

Lynn M. Thomas
Associate Professor, University of Washington
lynnmt@uw.edu

“Bodily Conceptions and Biomedical Opposition to Skin Lighteners in Apartheid South Africa”

My presentation this morning grows out of my current book project: a transnational history of skin lighteners centered in South Africa that extends into the broader southern African region, east Africa, and the United States. Through tracking the production, consumption, and opposition to skin lighteners, my book will explore how, over the twentieth century, changing politics of gender and race have developed through the movement of things, people, and ideas between a range of locations.

This afternoon, I'd like to consider skin lighteners as a kind of bodily technology and answer the question of why they came to be seen as a more dangerous bodily technology in South Africa than in the United States. Today, South Africa possesses the toughest laws against skin lighteners of any country in the world. Like some other countries including Kenya, the Gambia, Japan, Australia, and the European Union, South Africa has banned the most common skin lightening active ingredient –hydroquinone – from all cosmetic products. Only in South Africa, however, are cosmetic manufacturers also prohibited from advertising that any of their products can “bleach,” “lighten,” or “whiten.” By contrast, in the United States, hydroquinone in concentrations of up to 2 per cent is legal in cosmetics. In drug stores, beauty salons, and department stores from Seattle to Miami, Los Angeles to New York, one can easily find skin lighteners containing hydroquinone. And perhaps less surprising, the U.S. government has placed no restrictions on the use of words such as “bleach,” “lighten,” and “whiten” in cosmetic advertisements.

Helpful, I believe, to answering the question of why skin lighteners came to be seen as a more dangerous bodily technology in South Africa than in the United States, are insights from recent scholarship on bodies and technologies. By and large, these two areas of inquiry have remained relatively separate in African studies. Over the past three decades, Africa scholarship on the body has flourished through studies of ritual and reproduction, gender and sexuality, and health and illness. Especially relevant to a history of skin lighteners, scholars have explored the intersection and entanglement of radically different conceptions of the body over the course of the twentieth century.

Attention to technology within African studies, by contrast, has been much less common. With European technological superiority routinely evoked by earlier observers and scholars as both an explanation and justification for colonialism, most historians and anthropologists from the 1970s through the 1990s shied away from studies of technology for fear of supporting technologically deterministic interpretations of Africa's past and present. Yet, science and technology studies or STS has much to contribute to African historiography and especially the history of skin lighteners in Africa.

STS is useful for answering the question of why skin lighteners came to be viewed as more dangerous technologies in South Africa than in the United States for three reasons. First, STS draws attention to the material specificities of technologies: their physical and biochemical effects on bodies and interactions with environments. Moreover, STS encourages us to track both the networks through which technologies travel, and the varied and unpredictable ways in which people in different locales appropriate and reconfigure them. When combined with Africa scholars' attention to the intersection and entanglement of different bodily conceptions over the twentieth-century, these STS insights highlight how the manufacture, consumption, and opposition to skin lighteners in South Africa emerged through material formations, and through social and political processes that linked Africa to the rest of the world.

When I first became interested in the history of skin lighteners in South Africa several years ago, I imagined – for a variety of reasons – that the most important imperial and international influences on this history would come from Britain and India. Once I began research, I realized to my surprise, that some of the most prominent influences stemmed, in fact, from the United States. From, at least, the 1930s, American-made skin lighteners were sold in South Africa. When the manufacture of skin lighteners in country took off after World War II, South African businessmen looked to the United States for skin lightener formulas, and advertising and marketing strategies. They closely followed the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's regulation of the active ingredients in skin lighteners, and U.S. medical research on the health effects of those chemical compounds. Similarly, anti-skin lightener activists who emerged in South Africa during the mid-1970s engaged U.S. regulations and medical research in articulating their opposition to these technologies. They also drew significant political inspiration from the U.S. Black Power movement.

In the first half of the twentieth century, skin lighteners were one of the most common cosmetics used by both white and black American women. Since ancient times, women in parts of Europe, the Mediterranean, and Asia had used skin lighteners for reasons ranging from concealing blemishes to evening out skin tone to whitening their faces. During the nineteenth-century, these preparations became popular and profitable commodities in Europe, the United States, and various imperial outposts including South Africa. They appealed to white women by playing on a bourgeois and racialized aesthetic that valued skin purged of evidence of outdoor labor and intimacy with dark-skinned "others." These cosmetics also appealed to black and ambiguously raced women living in those same contexts who sought to navigate social and political hierarchies that privileged lightness, and to achieve aesthetic ideals rooted in both colonial and precolonial conceptions of beauty. By the mid-twentieth century in the United States and South Africa, skin lightener use had come to be more prominently associated with black women as, by then, many white women had embraced tanning as expressing a healthy and affluent lifestyle.

The most common active ingredient in skin lighteners for much of the twentieth century was ammoniated mercury. Early twentieth century medical textbooks routinely prescribed ammoniated mercury as an effective treatment for skin infections, particularly acne, and for fading freckles, scars, and other areas of darker pigmentation. For many users, creams containing ammoniated mercury lightened their skin, though usually only temporarily. Medical

and industry experts voiced different views about the mechanism by which lightening occurred. Some dermatologists argued that ammoniated mercury worked as an irritant that removed the top layers of the epidermis, revealing lighter layers underneath. Others argued that ammoniated mercury inhibited the formation of melanin, likely by rendering inactive the enzyme tyrosinase. Still others attributed the lightening effect of ammoniated mercury to both mechanisms. Despite these varying explanations, dermatologists agreed that while ammoniated mercury might lighten skin in the short term, prolonged use at higher concentrations could result in patches of darker pigmentation as the mercury oxidized and deposited in the skin.

Responding to these concerns, the U.S. FDA in 1939 began requiring cosmetic manufacturers to limit ammoniated mercury concentrations to 5 per cent or less. This regulation did not permanently allay questions about mercury. During the 1960s, environmentalists raised concerns about mercury as a widespread pollutant that could damage the human brain, central nervous system, kidney, and liver. After investigating the use of ammoniated mercury in the cosmetics industry, the FDA, in 1973, banned it from all commercial skin lighteners. Two years later, the South African followed suit, prohibiting the use of mercury in cosmetics, citing its ill effects on kidney functioning.

But by the time these bans went into effect in the United States and South Africa in the mid-1970s, mercury was no longer the most common active ingredient found in skin lighteners. That dubious title had been claimed by hydroquinone, a chemical routinely used to treat rubber and in photographic development. In the late 1930s, African American, Mexican, and white workers at a leather factory near Chicago experienced depigmentation of their hands and arms after wearing rubber gloves treated with the antioxidant monobenzyl ether of hydroquinone (MBH). The incident and the workers' subsequent repigmentation after they stopped wearing the gloves was reported in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* and the *Archives of Dermatology and Syphilology*. The authors of the journal articles theorized that MBH had lightened the workers' skin by preventing the formation of melanin either by acting on the cells that produce melanin or, more likely, by acting "on one or more of the intermediate products in the formation of melanin from aminoacide tyrosine." They further reported that they were investigating possible dermatologic uses of MBH, especially for treating residual pigmentation produced by scar tissue. A similar report soon appeared in the *South African Medical Journal* concerning "European" and "native" employees at a factory near Johannesburg that manufactured rubber fabric for raincoats and miners' gear. In reporting on these cases of depigmentation, the authors cited the articles on MBH published in U.S. medical journals, suggesting how South African doctors closely followed American medical research.

Soon after the accidental discovery of MBH as a lightening agent, U.S. cosmetics companies developed over-the-counter skin lighteners that contained between 1.5 and 5 percent concentrations of hydroquinone (figure 1, 1957 Artra ad in *Philadelphia Tribune*). But I as mentioned earlier, during the 1950s and 1960s, skin lighteners became a less prominent element of U.S. beauty cultures as more white women embraced tanning as evidence of health and affluence, and the political and cultural influences of the Civil Rights and especially Nation of Islam and Black Power movements cast as unseemly suggestions that black people might disavow their skin color. Although skin lighteners were less popular bodily technologies in these decades than they had been earlier in the twentieth century, they continued to be widely

available. Today, hydroquinone, in concentrations of up to 2 per cent, remains the active ingredient sold in most over-the-counter skin lighteners in the United States.

Skin lighteners containing hydroquinone first appeared in South Africa as imports from the United States. (See figure 2, 1959 Artra ad in *Drum*). Notably, almost all of the copy changes in this 1959 South African version of the 1957 Artra ad just shown highlight the product's U.S. origins. New phrases such as "proved to be a success by beautiful American women" and "developed . . . in one of America's most modern laboratories" situate Artra's American roots as a selling point. Within black South African publications, American – and especially African American – references and role models signaled a prosperous and progressive consumer culture seemingly outside of apartheid's political and racial hierarchies.

Around the time this Artra ad appeared in the late 1950s, a then small South African cosmetics manufacturer, Twins Products, launched SuperRose Pimple and Complexion Lotion (see figure 3), a liquid that contained hydroquinone. Demand for this product grew so great that Abraham and Solomon Krok, twin brothers who were the owners and namesakes of Twins Products, moved their manufacturing during the mid-1960s to a large factory in Isando, an industrial area near the Johannesburg airport. In 1974, just prior to the South African government's ban on mercury, a Twins representative wrote to the U.S. FDA inquiring about regulations regarding hydroquinone. A Department of Health official responded that hydroquinone was considered a drug, thus the FDA required approval for both its prescription and nonprescription use. FDA officials advised that hydroquinone concentrations be kept to one to two percent and that warning labels be provided. Twins likely turned to this U.S. agency in the hope of ascertaining whether a ban on hydroquinone, like mercury, was in the pipeline, and gathering evidence to bolster claims that their products complied with the most up-to-date and scientifically rigorous international standards.

By the mid-1970s, in fact, some South African doctors had begun warning of the disfiguring and potentially carcinogenic effects of hydroquinone. Dermatologists and pathologists, most prominently G. H. Findlay, documented that prolonged use of skin lighteners with hydroquinone (usually three years or longer), particularly at higher concentrations (above three percent), combined with the high levels of ultraviolet radiation exposure common in southern Africa often resulted in a form of bluish-black hyperpigmentation known as exogenous ochronosis. Thirty percent of all the black patients seen at a dermatology clinic in Pretoria sought treatment for hydroquinone-induced ochronosis. Findlay and his colleagues believed that such disfigurement was long term, if not permanent. They also surmised that the roots of this epidemic dated back to 1966, when a number of manufacturers increased the concentrations of hydroquinone in their skin lighteners from three percent to six-to-eight percent. A follow-up study in 1980 analyzed thirteen brands and found that they contained anywhere between 2.5 to 7.5 percent concentrations. Notably, Twins manufactured seven of the thirteen brands tested, and two of theirs contained the highest concentrations of hydroquinone of between 5.5 and 7.5 percent. That study recommended that, although short-term use of products with hydroquinone might helpfully remove blemishes, they should not be used as overall lighteners.

Around the same time that the government banned mercury and doctors began expressing concern over hydroquinone, Black Consciousness activists started criticizing all skin lighteners

on political and moral grounds. Influenced by African nationalism and the Black Power movement in the United States, Black Consciousness (BC) attacked apartheid policies and advocated for black pride and political self-reliance. At a trial in 1976, a year before his death at police hands, Steve Biko, the most prominent BC leader, evoked black women's efforts to make their "skin as light as possible" as evidence of the necessity for the motto "black is beautiful." When interviewed in the 1980s, other BC activists cited the continued use of skin lighteners by some in the predominately coloured western Cape as evidence of the need for further "conscientization" in that area. One, in a subsequent interview, portrayed the rejection of skin lighteners as a common first step in becoming politically aware. Attesting to the power of a political ideology to rework everyday practices, Emma Mashinini, a prominent labor activist, attributed her and other women's abandonment of skin lighteners to BC: "[It] saved us from hating the colour of our skin." Ultimately, the pervasive presence of skin lighteners in apartheid South Africa and the growing appeal of BC's anti-racism made hydroquinone into a well-known word in many black households.

During the late 1970s, BC activists teamed up with medical allies to make opposition to skin lighteners a progressive political issue. In 1982, they succeeded in having the maximum concentration of hydroquinone allowed in cosmetics limited to two percent, bringing South African regulations in line with U.S. ones. For the remainder of the decade, skin lightener manufacturers, most notably the Kroks, evoked this regulatory concordance to lend international credibility to their products. In turn, activists from organizations such as the Azanian People's Organization and the Transvaal Inkatha Women's Brigade Think Tank argued that despite the two percent regulation, skin lighteners continued to cause damage. Their medical allies explained that the U.S. regulations were inadequate for South Africa where black consumers experienced more intense exposure to ultraviolet radiation and seemed to apply skin lighteners more heavily, more frequently, and for longer durations than their American counterparts. Together, BC and medical activists urged the government to ban all skin lighteners with hydroquinone (see figure 4). Although their campaign did not immediately convince the apartheid government, it did influence consumers: by the mid-1980s, the skin lightener sales began declining at an annual rate of ten percent.

During the 1980s, resistance to apartheid reached its peak. The United Democratic Front (UDF), founded in 1983 to protest political reforms that continued to exclude those classified as "African," grew into a broad anti-apartheid coalition of labor, civic, church, and student organizations. Guided by the principles of the 1955 Freedom Charter, the UDF sought to make the country "ungovernable" through civil disobedience, and to foster a "people's democracy" that would enable those currently disenfranchised. The government responded to the UDF and other anti-apartheid groups by declaring a State of Emergency in 1986. Within this highly charged and often violent political conflict, more and more South Africans felt compelled to oppose apartheid through public protests. Opposition to skin lighteners, in this context, became a relatively safe way for a range of consumer, medical, and women's groups – including even the Housewives' League of South Africa – to demonstrate some commitment to political change. Reportedly, the Foundation for African Business and Consumer (FACOS) told P.W. Botha, South African president from 1984 to 1989, that if he failed to heed popular pleas on skin lighteners, he would not have "credibility on wider issues." Opposition to skin lighteners had become a kind of political litmus test.

By 1987, the National Black Consumer Union (NBCU) and the Dermatological Society of South Africa led the campaign to ban hydroquinone. In line with the grassroots approach of many anti-apartheid organizations, the NBCU sought to raise awareness of the issue by giving talks to women's organizations, at community workshops, and schools. Ellen Kuzwayo, NBCU president and a highly respected activist since the 1960s, also worked closely with doctors Charles Isaacson and Hilary Carman to convince Checkers and Pick 'n Pay, two of the largest supermarket chains in the country, to require skin lightener manufacturers to place stronger warnings on their products or face delisting. Around the same time, the government finally responded to activists' demands by introducing a draft regulation banning hydroquinone from cosmetics. The South African parliament passed the regulation in December 1987 with an implementation date of July 1, 1988. A week before that date, however, the Minister of National Health and Population Development suddenly deferred the ban for thirty months, citing a legal adviser's recommendation that manufacturers be given a more "reasonable period" for phasing out their stock.

The government's apparent capitulation to manufacturers infuriated activists and their allies who now ranged from the country's Medical Association and Pharmaceutical Society to the Black Taxi Association. For those already disposed to leftist political critiques, the capitulation smacked of collusion between capital and the apartheid state. As one medical doctor put it, the postponement demonstrated how "the interests of industry and capitalism" superseded the "health and wellbeing of individuals." Others noted that the health of all individuals was not so easily ignored. The NBCU argued that if products such as sun tan lotions were damaging white consumers in similar ways, they would be banned immediately. One health activist explained that because of the government's apparent indifference, blacks referred to exogenous ochronosis as "apartheid disease."

In August 1990, while the National Party government and the recently unbanned African National Congress negotiated the country's transition away from white minority-rule, all skin lighteners containing hydroquinone were finally banned from store shelves. Moreover, South Africa became the first and only country in the world to restrict cosmetics' advertisements from claiming the ability to "bleach," "lighten," or "whiten." By prohibiting the language of lightening from all cosmetics ads in addition to banning specific ingredients, South Africa's regulation bore the mark of the broader anti-racist political movement from which it emerged.

* * * * *

So why did skin lighteners with hydroquinone become more a dangerous bodily technology in South African than in the United States? I think the multiple reasons for this different historical outcome can be divided into two categories: material specificities, and political structures and concerns. Exogenous ochronosis and other short- and medium-term disfiguring effects of hydroquinone do seem to have been more common in South Africa than in the United States. When dermatologists in the two countries compared their clinical observations and research findings, they surmised that greater exposure to ultraviolet radiation in southern Africa enhanced hydroquinone's ill effects on the skin. Moreover, they concluded that

South African consumers generally applied skin lighteners more frequently and over much longer periods of time.

In addition to these material specificities of use, political structures and concerns played a crucial and arguably even greater role in making skin lighteners a more dangerous – and, ultimately, banned – bodily technology in South Africa. Even after the South African government adopted the U.S. regulation of limiting hydroquinone in cosmetics to two percent, apartheid officials seem to have lacked the inclination and, perhaps, the capacity to monitor skin lighteners entering the market to ensure that black consumers were not being exposed to higher concentrations of hydroquinone. As anti-skin lightener activists argued, the state demonstrated a weak commitment to protecting black consumers. Ultimately, however, capitalist interests were more decisive in shaping the regulation of hydroquinone in the United States than in South Africa (and Kenya, the Gambia, Japan, and the European Union). Whereas Twin Products and other South African manufacturers were able to delay a ban on hydroquinone until 1990, U.S. manufacturers have succeeded in doing so until the present.

Their ability to fend off a ban has been enabled by the absence of widespread condemnation of skin lighteners in the United States. During the 1980s in South Africa, by contrast, anti-skin lightener activists successfully positioned their popularity as a repugnant manifestation of structural racism. By casting skin lighteners as a dangerous bodily technology and opposition to them as a relatively safe and uncontroversial corollary of the anti-apartheid movement, activists turned the manufacture and use of skin lighteners into moral and political issues – a reframing that has been much more partial in the United States.