At the turn of the 20th century, African American women migrated to the urban North, and their increased visibility evoked varying responses from people committed to defining the New Negro woman as a modern, progress-oriented, and politicized subject. Historians have documented the ways elite and middle-class African Americans engaged in the “politics of respectability” as a practice of racial uplift and as a strategy to overturn the oversexualization of black women, but these scholars also positioned respectability as declining during the Depression years.

Laila Haidarali’s *Brown Beauty* demonstrates how new ideas of black womanhood looked different from those of previous generations, arguing that between the Harlem Renaissance and the end of World War II, “beauty eclipsed chastity and demure self-presentation as central tenets in cultivating the image of respectable middle-class African American womanhood” (p. 28). Haidarali explores how diverse groups of cultural producers used language and visual descriptions of brownness to craft a politicized racial discourse that connected race, color, gender, class, and modernity. Through the lens of brown complexion and feminized beauty, Haidarali unveils how African Americans rejected older views of respectability such as domesticity and sexual purity and instead embraced mass consumerism, sexual pleasure, and individual self-expression. She traces the changing meanings of brownness by impressively utilizing a variety of printed sources, including essays, poetry, fiction, artwork, advertising texts, newspapers, and magazines.

In Chapter 1 (“Brown Beginnings”), Haidarali offers a biographical sketch of Harlem educator and essayist Elise Johnson McDougald and examines how McDougald theorized the New Negro woman of the 1920s. McDougald called for a new public imagining of African American women that focused on physical appearance, occupational status, and education as necessary forces in negotiating modernity and racial progress, and she described beauty as existing in a variety of brown skin tones. As Haidarali makes clear, McDougald’s life work, which was featured in Alain Locke’s *New Negroes* (1925), showed the development of the trope of color as one important avenue for fostering a collective racial and gendered identity among middle-class African Americans of that time.

Chapter 2 (“Beautiful Brown Skin”) shifts the conversation to consumer culture, exploring how advertisements for dolls and cosmetics evoked the language of brownness to appeal to African American women and girls. In doing so, these marketing outlets played a role in cultivating a class-based notion of New Negro womanhood that centered social mobility through respectable labor, personal happiness through appealing to the opposite sex, and a feminized racial pride.

Haidarali continues with a close reading of different artistic
expressions from the Harlem Renaissance era, including photography, poetry, and literature. In Chapters 3, 4, and 5, she explores the emergence of brown-skin beauty through a variety of cultural avenues and highlights how African Americans used brownness as an intellectual space to foreground their growing transnational perspective of the New Negro. Haidarali assesses an array of brown-skin representations in Chapter 3 (“Of the Brown-Skin Type”), including the imagery of “Brown Madonna” that depicted the New Negro woman’s role as a mother; the “brown-skin mulatta” that uplifted the mixed-race gendered body in a heightened anti-miscegenation climate; and a more nuanced brown-skin womanhood that connected African-descended women to “other,” non-U.S.-born women of color. Haidarali argues that DuBois employed brown to symbolize a color-based Afro-Asian solidarity that went beyond place and offered a broader conceptualization of the era’s race womanhood.

Race leader W.E.B. DuBois’s novel Dark Princess (1928) is the primary focus of Chapter 5. The book revolves around an interracial romance between an Asian Indian princess and an African American man, both of whom DuBois describes as brown. Haidarali argues that DuBois used brownness as a color-based Afro-Asian solidarity that went beyond place and offered a broader conceptualization of the era’s race womanhood.

Chapter 4 (“To a Brown Girl”) studies thirteen poets’ cultural production and examines how they used color as a poetic device and descriptor of African American complexion. Women’s poetry critiqued male sexism, gendered colorism, and intergenerational conflicts about respectability. These artists rejected domesticity as their only purpose, advocating instead for public mobility in urban spaces and using brownness to describe pleasure and freedom.

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The final chapter of Brown Beauty takes up sociological studies by three prominent African American men in the first half of the 20th century — E. Franklin Frazier, Charles S. Johnson, and Charles H. Parrish — who all noted the importance of brown in the social attitudes and skin-complexion stereotypes held by youth. During the interwar period, they found old color hierarchy within the African American community, where light, medium, and dark-skinned complexes reflected elite, middle, and working-class socioeconomic statuses. Their studies also documented the gendered dimension to these rankings in that women encountered intraracial colorism more than men; women’s hair texture was an important physical marker of beauty as well. Despite the “high yellow” and “chocolate brown” stereotypes, Frazier, Johnson, and Parrish concluded that younger people viewed brown as the ideal skin color for women and positioned brown-complexioned people in a positive light. Their research supports Haidarali’s claim that brownness and femininity are useful analytical tools for assessing the social construction of African American womanhood.

Brown Beauty offers an alternative perspective on early 20th-century respectability politics and black womanhood that decents domesticity and sexual trauma. Haidarali’s work engages instead with black women’s pleasure politics, the area in which black women claimed ownership of their physical bodies, defined their own beauty standards, and were active participants in mass consumerism. This is an important text that critically analyzes the historical roots of colorism and also posits brownness as a realm of self-acceptance and a fruitful framework for examining social, cultural, economic, and gendered differences. More broadly, this text speaks to the power of mass media in influencing the social construction of racial identities. It would make a great addition to undergraduate and graduate interdisciplinary courses in history, gender and sexuality studies, film and media studies, and ethnic studies.

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