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Debate Article

Emergent or imposed?

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Brück (2021) provides an eloquent and necessary critique of an overreliance on scientific tools to understand social relationships. I enjoyed reading this debate piece and found myself agreeing enthusiastically with most of it. Rather than pulling at the details of Brück's argument, here, I would like to sharpen its edges. In particular, Brück challenges us to expand our interpretative imaginaries as we reconstruct the past using biomolecular data. I suggest, however, that we should also think more critically about these very data and how contemporary models of kinship by blood relatedness affect not just the interpretations we develop, but also the questions that we ask and the methods that we apply in answering them.

In a recent article, Wolf-Meyer (2020) argues that technology is entangled in kin relations: technology, when conceived of as inextricably enmeshed in complex networks of people, things and relationships, can be kin; but it can also form a conduit that creates connections between people, making kin out of them. Salient to archaeogenetic research, Wolf-Meyer (2020: 237) points to genetic ancestry tests as one example of how technology creates kinship by "rendering bodies like one another" and creates a sense of shared identity through biological substance. Indeed, he expands this to encompass the kinship chart—a graphic technology that, he argues, "composes a connection between bodies, across space and time" (Wolf-Meyer 2020: 242). Hence, archaeogenetics does not reveal innate kin relations, but creates them. This does not mean they are not real, but that they encompass only one element of the kinship experienced by past people, and represent it in terms that are more relevant to us, as contemporary scholars, than to those past people we study. Thus, genetic kinship relations in prehistory—like prehistory in general—are invented, constructed and woven together from incomplete and biased data. Scientific studies of biological relatedness do not reveal natural relations, but create them in both a language and form that is familiar to us, rather than revelatory about the past.

I am, therefore, compelled to ask what agendas we bring (even unconsciously) to our archaeological, biomolecular studies. We cannot disentangle our experience of the contemporary world from our interpretation of the past, and genetic data, in particular, are too often presented in an uncritically presentist framework (Frieman & Hofmann 2019). In line with Brück's (2021) critique, I worry that our reliance on normative, binary and biodeterministic models of identity simply reproduces Eurocentric models of kinship and relationality, crafting a fabricated pedigree for our own contemporary status quo and the inequalities it embeds.

In recent work, First Nations academic Kim TallBear reflects on what it means to be in relation and how to form relations outside of a colonialist framework. She focuses, in part, on the binaries introduced to North America as part of the European imperial endeavour, what she terms "compulsory settler sex and family structure" (TallBear 2018: 152): a sex

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binary, a gender binary, monogamous marriage and child rearing in discrete, nuclear families. Certainly, British colonial history demonstrates that imperial expansion included the imposition of anti-homosexual practice laws that have continued to shape policy and practice into the present (Han & O'Mahoney 2018). TallBear (2018) views these imposed sexualities, identities and kin structures as not just Eurocentric—alien to ideal Indigenous forms of relation—but also antagonistic. To TallBear, her community and the scholars with whom she is in dialogue, these normative kinship ties represent a colonisation of bodies and beds that diminishes the ability of First Nations people to maintain cultural traditions and produce strong families and kin networks.

It is clear that this historical and intellectual context has yet to be appreciated by archaeogenetics—where contemporary social relations, such as monogamy and nuclear families, are casually applied as if they are neutral, natural and universal practices. Indeed, the affordances of genetic data shape our discourse around a narrowly biologised form of kin-making that prioritises relatedness over relations, reproductive capacity over care and parentage over community. The question raised by Brück's (2021) debate piece is imperative: do scientific studies that yield the same sorts of normative kinship structures that were deployed as part of colonial genocides offer new insight into the past, or are they just new tools to impose a sexist, heteronormative, Eurocentric status quo onto the ancient world? Are we, in effect, settling the past to keep it from unsettling our present?

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