
CHARLTON ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH GRANT PROPOSAL
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MAKING DARK SKIN VISIBLE: THE ORAL HISTORY OF “ETHNIC SKIN” AND “SKIN OF COLOR”
DERMATOLOGY

Project Description and Purpose of Research

“Close your eyes and stick a pin in a map of the USA. Wherever the pin lands, you can go there and probably be the only African American dermatologist.” This is an oft-cited quote by Dr. John A. Kenney Jr., one member of the first generation of Black dermatologists in the United States in the mid-20th Century.¹ Dr. Kenney would go on to train an estimated 1/3 of the 300 Black dermatologists practicing across the country at the time of his death in 2003.² However, the legacy Dr. Kenney left behind lies not only in how many Black dermatologists he trained. A key part of his and his colleagues’ legacies over their careers was training dermatologists who would come to develop the most in-depth knowledge about people with dark skin and integrate this knowledge into their research and clinical practices. These interest areas—still too small and new to call subfields— are now commonly referred to as “skin of color” or “ethnic skin” dermatology. Dermatologists working in these interest areas have for the last several decades made a continuous effort to make the issues of people with dark skin visible in the field of dermatology.³

Only in the summer of 2020 did the importance of these neglected areas come to light for the general public. In the last year, news outlets from the United States to the United Kingdom have published articles on dermatology’s “problem with skin color,” discussing issues such as the lack of representations of diseases on dark skin in textbooks.⁴ This issue is important for a myriad of reasons, but a key one is this: Despite the ethnic and racial diversity in the United States—including its “melting pot” image—dermatologists and trainees struggle to recognize and treat conditions of people with darker skin tones with dire consequences. As recently as February of 2020, a study of medical students at two universities demonstrated that medical trainees were inconsistent in their ability to diagnose skin conditions, including squamous cell carcinoma, urticaria (or “hives”), and atopic dermatitis, in patients with dark skin compared to those with lighter skin.⁵ All this

¹ Ahmad Reza Hossani-Madani et al., “RESIDENT ROUNDS : PART I History of Howard University Hospital Department of Dermatology and Residency Program,” *Journal of Drugs in Dermatology* 11, no. 8 (2012): 991.

² “John A. Kenney Jr., 89,” *The Washington Post*, December 7, 2003, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/2003/12/07/john-a-kenney-jr-89/b26bfa6c-5c46-4f31-9540-11cefb734352/>.

³ Rasna Kaur Neelam and Taylor Jameson, “Seeing the Spectrum: Including and Embracing Skin of Color Education in Everyday Dermatologic Practice,” *The Dermatologist* 28, no. 8 (2020): web, <https://www.the-dermatologist.com/article/seeing-spectrum-including-and-embracing-skin-color-education-everyday-dermatologic-practice>.

⁴ Roni Caryn Rabin, “Dermatology Has a Problem With Skin Color,” *New York Times*, August 30, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/30/health/skin-diseases-black-hispanic.html?referringSource=articleShare>; Neelam and Jameson, “Seeing the Spectrum: Including and Embracing Skin of Color Education in Everyday Dermatologic Practice”; Daniela Morosini, “Why Doctors Still Struggle to Detect Skin Cancer in Black People,” *The Cut*, June 11, 2021, <https://www.thecut.com/2021/06/why-doctors-struggle-to-detect-skin-cancer-in-black-people.html>; Abi Rimmer, “Presenting Clinical Features on Darker Skin: Five Minutes with . . . Malone Mukwende,” *BMJ* 369 (June 25, 2020): m2578, <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m2578>.

⁵ Anne Fenton et al., “Medical Students’ Ability to Diagnose Common Dermatologic Conditions in Skin of Color,” *Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology*, February 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaad.2019.12.078>.

culminates into disparities in dermatological care. People with dark skin are less likely to develop skin cancer, but they are more likely to die from it due to delays in *detection*.⁶ Dermatologists increasingly recognize that this is a problem. For example, a 2011 survey of dermatologists revealed that 47% of dermatologists and dermatology trainees found their training inadequate for responding to patients with darker skin.⁷ To date, few if any projects document the experiences and practices of the dermatologists who have attended to patients with dark skin since the mid-20th century. These dermatologists have created textbooks, specialized clinics, and organizations such as the Skin of Color Society with the goal of making dark skin visible in dermatology.

This oral history project documents the development, history, and proliferation of professional practices and traditions in dermatology oriented toward the medical management of the skin, hair, and nails of people with dark skin, “ethnic skin,” or “skin of color,” in the United States in the 20th and 21st Centuries. Because patients with dark skin have been historically neglected, this project aims to highlight practices and traditions that have responded to these patients’ needs, as well as the people behind these practices. Ethnic skin and skin of color dermatology are still relatively new practices and traditions, and their history has yet to be well documented and archived in an accessible way. Prior oral and textual history projects on dermatology, such as the Victor Witten Dermatology Foundation of Miami oral history collection archived at the National Libraries of Medicine, have failed to capture people and practices focused on patients with dark skin. This oral history project will preserve the history of these practices and ensure that the people who began these pursuits, their struggles, and their motivations are documented and accessible.

A few notable organizations and institutions have had a significant impact on this field. One of the most notable organizations in this field is the Skin of Color Society. In 1999, dermatologist Susan C. Taylor created the terminology of “skin of color” as a broad categorization for a large swath of people of various darker skin tones, races, and ethnicities— broadly, non-White people— in recognition that people with different skin have different medical needs.⁸ Up to that point, people with these darker skin tones were generally referred to as having “ethnic skin.” Many dermatologists continue to use the earlier terminology or use the terms interchangeably. Taylor and a small group of dermatologists established the Skin of Color Society to build a professional network of dermatologists dedicated to the treatment of skin of color.⁹ Leaders in the SOCS have led initiatives that include publishing *Dermatology for Skin of Color*, a textbook in its second edition, a doctor database to direct patients to skin of color dermatologists and holding annual scientific meetings. A similar organization is the dermatology section of the National Medical Association, the nation’s largest and oldest organization dedicated to the concerns of African American physicians.

A few key Black institutions have also been dedicated to the issues of patients with dark skin. The one that dates furthest back is the dermatology department at Howard University Hospital , originally Freedmen’s Hospital, a key institution in the development of physicians across specialties who would help to serve the

⁶ Alpana K Gupta, Mausumi Bharadwaj, and Ravi Mehrotra, “Skin Cancer Concerns in People of Color: Risk Factors and Prevention,” *Asian Pacific Journal of Cancer Prevention : APJCP* 17, no. 12 (December 2016): 5257–64, <https://doi.org/10.22034/APJCP.2016.17.12.5257>; Morosini, “Why Doctors Still Struggle to Detect Skin Cancer in Black People.”

⁷ Kesha J Buster, Erica I Stevens, and Craig A Elmetts, “Dermatologic Health Disparities,” *Dermatologic Clinics* 30, no. 1 (January 2012): 53–viii, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.det.2011.08.002>.

⁸ Susan C Taylor, “Skin of Color: Biology, Structure, Function, and Implications for Dermatologic Disease,” *Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology* 46, no. 2 (February 1, 2002): S41–62, <https://doi.org/10.1067/mjd.2002.120790>.

⁹ Neelam and Jameson, “Seeing the Spectrum: Including and Embracing Skin of Color Education in Everyday Dermatologic Practice.”

historically majority-Black city of Washington, DC. Howard University Hospital was the training grounds of “the Magnificent Seven,” a group of dermatologists who were the audience to Dr. Kenney’s opening quote.¹⁰ The Magnificent Seven would become the “forefathers” of skin of color and ethnic skin dermatology. The Henry Ford Multicultural Dermatology Clinic in Detroit, Michigan was established in 2003 with a similar impetus. These key institutions are key for understanding how the development of Black physicians, specifically, has impacted the historical trajectory of skin of color and ethnic skin dermatology. Notably, dermatology remains the second least diverse field in medicine, with only three percent of dermatologists identifying as Black,¹¹ yet Black dermatologists’ impact in skin of color and ethnic skin dermatology is widely felt.¹²

Previous Research of the Topic

My previous research has focused on the intersections between race and medical education. During interview-based research on racism in medicine in the summer of 2019, medical students I interviewed consistently named dermatology courses as most deficient in training for working with diverse populations because course materials almost exclusively featured white patients. This research resulted in a paper presented at the Society for Medical Anthropology’s 2020 conference and sparked my interest in carrying out research in the summer of 2020 toward developing a larger project on how dermatology residents learn to see disease in the context of human skin color diversity. This preliminary research resulted in a National Science Foundation dissertation research grant to study how dermatology trainees learn their specialty in the context of racial diversity.

As part of that project, I attended virtual (due to COVID-19) conferences of the Skin of Color Society. Through conducting participant observations at their meetings, I learned about key actors and organizations contributing to skin of color dermatology. For example, organizers presented a short memorial documentary film at the 2021 conference that discussed the contributions of Dr. John A. Kenney Jr.

So far, I have conducted several interviews with dermatologists and trainees. Interviews with two dermatologists in particular who identify as skin of color or ethnic skin dermatologists have provided me with some of the key leads related to this oral history project. These semi-structured interviews were conducted before the conception of the oral history component, so my interlocutors remain anonymous. Through this research, I learned that though skin of color is a new concept and category, debates about the lack of representation of people with dark skin dated further back than the 1999 creation of the term. Howard University emerged as an essential site for the development of dermatological care for patients of color, and the training of Black dermatologists of color charged with further developing dermatology for Black patients.

I have also developed work related to this project into an episode for a cancer-focused medical humanities podcast called Meta-Stasis. I interviewed Dr. Andrea Murina who was part of a key recent study that demonstrated the dearth of knowledge medical students receive about patients with dark skin.¹³ My interview with Dr. Murina from the dermatology department of Tulane University covered her study, as well as other issues related to the lack of diversity within dermatology.

¹⁰ Ajay Kailas, Beverly Baker-Kelly, and Andrew F. Alexis, “A. Paul Kelly, MD (1938-2014): The ‘Quiet Pioneer’ in Dermatology for Skin of Color,” *Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology* 77, no. 2 (2017): e61–62, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaad.2017.04.1132>.

¹¹ Amit G Pandya et al., “Increasing Racial and Ethnic Diversity in Dermatology: A Call to Action,” *Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology* 74, no. 3 (March 1, 2016): 584–87, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaad.2015.10.044>.

¹² Sotonye Imadojemu and William D. James, “Increasing African American Representation in Dermatology,” *JAMA Dermatology* 152, no. 1 (2016): 15–16, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamadermatol.2015.3030>.

¹³ Lan Li, “The Wart” (United States: meta-stasis Podcast, 2021).

Since May 2021, I have been conducting digital archival research to learn more about the history of skin of color and ethnic skin dermatology. Through this research, I learned of the scarcity of both textual and oral resources on the history of skin of color and ethnic skin dermatology in both national and medically-focused archives. Most resources were either textual sources, such as textbooks or technical articles, though the Victor Witten Collection consists of interviews with several important dermatologists, including John A. Kenney, Jr. However, the Witten Collection of oral histories ends before skin of color became a category within the field of dermatology. This prompted my interest in preserving this history through a more extensive oral history project that would include the archiving of these interviews for future researchers.

Persons to be Interviewed and Arrangements for Interviews

I will interview mid-to-late career and retired dermatologists across three key categories that relate to skin of color and ethnic skin dermatology. One category of participants will be those who have written dermatological books on ethnic skin and skin of color dermatology. Another category of individuals will be those who have held major leadership positions in organizations dedicated to these fields, such as the Skin of Color Society and the National Medical Association's Dermatology Section. Finally, I will also interview dermatologists who were trained by Dr. John A. Kenney Jr. or other early Black dermatologists who helped to develop the field, such as Theodore K. Lawless, the first known Black dermatologist, who only died as recently as 1971. These dermatologists may be able to shed significant light on the contributions, personalities, and other features of these earlier dermatologists. I will conduct 25 oral history interviews beginning in July 2021 in Washington, DC; Baltimore, MD; Philadelphia, PA; New York, NY; Detroit, MI; and Boston, MA. The Skin of Color Society's 2022 annual meeting, as well as the annual meeting for the American Academy of Dermatology are scheduled to be in Boston in March 2022, where I will conduct all remaining interviews. For my dissertation research, I am based in Washington, DC where the majority of interviews will be conducted. A sample of dermatologists in ethnic skin/skin of color dermatology that will be asked to participate include the following, listed with the reason for their inclusion and their city of practice:

- Rebat Halder, Dermatology Chair Emeritus, Howard University Hospital, Washington, DC
- Chesahna Kindred-Weaver, Chair of Dermatology Section of the National Medical Association, Washington, DC Metro Area
- Lynn McKinley Grant, Past President, Skin of Color Society, Washington, DC
- Ginette Okoye, Current Chair of Dermatology, Howard University, Washington, DC
- Recommended Affiliates of Howard University Hospital, Washington, DC (first program dedicated to ethnic skin)
- Crystal Aguh, Dermatology Faculty at Johns Hopkins & author of texts on Ethnic Skin & Hair, Baltimore, MD
- Susan C. Taylor, Founder of the Skin of Color Society, Philadelphia, PA
- Andrew Alexis, Skin of Color Society Leader & Dermatologist at the Center for Diverse Skin Complexions at Weill Cornell Medicine in New York City
- Recommended Affiliates of the Skin of Color Center™, Mount Sinai West, New York, NY (original skin of color center)
- David J Goldberg, Author of several texts on ethnic skin, New York, NY
- Henry K. Lim, Chair of Dermatology, Henry Ford Hospital, Detroit, MI
- Recommended Affiliates of Henry Ford Hospital Dermatology, Detroit, MI (institution with most SOCS members)
- Donald Glass, current officer Skin of Color Society, Texas (will offer interview in Boston)

Although I will make the best attempt to conduct interviews in person to establish a better rapport and level of comfort with participants, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, I will offer participants the option of being

interviewed via Zoom. Based on prior research that I have been conducting during the pandemic, practicing dermatologists have been familiar and comfortable with using this technology for interviews, as they have used it daily for work.

Oral history interview questions will focus on the following:

- Dermatology Training
 - Tell me a little about your dermatology training. Where did you receive your dermatology training? Where is that? When did you do your dermatology training? What was training there like? With whom did you do your dermatology training?
- Dermatology, General
 - I am interviewing you because you are a dermatologist (or X). Can you explain a little more about what you do?
 - Why did you choose to go into dermatology?
 - How did you make the decision to go into dermatology?
 - What were your experiences with dermatology before you went into it?
 - Why is dermatology important to you?
 - What has been the most important issue in dermatology in your career?
 - What have been your major challenges/frustrations over the course of your career?
- Career Trajectory
 - What professional jobs or appointments do you hold? Can you describe what each of these entails?
 - Can you sketch out your dermatological career for me?
 - What was your first job as a full and independent dermatologist like? Can you describe the clinic? What were the most memorable aspects of that place? What kind of tools did you have then?
- Mentors in Dermatology
 - Who are/were some of your mentors in dermatology? How long were they/have they been your mentor? Tell me a little bit about them. How did you meet?
 - Who are your greatest heroes in dermatology and why?
- Defining and Naming Ethnic Skin/Skin of Color/Dark Skin-oriented Dermatology
 - So first, what do you call the sort of emergent field in dermatology that focuses a little more on ensuring the concerns of people with dark skin are met? Why do you call it what you call it? What is your experience with [ethnic skin/skin of color/other preferred term] of dermatology?
- Development of Ethnic Skin/Skin of Color/Dark Skin-oriented Dermatology
 - How did you learn about [ethnic skin/skin of color/other preferred term] dermatology? Who taught you about it? When did you start to hear about this or pay attention to this? Where—what cities or institutions or clinics—have helped to expose you to these issues?
- Experiences with Ethnic Skin/Skin of Color/Dark Skin-oriented Dermatology
 - Who are the key people in [ethnic skin/skin of color/other preferred term] dermatology?
 - Why is this important to you?
 - What kinds of traditions or practices are relatively unique to [ethnic skin/skin of color/other preferred term] dermatology?
- Role in Ethnic Skin/Skin of Color/Dark Skin-oriented Dermatology
 - Tell me about the publication of ____ (book). How did that come about? What was your role in that? Who else was involved? Why was the book published?

- Can you tell me a little about the _____ Center/Institute/Organization? What is it? What do you do there? How did that come about? What was your role in that? Who else was involved? Why was that site/organization developed?
- Future(s) of the Field(s)
 - What is the future of dermatology?
 - Where is [skin of color/ethnic skin/other preferred term] dermatology going?

Proposed Scholarly Outcomes

The Charlton Oral History Grant will allow me to conduct the interviews for this oral history project as well as pursue scholarly projects related to it. This project will be publicized through the production of a physical exhibit and a digital exhibit. I also plan to present this work at the 2022 Oral History Association conference, as well as the Society for the Social Studies of Science (4S)'s 2022 conference. Because a major aim of this project is popularizing this history, especially within the medical community where it is still not well known, I will also publish blogs about these materials, ideally on the National Libraries of Medicine Blogs by incorporating materials from their collection.

First, I plan to create a digital exhibit focused on the narratives collected in this project. The project will be launched in February 2022 in celebration of Black History Month. This will be an interactive (play on-click) narrative around ethnic skin/skin of color dermatology featuring excerpts from interviews and images. Through a collaboration with the Digital Oncology Initiative at Rice University, I have hosted a digital medical humanities exhibit on dermatology called *undertones* on the *meta-stasis Podcast* website where I will publish this exhibit as well.¹⁴

I will mirror the digital exhibit with a physical exhibit for wider public consumption. I hope to develop a physical exhibit to be ideally housed on the Rice University campus, such as at Fondren Library for Black History Month in February of 2023. This exhibit will be interactive and use excerpts from narrators to detail the history of skin of color and ethnic skin dermatology, along with photographs of narrators and their mentors and artifacts (such as books). I plan to also host an opening of the exhibit to the public, including people who may be interested in working with the collection, such as Rice University and Houston Medical Center students and faculty, as well as local Houston dermatology associations.

Finally, this material will be key for developing my dissertation. I will use information gathered through this project as substantive material for my ongoing dissertation project on how dermatology trainees have learned their specialties while attending to diversity. As the narrators included here are the exemplars of such work, they are critical to developing especially the main historical chapter of my dissertation project which will document how, historically, dermatologists—especially dermatologists of color—have worked to make dark skin visible in dermatology.

¹⁴ <https://www.metastasispodcast.com/undertones>