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Performing DNA Spacing: Omogeneia and Dissonant Genealogies

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Performing DNA Spacing: Omogeneia and Dissonant Genealogies

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Abstract

In 2023, Dr. Eftihia Mihelakis and Dr. Lucille Toth discovered through a DNA test that the geographical and national spaces to which they thought they belonged did not actually match the story told by their DNA results. L. would be 72% Spanish, when she thought she had deep roots in Continental Europe (Hungary), and E. is 66% Eastern Mediterranean, but with significant roots in Northern Africa, Russia, and Norway. She was raised to believe she only had Greek roots. This dissonance between biodata and multi-generational family fantasies, between monocultural expectations and bio-mediated bodies who form part of a global pool of human DNA, made possible a (re)examination of identity.

Their performance-based flash talk combines Greek and Hungarian folk dances and posthumanist feminism (Braidotti, 2018). Examining their identity as bioliving matter, one that is constantly interacting with known and unknown environments, their dance-talk produces multiple ecologies of belonging that trouble the idea of loyalty and familiarity with/to the European/Continental/Mediterranean space. These preliminary findings form an affective postanthropocentric form of identification that troubles the tensions between “technophilic” (Braidotti, 2002) desires to belong, to matter, and their (dis)loyalty to phallic and paternal (humanistic) genealogies.

Keywords: DNA, Genealogy, Epigenetics, Performance, Dance, Omogeneia

*Facing each other, Lucille lifts Eftihia, who extends her legs to create a straight plank in the air.*¹

Lucille:

I am French, but my last name is Hungarian. I have a Hungarian bone structure and a Hungarian vibe. So I was told. My mother's maiden name is Daffos. Sounds Greek.

Lucille straightens her right leg in front of her and taps her foot three times.

She looks Mediterranean. I look Mediterranean. We are Mediterranean.

Eftihia holds Lucille's left hand as Lucille jumps, twisting her legs mid-air.

So I was told.

Eftihia:

Omogeneia is a problematic ethno-nationalist concept.

Omo for the "same."

Geneia for "genetic."

As a child of the Greek diaspora, I was born and raised in Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

Lucille straightens her right leg in front of her and taps her foot three times.

We had two ways to sustain our Greek heritage: language and Greek dances.

In one swift turn, Lucille moves toward Eftihia's left-hand side. They are both facing the audience.

For second-, third- and fourth-generation children of the diaspora, linguistic and cultural competence is crumbling under its own contradictions.

Lucille:

According to a recent DNA test, my ancestry composition is 100% Western European.

75% Spanish with a splash of Northwestern Europe.

Zero Hungarian.

Lucille and Eftihia bend their legs, then extend their left heel and slightly tap it on the ground. At the same time, they extend their arms in front of their body and cross them forming a box parallel to the ground. They do the same for their right side.

Zero Eastern anything. I am more Irish than Hungarian.

Dissonant genealogy?

¹ The movement descriptions are in italics.

Eftihia:

Lucille does the previous move twice.

Three years ago, my brother and I decided to get our DNA tested. Expecting to have this diasporic Greek “sameness” reflected in my DNA spacing, I opened the result and gasped for air. I am mostly of Norwegian, Slavic and North African descent.

Omogeneia, common ancestry?

Does this then mean that all Greeks are also Scandinavian, Slavic and from the Maghreb?

Lucille:

With her arms stretched sideways, Eftihia begins to turn.

Fun fact: Since women do not have a Y chromosome, DNA reports cannot directly provide women a Y-chromosome haplogroup (also known as a paternal haplogroup). Women have the option to connect the haplogroup assignment of a father or brother to their Paternal Haplogroup Report if they want to learn about their paternal DNA lineage. So there is actually still a possibility for me to know if my Hungarian lineage is simple dissonant genealogy or if I do belong.

Eftihia:

Lucille begins to turn and jump among the audience, asking them to join.

Last night I dreamt I was in Socrates’ prison giving my last lecture to an audience of students who only spoke Greek. I wanted to ask them: “What it is like being a Greek in the heart of Athens, the fortress of Western knowledge?”

Epigenetics is the study of mechanisms that modify gene expression. They are shared experiences of cultural trauma (Lehrner and Yehuda, 2018). They target a cultural or ethnic group and become part of the story the community tells about the world, about itself, and about its survival.

In the fields of psychology and psychiatry, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or depression following trauma are only applied to individuals. However, over the past decades, recent advances in molecular biology have facilitated investigations of the intergenerational transmission of trauma-related effects through epigenetic mechanisms (Lehrner and Yehuda, 2018). Converging evidence indicates that subtle adaptations at the molecular level may not be completely erased in gametes and at conception but may be conserved in offspring.

Diaspora denotes difference within a host nation and connection with a real or imaginary homeland elsewhere. For English-Canada, I am a first-generation Greek-Canadian; for Québec, I am second-generation because I was born in my host country. Connection and difference

operate through linguistic houses. My diasporic experience connotes a state of dissonance (Braidotti, 2012).

Lucille:

Lucille is standing still, away from Eftihia.

I don't know anything about my Hungarian heritage. I don't know the language. I don't know the people. I don't know the traditions. I don't know what dance movements make up their community. I had to learn on my own. And yet, I am contemplating the privilege of having a multi-generational family fantasy. The privilege of being able to trace my ancestry back to the 16th century if I choose to, just based on my name. I'm reflecting on what DNA results signify for individuals from diasporic communities or those who have been deported, or for former enslaved people. I am wondering what remains in the DNA when there are holes in intergenerational transmission.

Eftihia:

As a child of immigrant parents, formal education served as my good substitute mother. And so, unlike other Canadians, I have three mother tongues, depending on which national-juridical-political borders you are referring to. I can be in Montreal and be the Other-phone to the Franco-Québécois, but not belong to the historical Anglophone community, and elsewhere not sound like an Other-phone to English-Canadians. And so, everything lies in the name.

Lucille:

My Western cultural upbringing erases my Eastern diasporic roots. Does that mean that my DNA does not experience any intergenerational transmission? Does that mean that this lack of transmission of my paternal lineage prevents me from genetically developing? Did I peak genetically?

Eftihia:

I remember my dream again. I am back in my prison-campus where Monday is the day. I went to bed rather early and read a little before I slept: "A Forgotten Language": omogeneia, diaspora. In what other space can dissonant genealogies unfold if not in a web of creative digressions?

In silence, they face each other as Lucille lifts Eftihia, who extends her legs to form a straight plank in the air. Side by side, they straighten their right legs and tap their right foot three times. Eftihia holds Lucille's left hand, bends her legs to create momentum as Lucille jumps, twisting her legs mid-air and tapping her feet with her right hand.

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