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Book Review

Let's Talk About the Ghosts in the Room: The Haunting Language of Biological Differences

Haunting Biology: Science and Indigeneity in Australia, by Emma Kowal, Durham & London, Duke University Press, 2023, 264 pp., \$27.95 (Paperback) ISBN: 978-1-4780-2537-5, \$104.95 (hardcover) ISBN: 978-1-4780-2059-2.

“There is no escaping the haunting presence of the past lives of biological research, but we can seek to better understand the ghosts we live with.”

Emma Kowal (2023: 66)

Science is never *neutral*. It is always made by people shaped by specific ideas, concepts, values, and experiences. It is always done for a purpose, and this purpose is determined by many different factors: ideological, economic, political, historical, technical, among others. Science is never just a *matter of facts*. Emma Kowal's book, *Haunting Biology: Science and Indigeneity in Australia* (2023), is full of examples of how many different interests, desires, beliefs, and decisions shape the development of science and its impact on people's lives. It is an engaging tour through the exceptionally difficult and complex history of the production of knowledge about biological differences between human populations, with a particular focus on Indigenous peoples of Australia.

Searching for the biological differences

Studying human anatomy can sometimes lead to an almost alchemical transformation of the body (or remains) of a specific person into an object of analysis. If this body belongs to someone who is not fully considered human, the probability of its objectification is extremely high. Then, such an object can be measured and described, as well as compared with other objects without raising too many uncomfortable questions – after all, it's not a person anymore! Finally, an object can be sold or purchased, collected, thrown into a box, stored in a laboratory, or exhibited in a museum. It can lie in a dark warehouse for decades, only to

suddenly be given a second life and take on a completely new meaning. Who would care about an object's feelings? Who would be afraid of its ghost?

From the beginning of the 19th century to the present, the bodies of thousands of Indigenous peoples of Australia have been dehumanized and objectified for 'the sake of science'. During this time, however, science itself has fundamentally changed in terms of how it understands and studies the biological diversity of our species, including the language, methods, and tools it uses. In her book, Kowal examines these changes in relation to a few cases of research performed on the remains or bodies of representatives of the First Nations (combining discussions from the areas of historical anthropology, history of science, science and technology studies, and Indigenous studies). The stories she describes – those from the distant past and the present – intertwine, leading to one basic question: “How are we to understand Indigenous biological difference in the twenty-first century?” (Kowal 2023: 4). I must admit that this is a damn difficult question. In large part, this is because when we raise it, we also usually revive the spooky concept of race and all the evil that comes with it.

Let's start with a relatively simple matter: the belief that the wording *the only race is the human race* is not just an empty political slogan. Nowadays, most researchers agree that biologically understood human races do not exist; they are not *natural kinds*, as proven by hundreds of reliable studies in the field of population and evolutionary biology, among others (Graves and Goodman 2021). In a few European countries (some of those with histories marked by brutal and long-lasting practices of colonial violence and exploitation of racialised others, such as Germany and France), the word 'race' was even more or less officially eliminated from use, including in science (Simon et al. 2019). But another undeniable fact is that people differ from each other in many ways. To somehow organise these biological differences, many continue to classify them using ethnoracial categories. However, there is considerable confusion in this regard.

The majority of scientists interpret race as a strictly social construct. In such cases, biological differences between racialised populations are usually recognised as the impact of social inequalities rather than some innate, essential, and universal features of representatives of certain groups. Ethnoracial data (like self-declared social identity) is then used as a proxy for other sociodemographic characteristics such as disparities in income, access to education, healthcare, etc. (Malinowska and Żuradzki 2023a). For example, during the pandemic, many argued that the cause of the so-called racial disparities in Covid-19 mortality and morbidity is racism, not race (Malinowska and Żuradzki 2023b). Yet, others believe that – even understood as a social category – race is also a reliable proxy for relevant biological characteristics (such as genetic polymorphisms), and thus its application in areas like genetics and genomics may be useful (Spencer 2018a). In such a case, one's ethnoracial identity or some phenotypic feature is supposed to correspond to having certain genes. As noted by Kowal, the biggest difference between the above approaches is the length of the adaptation timescale and the mode of inheritance they focus on (2023: 9).

Moreover, both positions are increasingly criticized as inaccurate and methodologically unjustified (although most criticism focuses on the biologisation of race,

there are also critical arguments regarding the use of this category as an umbrella term for different environmental factors) (Malinowska and Żuradzki 2023a). Thus, besides ethical debates, there are also growing epistemically driven attempts to develop a precise and adequate post-racial language for discussing biological differences in their various forms (Huddart et al. 2019; Byeon et al. 2021). While achieving this aim is still a work in progress, inspired by multiple interests – or simple ignorance – racialised (pseudo)science is thriving. Unfortunately, the terminological and conceptual imprecision, as well as the lack of methodological rigour occurring in many scientific analyses of biological variation in humans, make it easy to then use such research as arguments legitimizing racial oppression (Malinowska 2016; Sear 2022; Sear and Townsend 2023). As I already mentioned, science is never neutral, nor is the language it uses.

The language of *Haunting Biology* is not the language of highly analytical conceptual analysis. Nor is it a language of simple divisions into 'good' and 'bad' racialised science. Instead, it employs a vivid and descriptive language focused on capturing the multifarious nuances related to this issue. As Kowal explains, her aim was "neither to dismiss all biological knowledge as racist nor to excuse any of its negative effects on Indigenous people", but to "argue that biological data as diverse as diabetes incidence and hair form both contain haunting possibilities and resonances" (Kowal 2023: 9). Therefore, while it may not be the easiest read (it sometimes made me really tired of returning to previously described threads, changing the subject, and lacking a clear structure), it is certainly an incredibly valuable one. Its main contribution (as I see it) lies in recognizing all the subtleties in the thicket of tangled interests that affect which, by whom, when, and why biological differences are studied, as well as how they are interpreted and named.

Bones, blood, ghosts, hauntings, superpowers, and repentance

Besides the Introduction and Conclusion, the book is organised into six main chapters, with the first titled 'Living with Ghosts'. It begins with a brief discussion of the not-so-distant and highly politicised (unsuccessful) attempts to define an Australian Aboriginal genome and to use DNA test results to determine the ethnoracial identity of Australians, as well as their critique. In the context of the development of modern genetics and genomics, the question of how to understand, conceptualise, and study biological differences resonates most clearly. For example, how to develop projects focused on Indigenous Genomics, such as *Genomics Aotearoa* (a collaborative research platform for genomics and bioinformatics in New Zealand, which is focused on benefiting Māori and led by Māori people¹) and the *Native BioData Consortium* (the first non-profit research institute and biobank run by Indigenous scientists and tribal members in the United States²), and cope with the inevitable visits by ghostly presences? In other words, how can such research be conducted in a way that it does not become the basis or justification for racist and eugenic ideas? Kowal hints at what these

¹ <https://www.genomics-aotearoa.org.nz>

² <https://nativebio.org>

similar ghosts are and why they appear, rather than giving a clear answer. But this is already a lot. As she explains, acknowledging these ghosts that are still around and embracing them, while uncomfortable, enables us to have some understanding of what we are actually facing.

Later in chapter one, Kowal presents the conceptual and methodological framework of the book as well as its structure. It's important to note that the notions of ghosts and haunting are not employed in the book in a trivial manner. On the contrary, *Haunting Biology* consciously refers to ideas such as the Derridean concept of hauntology (Derrida 1994) and its reinterpretations (Gordon 2008; Kristeva 1991), discussions about the violent colonial history of Australia (Gelder and Jacobs 1998), and references to beliefs of some of its Indigenous communities (Keen 2006; Clarke 2007), among other things. In brief, Kowal proposes understanding the invoked ghosts as ubiquitous and diverse effects of repressed experiences of violence, as well as reflections of postcolonial concerns. They denote absent beings (some as ephemeral as ideas, others as specific as certain individuals and objects) that influence the present in both negative and positive ways. One of their functions, as Kowal argues, is to provide us with the means "to better comprehend a confusing colonial present" (Kowal 2023: 24; see also Smith 2008: 96).

The second chapter, titled 'Blood, Bones, and the Ghosts of the Ancestors', introduces the reader to a land full of ghostly presences understood in the aforementioned way. It starts with the story of the haunting of an Aboriginal poet and filmmaker, Romaine Moreton, by the ghost of orthopaedic surgeon and comparative anatomist Sir William Colin Mackenzie. Importantly, Kowal discusses Moreton's haunting "not as a freak event but as an allegory of scientific research in a settler colony" (2023: 37). She uses that story to describe various paths of racialisation of the remains and body samples collected from representatives of Indigenous communities, focusing on different attitudes towards bones and blood. There is no doubt that collecting and exhibiting elements of human skeletons is the subject of many loud debates, including those regarding their repatriations and reburials. Kowal demonstrates that the history of collecting, storing, and studying blood samples and other bodily substances of Indigenous peoples is equally complex and fascinating. She writes, among other things, about the views on blood among Australian Indigenous communities and beyond, how the development (and racialisation) of blood group research and serology looked, as well as what factors affected these processes. Finally, the second chapter analyses why and how the goals of such biomedical studies and the language they use have changed over time (from race science towards health research considering *Aboriginal benefits* (2023: 51-52)).

Chapter three, titled 'A Century in the Life of an Aboriginal Hair Sample', explores the complex journey of a hair sample collected from a young Aboriginal man in 1923, showcasing the significance of adopting various perspectives (such as anthropology, history and philosophy of science, sociology, and science and technology studies) for a deeper understanding of the evolution of scientific disciplines, tools, methods, and ideas. The narrative begins at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, a period when many scholars were refining racial concepts and classifications based on phenotypic features like skin tone and hair texture, drawing inspiration from 18th and 19th-century race sciences. Among them was

anthropologist Alfred C. Haddon, who collected, described, and studied the mentioned hair sample. In his 1909 book *The Races of Man and Their Distribution*, he posited that hair is the most useful feature for classifying the "main groups of mankind" (Kowal 2023: 74; see also Haddon 1909). However, as time passed, the advancement of life sciences, coupled with the rise of fascist ideologies, prompted Haddon and many other researchers to openly denounce racialised biology as a pseudoscience that served political and economic agendas (Kowal 2023: 76; see also Huxley, Haddon, and Carr-Saunders 1935: 7).

But this is not the end of the history of using this specific hair sample to study biological differences. Its second life began with the development of genetics, in particular with research on so-called ancient DNA (aDNA). In brief, aDNA studies focus on analysing genetic material from archaeological samples to learn about the history of human populations, their migrations, interactions, and the evolution of genetic traits over time. In 2010, the hair collected by Haddon became the subject of such research. The results were then submitted to *Nature* and eventually published in *Science* as an article titled 'An Aboriginal Australian genome reveals separate human dispersals into Asia' (Rasmussen et al. 2011). The reconstruction of various objections raised by that publication is (in my opinion) the most intriguing part of the third chapter. The multidimensional analysis conducted by Kowal covers problems such as ethical and legal questions regarding the reuse of the famous hair in research, racialised language of modern genetics and genomics, as well as the racialised aesthetics of the photos added to the *Science* article, directly referring to historical pictures of racial types (including photographs taken by Haddon and published in his already mentioned book from 1909 (Kowal 2023: 85)). All of these issues illustrate how easy it still is to evoke ghosts contained in once racialised artefacts.

The title of chapter four is 'Race and Nation: Aboriginal Whiteness and Settler Belonging'. It focuses on the conceptual changes regarding the recognition of Indigenous people of Australia as white or non-white. Kowal highlights the highly instrumental, contextual, and negotiable nature of ethnoracial identities and classifications. To this end, she reconstructs the history of the *archaic Caucasian* theory: a hypothesis popular in the 19th and mid-20th century that Indigenous Australians and Europeans shared some features thanks to common ancestors, or – in other words – that up to a point these two populations constituted one racial group. Perfidiously, placing Indigenous peoples higher on the hierarchy of whiteness was not associated with granting them white privileges. Such a conceptual framework allowed settlers to better cope with the psychological costs of benefiting from colonial violence and exploitation. As explained by Kowal, the "brutal history of colonisation could thus be retold as a family reunion of distant cousins" (2023: 30). At the same time, she emphasizes that Indigenous people have never been treated as some older family members who should be respected, listened to, and cared for. It was more about stepping into their shoes, replacing them, and still feeling at home (Kowal 2023: 110). Thus, the symbolic assimilation of Indigenous peoples into the settler community was at the same time their symbolic elimination, and therefore an attempt to eliminate the problem.

One of the most brutal practices consistent with the above rhetoric, now known as the *Stolen Generations*, lasted from approximately 1905 to 1970. During that period, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were forcibly removed from their families by Australian government agencies and church missions. But, as demonstrated by Kowal (2023: 116), although due to that and other reasons, stereotypical features of Indigenous people (darker hair and skin) are less and less visible on the streets of Australian cities, the aim of erasing Indigenous identity from Australia wasn't achieved. Thanks to some conceptual shifts in defining Indigeneity, in the last few decades thousands of Australians redefined their identities by recognising their Indigenous heritage. At the same time, it has turned out that in some cases, DNA tests can also help people find their lost families and ancestral lines. After all, while ethnoracial affiliations cannot be reduced to having certain phenotypic features or genes, the sense of belonging to a given community plays a key role in this context.

Chapter five, titled 'Indigenous Physiology: Metabolism, Cold Tolerance, and the Possibility of Human Hibernation', primarily addresses the issue of biological differences understood as specific adaptations of given populations to the environmental conditions in which they live. One such 'local' adaptation is, for instance, genetic variation linked to high-altitude adaptation specific to Tibetans (Simonson et al., 2010). Another is the potential ability of Aboriginal men to slow down their metabolism and enter temporary hibernation, as discussed by Kowal. She analyses this issue both in the context of historical colonial exploitation and race science, as well as contemporary and future threats and possible benefits related to the search for biological 'superpowers' specific to representatives of given communities (Kowal 2023: 120). Once again, a significant problem in this case is the lack of an appropriate language and conceptual framework for discussing biological differences. While ethnoracial concepts and classifications do not reflect the distribution of genetic variability (Malinowska and Serpico 2023), they continue to haunt research on this subject. Unfortunately, even the developing language of modern biology is very easily manipulated and instrumentalised. As Kowal repeatedly reminds us, "in the wake of colonial devastation, to make biological knowledge about Indigenous people is to live with ghosts" (Kowal 2023: 37).

The final chapter, 'Spencer's Double: The Decolonial Afterlife of a Postcolonial Museum Prop', takes us back to the collection of remains amassed during the heyday of race science. It tells the story of a sculpture depicting Baldwin Spencer, an anthropologist and biologist whose collection of objects from Indigenous communities formed the basis of the Museums Victoria exhibition for decades. The sculpture was created in 2000 as a post-colonial critique of Spencer's work, but after about a decade it was moved to the museum storerooms, where it remains in the dark, haunting the thoughts of people who must decide what to do with it next. In a sense, the story told by Kowal comes full circle. This time, however, the author focuses on completely different problems: discussions about the present and future of the problematic colonial legacy and all its ghosts. The language of this chapter is the language of changes: from the colonial language of racist dehumanisation, through the naïve postcolonial language of repentance, to the decolonial language of regained Indigenous

subjectivity. As usual, Kowal asks many difficult questions in this regard: which language should we develop? Which voices should be heard? Which ones should we consider valuable and representative? Who should control the lectern? Ultimately, should some words and stories be forgotten? Spoiler alert – as you can guess, you will not find answers to these questions in the book. But acknowledging them is already something.

Do you believe in ghosts?

Kowal's goal is to persuade the reader of one thing: the past is not something that can be left behind because it constantly affects the present, and the past hidden in darkness and covered in a veil of silence has perhaps even greater haunting potential. I am definitely convinced by her arguments. In fact, while I was reading the book, I also struggled with some of the ghosts it summoned. First and foremost, I repeatedly asked myself whether I should write its review. Is the language shaped by my experience adequate in this context? To be honest, reading *Haunting Biology* in semi-peripheral Poland (where I grew up and live) is a very strange experience. As a Pole, I do not fully fit into the mainstream discourses on white privilege and lack thereof (Kalmar 2022; Lewicki 2023). These discussions, however, are to a great extent taken over by the so-called *US race talk* (Spencer 2018b), and Kowal's book goes far beyond it. It is attentive to any signs of unjustified essentialisation of biological differences as well as attempts at naïve universalisation of sociocultural ethno-racial classifications. Eventually, Kowal, who has Polish-Jewish roots, also falls somewhere in between racialised realities. Perhaps the experience of being such an inbetweener is what makes people more sensitive to the presence of ghosts? Maybe it is also one of the reasons that make me question if my voice deserves to be heard over and over again? Well, these are some of the thoughts inspired by the haunting presences brought to my attention by Emma Kowal. I am now trying to understand them and learn to live with them in harmony. I recommend you read her book and do the same.

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