

Anthropology Colloquia

Spring 2014

James Battle

Bioethical Conscription: Ascriptive Inequality, Kinship, and the Moral Economy of Participation

This paper examines the ethopolitics of African (American) inclusion in both genomic and pharmacogenomic research. Based primarily on ethnographic fieldwork in Northern California, Texas, and North Carolina, I wish to place in narrative tension the challenges of biopharma efforts to recruit African (American) researchers, with African (American) public sector researchers who see genomic research involvement and knowledge production as a question of social justice. I build on Montoya's (2007) "bioethnic conscription" to highlight the ways ethnoracial classification as a form of description and attribution reconfigure both the category and the group, and the moral economy of participation such inclusion seeks to mobilize. Drawing from the Henrietta Lacks case, I use the social scientific term ascription rather than attribution to engage the wider, gendered hierarchal social system of inequality informing research gleanings of the biological sample, racial categorization, and their intersections with anthropological notions of kinship. My argument rests on the assertion that ascribed social inequality qualitatively inheres to biological samples and data sets, and precedes any quantitative analysis. In making this argument, I seek to explicate history in locating biovalue within forms of ascribed status marking both heritage and heritability.

James Battle is a University of California President's Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Sociology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where he works with Jenny Reardon at the Science and Justice Research Center. He is a graduate of the University of California, Berkeley/University San Francisco Joint Medical Anthropology Program. His research and teaching interests lie at the intersection of science, technology and society studies, development studies and anthropological approaches to health and the body.



He applies these interests to study the political economy of genomic discourses about race, risk, health disparities, and the strategies utilized to produce, disseminate, and operationalize these discourses of heritage and heritability.

Monday, April 28

3:30-5:00PM

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