

Book Review

Sarah Abel, *Permanent Markers*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2021.

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Genetic ancestry testing has become increasingly familiar in the past decade. The expansion from small companies investigating particular communities to huge multinational biotech organizations, such as 23andme and Ancestry, has been swift and, frankly, enormous. Ancestry currently has more than 22 million individual DNA records in their commercial database, with smaller organizations such as MyHeritage holding around 6 million. Size matters in this market, as the bigger the database, the more fine-grained detail the service can offer. The tools available to interpret data are developing at speed, with Ancestry now using “SideView” to suggest which parent contributed which parts to an individual DNA (this is akin to the “Lazarus” tool that was developed by the Gedmatch family history community). Their “DNA Traits” tool suggests that genetic data can explain or reveal foundational ‘truths’ about a user. For public historians, the challenge of these new technologies and what they mean for contemporary historical sensibilities is acute and widespread. DNA, as Sarah Abel writes, “is increasingly being used as a tool for piecing together individual and collective histories” (188).

This explosion in usage has been driven by the increasing popular understanding that DNA can ‘match’ and explain not just an individual’s family connections but also their ethnicity. Ancestry will give you a readout of your ‘percentage’ of various ethnic identities and will also seek to connect you to regions, communities, and groups. This has been long challenged by scientists and other critics of DNA-as-product who argue that such concepts are ahistorical, irrelevant, and incorrect.

Sarah Abel’s excellent book *Permanent Markers* is an important intervention into the wider discussion of the value, ethics, purpose, and effects of increased genetic awareness of this type and is, in particular, a critique of the ways in which ‘ancestry’ and ‘ethnicity’ have been intertwined in both commercial and scientific contexts. Our understanding of “life on a molecular scale” has greatly expanded in the past 50 years (3). Increasingly, the ways in which we understand ourselves genetically is being bound up with articulations and definitions of race and other markers of ancestral identity. Abel considers multiple ways

that genetic science seems to intervene into understanding of race and ethnicity and traces the problems inherent in this development. Without much challenge, DNA has become widely understood as having meaning in relation to race. By looking at the ways in which genetic testing for ancestry has been aligned with race-making and the articulation of social definitions of ethnicity, Abel helps us to understand the complexity of the situation and how we got here.

Abel’s book illustrates that genetic science has both a technical and a social aspect, reminding us that “the tantalizing through that our DNA holds the key to our identity inevitably gives way to a series of more troubling questions” (4). Throughout, Abel is careful to recognize that concepts relating to race, ethnicity, inheritance, and ancestry are problematic and constructed, and her critique of the DNA-industrial complex in all of its forms is thorough and trenchant. She sees race as “the product of a set of interrelated worldviews that have *multiple* meanings and effects, spanning the sociocultural and biologic” (10). This, crucially, is where genetics comes in, as the ways in which DNA data are interpreted and used allow us to see the fault lines and power dynamics of racial discourses laid bare quite spectacularly. Far too often, DNA is seen as the ‘answer’ for questions of inheritance and ancestry; as Abel shows, “DNA markers often function as a parallel script alongside – or in contradiction to – embodied experiences of racism and identity” (17).

Abel’s technique in *Permanent Markers* is to study two countries that have complex relationships to race, ethnicity, and genetics: the USA and Brazil. Her approach allows her to “show that genomic data are necessarily read in the light of various cultural and political discourses about race, ancestry and identity” so “they can never be regarded as universal or unambiguous in their scope and meaning” (5). Indeed, the comparative aspect of the book is one of its great strengths. There is a (relatively) large amount of work on American race and genetics – such as by Kim TallBear or Alondra Nelson – but little accessible work on DNA in Brazil.¹ Furthermore, the comparison between the countries allows Abel to make key interventions about the ways that race is constructed in each and therefore develop her central arguments about the deeply problematic and strange ways that genetics has entered this debate.

¹ See Alondra Nelson, *The Social Life of DNA* (Boston, Beacon Press: 2016) and Kim TallBear, *Native American DNA* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press: 2013).

Abel's work is highly accessible yet theoretically astute. She writes well about complex topics and gives them an urgency that recognizes how crucial these debates are now and will be in the future. In particular chapter three, "Technologies of the Self," shows, through a fast-paced account of the development of Direct-to-Consumer (DTC) testing, the ways in which racialized genetic identities are being sold and encouraged. Her final chapters look at how this plays out in individual cases and particular communities. Abel concludes by thinking carefully about the antiracist potential of DNA testing, the clarity often idealistically suggested by organizations such as the Human Genome Project. Concluding her project in 2020, Abel understands that Brazil and the USA are problematic locations for nuanced discussions of ancestry, race, and legitimacy. This is still the case. DNA *can* be used to reveal, to rethink and, as Abel shows, to understand the violence and trauma inherent in contemporary identity. It is painful, often, but positive, and

Abel's account of possible futures for genetic history gives us an interesting and challenging model to begin to work with.

Finally, a moment on privilege and positionality. Abel takes some time in the introduction to discuss her intervention as a white European scholar. Her writing here is honest, thoughtful, and acknowledges the ongoing problems of work in this area. There is much to be done to ensure that work on race, ancestry, and DNA does not simply reiterate and rehash or – worse – contribute to racist discourse and structural inequality.

Family history is a growth area in public history studies, and genetic ancestry work is a crucial part of this. Abel's work is therefore of great interest to those of us who are intrigued and worried about the increasing use of historical genetics from Ancient DNA to Ancestry DNA. More so, though, her work shows us how to argue carefully about the increasing scientization of concepts crucial to contemporary society.