Speaker: Laura Stark, PhD, Assistant Professor, Center for Medicine, Health, and Society, Vanderbilt University

Title: *The Recovery of Bernadette G.: Ethics Review, Experimentation, and the Puzzle of Exploitation*

**ABSTRACT:** On April 12, 1980, the US National Institutes of Health reported the first death of a healthy human subject enrolled in a study at the US government’s research hospital on the NIH campus in Bethesda, Maryland. This talk reopens the case of a “healthy patient,” Bernadette G., who never recovered, in the medical sense, from the study in which she enrolled.

The talk explains the connected history of two institutions that fuel clinical research today: the ethics-review system and the clinical-trials recruitment system. Laura Stark argues that the two institutions developed iteratively—in reference to each other—and are best understood as institutions that mutually enable, rather than broadly limit, each other. The talk presents the origin of ethics-review boards not (only) as a chronicle of scandals, but as a long-developing system designed to solve specific problems facing clinical researchers at NIH following World War II. Simultaneously, the talk pieces together crucial shifts in the clinical-trials recruitment system at NIH that now spans the globe—from the indenture of soldiers and prisoners in the postwar period to the hire of paid civilians in the present-day.

The talk draws on unpublished internal documents from NIH archives and on the author’s new “vernacular archive” of oral histories, letters, and photos of 80 healthy participants who served long-term in clinical trials at NIH between 1954 and 2005. Taken together, these materials suggest how ethics-review facilitates research, rather than restricts it—and how the practice does so in uneven ways. They also suggest how to reconsider the experiences of healthy volunteers, and to imagine differences *among* the people typically fused together within the category of “research subject.”

The aim of the talk is to open up discussion of the paradoxes built into historical and bioethical conventions, especially the paradox of exploitation.