

## *Beauty in a Box: Detangling the Roots of Canada's Black Beauty Culture* by Cheryl Thompson

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# *Book Reviews*

Spring 2020

## *Beauty in a Box*

### *Detangling the Roots of Canada's Black Beauty Culture*

By Cheryl Thompson

Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier Press, 2019. 318 pages. \$36.99 paperback. ISBN 9781771123587

Standing as one of the only comprehensive books reviewing black beauty culture in Canada, *Beauty in a Box* provides an expansive and critical look at the textual and visual histories of black Canadian culture in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Thompson engages in the difficult task of finding black Canadian voices in a beauty culture overwhelmingly framed as African American. Instead, Thompson impressively outlines the significance of black contributions to broader conversations of retail consumerism, media representation and print advertising.

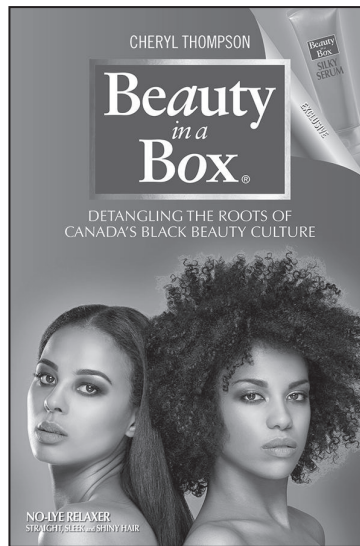
*Beauty in a Box* is thorough in its scope and research covering black beauty culture from the early 1900s to contemporary conversations around black hair in the twenty-first century. The book's strength is in its extensive analysis of black Canadian

periodicals such as the *Clarion*, *Dawn of Tomorrow*, *Contrast*, and *Share* which aided in the development of a growing black beauty culture in Canada. Acknowledging black participation as central in the creation of consumer modernity, Thompson critically weighs the significance of transnational constructions of beauty and black life within these newspapers. Thompson's analysis of beauty ideals from the "New Negro Woman" to "Brownskin" and "Black is Beautiful" position black consumerism in relationship to dominant societal and beauty expectations. Here, Thompson argues that although smaller in scale, black Canadians aspired to embody a "newness" that not only adhered to notions of femininity and respectability but also rejected dominant media representations of black communities. According to Thompson, "...

the black press provided alternative depictions of black people and women within their communities that could contradict the negative stereotypes that were ubiquitous in the Canadian public sphere” (50-51). As such, Thompson points to a long history of barber/hair salons and haircare/make-up products that were part of the black Canadian experience and distinctive from, although always connected to, African American beauty culture.

This is where Thompson’s meticulous and critical read of black Canadian periodicals and advertisements comes to the fore. For example, Thompson is able to read the significance of advertisements in newspapers such as the *Dawn of Tomorrow* which presented important information about local black businesses and news juxtaposed with skin lightening and hair straightening ads in ways that signaled white beauty aesthetics and a desire for social acceptance by the dominant culture. Ultimately, Thompson seeks to present blackness in its complexity by tackling important issues of colourism, respectability and resistance.

While there are moments when the book centres conversations around well-known figures in the United States, Thompson positions black women like Viola Desmond and Beverly Mascoll who helped to cultivate a black Canadian beauty industry with localized boutiques and small scale products. Despite the significant impact that discrimination in Canada had on limiting black cultural products on a national and global scale, Thompson features the black innovation, ingenuity and creativity that helped



to sustain a thriving black beauty culture in the middle of the twentieth century (100). To demonstrate this, Thompson masterfully situates these businesses alongside white beauty firms and magazines like *Chatelaine* who constructed the vision of modern Canadian womanhood as white and largely excluded black women and ignored their role as consumers.

*Beauty in a Box* does not shy away from critiques of multiculturalism and the ways this concept as an ideology and brand stifled the politics of black enterprise and entrepreneurship in by the 1990s. In outlining shifting trends that promoted multiculturalism, Thompson charts the ways in which “ethnic” beauty became the dominant representation of minority women in ways that depoliticized black participation and the role black Canadians had in the development of a more diverse beauty culture. Thompson explains, “Inclusion-based advertising, then, used multiculturalism as a tool to avoid the issue of race; stated otherwise, if we all are ‘multicultural,’ how could the beauty industry be accused of racism?” To this end, Thompson contends that the global expansion of the black beauty culture industry dramatically changed the place of black business owners moving away from predominantly African American owned companies to white-owned conglomerates. Thompson continues this transnational approach to explore black beauty trends as far as Brazil and the Dominican Republic to demonstrate how black beauty culture evolved into the twenty-first century.

Although *Beauty in a Box* weaves com-

plex quantitative research to articulate the significance of black buying power during the rise of the consumer culture era in Canada and the United States, Thompson's analysis is also buttressed by her own personal narratives in ways that add richness to the stories of black life in Canada. Although acknowledging that the book does not utilize oral histories, the reader longs to understand the ways in which Thompson positions her personal narratives as a methodological approach when writing about black Canada. There are also moments when Thompson discusses black consumers, mostly black women, as passive in their receipt of these dominant messages about beauty in mainstream media. For example, Thompson describes how chemical-relaxer advertising constructed an image of "black woman-as-spectacle, as passive (i.e., feminine) and male-seeking (i.e., the bearer, not maker of meaning)..." However, if one considers bell hooks' argument about the oppositional gaze, black female spectators and their "awareness" of racism and its erasure of black womanhood was an important part of looking relations (Hooks, 119). Hooks posits that not all black women submitted to the spectacle of regression but often resisted this identification to create an oppositional gaze. Although

Thompson's review of textual culture creates limitations when exploring audience reception, an examination of black women's oppositional gaze may give space to illustrate how black audiences read these advertisements. How might black audiences who "look against the grain" challenge mainstream representations of beauty? It is clear that Thompson begins to tackle some of these concerns and challenges readers to consider black cultural practices in their review of black Canadian history.

*Beauty in a Box* offers a rich and textured analysis of black contributions to the consumer marketplace in Canada. It is critical and informative in its interdisciplinary approach to tackling race, gender and classed based assumptions in black beauty culture both within Canada and more globally. In so many ways, the book helped me to rethink my own politics of hair and the challenges of navigating consumer markets that largely ignore black women. Its contributions help us to consider the economic and cultural capital that black populations continue to bring to the Canadian landscape.

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## *Not Quite Us: Anti-Catholic Thought in English Canada since 1900*

By Kevin P. Anderson

Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019. 328 pages.  
\$34.95 paperback. ISBN 978-0-7735-5655-3.

The people of Cavan wanted no part of the Cistercians. It was, one councillor boasted, 'a Protestant township and it shall stay like this' (226). Others dropped dark hints that if the monks did

appear Orange vigilantes might take matters into their own hands. What shocks is not the bigotry, but the date—1976—and the place, not the Irish borderlands but some 20 kilometres from Peterborough,