



## **Marshall University Graduate Humanities Program**

### **2020 Major Scholar Seminar**

#### ***Mapping Human Diversity: Genetic Testing, Folk Ideologies of Heredity, and Race***

**with Dr. Jonathan Marks**

*Dr. Marks is well-known for his critiques on race, the genome project, and of ahistorical science. He is a leading critic in public debates about direct-to-consumer genetic testing, and its marketed correlation to heredity.*

*For instance, understanding how and why "I'm 45% Irish" is an invalid scientific claim not only requires deeper knowledge of science, but of history and culture as well.*

*Marks argues that understanding human problems is best approached through engagement with a liberal arts that combines, rather than silos, the sciences and humanities.*

Interviewed by Dr. Luke Eric Lassiter, Director, Graduate Humanities Program

LEL: What do you consider to be some of the most important aspects of your writing? What do you want readers to come away with when they read your work?

JM: Biological anthropology is a hybrid field, and if you know the biology, you only know part of the story of human origins and diversity. Moreover the biology is not the most important part of the story, since science is itself a cultural activity, and has to be understood in large part ethnographically. Consequently, anthropology not only informs how we understand ourselves scientifically, but how we understand our scientific understanding of ourselves.

LEL: One of the key things that we hope to accomplish in our Major Scholar Seminars is to assess how scholars' ideas change over time, including how these ideas shift in both perspective and approach. How would you say your ideas, perspectives, and approaches have developed over time?

JM: I've always felt that the interesting questions lie in the overlaps among intellectual fields. My career started as a post-doc in the Genetics department at UC-Davis. But I socialized with anthropologists too and participated in their seminars. When I arrived at Yale in 1987, it was a great, stodgy old anthropology program, priding itself on being about 20 years behind the curve. When I arrived at Berkeley ten years later, it was an avant-garde program, priding itself on being about 20 years ahead of the curve. That was basically a very quick 40-year intellectual swing! But I had the

opportunity to get involved in early "Science Studies" at Berkeley which helped me make sense of the things that I had experienced as a lab scientist up to that point. Now, after 20 years at UNC Charlotte, I teach a class on The Anthropology of Science that started as an undergraduate seminar at Yale and now is a big lecture class in our Liberal Studies program at UNCC.

When I was younger I thought that facts came with self-evident meanings; now I focus more on how we make meaning. Within biological anthropology, my interest in the relevance of things like racism and colonialism in the field was very threatening to my older colleagues at the start of my career. Now it is normative.

LEL: Another important aspect of our Major Scholar Seminars is assessing scholarship itself. For you, what are some of the critical components of doing good scholarship? And, as it relates to your writings, doing good science?

JM: Good science is easy. It has two elements: competence and honesty. Good scholarship is more difficult to characterize because it is broader, more creative, and more integrative. It's like the distinction centuries ago between natural history (the data) and natural philosophy (making sense of the universe).

I think it's important that if you are going to do interdisciplinary work, you hold yourself up to the standards of both disciplines. When I did genetics, I

did it as a geneticist does, and held myself to the standards of that field. When I did history, I did it as a historian does. I don't claim to have full credentials in either of those fields, but I earned the respect of some of the people working in them, and in some cases got them interested in anthropology!

LEL: You shared several times in the seminar some of your newest ideas, research, and writings. Would you mind sharing that in this context? What prompted you to start working in this direction?

JM: My current book is a short one on creationism for Polity Press (UK), which published my last book, "Is Science Racist?" It's a subject I have been interested in since graduate school, from both an antagonistic view

(it's my job to teach about human origins, after all) and a cultural view (wow, there are people "out there" who reject science, even in universities!).

My renewed interest comes from actually meeting and interacting with theologians and biblical scholars, none of whom are literalists, much less creationists. And what I'm trying to do here is redraw the battle lines, and show how creationism isn't a "science vs. religion" problem, but actually a "religion vs. religion" problem. That is to say, biblical literalism is a theological issue within Protestantism. From the standpoint of science education, mainstream Christian theologians and biblical scholars, while quintessential humanists, are our important allies; but they have generally not been recognized as such. ###