Sarah Abel

Can DNA ancestry testing debunk racist ideologies?

For several decades genetic knowledge has been regarded as an antidote to ideologies of racial purity and positioned at the forefront of anti-racist movements in science. In the year 2000 the leaders of the Human Genome Project reinforced this position by declaring that, genetically, all humans, regardless of race, are 99.9% the same. Around the same time, the first direct-to-consumer DNA ancestry-testing companies appeared, offering to match customers genetically to ancient ‘clans’ or to modern-day ‘ethnic regions’. These products were hailed variously as a tool for identity construction for groups who have experienced a collective ancestral trauma, such as the descendants of enslaved Africans, and as a means of debunking racist myths by demonstrating that, on a genetic level, ‘everyone is mixed’. At the same time, the industry has also attracted criticisms: for instance, Native American groups have argued that DNA tests are facilitating the appropriation and racialisation of indigenous identities, and it has been revealed that some white supremacist groups have been using these tools to stake claims to ‘racial purity’.

This presentation addresses the question of how effective DNA ancestry tests are as tools for debunking racial ideologies, based on the analysis of certain highly publicised examples of celebrity DNA ‘reveals’, as well as a corpus of interviews collected from genomic ancestry test-takers in the US and Brazil. Whereas genomic data are often considered to provide ‘hard evidence’ that can easily resolve questions of identity, this presentation highlights how ambiguous these data become when used as a lens for interpreting personal racial or ethnic identities. In particular, it assesses the efforts of scientists and DNA ancestry-testing companies to dictate what genetics can and cannot ‘say’ about race, and argues in favour of a more nuanced, ethical approach to defining what constitute legitimate uses, versus abuses of DNA ancestry technologies.
Sarah Abel is a fellow of the HERA-funded project ‘Identity, citizenship and nationhood in the post-genome era’ (CitiGen), and currently holds a post-doc in anthropology at the University of Iceland, researching how genomic data are being used to shape personal and population histories. In 2016, she defended her PhD thesis at the EHESS in Paris, entitled ‘The scientific construction and social uses of DNA ancestry tests in two post-slavery societies’. From 2012–15, she was a fellow of the EUROTAST training network, a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions project that examined the history and legacies of the transatlantic slave trade from genetic and social science perspectives.

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