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Response to:
 “The Genetic Historical Fantasy” by
 Nadia Abu El-Haj

In her paper, Nadia Abu El-Haj explores the expanding uses of genetics to locate and constitute deep ancestral claims for contemporary individuals and groups. Genomics has enabled multiple forms and practices of late for making such claims, and of course, is conditioned by the violent memory, history, and politics of eugenics. In Abu El-Haj’s primary case study, the object is to secure a “Jewish Genetic Map” of the human population – one that could potentially reclaim the so-called “lost tribes” of Israel, but also constitute “Jewishness” itself as a biological rather than ethnic or religious identity. She asks provocatively at the start of her paper “how is it that individuals who identify as members of social groups (Jews, African Americans) who suffered the violence of race science and eugenics in such recent memory are now so ready to embrace and even to promote a biological self-definition”? Thus, she identifies a remarkable shift in how biology is now constituted via the work of technology (genome sequencers) and politics (the hunger for certainty about origins across racial and ethnic diasporic populations). Abu El-Haj theorizes a new “genetic historical self,” one that is mediated by the epistemic value of “Junk-DNA” (markers which cannot generate differences of any kind between groups) which nonetheless offer a new kind of expert space for making claims about biological essence and kinship. This paper thus engages some of the most charged political concerns of our moment and does so with a clear appreciation of the larger social costs of asking how genomics is being deployed to (re)define ethnicity and race. Abu El-Haj offers us a highly provocative contribution to the anthropology of science, one that I am happy to read and engage.

What I find particularly interesting about Abu El-Haj’s argument is the way it engages “emergence” as an assumption in science studies. The focus on emerging knowledge has been an extraordinarily powerful rubric for organizing inquiries into technoscientific forms, and might even be recognized as kind of a conceptual charter for science studies. Its liberating dimension is that it focuses analytic attention on the work of making new claims – via theories, machines, and experiments -- and encourages exploration of the uncertainty and debate in that process. The power of emerging knowledge as a cultural trope, however, has also been powerfully taken up by the marketing divisions of information, biotech, and national security corporations as a form of speculative hype – articulating a new future not out of fact production but rather by mobilizing tantalizing ideas about imminent breakthroughs. The world of national security science is filled now with the “anticipatory” logics of future making, generating whole geopolitical strategies out of a combination of prediction, imagination, and efforts to install American military “capacities” into a deep future. A strict focus on emergence risks a radically dehistoricizing, depoliticizing gesture, even as the proliferation of new forms of knowledge require us to attend carefully to the work of expertise, knowledge production, and experimental forms. Thus, it is vital at this

historical moment in particular to be clear about the politics and assumptions behind any claim on emerging knowledge, even as we proliferate intellectual tools for studying such claims and their wider social effects.

Abu El Haj's announcement of a "genetic historical self" is an emergent logic – a form of genetic reasoning enabling a new configuration of "Jewish-ness" along both biological and historical vectors. "Junk-DNA" she writes is complicated in that it "cannot generate cultural, behavioral, cognitive, or biologically consequential differences between human groups" - it is "not –quite-biology. It is not quite nature." This "not quite-ness" is the key development in her story – a technologically mediated space where longstanding cultural ideas about biological essence can reappear but scrubbed of the difficult history of eugenics. Thus, Junk-DNA presents first of all an interpretative opportunity, and what Abu El-Haj has identified is a rather wide spread interest across multiple sites to fix biology and culture for a 21st century politics. Her essay tracks this across several different contemporary ancestry projects, revealing a new industry that seeks to answer the anxieties of diasporic populations eager to secure their identities through seemingly incontrovertible scientific claims on biological fact.

In one sense, this story is familiar and even somewhat predictable – that of how a new technology of the body becomes both an opportunity and a space where longstanding cultural desires for fixed identities are expressed and re-claimed. I'm reminded here of Allan Sekula's examination of how photography in the 19th century merged with a new notion of population statistics in 1) Bertillon's criminological effort to identify individuals; and 2) Galton's effort to create a purified vision of the races. For Sekula – both of these projects of population – that of policing and of eugenics – turned to photography for its appearance of "facticity" while simultaneously coding deep assumptions about race and interior essence. Indeed, these new technologically mediated claims on objective truth relied on and reproduced racial and ethnic stereotypes and thus served to confirm rather than challenge existing forms of social order. In this light, we might ask of the contemporary case of ancestry testing: are there moments where the search for the Jewish gene transforms existing expectations and remakes ideas about identity in a radical way? Or do these newly commodified practices simply work to productively confuse the manner in which the question can be asked allowing desires to be confirmed? Outside of the reconstitution of "Jewish-ness" what other modes of identification are being recoded or enabled through this technology?

Galton famously used a composite photographic technique – laying multiple images on top of one another -- to constitute a new vision of race, and one of his first efforts was to define a "Jewish type":



Francis Galton. The Jewish Type. 1883. Plate XXXV from Pearson.

So here is an emerging technology and interpretive logic, one devoted to constituting a biological essence via a state of the art (19th century) technology. But of course technologies of bodily identification are constantly revised in both form and substance: Galton's project is now iconic of a widely rejected eugenical thinking while Bertillon's work evolved into the modern mug shot (prefiguring fingerprinting, as well as the biometric cataloging of individuals increasingly used today). The eugenical search for a singular Jewish has now been reconfigured via the genomics described in Abu El-Haj's paper as a potentially endless field of new associations. What does this new inscription look like visually and how is it distributed and archived?

The emergent here has multiple potential valences: Is it the space opened by genomics to revisit the issue of race science, as self-consciously de-historicized – the miraculous potential of the “Junk-DNA”? Or is it the way that kinship here becomes infinitely expandable via deep history and even calibrated to key religious texts? Or is it the way that “religion” itself becomes a vector of biological essence, now traceable across 100 generations? Or is it the arrival of a new kind of self-fashioning, illustrated by the individual whose genetic ancestry test allows her now to claim connection to “160 different countries” (truly a global citizen!), who took the test to see if she was “Jewish”?

Abu El-Haj concludes that there is much pleasure to be had in thinking both culturally and biologically at the same time – to fuse the body and religion in a way that makes both impervious to time. She suggests that a confusion of biology and culture is now “built into the epistemic architecture of genetic history.” A powerful claim, but one that also requires us to ask in how many ways this epistemic architecture is constituted and with what range

of current outcomes? I suspect Abu El-Haj's forthcoming book on the subject explores this issue of scale and scope directly and look forward to reading more.

For me the chapter does not resolve these issues at the level of genomic science but rather by documenting a contemporary longing for clarity and certainly about identity itself. In this regard we might well ask if the "genetic history fantasy" *as fantasy* is a form that can be rendered visible to experts and consumers alike (through the kind of explanatory apparatus Abu El-Haj presents here) or whether this desire is so constitutive of the question itself that it is more in the realm of "phantasy," which designates a structuring structure that remains inaccessible to the conscious subject. The fantasy element is constitutive of the desire and interpretative frames of the specific project analyzed here, but how far would Abu El-Haj push a theory of fantasy at the level of genomic science itself? Is this largely a case of an ancestral history market being created and served or is there a more profound reconfiguration of identity now occurring – one for example that relies less on personal memory and experience, and more on science?

A related issue here is the way that science itself is rendered cultural in this analysis – not only in terms of which questions are asked and why, but also in how interpretive frames function to code results. As Abu El-Haj underscores at each step in the evaluation of Junk-DNA or Y chromosome types there are alternative interpretations – equivalences without meaning, etc., – that might be emphasized and that challenge the "certainty" of ancestral claims. This returns us to the issue of emerging knowledge as genomics is a quickly evolving field, subject to radically changing understandings and expectations. Given Abu El-Haj's intervention, we can now track the life course of the "genetic historical self," which inevitably will have many forms.

In the end, the challenge of the essay is that it engages a cultural desire that can be tracked across multiple scientific "revolutions" but that is also partially re-made by each of them. Eugenics conditions (both as a spectral form as and counter-discourse) the depiction of genomic ancestry here even as the contemporary genomic ancestry efforts work to both secure and free up the historical field for more claims on biological essence. But instead of the strictly hierarchical racist project of Galton's age, we are in a moment of conscious self-fashioning via genomics. It would appear that history (of science as well as of society) is being optimized here as much as the body, and that there is an increasing desire today for finding biological connection across time and space and culture. Abu El-Haj raises these important questions about a genomic recasting of identity, and helps us see the stakes of how we ask and how we answer them.

For our discussion this week about Fact/Value, Abu El-Haj's paper invites us to consider two very general questions:

- 1) How do we constitute ethical judgments in regard to emerging knowledge?
- 2) How does the move from statistical thinking to probabilities and potentialities inform the production of facts today?