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Race, beyond Fact and Fiction

Amade M'charek

Abstract What is biological race and how is it made relevant in specific practices? How to address the materiality of biological race without fixing it? And how to write about it without reifying race as a singular object? These are the central questions in this short essay. Instead of debunking or trivializing biological race, it wants to attend to race and investigate how it is made relevant in practices. I am interested in what it is made to be in them. By engaging with race in practices, I want to move away from two dominant and mutually exclusive notions: race as a fact, and race as a fiction. As a contrast to these approaches I present one short case to show how race is enacted but also that it is both factual and fictional.

Keywords materiality; practice; body; race; fact; fiction.

I. Beyond Fact or Fiction

The astonishing developments in the life sciences and in genetics more specifically has put biological race back on the table as a growing 'matter of concern' (Latour 2008). A growing corpus of more or less STS literature on race is showing that the new genetics is simultaneously reifying old categories of race and producing novel configurations of differences (e.g. Duster 2005; Reardon 2005; M'charek 2005; Nash 2005; Abu El-Haj 2007; Fullwiley 2007). This indicates that race is not easy to categorize and might even suggest that it shifts and changes (see M'charek 2010). Thus, instead of treating it as a singular object 'out-there' in nature as it were, I want to suggest that we should attend to how race is made 'in-here'¹. How it is *enacted* in practices (e.g. Mol 2002).

With this take on race, I want to move away from two dominant approaches to biological race: race as a *fact* and race as *fiction*. Although I am very brief here, let

¹ On "out-there-ness", "in-here-ness" and singularity, see Law (2002).

* This essay is based on my Keynote address at EASST010. An article based on this lecture, titled *Beyond fact or fiction: On the materiality of race in practices* is now under review and will become available shortly.

me just say a few more words about these approaches. In the approach of *Race as fiction*, there is no such thing as biological race. And, if we encounter it in science or society, it really is an ideology that we are talking about. Something in the head of people, or, of institutions.² This approach contributes to the trivialization of the biological, the trivialization of biological differences.

This approach obviously leaves us empty handed in a time where the life sciences are gaining pride of place in knowing ourselves, in which practices where biological race is made relevant seem to proliferate on a daily basis. The problem is that by trivializing or debunking biological race, it is completely left to geneticists and other biologists to determine what it is. The issue is not that we should reject the biological. That would be a ridiculous thing to do. But rather, as David Skinner (2006) has suggested, to see that anti-racist politics has become a struggle over biology rather than against it. What biology is made to be or how it comes to matter in people's lives is my concern here. The second well established way of thinking race is: *Race is a fact*. In this line of thought race is a collection of biological markers that help to sort people out and to cluster them in natural kinds. If we want to know what race is, we have to look in the body. It is there that you will ultimately find it, in the form of a blood-group, a gene, a protein, or, as externally visible characteristics such as skin colour.

But something strange, or rather interesting, is going on with this fact-making. It suggests that all markers of difference contribute to the discovery of the same fact of race. Whereas in practice we e.g. see that the difference between one population and the other changes depending on the kinds of DNA markers that are used (M'charek 2000). And if two groups of people would be clustered based on externally visible characteristics these differences might get diluted when using DNA technology. The reason is that there are no genetic variations that are exclusively found in one population and not in the other (e.g. Serre and Pääbo 2004). Any genetic variation will be found in all populations but in different frequencies. So whereas the fact-making approach suggests that all technologies contribute to the discovery of the same fact, and to constructing or solidifying the same boundary, in practice, technologies may point in different directions.

2. Getting Practical

The case I discuss below shows that in practices race is simultaneously factual and fictional/ideological. Also, if different technologies produce different versions of race, we cannot but follow these around in practices as to unravel what they make of race. Are the different versions compatible or do they conflict? Are some versions dominant over others, and to what effect: silencing them, translating them, or something else? And in the end, what do different technologies make of us and of the not-us? I contend that the two dominant takes on race, "race as fic-

² In the extended version (see the first footnote) I use statements on race that have been commissioned by the UNESCO as to unravel these positions about race.

tion” and “race as fact”, are not helpful to understand the omnipresence of biological and racialized differences. Not only do these approaches contribute to the idea that race is one unified thing (to comprehend or to combat), but also, as I briefly indicated, we cannot know beforehand whether race is made into a fact or a fiction.

How To Do Identity with Bones and DNA

On March 13, 2002, Nico Arts, the city archaeologist of Eindhoven, discovered a grave dating back to the 13th century. It appeared to be the grave of a ten-year-old child. Based on the DNA retrieved from the teeth, the Eindhoven skeleton was identified as that of a boy who came to be called Marcus. The skull was sent to the Netherlands Forensic Institute for a facial reconstruction. The excavation of Marcus’ remains indexed a much greater discover, namely a collection of 700 graves of burials spanning from the 12th till the 18th century. The project soon became a collaborative project between archaeologists, genealogists and geneticists. The added value of the collaboration with geneticists was to learn more about genetic genealogy and therewith about the identity and history of Eindhoven and eventually of the Netherlands.³ The reconstructed skeleton of this young boy became a key figure in the Eindhoven project. For Marcus had become a genuine star. A biography has been written about him (Arts 2003), he was exhibited at various locations, his reconstruction was viewed by thousands of visitors, and he figures in many publications about the Eindhoven project. For Marcus had become a genuine star. A biography has been written about him (Arts 2003), he was exhibited at various locations, his reconstruction was viewed by thousands of visitors, and he figures in many publications about the Eindhoven project. One of these publications was cast as a quasi-interview conducted by Marcus himself with his ‘father’, the city archaeologist Nico Arts. This interview as a whole is highly interesting but in what follows I will refer to just two short instances.

Marcus opens the interview as follows:

My father Nico...

Ever since the emergence of human beings, great importance has been attached to the relation between a father and a son. The ecclesiastical history even begins with a Father, who long after that origination sacrificed his Son for the benefit of humanity. Also for me, a ten-year-old whippersnapper from the 13th century, this relation is pivotal. I am therefore happy that I can turn to Nico Arts, city archaeologist and my spiritual father to ask him some pressing questions. After all, he has given the history of Eindhoven a face. My face.

³ As in many comparable projects nowadays, the stakes are high. In the well-funded high profile Eindhoven project the goals are no less than unraveling the secrets of a number of common diseases, such as diabetes, hypertension, but also the secrets of HIV.



Marcus is highly interesting; in his time is crumpled (Serres and Latour 1990). Practices that are as distant as eight centuries apart are folded together in a surprising and engaging story. How is that done? Given the young age of Marcus, it was not possible to sex his body based on archaeological techniques, that is, by studying the bones. His sex was determined based on DNA analysis. This DNA however, was also used to determine his genealogical descent, in terms of a belonging to a specific population. The city archaeologist reports that, '[t]he results indicate a relationship with population groups found across the central Mediterranean and North-West Europe region' (Arts 2003: 63). To be sure, such DNA analyses are probabilistic and do not guarantee that an individual stems from one population or the other (Serre and Pääbo 2004; M'charek 2000, 2005). Yet, given that Mediterranean as well as North-West European populations are mentioned, it is striking that Marcus' facial reconstruction had led to a fair looking boy with red-gold coloured hair. Or, in the words of his makers, '[n]eutral colours were chosen because we have no information about the actual hair, eye and skin tones' (Arts 2003: 100). One could say that to make Marcus into the face of Eindhoven, that is, a passage point into the history of this city, Marcus himself had to become somebody that a mainstream Dutch audience can identify with – a beautiful, 'neutral' white boy.

Marcus: What kind of a boy was I in former times?

Nico Arts: You were buried at an important spot in Eindhoven: near the altar of the old Catharina church. On your body we have found a silver coin, probably a souvenir of a crusader. [...] You are a child who stems from an important and wealthy family. You did not have a nice life though. You were often ill, since your teeth are not full grown. You suffered from anaemia and during your first life there was no cure for that. You died much too young: only 10 years old. Maybe you never had a chance to play outside and spent most of your days in bed.

Again Marcus' complexion makes us wonder. For to imagine a medieval child who was chronically ill, and probably never had a chance to play outside, does not

quite match the facial reconstruction that Marcus has obtained. We see a young boy in the pink of health, a boy with a chubby face and blooms on the cheeks. This all suggests that Marcus brings about more than his own life story.

In his biography, Marcus is connected to a whole range of historical figures, involved in crusades during the 12th century (Arts 2003: 74). On Marcus' body a coin was found which evoked that history. It was identified as a coin from Venice, one that was stamped with a portrait of St. Mark. Hence Marcus' name. The link between St. Mark and Venice had not always been there. St. Mark was in fact imported to Venice around the year 828. At that time the Venetians felt that they deserved a more prestigious patron for their prosperous city. So they had cast their eyes on St. Mark. His skeleton was, however, in Alexandria. So the Venetians had it stolen. 'Their excuse for this was that the Muslims wanted to put the church which contained the relics of St. Mark to new use, non-Christian use' (Arts 2003: 66). The relics were smuggled out of Egypt. The story goes, that the smugglers had covered it with pork, forbidden food for Muslims. This history is not left behind. By contrast, the opening of the interview sets the stage for the link between Marcus van Eindhoven and his relevance in the 'here and now' on the one hand, and the history of the crusaders, the presence of St. Mark's skeletal remains in Venice, and the historical conflicts between Christian and Muslim societies, on the other. They are drawn together in Marcus in a topological fold (Serres and Latour 1990) reflecting the proximity of alleged distant histories and places.

Now, anthropologists, such as Marilyn Strathern (1992) have a longstanding tradition of thinking genealogy, kinship and nation together. And recently, given the prevalence of genetic in doing genealogy and kinship, race has moved centre stage in these analyses. Marcus, I want to suggest, draws together the history, present and future of Eindhoven and beyond. His racial identity contributes to what Dutch-ness is made to be. It contributes to a racialization of Dutch-ness. The example of Marcus however, makes clear that race is not a matter of DNA. But it also adds something to the previous examples. Namely, that the different entities that are linked to one another carry with them a history, a culture. The invested-ness of such entities can be and were mobilized in Marcus and they helped to enact race.

3. Concluding Remarks

We cannot a priori know fact from fiction! But how were they present in our example?

The example of Marcus has taught us that facts about genetic differences were mingled with stories about descent, historical ties and national belonging. It was made clear that the archaeologists in our case were not particularly interested in genetic diversity or kinship as such but in local and national histories and identities. This fiction (narrative) has racialized Marcus, and turned him into a personification of Dutch-ness. We have thus moved a long way from our starting point, namely the idea of race as a simple fact. This is not to say that race is fictional or that it does not materialize. By following the strategy of locating and by attending

to the various technologies of doing similarities and differences, I have shown that race does not simply inhere in bodies. Rather it materializes in the very relations that are established in practices. It is in this sense that race is relational.

In his classic paper "Drawing Things Together" Bruno Latour (1990) elaborates on his notion of *immutable mobiles*. Latour (1990, 56) raises the question "how can distant and foreign places and times be gathered in one place in a form that allows all the places and times to be presented at once [...]?" Thus how can knowledge about a world out there move between sites without losing shape and content? His answer is: make immutable mobiles, flat, two dimensional inscription devices. Although Latour might have a point, I want to suggest that in order for facts to travel *and* to arrive, they need fiction too (see e.g. Strathern 1987). To be sure, facts and fiction are not in and of themselves either the one or the other. A fact in one practice can be enacted as a fiction in another.

So facts need fiction. Fiction is obviously a broad category. Work conducted in STS has brought about similar concepts, such as the work of John Law (2002) on how narrative helps to enact technological objects, or Steven Shapin (1984) on literary styles and their role in the production of matters of fact. Yet I want to insist on the notion of fiction for a number of reasons. Here I want to highlight two.

Firstly, we need to attend to fiction for it contributes to the making of wholes out of parts⁴. As we have argued race can be many different things. And different markers produce different configurations that do not add up. Yet, e.g. the 'fiction' of human evolution or the Out-of Africa theory contributes immensely to an illusion of wholes, by providing a narrative that supports the existence of integer groups that are separated in territorial and temporal ways. Secondly, there is a tendency to attribute fictions to some knowledge practices and not other. Archaeology is a case in point. I suggest that knowledge practices such as archaeology function like a prism indicating the crucial role of fiction in other allegedly 'fiction-free' practices. There might be different styles or genres but "there cannot be a choice to eschew fiction altogether" (Strathern 1987, 257). Insisting on the persistence of fiction is attending to the fact that race is not an entity in the body but a relational object. If not only, it is a relation between bodies and the kinds of fiction that matter to us.

Thank you.

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⁴ "[T]o be One is to be an illusion", thus Haraway (1991, 177).

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