have influenced women's decisions to wear face powder, Dhlomo and his supporters insisted that desire for lighter skin could not be disentangled from South Africa's history of colonial racism.

Although most of the cosmetics commentary that appeared in *Bantu World* was authored

³⁸ On the development of racialized notions of the body in southern Africa, see Jean Comaroff, "Medicine, Colonialism, and the Black Body" in John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1992), 215-53; Timothy Burke, *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption, and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), esp. ch. 1-2.

³⁹ Isaac Schapera, *Married Life in an African Tribe* (New York: Sheridan House, 1941), 46; Monica Hunter, *Reaction to Conquest: Effects of Contact with Europeans on the Pondo of South Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), 222. On bodily practices in precolonial southern Africa, see Burke, *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women*, ch. 1.

by men, some women did voice their opinions. One repentant cosmetics-user named “Swanee” testified that she had recently stopped wearing face powder and lipstick after realizing (with the help of a male friend) that the make-up made her look like a “guinea baboon.” Advising women to limit their cosmetic usage to “face-creams” that would moisturize their skin, Swanee admonished readers that they would “never change from black to white.”⁴⁰ A letter by Sarah Ngcobo of Durban voiced another, more annoyed, reaction to men’s commentary. Ngcobo wrote that she was “fed up” with reading articles that blamed “women, particularly young girls, for everything . . . [including] for powdering their faces, for going out at night, for snaring other women’s husbands, for dressing expensively.” She requested the Editress to publish more “encouraging” and “educative” articles lest young women like herself “who try to do good will be tempted to give up.”⁴¹ Ngcobo’s letter suggests how some *Amarespectable* modern girls’ viewed the cosmetics debate as part of broader efforts to blame them for numerous social ills and downplay their “good deeds.”

Another female author, who notably had just returned from earning a beauty school diploma in the United States, defended the moderate use of powder and lipstick. In July 1935, Miss Rilda Marta reported on her discovery that “the American Negro”—both those who are “very light” and “others [who] are very dark in complexion – attain charm and allure with the help of beauticians. Marta urged “African ladies” to embrace the wisdom of African American beauty culture entrepreneur Madame C.J. Walker: “They key to Happiness and Success is a good appearance. You are often judged by how you look.” Marta’s two articles, as Amanda Kemp discusses in her study of “the sign of the American Negro” in South Africa, held up

⁴⁰ “Swanee,” “Women Should Not Use Lip-Sticks and Powders as Toilets,” *Bantu World* (19 May 1934), 12. Also see, A.L.J. Rabotapi, “Mr. R. Roamer Blunders Now: Some Women Behave Disgracefully in the Streets,” *Bantu World* (21 April 1934), 10; and Dimbane, Johannesburg, letter-to-editress, *Bantu World* (27 March 1937), 12.

⁴¹ Sarah Ngcobo, Durban, “Articles on Lipsticks Dance, Dresses and Love Become Boring,” *Bantu World* (29 September 1934). For another defense of girls, this time as reliable employees, see Mary Zulu, “Decent Girls Should Also Be Mentioned and Helped Along,” *Bantu World* (28 January 1933), 12.

African American women to legitimate a “modern [African] woman concerned with her personal appearance.”⁴² Much of Marta’s articles focus on hair care, encouraging women to grow their hair long and straight, and, if need be, to seek assistance at her hair salon in East London. In a more limited way, she discussed facial cosmetics. Noting that even white women use “powder to make themselves lighter” and “lipstick and rouge to improve themselves,” Marta cautiously endorsed black women’s use of cosmetics: “I do not mean that you should go and use lipstick and rouge because our colour is different to theirs; but if you do want to use some, remember there is a way of doing everything.” Marta evoked black women in the United States as well as white women in South Africa to persuade her readers that moderate cosmetic use could be an acceptable part of personal hygiene routines.⁴³ Compared with Dhlomo and his supporters, Marta demonstrated a greater sympathy for the challenges that black modern girls faced in simultaneously upholding racial respectability and fashioning an urban, cosmopolitan appearance.

Black women’s motivations for using face powder exceeded the desire to lighten their skin color; they sought to achieve an urbane look. During the 1920s in South Africa, face powder was mainly marketed to white women and existed in a limited range of shades extending from light beige to pink.⁴⁴ It was not until the mid 1930s that a couple of U.S. and South African companies began to follow international trends of appealing to different “beauty types” by marketing cosmetics in a wider spectrum of shades including “olive tint” and “avocado.”⁴⁵

⁴² Kemp, “‘Up from Slavery’ and Other Narratives,” 156.

⁴³ Rilda Marta, “Miss Rilda Marta’s Trip to United States of America Full of Interest,” *Bantu World* (6 July 1935), 12; “Miss Rilda Marta’s Trip to America,” *Bantu World* (13 July 1935), 12.

⁴⁴ “Report for Lehn & Fink,” 10, notes the most popular face powder shades in 1931 as “Rachel,” “Sunburn,” and “Naterialia.”

⁴⁵ See Apex ad in *Bantu World*, 15 July 1933; Valmor ad in *Bantu World*, 22 February 1936; and Keppels ads in *Bantu World*, 1 February 1939, and *Cape Times*, 1945. On the international trend see, Barlow et al., “The Modern Girl Around the World,” 25-27 and 30.

Women who wore powder to achieve smoother and clearer skin, for instance, had little choice but to use a light-colored shade. The limited range of shades offered by cosmetics companies did much to ensure that black women's use of their products was interpreted by some as racial mimicry. In their study of African-American expressive culture, Shane White and Graham White persuasively argue that black young women's use of powder, rouge, and lipstick during the 1920s was less about "look[ing] white" than "drawing attention to their faces" and distinguishing themselves from "the 'natural' look of their mothers and grandmothers."⁴⁶

Similarly, in wearing face powder, South African modern girls like Miss Rilda Marta, Tommy's "pink-cheeked damsel," and perhaps Mrs. Flora Ndobe herself sought to attract favorable attention, and to appear more up-to-date and urbane than their rural kin and female elders.

Marketing Skin Bleaches

In 1933, amid the face powder debate, *Bantu World* began to advertise skin bleaches [slide #10, Apex mirror]. (It features a bobbed-haired modern girl in a sleeveless evening dress gazing into a handheld mirror; the accompanying text promotes a hair straightener, a hair strengthener, and a skin bleach that "instantly lightens complexion.") These are the earliest ads for skin bleaches that my research assistants and I have yet found in the black press from southern, East, or West Africa. [Add sentence on difference from Tim Burke's chronology that has these products first marketed in the 1950s and taking off in the 1960s.] As we shall see,

⁴⁶ Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 188-191. A number of scholars of black beauty culture in the United States and South Africa have similarly argued that hair straightening should not simply be reduced to "the desire to be white." Maxine Craig, "The Decline and Fall of the Conk; or, How to Read a Process," *Fashion Theory* 1, 4 (1997): 399-420; Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*, 41; *hair matters*, 9-10; Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen*, chapters two and six. In "Hair Politics" (Sarah Nuttall and Cheryl-Ann Michael, (eds.), *Senses of Culture: South African Culture Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 380-92), Zimitri Erasmus recalls her own experience of hair straightening in 1970s and 1980s South Africa as partly about "aspirations of whiteness in the coloured community in which I grew up" and partly a "ritual of affirmation for me as a young black women." For Erasmus, while black hairstyles are always "mediated through racial imagery," they are not "eternally trapped by 'race.'"

during the 1930s, skin bleaches generated less controversy than face powder. These ads are important, though, because they suggest how this commodity that became widely distributed in the post-World War II period and so hotly contested from the 1960s onwards first entered the African marketplace.⁴⁷ Significantly, they are also the earliest ads from the African press that feature a black modern girl.

Skin bleach advertisements targeting white South African women date back to, at least, the mid 1920s. [slide #11, Nyal Bleach Cream] The Modern Girl Around the World research group's examination of the colonial press in China's treaty ports, India, and South Africa has revealed that during the 1920s and 1930s cosmetic companies directed bleach ads at white women living in imperial outposts. These products, like those marketed in the United States since at least the mid-nineteenth century, contained lead, mercury, or, in this case, peroxide as the active bleaching ingredient. A pale complexion would have distanced elite white women from the lower-class taint of outdoor manual labor while upholding the "anxious [colonial] obsession with maintaining whiteness in a world of phenotypic others."⁴⁸ Ads like this from a 1927 issue of Johannesburg's *Rand Daily Mail* illustrate how advertisers deployed modern girl images to market bleach creams. In South Africa, the late 1920s was likely a time of heightened concern about skin color for some white women. During this period, many daughters from poor Afrikaner families migrated from their rural homesteads to urban areas in search of waged employment to support themselves and their families.⁴⁹ The use of bleaching cream and other cosmetics may have been one way that these young women sought to don a more urbane appearance, and to ensure that they were recognized as white, not coloured, Afrikaans-speakers.

⁴⁷ Burke (*Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women*, 119, 158-59, and 168-69) has argued that skin lighteners emerged in Southern Rhodesia in the post-World War II period and only took off in the 1960s.

⁴⁸ Barlow et al., "The Modern Girl Around the World," 19-24, quote from 20.

⁴⁹ *The Poor White Problem in South Africa: Report of the Carnegie Commission*. (Stellenbosch: Pro Ecclesia-Drukkery, the Avenue, 1932), especially vol. I., 214-220.

The first skin bleach ads to appear in *Bantu World* did not crossover from the white South African press. Rather, they stemmed from African American enterprise. By the 1920s, some of the most successful black-owned businesses in the United States manufactured and sold cosmetics including skin bleaches. Several of these companies, including Madame C.J. Walker, Poro, and Apex, were women-owned and marketed their products through a network of female agents who sold door-to-door. Black publications like *The Afro-American* (Baltimore) and Marcus Garvey's *Crusader* and the *Negro World* received much of their revenue from advertising these products.⁵⁰ At the same time, some black intellectuals and leaders denounced women's use of skin bleaches and hair straighteners as racial self-loathing. Black journalist George Schuyler famously attacked the "hypocrisy" of skin bleaches in his *Messenger* columns and in his satiric novel, *Black No More*. W.E.B. Du Bois's journal *The Crisis* refused to run bleach ads during the 1910s. These American debates and products made their way to the distinct but linked political context of South Africa in 1933.

In July of that year, *Bantu World* ran ads for Apex cosmetics. At the time, Apex was one of the largest black-owned businesses in the U.S. and, according to one of its *Bantu World* ads, the first "all Negro Company" in South Africa.⁵¹ While white American capital had been heavily invested in South Africa since the mineral revolution of the late nineteenth-century, African American commerce was a novelty in the early 1930s.⁵² *Bantu World* had previously run ads for hair straighteners, possibly imported from the United States. **[slide #12, Kinko Ad, 1932]**⁵³.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 34-35, 41-43, and 207-213; and Johee Lee, "Stable and Unstable Versions of Whiteness: Medical Morphing and Skin Bleaching in 19th Century America," B.A. honors thesis, Harvard University, March 2002. Although Madame C.J. Walker refused to manufacture skin bleaches during her lifetime, following her death in 1919, the company marketed a bleach named "Tan-Off."

⁵¹ Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*, 92; Apex ad, *Bantu World*, 7 July 1934.

⁵² James Campbell, "The Americanization of South Africa," unpublished seminar paper presented at the University of the Witwatersrand, Institute for Advanced Social Research, 19 October 1998.

⁵³ The "Kinko" ad (26 November 1932) insinuated that it was an American product while the "Lion" ad (11

The Apex ads, however, were the first to promote a skin bleach alongside of various hair products, soaps, and facial creams. In contrast to this Kinko ad that featured images of carefully-groomed men, Apex ads featured line drawings of black modern girls. **[slide #13, Apex beautician]** This Apex ad features a bobbed-haired beautician combing the long straight hair of a client and promotes a long list of beauty preparations including hair products, a deodorant, a skin bleach, and, interestingly in light of the ongoing *Bantu World* debate, face powder in “all shades.”

Later Apex ads included a photograph of a light-skinned black woman with a straightened short hairdo and the American-sounding name “Mrs. E. Garson” **[slide #14, Garson ad]**. Garson may well have been an Apex agent from the United States and the force behind the company’s South African venture. Various ads described Garson as a “firm believer in APEX products” and provided her Johannesburg address while inviting readers to visit the Apex show room housed in the Bantu World Building.⁵⁴ By providing the name, photo, and address of an Apex user resident in South Africa and inviting readers to a show room housed in the newspaper’s own building, such ads sought to make these U.S.-made products more familiar and accessible to black South African consumers. In a further attempt to localize the marketing campaign, some Apex ads provided product descriptions in Setswana **[slide #15, Setswana Garson ad]**. Suggesting that Mrs. Garson sought to develop a network of Apex agents in South Africa, this same ad encouraged readers to join the Apex School of Beauty Culture & Hairdressing, proclaiming: “It will make you independent by giving you a valuable

February 1933) claimed that the product was manufactured by “The Lion Pharmacy” of Geduld Extension township in Springs, South Africa. In 1939, *Bantu World* ran ads for other hair straighteners, apparently imported from the United States, including “Kam” (19 August 1939, 20) and “Dixie Peach” (9 September 1939, 15). A third brand, “Kurlax” (9 December 1939, 9) did not claim American origins.

⁵⁴ Other Apex ads (for example, see figure 4) list “Jolly Jack Barnard” of 178 Commissioner Street as the Apex agent.

profession.”⁵⁵ The Apex campaign depended on developing a local resonance for African American enterprise.

A few months after the first Apex ads appeared, *Bantu World* ran an article on the founder and president of the Apex Hair Company, Madame Sara S. Washington [slide #16, **BW 11 Nov. 1933**]. Elaborating this African-American businesswoman as a commercial and cultural role model for black South Africans, the article carried the headline, “Remarkable Business Acumen of Negro Woman Shown in Her Work.” The article discussed how the Apex Company and Beauty Colleges had created profitable “legitimate business” opportunities for many black women in the United States and how the Company was “one of America’s largest concerns doing an international business.” The final paragraphs explained that the Company’s arrival in South Africa meant that “hundreds of young men and women” could follow “in the footsteps of this great American Negro Concern” and that the “Bantu race,” more broadly, could benefit from using beauty products “so successfully manufactured for them by their brothers and sisters in America.”⁵⁶ According to the article’s logic, racial uplift could be practiced and diasporic affinities forged through the manufacture, marketing, and purchase of cosmetics that, among other things, promised to lighten the appearance of black consumers. As Shane White and Graham White have argued, the success of African American-owned cosmetic companies, like Apex, embodied the desire for “personal liberation” through aesthetic and economic self-improvement: “to an even greater extent than was true of the white beauty industry, black cosmetics were associated with modernity and, most importantly, with progress.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ The Setswana text and an English translation of it describing “Apex Skin Bleach” in *Bantu World* (26 August 1933), 15 reads as follows: “Ke Mafura a sueufatsang letlalo la motho. A tlosa diso le ditshila tse ding letlalong. A etsa gore motho a be motle, a dira letlalo la gagoe boleta gamogo le sefahlogo sa gagoe.. (It is a oil/lotion that whitens a person’s skin. It removes sores/pimples and dirt from the skin. It makes a person beautiful and makes their skin and face very soft/smooth.)” Thanks to Lorato Chwene for assistance with this translation.

⁵⁶ “Remarkable Business Acumen of Negro Woman Shown in Her Work,” *Bantu World* (11 November 1933), 10.

⁵⁷ Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin’: African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginning to the Zoot*

Bantu World did not publish any commentary on the Sara Washington article or the Apex ads. This silence is notable given their appearance in 1933 at the height of Dhlomo's campaign against face powder. As was the case with segments of the African American press, editors of *Bantu World* may have viewed the advertising revenue to be gained from Apex or its agent(s) as placing their products beyond reproach. The silence may also reflect limited consumer interest in the company's products. The Apex ad campaign stopped after fifteen months, suggesting that either limited demand for the products could not justify the advertising expenses or that the close working relationship between *Bantu World* and Garson had come to an end, perhaps because she returned to the United States. Yet, during their fifteen-month run, the Apex ads most likely reached an audience larger than the several thousand readers of the newspaper. In order to encourage businesses, particularly white ones, to advertise in the black press, Bertram G. Paver, the white salesman who founded *Bantu World*, offered a multi-pronged advertising campaign. He outfitted all businesses with a stand and African translator at the "Bantu World Trade Exhibition" held in April 1933. He also provided them with 5,000 leaflet-reprints of their *Bantu World* ad. These same ads were then compiled into traveling slide show that toured over 4,000 miles of the country.⁵⁸ Although their presence in *Bantu World* was relatively short-lived, the Apex ads that featured modern girls as both consumers and agents were likely viewed by a broader cross-section of black South Africans than *Bantu World* readers.

Other companies advertised skin bleaches in subsequent years. In 1936 and 1937, *Bantu World* carried ads for another line of African American cosmetics, Sweet Georgia Brown Beauty Products [**slide #17, BW 22 Feb. 1936**]. Like the Apex ads, these ones encouraged readers to

Suit (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 189-90.

⁵⁸ Couzens, "A History of 'World'," 77.

“be independent” by becoming sales agents.⁵⁹ In 1939, a South African company called Keppels began to advertise cosmetics targeting black consumers. Keppels touted local rather than foreign affiliations and marketed its products through chemists rather than sales agents. [slide #18, *BW* 1 Feb. 1939]. This ad featured three different drawings to promote three different products. A pimply gray-skinned black man accompanied the text for acne cream. Freckle wax, a euphemism for skin bleach, was illustrated by three versions of a black woman’s face, shifting from gray, marked, and stoic to white, clear, and smiling. And finally, the text for an olive-tint face powder was accompanied by a dancing *Amarespectable* couple: the man in a tuxedo and the modern girl sporting an open neckline, short hairdo, and teeth-revealing smile.⁶⁰ According to this ad, cosmetics consumption would provide “dark ladies” and young men with brighter faces and futures. This Keppels campaign is noteworthy as it appears to mark the beginning of a trend, much more widespread in the post-World War II period, whereby white-owned South African companies would dominate the sale of cosmetics specifically targeting blacks. Although African American companies first marketed olive-tint face powder and skin bleach to black South Africans, white capital, recognizing a profitable enterprise, soon moved in.

It is difficult to know how these ads and products were received. Unlike with the *Bantu World* beauty competition and the use of face powder, there were no reader-voters or newspaper debates. A piece of evidence from 1941, though, is suggestive. In that year, Zilpah Skota wrote a letter to her husband Mweli Skota, a black journalist and the author of *The African Yearly Register*, a fascinating “Who’s Who” of famous African leaders and *Amarespectables*. Zilpah wrote the letter from her family home in Klerksdorp where she had returned after Mweli’s

⁵⁹ Peiss (*Hope in a Jar*, 237) has argued that the Sweet Georgia Brown ad campaigns of the 1930s and 1940s that featured “old-fashioned before-and-after pictures” and often highly sexualized images signaled a new, less politically progressive era, in the marketing of African American cosmetics.

⁶⁰ Keppels ad, *Bantu World* (1 April 1939), 17.

economic misfortunes had compelled them to sublet part of their home near Johannesburg. Zilpah requested Mweli to send her “a jar of shampoo or skin lightener.”⁶¹ This request suggests that by 1941, skin lighteners or bleaches had become a desirable commodity for some *Amarespectable* women, even one living in financial hardship.

The only *Bantu World* piece, at least in English, to specifically comment on skin bleaches appeared in 1939 [slide #19, *BW 4 March 1939*]. In an open letter, James R. Korombi of Johannesburg chided “African youth” who sought to straighten their “woolly hair” and “even attempted to change their colour with expensive cosmetics.” Evoking the long-standing distinction between natural and artificial beauty, he held adults responsible for much of the problem:

The purpose of refinement is not to enable people to change their hair and skin but is to make them naturally perfect; and therefore grown-ups who encourage the youth to cultivate such habits of adopting artificial outlooks should be blamed. In brief, African youth can learn to have respect for and be proud of their race and colour on condition that the adults become responsible for and be capable of imbuing them with a spirit of national pride, unity and patriotism.

In contrast to earlier writers who criticized black women’s use of face powder and lipstick as a vain attempt to become white, Korombi identified other objects of racial mimicry: “African youth could be taught to be proud of their race and colour and should not be encouraged to pretend to be Indians or Coloureds.”⁶² This remark suggests that although skin bleaches marketed to black South Africans originated in the United States, they quickly became entangled with the particularities of South African racial hierarchies. According to Korombi, the use of skin bleaches was not about looking white but passing for a lighter shade of black. In subsequent decades, as the *apartheid* state elaborated its far-reaching system of racial classification and

⁶¹ Campbell, “T.D. Mweli Skota,” 30-31.

⁶² James R. Korombi, Johannesburg, “Hair Straightening,” *Bantu World* (4 March 1939), 5. In the same year (*Bantu World*, 5 August 1939), another letter-writer, Dandi Magangalazane of Hoofd St., Milner Park, criticized “Bantu girls” for straightening their hair in defiance of God’s plan for mankind.

repression, such nuances of skin color would take on even greater significance. Within this political context, the marketing and use of skin bleaches expanded greatly.

Conclusion

This paper has documented the emergence by the early 1930s, at least, of a black modern girl in South Africa. She emerged through mission schooling, new urban styles, and African American affiliations, and existed in tension with the urban female figures of the prostitute, beer brewer, and *shebeen* owner. It is likely that many of the fashions and practices that came to define the *Amarespectable* modern girl such as provocative dress and the use of cosmetics were, in fact, pioneered by these more disreputable figures. It is also quite possible that the black modern girl was a vexing presence in South before she became visible in *Bantu World's* editorials, letters, photographs, and ads. As the work of the Modern Girl research group and of other scholars has shown, during the 1920s, film, fashion magazines, travel, and multi-national marketing campaigns all did much to circulate modern girl images and ideals around the globe. *Amarespectable* young women faced the challenge to create a modern persona by maneuvering the gender and generational hierarchies of African households, and stretching the Victorian notions of respectability fostered at mission schools and churches.

During the 1930s, with the hardening of racial segregation and narrowing of employment opportunities for school-educated Africans, *Amarespectables* became a class under siege. Many *Amarespectable* leaders perceived these political and economic pressures as co-existing with a moral crisis in which young men and women flaunted the authority of elders. Of particular concern to *Bantu World's* journalists were the difficulties that *Amarespectable* men faced in controlling their wives and daughters. While these men positioned themselves as capable of navigating urban and international currents, they doubted their female counterparts' ability to do

so without being corrupted. As Amanda Kemp has deftly argued in her study of the figure of the “Negro” in South Africa: “when the emancipated, autonomous transnational black subject was gendered female, an ambivalence emerged.”⁶³ Such ambivalence animated male elites’ efforts to police gender, sexual, and class politics within African communities.

Cosmetics use became a contentious practice because some interpreted it as shameful and unsightly effort by African modern girls to mimic or even pass as white, coloured, or Indian. Although *Bantu World* reader-voters lauded Mrs. Flora Ndobe’s luminescent face and Tommy was charmed by the “pink-cheeked lady”’s racial ambiguity, Dhlomo and his supporters viewed young women’s use of white face powder as contributing to racial disrepute. In her study of U.S. beauty culture, Kathy Peiss has rightly argued that a “racialized aesthetic” encouraged both European American and African American women to use white powders and bleaches.⁶⁴ In South Africa too, the use of these cosmetics cannot be disentangled from the history of white racism. Nonetheless, we should avoid reproducing the position of Dhlomo and his supporters who saw only misguided mimicry in black women’s use of cosmetics. As Miss Rilda Marta discovered on her study trip to the United States, cosmetics could be a part of fashioning an urban, cosmopolitan appearance that upheld rather than subverted racial respectability.

⁶³ Kemp, “‘Up from Slavery’,” 6.

⁶⁴ Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*, quotes from 41 and 43.