

L. Ayu Saraswati. *Seeing Beauty, Sensing Race in Transnational Indonesia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013. 207 pp.

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In Indonesia, having fair skin (i.e., light-colored) is a desirable thing for women (and also, to a lesser extent, for men). And fair skin means work: women pull on gloves to ward off the sun before hopping onto their scooters, they refuse to go swimming before the sun is down, and they buy and use one or more of the hundreds of whitening creams and body lotions sold in stores or beauty clinics. Cosmetics companies such as Unilever and L'Oréal have huge Asian markets for skin-lightening creams, and market researchers predict that the demand in Indonesia for skin-whitening products will only grow in the coming years.

Considering the importance of perceived ideals of skin color and the ways in which Indonesians identify and judge other Indonesians by physical features (such as slanting eyes, nose shape, and hair form), it is surprising that there is not a larger body of studies on race in Indonesia. Race is a major topic of academic discussion in accounts of the colonial era, when racial discrimination was a “cornerstone” of colonial rule, and when it was, depending on your viewpoint, a pervasive or elusive aspect of daily life. Thanks to Ann Stoler and to those reacting to and reflecting on her work, we know how difficult it is to pin down the importance of race in relation to other indicators of difference—such as class, religion, or language—and how important it is to do that anyway.<sup>1</sup> Scholars of postcolonial Indonesia have paid less attention to race, partly, perhaps, because of Suharto's SARA policy, a ban on the public discussion of issues related to ethnic groups, religion, race, and other group-based interests, because they were considered a danger to public order.<sup>2</sup> Only in studies of the position of people of Chinese descent in Indonesia and in critical studies of Papua has race been a concept of some interest.

*Seeing Beauty, Sensing Race* is, therefore, a welcome contribution to Indonesian studies, as it looks at the idea of “whiteness” in (the history of) Indonesia. It traces ideas of beauty and skin color and its intersections with race, gender, and emotions from the Ramayana to today's use of whitening cosmetics. The book is anchored in feminist and cultural studies and affect theory. Through the lens of affect and emotion, ideals of beauty are conceptualized as feelings about people of specific race and skin color. “The act of seeing,” writes Saraswati, is “simultaneously an exercise of sensing” (4). “Sensing” is used here as an umbrella term that includes affect, feelings, and emotions, and it is a useful concept to remind us how prejudices and the longing for unattainable beauty standards are rooted in socially learned emotions.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see Ann Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> SARA is an acronym for ethnic (*suku*), religious (*agama*), racial (*ras*), and inter-group (*antargolongan*) differences.

But those are not the only theoretical tools Saraswati introduces. In what she accurately calls a “tapestry of theories” (9), every chapter features a new conceptual intervention. These are of varying usefulness. In the first chapter it is *rasa*, “a dominant emotion felt when encountering performative events” (16). In the second it is colonial emotionology, “the ways in which ideologically permitted emotions [...] serve the interest of the colonial empire” (47). In the third it is emotionscape, a term devised to highlight the relationship between space and race. In the fourth chapter, virtuality plays a role; and, in the last chapter, *malu*, meaning approximately shyness, shame, or embarrassment, is the structuring concept.

A great strength of this book, for readers outside Indonesian studies, is its subtle demonstration of how ideals of whiteness in Indonesia differ from those in the United States or Africa (and, moreover, are not simply postcolonial mimicry). As the term “transnational” in the title suggests, ideas about whiteness and beauty traveled, and the locations where ideal beauty was situated also shifted over time. Saraswati’s narrative of these locations takes the reader from the moon (see below) to Europe, and then from the United States to Japan and wider Asia.

Another contribution of this book is its combination of history and anthropology. The book starts in the tenth century, then quickly moves on to the late colonial period and then to the present. The preference for fair skin has a long history, although, according to Saraswati, this preference is not necessarily inherent in mankind. In the first chapter, she traces this beauty standard back to Java and to the introduction and circulation of the *Ramayana* around 900 CE. When describing beauty in the *Ramayana*, the terms used are related to brightness or lightness, and the radiant moon in particular was often used as a metaphor. The moon, writes Saraswati, brings across feelings of love for and being overwhelmed by the beautiful protagonists of the story. Evil characters, on the other hand, are described as having dark skin colors, such as king Dasasya, whose “black complexion made him look like the flashing clouds of doom” (31). This description reminds one of Eka Kurniawan’s novel *Beauty is a Wound*, in which the ugly baby of the beautiful Indo-European protagonist is described as “jet black as if it had been burned alive.”<sup>3</sup> (Kurniawan does subvert the narrative, however, by showing that beauty, too, is a curse.)

From the introduction of the *Ramayana*, Saraswati jumps centuries ahead to the late colonial era. She also moves on to a different kind of source material: women’s magazines. Before the arrival of Europeans, Saraswati argues, skin color very likely played a role in social hierarchies, but this became more pronounced under colonialism, especially in the twentieth century. With Europeans arrived a more fully fledged idea that skin color was one of the markers that separated races from each other, although, in practice, boundaries were unclear and racial differences always intersected with other factors, for example, language, class, and religion. The presence of the Dutch, writes Saraswati, allowed Westerners in Indonesia to circulate the idea of the European woman as the epitome of beauty. Saraswati alternatively uses “Caucasian” for this beauty ideal: this is not an actors’ category, but Saraswati’s [American] reading of visual depictions of women.

<sup>3</sup> Eka Kurniawan, *Beauty Is a Wound: A Novel*, trans. Annie Tucker (London: Pushkin Press, 2016) [Eka Kurniawan, *Cantik Itu Luka: Sebuah Novel* (Yogyakarta: AKY Press, 2002)], 4.

Saraswati uses diverse sources in her work, including discourse analysis of the *Ramayana* and of women's magazines, as well as a chapter based on interviews with Indonesian women. Advertisements, dating mostly from the late 1920s and 1930s, show European women promoting creams that improve their complexion. For her analysis, Saraswati uses magazines that were targeted at European women, such as *De Huisvrouw in Indië*, where it is not very surprising to see European women in ads, but the same was true for Malay-language periodicals. It's a pity that while Saraswati's theoretical reflections are very thorough, the actual analysis of the advertisements only merits three pages in this chapter and leaves the reader with little understanding of the audience for and social life of those magazines. The examples are telling, however, and one interesting find is that while the word *putih* (white) was used for European whiteness, *kuning* (yellow) was seen as a second-best option for indigenous Indonesians. This did not change with Indonesia's Japanese period. Thanks to Japan's relatively brief occupation (1942–45), the Japanese did not manage to introduce an entirely different ideal of (Japanese) beauty, although, according to Saraswati, they provided theoretical and psychological space for non-European beauty ideals in the postcolonial period.

Colonial ideals continued to linger under Sukarno, with Eurasian women featured in advertisements in women's magazines. In the Suharto era, American influences were added to the mix, and Europe and the United States were framed as places where authentic beauty was located. Images of Paris and the Eiffel Tower, for example, were combined with white models, and together this construct became filled with positive affective meanings. At the same time, Indonesian elements of culture—portrayed as traditional spaces—also popped up every now and then. In one ad, for example, the beauty and spirit of Acehnese women was seen as “the foundation for the creation of the color trend for contemporary Indonesian women” (77).

In the 2000s and with the increasing significance of mass media, ideals of skin color became more cosmopolitan and the desire for Caucasian whiteness waned. Saraswati shows how “whiteness” is now a desirable commodity without a determinate geographical boundary, and models of different mixed-race backgrounds and Asian countries appear on the pages of *Cosmopolitan*, the Indonesian version of the U.S. magazine that is central to this chapter.<sup>4</sup> Like the original publication, the magazine in Indonesia sells messages of happiness and freedom combined with ideals of femininity and whiteness. Its ads for skin-whitening products, writes Saraswati, affirm racial hierarchies by linking whiteness to cosmopolitanism (in their use of English instead of Indonesian), and to positive affective identification (in their use of models who look white and desirable at the same time). Even the list of names of the creams and lotions is revealing in their employment of the English word “white”: “Night Whitening Milk,” “Re-Nutriv Ultimate White Lifting Serum,” “White Beauty,” “Whitening Source Dermdefinition,” “White Glamour,” and so on.

The last and most ethnographic chapter is a welcome addition to the other sections because it turns to the testimonies of women who do or have used whitening creams. In interviews done in 2005, Saraswati found that when women talked about skin-whitening products, they professed feelings of *malu* (shame, embarrassment)

<sup>4</sup> *Cosmopolitan* was first introduced in Indonesia in 1997 as *Kosmopolitan Higinia*.

connected to skin color. The fear of being called out, even in a teasing way, for being dark was enough of a reason to use whitening products. One self-perceived dark girl said she was too dark for a good match in Indonesia, so she married a Westerner with different beauty standards (122). The preferred skin color of most of the interviewed women was not “Western white” but often “Japanese white,” a color to which the women attached positive connotations but that differed, according to them, from “Chinese white.” Ami, for example, age 34, was of the opinion that “Japanese skin is not pale. Their look is more elegant than the Chinese. I just don’t like Chinese white skin” (115).

This book, worthwhile and informative, nevertheless leaves unresolved several questions. The most important is that of Indonesia’s human diversity and the extent to which ideas of whiteness vary across Indonesia. Saraswati never clarifies to what extent the book is actually an account of cosmopolitan, middle-class Javanese women, and this obscures the contributions of relatively darker-skinned women, especially from eastern Indonesia. With regard to the women who were interviewed, how did their Malayness, Chineseness, or Arabness influence the beauty ideals? How widely read is *Cosmopolitan*? Where is *hitam manis*, the dark-skinned beauty? Nevertheless, this book is a rewarding analysis of the complexities of whiteness and how they go hand in hand with senses of (not) belonging.