

‘Constitutions Selection’: Darwin, Race, and Medicine

A lecture by PROFESSOR SUMAN SETH,
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WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 16, 2:00 PM

VICTORIA COLLEGE CHAPEL, VIC 213

ALL ARE WELCOME

In the course of his discussion of the origin of variations in skin colour among humans in his *Descent of Man*, Charles Darwin suggested that darker skin might be correlated with immunity to certain diseases. To make that suggestion, he drew upon a claim that seemed self-evidently correct in 1871, although it had seemed almost certainly incorrect in the late eighteenth century: that immunity to disease could be understood as a hereditary racial trait. This paper tracks Darwin’s conceptual resources on this question to explore the history of relationships between conceptions of disease and conceptions of race in the nineteenth century. That period saw the birth of a modern, fixist, biologically determinist racism, which increasingly manifested itself in medical writings. My aim here is to show that the reverse was also true: that medicine was a crucial site in which race was forged.

Suman Seth is a Professor in the Department of Science and Technology Studies at Cornell University. He is the author of *Difference and Disease: Medicine, Race, and the Eighteenth-Century British Empire* (Cambridge, 2018) and *Crafting the Quantum: Arnold Sommerfeld and the Practice of Theory, 1890-1926* (MIT, 2010). He is co-editor, with W. Patrick McCray, of the journal *Osiris*, and has guest edited a FOCUS section of *Isis* on “Relocating Race,” and a special issue of *Postcolonial Studies* on “Science, Colonialism, Postcolonialism.”

If you have an accessibility or accommodation need for these events, please e-mail Adriana Leviston at adriana.leviston@utoronto.ca to make appropriate arrangements.