

## **Bodily Conceptions and Biomedical Opposition to Skin Lighteners in Apartheid South Africa**

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My paper derives from my current book project: a transnational history of the manufacture, use, and opposition to skin lighteners in southern Africa, east Africa, and the United States. Among black South African women, the sale of skin lighteners took off in the 1950s and 1960s as they became more engaged in consumer culture and apartheid policies heightened the significance of skin color. Through advertising in popular pictorial magazines, South African manufacturers marketed skin lighteners across much of the subcontinent, creating a multi-million dollar per year industry. By the late 1960s, two distinct strands of opposition to skin lighteners emerged: one rooted in black nationalist ideologies, the other, in biomedical concerns. Postcolonial leaders including Julius Nyerere of Tanzania and Idi Amin of Uganda banned skin lighteners as part of efforts to safeguard new African nations against the “moral decadence” of the West. Black Consciousness leaders in South Africa including Steve Biko denounced the popularity of skin lighteners as the product of structural racism. Such critics rejected arguments made by some that the appeal of these products stemmed from precolonial beauty preferences for skin that was smooth, bright, and light brown in color rather than from colonial racial hierarchies. Meanwhile, dermatologists working in Nairobi, Johannesburg, and Durban reported in medical journals that the active ingredients in these cosmetics – namely, ammoniated mercury and hydroquinone – damaged skin if used in high concentrations and over prolonged periods. Eventually, these two strands of opposition converged, resulting in heightened regular of skin lighteners in a number of African countries.

For this panel on “Bodies and Technologies,” I will consider skin lighteners and their active ingredients as technologies, and analyze the biomedical discussions and debates they engendered. I am especially interested in South African dermatologists’ efforts to understand the long-term effects of ammoniated mercury and hydroquinone, and, ultimately, to prohibit their inclusion in cosmetics. Drawing insight from recent Africanist scholarship on medical pluralism and corporeality, I will argue that dermatologists’ biomedical conceptions encountered and, in some ways, became entangled with two other conceptions of the body. The first cast efficacious medicines as potentially painful and damaging medicines while the second bodily conception, articulated by Black Consciousness activists, celebrated the beauty of dark skin and rejected all products that promised to lighten. By analyzing the intersection and entanglement of these different bodily conceptions, I will demonstrate that environmental, social, and political particularities within apartheid South Africa caused these dermatologists to view skin lighteners as much more dangerous technologies than did their colleagues in the United States.