



Centre for Management of Health Services (IIMA - CMHS Seminar Series)



Topic : **The Biopolitics of Race and the Post-Genomic Turn to Caste**

Speaker : **Garry J. Bertholf, Ph.D**
Assistant Professor
Department of English, Clemson University, United States.

Venue : **Wing- 11 Faculty Lounge, IIMA**

Day & Date : **Monday , December 29, 2014**

Time : **3.15 P.M. (After an informal interaction over tea, the Seminar will begin at 3.30 p.m.)**

Abstract

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the Human Genome Project seemed to have dispelled finally the biological notion of race. This situation has changed over the last decade or so with the emergence of race-based pharmacogenomics. In 2005, for example, the FDA approved the first race-specific drug, BiDil, to treat heart failure in black patients. At the same time that the biotechnology and pharmaceutical industries conspire to secure race-specific product patents and prescription drugs--patents and drugs which necessarily incorporate assumptions of racial difference at the genetic level--they threaten to reinforce existing medical stereotypes and racial pathologies associated with African Americans. This study posits health as an ongoing political project and calls our attention to the perils of contemporary racial pseudoscience.

The time is now ripe to ask how the FDA's approval of race-based biotechnology in the United States might have provided a most dangerous precedent for public health policies, regulatory agencies, pharmacogenomics, and healthcare practices in India, where the phenotypical differences between "Ancestral North Indians"(ANI) and "Ancestral South Indians"(ASI)--a distinction recently made by scientists at the Center for Cellular and Molecular Biology in Hyderabad--is an especially telling example of how the language of epidemiology in India is becoming "racialized". Indeed, Kumarasamy Thangaraj and Lalji Singh, for example, have gone so far as to posit the biological determination of caste (as if caste, like race, is some kind of "natural" division of human beings; and here we would do well to pay heed to the recent work of, say, Ruha Benjamin and Projit Bihari Mukharji). (It has even been rumored--and I am here also as an ethnographer, hoping to find out whether or not--BiDil is now being repurposed in India as a caste-based biotechnology.)

I argue that healthcare inequality is disproportionately affecting those who are disproportionately poor, irregardless of race and/or heredity, and that what might be taken up instead of geneticizing health disparities (or pathologizing the so-called "darker" races, "lower" castes, and "ancestral south") is responsible intellectual work and protracted political action. This seminar will posit race- and caste-based biotechnologies as iterations of the same post-genomic, biopolitical strategy--a global strategy attempting to shift our political center of gravity rightward, toward pseudoscientific explanations of health disparities as a matter of genetic and hereditary predisposition rather than economic inequality.

Speaker's Profile



Garry J. Bertholf, Ph.D
Assistant Professor

Garry Bertholf is Assistant Professor of Digital Rhetorics, Comparative Media, and Civic Culture in the Department of English at Clemson University. Before joining the faculty at Clemson, Professor Bertholf was the inaugural postdoctoral fellow of the Program on Race, Science, and Society at the University of Pennsylvania, where he was the first recipient of the Ph.D. in Africana Studies. During the 2013-2014 academic year, Dr. Bertholf was also an affiliate fellow of the Penn Humanities Forum on "Violence" and a lecturer of cultural studies and criticism in the Critical Writing Program of the Center for Programs in Contemporary Writing. He has held previous appointments as a visiting assistant professor of Africana Studies in the Department of History and Politics at Drexel University and as a preceptor in the Center for African American Studies at Princeton University. He is currently working on two book projects, the second of which is an examination of scientific rhetoric in the post-genomic era. More specifically, Dr. Bertholf is interested in the emergence of race-based biotechnology, and the constitutive role of scientific language in its formation. Last year he co-organized (with Professor Dorothy E. Roberts) a series of colloquia, as well as an inaugural symposium on "The Future of Race and Science," in order to launch the University of Pennsylvania's new program on Race, Science, and Society (PRSS). The symposium that Professor Bertholf co-organized featured scholars from a number of prestigious American universities, including Columbia University, New York University, and Harvard University, as well as the current director of the Center for Research on Genomics and Global Health (CRGGH) at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). For the greater part of his visit, Dr. Bertholf will be conducting an ethnography of the prescription drug BiDil--the fixed-dose combination of two previously approved generic drugs: hydralazine and isosorbide dinitrate.

