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From the series *Ma Demeure* | 2018 | Dalila Dalléas Bouzar (courtesy of the artist)

## THE MEMORY AND HISTORY INSCRIBED IN THE GENETIC TECHNOLOGIES OF FIGHTING CRIME

Helena Machado and Sheila Khan

In his elegant essay, *The Idea of Europe* (1), George Steiner romantically exalts and renders eternal a multicultural, cosmopolitan and borderless Europe. But this Europe is confronted with the ghosts of its past by terrorist attacks in France, Belgium and the United Kingdom. As Europeans, these attacks leave us stunned by our own memories and unable to make inferences or draw conclusions. We are quick to lay out moral and geopolitical readings of the attacks and rapidly turn to technologies of securitization. We desire these technologies to be objective and scientific. We are quick to build walls. We are audacious in our declarations of who the crowns of civilization and progress truly belong to.



The mission of the EXCHANGE project (2015-2020) (2) is to reflect critically on the perpetuation of the “European dream” of a community of solidarity in which national, linguistic and cultural differences are overcome to produce a space in which citizens can move freely and safely. The surveillance technologies that the project studies have a shared feature: they are genetic machineries that seek to identify individuals for the purposes of criminal prosecution. They are based on computerized data that contains thousands of genetic profiles. States use these databases to find genetic matches. The Exchange project seeks to understand the social, ethical and political implications of the rapid expansion of such technoscientific apparatuses by which criminalized populations are put under surveillance by justice systems. In this context the transnational sharing of genetic information and DNA profiles, held in criminal databases, assumes a particular contemporary significance.

In our contemporary moment, the turn to genetic technologies to combat crime, terrorism and international migration is underpinned not only by thinking about security and the physical protection of citizens or the territorial defence of states. Rather, woven through these apparatuses is a discourse based on, and legitimized by, interlocking epistemologies and instruments of science and the law. These are webs of “technoscience” in Bruno Latour’s sense (3). In them, according to Latour, a kind of syncretism underwrites the making of black boxes: unique and indissociable artificial entities whose parts no-one dares separate.

The genetic technologies used in security policy reconfigure race as an unstable object, made of corporeal, digital and discursive elements. Racist practices associated with surveillance technologies discriminate against bodies and populations, and try to expel them beyond the walls of Europe. However, as the sociologist David Skinner (4) has highlighted, the racism embedded in the genetic technology used to combat crime ironically often contradicts political sensibilities which claim to respect cultural, racial and ethnic diversity. These sensibilities, far from altering structural inequalities, in fact reinforce them.

To think about surveillance technology, combatting crime and terrorist attacks is to immerse our entire political, social and psychological body in the History and the Memory of a flawed Europe. Without careful attention to history it would be easy to give human faces and human bodies strange names. The epistemological foundation and journey of a DNA profile cast it as the ultimate means of biological individualization. by Michael Lynch’s (5) metaphors for genetics are key here: “machines of truth” and “machines of revelation”. The technologies studied in this context share conceptions of objectivity,



neutrality and certainty, based on bringing together human fallibility with the precision, reliability and predictability of a machine.

Genetics is premised on a historically constructed (6) idea of objectivity and realism, figured in opposition to a subjective realm of ideas. This notion of objectivity relies directly on quantification. The fact that data is measurable and quantifiable allows it to be shared through transnational networks of political and juridical cooperation. These networks are underpinned by both unstated and negotiated understandings, and are driven by moral principles of anonymity. Yet, there is History and a Memory that lies behind each dissection of each DNA molecule from a suspect body, categorizing it and splicing it in the hope of finding a wholly “objective” identifier.

Science is vital and human as and when it respects the social, cultural and historical maturity of the societies that produce it. Simone Brown sums up the entangling of humanity and science in *Dark Matters* (7): “rather than seeing surveillance as something inaugurated by new technologies, such as automated facial recognition or unmanned autonomous vehicles (or drones), to see it as ongoing is to insist that we factor in how racism and antiblackness undergird and sustain the intersecting surveillances of our present order” (8).

“That Mighty Sculptor, time” (to take up the title of a collection of essays by Marguerite Yourcenar) (9), is always embedded in the soul of the sciences and the various apparatuses that societies possess to protect and valorize “their own”. It is hard to think socially and historically about the decisions that underpin these apparatuses. To move forward with History and Memory always at our side is a duty of remembrance: doing so means that we don’t face the present as a wholly new departure. We must not forget the lessons of the past.



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- (1) Steiner, George (2015). *The Idea of Europe*. New York: The Overlook Press.
- (2) The project EXCHANGE – *Forensic geneticists and the transnational exchange of DNA data in the EU: Engaging science with social control, citizenship and democracy* is funded from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement N.º [648608]). The Exchange project is led by Helena Machado and it is hosted by the Institute for Social Sciences and CECS (Communication and Society Research Centre) at the University of Minho (Portugal). Between 2015 and 2017, this project was hosted at the Centre for Social Studies (University of Coimbra).
- (3) Latour, Bruno (1987). *Science in action: How to follow scientists and engineers through society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- (4) Skinner, David (2018). “Race, Racism and Identification in the Era of Technosecurity”, *Science as Culture*, p. 1-23.
- (5) Lynch, Michael (2013). “Science, truth, and forensic cultures: The exceptional legal status of DNA evidence”. *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*, v. 44, n. 1, p. 60-70.
- (6) Porter, Theodore M. (1995). *Trust in numbers: The pursuit of objectivity in science and public life*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- (7) Browne, Simone (2015). *Dark matters: On the surveillance of blackness*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- (8) Traduzido do original: (Browne, 2015: 8-9).
- (9) Yourcenar, Marguerite (1993). *That Mighty Sculptor, Time*. London: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.
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