

<http://somatosphere.net/2020/special-issue-doing-the-individual-and-the-collective-in-forensic-genetics-governance-race-and-restitution.html/>

## Special Issue: Doing the individual and the collective in forensic genetics: governance, race and restitution

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By Megh Marathe

[BioSocieties](#) has a new open-access special issue titled, "[Doing the individual and the collective in forensic genetics: governance, race and restitution](#)." Edited by *Amade M'charek and Peter Wade*, this collection takes race as a central concern and traces "the kind of work that forensic genetics is made to do; the kind of (legal, political, societal) infrastructures necessary for that work; and the ways it necessarily orders social relations, producing effects of proximity and distance between collectives, while apparently dealing only with the individual."

[Forensic genetics and the prediction of race: What is the problem?](#)

*David Skinner*

A new wave of innovations in forensics seeks to support criminal investigations by making inferences about the racial or ethnic appearance of as yet unknown suspects using genetic markers of phenotype or ancestry. This paper argues that to grasp fully the potentials of these innovations they must be understood both in the context of established patterns of police–minority relations and as part of significant changes in the use of 'race' as an object of knowledge in science, policy, and politics. Socio-technical developments offer new means of identification through geneticisation, datafication, and visualisation and heighten the visibility and valorisation of racial difference. Elements of this are already evident in existing national police forensic DNA databases whose operation, outcomes, and accompanying ethical frames are racialised in varied ways. By openly mobilising race and ethnicity, however, predictive techniques raise new questions about the validity, interpretation, dissemination, and application of results. Examination of existing use by the police and public of suspect descriptions shows the enduring power of common sense visual and linguistic understandings of race and appearance. That very power makes it hard to transition effectively from moments of collective stigmatisation to the identification of individual suspects.

[Individual and collective identification in contemporary forensics](#)

*Simon A. Cole*

It has long been understood that individual and collective identification are inexorably intertwined. This convergence is not limited to genetics. This paper discusses the convergence of individual and collective identification in a comparative analysis of three other forensic areas: fingerprint analysis, microscopic hair comparison, and microbiome forensics. In all three case studies, we see purportedly individualizing technologies reverting, in a sense, to collective identification. Presumably, this has much to do with the perceived utility of collective identification. When knowing precisely who is the donor of a trace is not possible, or not useful, then knowing that the donor is 'white,' or 'black,' or 'Middle Eastern' begins to seem somehow useful. In each case, we also see that these collective identifications are ultimately founded on crude and broad, seemingly 'commonsensical' or 'social,' racial categories. These categories, meanwhile, are based on a less-than-fully-transparent combination of self-identification or official ascription. These suspect data are then transformed into seemingly persuasive scientific claims about the genetic attributes of this or that 'race,' 'ethnicity,' or 'ancestry.' Through this comparison the paper will explore how the individual and the collective are 'done' differently and similarly in different forensic disciplines.

[Making up families: how DNA analysis does/does not verify relatedness in family reunification in Finland](#)

*Anna-Maria Tapaninen, Ilpo Helén*

This article examines the role of DNA testing in immigration management practices in which individuals and their kin relationships are modified as objects of investigation: defined, categorised and "made up" (Hacking in *Historical ontology*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2002) as families. Analysis focuses on the interplay of documents (or lack thereof), narratives and DNA analysis that produces evidentiary facts and knowledge about migrants and, simultaneously, forges relationships between individuals, families and other collectives. Analysis of the Finnish administrative and legal data concerning family reunification shows that DNA testing does much more than just provide evidence of the existence of a genetic tie between alleged family members; testing can also be translated into proof of 'true' families or extended to test the credibility of the applicants. Via translations and

extensions, the accuracy of DNA analysis is intertwined with the contingencies of decision-making in the context of immigration management. Related to this, the article demonstrates that DNA testing supports the process by which immigration authorities in the Global North constitute the family as contingent, indefinite and even arbitrary, rather than consolidating a clear and solid model of eligibility for family reunification.

[Opposition to the forensic use of DNA in France: the jurisdiction and veridiction effects](#)

*Joëlle Vailly, Yasmine Bouagga*

The use of genetic databases by the police and justice system has risen dramatically over the last 20 years, particularly in France, which has the second largest database in Europe. In such a context, this article analyses the legal and scientific effects of the forensic use of DNA on the formation of individuals' (bio)identities in France. More specifically, we adopt a line of investigation that builds out from forms of resistance to genetic databases. Our methodology draws on a series of interviews and observations of legal proceedings against people who have refused to give DNA samples. In the first part of this text, we focus on the 'jurisdiction effects' of the DNA database being expanded to populations, showing that legal classifications (offender, suspect, etc.) constitute a key issue for these opponents. We then go on to analyse the 'veridiction effects' at work among social actors, in terms of the medical information/information related to origin that is conveyed (or not) by DNA profiles. In conclusion, we show that genetic analyses applied in a criminal context to populations, rather than simply individuals, shift (bio)identities through these dual effects, which form the basis of opponents' resistance to genetic databases.

[Migrant flows and necro-sovereignty: the itineraries of bodies, samples, and data across the US-Mexico borderlands](#)

*Vivette García-Deister, Lindsay A. Smith*

Through an ethnographic examination of the tension between the practice and politics of mobility, this article examines the movement of bodies as scientific objects and sociopolitical signposts for both sovereignty and identity. In particular, we explore the following paradox: living migrants are seen as dangerous bodies and political threats while dead bodies, specifically, the objects and data generated from their remains

make multiple, socially valued migrations across the political space of the border. We argue that scientific objects flow because these objects, not the people, become the currency of necro-sovereignty, a nationalistic currency premised on death and exercised via appeals to human identification as a form of family reunification and the return of bodies-out-of-place to their 'correct' locations. Exploration of this paradox also shows that although individuation is the key goal of forensic science, collective identities, including race, class, gender, and nationality, become obligatory passage points in the path toward individuation.

[Facing the unknown suspect: forensic DNA phenotyping and the oscillation between the individual and the collective](#)

*Roos Hopman, Amade M'charek*

Forensic DNA phenotyping (FDP) encompasses a set of technologies geared towards inferring externally visible characteristics from DNA traces found at crime scenes. As such, they are used to generate facial renderings of unknown suspects. First, through the configuration of molecularly inscribed parts, pigmentary traits are assembled into a probabilistic rendition of the face; second, facial features are landscaped from DNA to produce a metrically rendered face; third, by geographically ordering DNA, an unknown suspect is attributed a particular genetic ancestry as to give him a face. We ethnographically examine these FDP practices within and beyond the laboratory to demonstrate how the promise of individuality—namely the face of the suspect—comes with the production of collectives. And it is precisely these collectives that are a matter of concern in the context of crime, as they rapidly become racialized. We show that each of these FDP practices folds in disparate histories—variously implicating the individual and the collective—while giving rise to different versions of race. The “race sorting logic” (Fullwiley in *Br J Sociol* 66(1):36–45, 2015) displays the tenacity of race in genetics research and its practical applications.

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