The Problem of Color, or the Color Problem? Dermatology, Melanin, and the Metrics of Liberation



J. Cecilia Cárdenas-Navia PhD Candidate, History of Science and Medicine / Yale University

Wednesday, March 9 @ 12.00 pm ~ Fulton Room, 333 Cedar St

Dermatology, a subsidiary medical discipline whose attentions had mainly focused on skin rashes, eruptions, and syphilis, transformed its scope and part of its mission in the latter half of the century. Beginning in the 1960s, environmental apprehensions of the thinning of the ozone layer and associated concerns with rising incidences of skin cancer contributed to diverse investigations into melanin as both a natural sunscreen and a metaphorical radioisotope for human evolution. Although assignations of "Negro" and "Caucasian" skin had long diffused the medical literature, some dermatologists searched for constructive categories that acknowledged the wide spectrum of skin tones within these assignations.

The Fitzpatrick scale, posited in 1975 and amended in 1988 and 2002 by Harvard dermatologist Thomas Fitzpatrick, presented a phototyping classification schema that ordered light and dark-skinned patients into six groupings, privileging photosensitivity/erythema and tanning reactions over ethnoracial attachment. This promotion of a scale of difference that neatly sidestepped previous biomedical constructions of "race" built upon previous efforts to construct tools and metrics that did not rely on the subjectivity of the human eye. The co-development of colorimetry, spectrophotometry, and UV-radiation treatments to assess human skin color variation for treatment (rather than taxonomy) also offered new methods to investigate pigmentation disorders, including vitiligo, albinism, and Addison's disease. The emergent intersections among photobiology and basic sciences lent much-needed authority to dermatology, helping to usher in its heightened status as a biomedical discipline that could weigh in on sun protection, melanoma, and human variety on both cellular and practical levels.