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# Fragile differences, relational effects: Stories about the materiality of race and sex

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## Abstract

This article is about the materiality of difference, about race, sex and sexual differences among others. To find out about these differences and their materialities, this article looks not into bodies but rather at how bodies are positioned in spaces and how they are enacted in practice. In the first part of the article, the focus is on the relationality of identities and how they are made and unmade in specific practices. The second part of the article attends to the various histories and practices that are drawn together in one specific body and how they help to enact a particular version of the body. Differences, it is argued, are not given 'entities' out there, awaiting discovery; rather they are *effects* that come about in relational practices. This indicates that materiality is not simply a given that can be taken on board (such as readily given biology or the body), but it is the very configuration through which differences can be articulated.

## Keywords

articulation, auto-ethnography, body, differences, diffraction, materiality, race

## Introduction

This article is in conversation with scholarly work that wants to take account of the biological, the bodily, the material. Yet it is also concerned about how in these attempts the biological, as *nature*, is viewed as a simple, singular given, a 'factor' we can readily add to our sophisticated renderings of *culture*. This kind of 'return-to-nature', I contend, cannot be seen separately from the ever-growing power of the life sciences and the place they occupy in societies. The problem with scientific representations and with the 'return-to-nature' approach is the very idea of an immediate access to nature and the biological. Even with the addition of culture, such approaches contribute to the objectification and essentialization of nature and the biological. I am not alone in my concern about this take on the biological, I take stock of a growing body of literature in

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feminist science studies from the 1970s onwards. Here I want to elaborate on and relate to the work of Donna Haraway and Annemarie Mol.

It has been more than 20 years since Haraway suggested viewing the body, nature and the biological as *material semiotic actors*. The notion of material semiotic actor 'is intended to highlight the object of knowledge as an active, meaning-generating axis of the apparatus of bodily production, without *ever* implying immediate presence of such objects. . . . bodies as objects are material-semiotic generative nodes. Their *boundaries* materialize in social interaction . . . objects do not pre-exist as such' (Haraway, 1991a: 200–1). How, then, to know such intricate objects? In her 'Situated Knowledges', Haraway addresses the centrality of vision in western knowledge practices and famously suggests reappropriating this metaphor for feminist politics. She argues that seeing is always mediated by technologies of visions (even if we call such technologies a theory), and that all vision is partial and embodied. To account for objects as material semiotic actors, she suggests changing metaphors. *Diffraction*. The bending of waves around obstacles and the spreading out of, for example, light rays past small openings, such as a prism. Diffraction is a generative technology that attends to differences and impure objects. In contrast to technologies of representation that are about resemblance, 'Diffraction does not produce "the same" displaced, as reflection and refraction do' (Haraway, 1992: 300). Diffracting rays produce patterns of *interference*, rather than semblance. 'A diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear, but rather maps where the *effects* of difference appear' (Haraway, 1992: 300). To put it differently, difference *is* the effect of interferences; it is the effect of technologies and practices.

Diffraction is about interference and about objects emerging as the very effect of interference patterns. It is, as I want to suggest, a contrasting technology. It incites us to attend to practices, to juxtapose them, so as to unravel what objects are made to be in them. This method suggests that objects or subjects do not have an essence, but are indeed effects of technologies, effects of our interaction with the world. This does not make them less 'natural' or 'biological', but rather *differently* natural and biological. Nature (and the biological) is not a singular entity out there, but rather a node *elsewhere*. Objects are made in a normatively charged field of action. In addition, objects are not one or singular, but rather, as Annemarie Mol (2002) has taught us, *multiple*.

The difference between multiple and plural is crucial. In her book *The Body Multiple* (2002) and her essay 'Ontological Politics' (1999), Mol demonstrates the coexistence of different versions of an object by focusing on the doing of such objects in practices. She argues that *multiplicity* is essentially different from the *plurality* of objects that has been theorized in perspectivalist or constructivist approaches. Perspectivalism has 'multiplied the eyes of the beholder of knowledge' (Mol, 1999: 76). Depending on who this beholder is, a different view on the essentially-same-object has been claimed. Constructivist approaches, for example, in science and technology studies (STS) – whether in the tradition of the social construction of technology or the so-called laboratory studies – have shown that the history of an object or of a scientific fact is contingent. Things could have been otherwise, in the words of the late Susan Leigh Star. Yet much of the analytic work has gone into showing how specific facts or objects and their spokespersons overrule other possibilities. In sum, in these branches of STS, the assumption is that there was plurality in the past, but it got lost in the present. By contrast, Mol argues for the multiplicity of

objects in the 'here and now'. To account for multiplicity, she suggests to focus on *activities* and *interventions* in practices. Contrasting different practices, we come across different versions of an object – versions that do not easily add up to produce a whole and that may coexist in tensions or even clash with one another. These different versions interfere with one another through the work of coordination and so help to prevent an object from 'falling apart', as it were. Now, if the body is a material semiotic actor, we should focus on activities in practices so as to get to know what it is.

In addition to these ontological concerns about 'nature', this article is written in the post-9/11 era. It is also an era of 'global conjuncture of belonging', as Tania Murray Li (2000) has aptly put it. That is, an era in which the global circulation of humans and things is taking place at high speed, and where at the same time 'local' or 'authentic' identities are gaining pride of place. In this conjuncture, processes of Othering as well as of self-making seem to be going hand in hand. The examples I discuss come from the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, xenophobia and nationalism have gained momentum since the murder of the politician Pim Fortuyn in 2002, and of the filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2004. The racism and xenophobia that followed seem to coincide with a quest for *the* Dutch identity. Although the very existence of a (coherent) Dutch identity is being questioned (WRR, 2007), various science-based projects are carried out in search of clues about what it could be. Obviously, the Dutch are not alone in alluding to the dictum 'know thyself' on the basis of genetic knowledge. In fact, 'know thyself' was mobilized by Walter Gilbert in the early 1990s to convince us of the importance and urgency of the Human Genome Map. We are our genes, or so we were told (Gilbert, 1992).<sup>1</sup> Recently, genetic knowledge has travelled outside the walls of the laboratories to find employ in various domains in society. Commercial genetic kits can be purchased on the Internet to help to fill in gaps in family genealogy, and geneticists are called upon, for example, by archaeologists, to help to identify skeletal remains and construct the past of a city or a region. It seems that histories are best told by bones and genes, by bodies that cannot lie.<sup>2</sup> Science is, thus, caught up in a process of Othering and self-making.

In this article, I present two contrasting cases in which identities and differences *matter* in both senses of the word (Butler, 1993). Given the focus on the materiality of race and sex differences, the cases are situated in ongoing debates in feminist technoscience.<sup>3</sup> To be sure, this article is indebted to and wants to contribute to a version of feminist technoscience that does not explain the power and politics of science as simply 'ideology' or 'representations' (in the sense addressed above). It does not take the work of science as an ideological layer that can be removed to learn the truth about the social (or nature). Rather, science and technology are to be analysed as part and parcel of the social fabric and nature as we know it.<sup>4</sup> Insights from this scholarship about the effects of science and technologies on gendered and racial identities (and other entities), the non-stableness of boundaries between self and Other, nature and culture, the biological or the physiological, on the one hand, and the stuff around us, on the other, are at the heart of the analyses conducted in this article. In addition, scholarship in feminist technoscience has urged us to not only study the scientific citadels (laboratories and related scientific institutions) and therewith reproduce gendered power relations, but also to pay attention to popular science and other everyday practices in a world that is populated by science and technology.<sup>5</sup>

In this line of thought, the first case is an auto-ethnography, based on everyday events. Here I transport methodological insights developed in research on science and technology to everyday life to analyse what identities are made to be and how. The analysis is aimed at denaturing difference by focusing on the kind of differences that emerge and vanish in a split second, namely fragile differences. What are these differences made of? And what kind of relations help to make or unmake them?

In the second case, I move back to scientific practices and focus on one artefact, Marcus van Eindhoven. However, I do not enter laboratories or clinics, but attend to the work Marcus does for a broader public. I take insights about the relationality of difference from the first case and view the kind of links that are made in Marcus and how this helps to enact him as one of 'us'. Here I consider both the processes of naturalization and how these contribute to a 'natural' and singular object, and to patterns of interferences between different practices and histories that prevent Marcus from becoming one. I thus argue that Marcus is a material semiotic node that draws various different practices and histories together.

### Case I. A hair piece:<sup>6</sup> On race, sex and sexual differences

At the end of the 1980s when I had just started studying at the University of Amsterdam, a fellow student called me up. She asked me whether they could nominate me as a candidate for the forthcoming elections for the University board (a former political institution of the more democratic university back then). She thought it was important to have more women on this board. While she was explaining to me the kind of work a membership in this board would entail, I realized that I could think of a couple of other and much better female candidates. I had become politically involved in the student movement, but it was only my first month at the university. While listening to the voice in the phone, I dared to ask the question: 'Are you asking me because I am not just a woman? I mean, are you asking me because I am also an immigrant?' The answer came after a short pause. It was affirmative. I declined and explained to her why.<sup>7</sup>

This is not a story by a 'hands-on' expert. My aim here is not to present you with authentic stories with which some of you might identify and others not. These stories are not aimed at *representing* events in a personal life, but rather at *articulating* (Haraway, 1992; Latour, 2004; M'charek, 2008) collective concerns. Although I am true to the ethnographic material I mobilize here, this material is thoroughly theorized and rendered useful for the argument of this article. I apply the notion of articulation to indicate its collective nature. Articulation is captured well in the words of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001 [1985]: 105). They define it as 'any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as the result of the articulatory practice'. Articulation in the context of this article indexes a multitude of relations: the events; the specific practices that are mobilized; the style of narrating these in an ethnographic account (a genre); the way they are placed in the context of an academic article, and related to the problem of difference, race and materiality, to mention just a few examples.

The story described above is an articulation of the politics of representation. Nowadays diversity has become a management tool. Good organizations and institutions should

reflect the diversity in society. Yet, in many cases (or at least in the Netherlands), this politics of representation generally requires the 'Other' to come in one version. For this Other is there to represent, to speak on behalf of, and in fact, to embody an objectified group out there. The Other is supposed to *sit still* and speak in one tongue! In a sense this politics is a kind of 'vampire politics', for which the virginal blood of the other is lifeblood. The Other is beautiful, virginal and *with* blood, but not *of* flesh and blood. What follows is in conversation with this politics of diversity. The stories aim at de-essentializing and denaturing difference. They take issue with the idea that difference is a variable (or a series of variables) located in the body and that these variables can be added up or subtracted to produce a singular subject (woman, of immigrant, working-class background, etc.).<sup>8</sup>

My engagement in politics intervened in various ways with my everyday life. For example, it had an effect on my phone number. After a local newspaper printed my phone number in an article about an anti-racist demonstration that I had been part of, I had to change it because I started receiving threat phone calls from young men, members of a Dutch neo-Nazi organization (de Viking Jeugd). Visibility and non-visibility became an integral part of my life.

In 1991, the Gulf War started. In addition to a variety of familiar differences, such as class, sex, ethnicity, political friends and enemies, another more complex and tricky difference presented itself. It took me a while to find out what it was, to give it a name. The difference between the western and the Arab world, or better, the Muslim world. Under those circumstances (the debate about the 'just war' and the rhetoric of Muslim threat), I 'became' an Arab, even a Muslim, whether I liked it or not.

However, my relationship with Arab-ness and with the Islam proved to be larger than my specific interaction with the world. Events and discourses elsewhere in the world became dominant and started to impose themselves, or so it seemed. Even though they were ambiguous and slippery, these relations started to do their work.

Given my previous experiences with neo-Nazis and my wish to have a space to move, I decided to have my hair cut. While dark and long curly hair would emphasize my Arab appearance and might invite aggression, short hair, very short hair could obscure that and so provide me with a larger space to move around in the city.

Hair is political. It is a racial object. Also in this case. Curls, dark curls, make non-western. Short hair does not leave much space for curls. It tends to be straight and lean, and to produce ambiguity, maybe even western-ness. A so-called *coupe garçon* was chosen as a haircut. Quite soon however, this *coupe garçon* proved to be much more than just a metaphor, or a style.

Not long after I got my haircut, I visited a good friend of my mother in Beverwijk. On a Saturday morning we went to the so-called black market. It used to be a flea market, but it eventually grew into an oriental market where many Turkish, Moroccan, Hindustan and Surinamese traders sold their goods (especially food). My mother's friend Fatiha liked to go there early in the morning and do her shopping before the market got crowded. We were walking next to each other along the row of market-stalls that were being built and arranged, when all of a sudden I felt a slap-bang on my head. At first, I did not quite understand what had happened. Was it somebody I knew who tried to say 'hello' in a strangely unusual way? In fact, as I soon came to realize, the slap was meant for what it was, an act of violence. When I turned

around I saw a tall blonde woman looking angrily at me and claiming that I had pinched her buttocks. Not quite understanding what she meant at first, I soon realized that looking at me from behind she must have thought that I was a man. With my *coupe garçon*, dressed in a long black coat and wearing army boots, I was walking next to a woman who was wearing a scarf. This was apparently enough of an indication to make me an Arab man aiming at her buttocks.

The blonde woman was overtly confused, once she saw the feminine face and the flashy red lipstick that came with that short hair. A face that could hardly be interested in her buttocks. My objection and anger followed. But then she quickly disappeared behind her stall to make room for her strongly built partner. He was to handle this conflict further.

Hair does not only make western or non-western. In this case, it also helped to enact both man and woman. Without the face that goes with it, short hair helped to produce a man; the kind that tends to pinch women on the buttocks. Such an offensive act provokes a response. It *deserves* a response. However, this response will hardly ever be a punch on the head. That punch was an effect of a specific moment in a specific space. 'The Black market': it is crowded with black people. . . In that context, a *woman* with a short haircut, seen from behind, walking next to a woman wearing a scarf, might be taken for an *immigrant man*. The kind that is inclined to take his chances and pinch blonde women on the buttocks.

Instead of 'my apologies', 'sorry, a mistake' or whatever, so as to resolve the conflict in equity (among women), it was not the blonde *woman* but her male partner who stepped forward to face the problem and, the woman with the short haircut. He was supposed to manage the anger. At the beginning of this conflict, the woman with the short haircut was enacted as an Arab man. Upon her face becoming *visible*, she became a woman. However, within these seconds, and standing not in front of the blonde woman, but in front of the man instead, her identity changed for a third time. Confronted with the heavily built Dutch man, she became a representative of a people. A people that is often typecast as potentially dangerous and difficult to control. The woman was thus enacted as the *Arab woman*, the Other.

Hair is a political object. Short hair makes masculinity, but not always. Short hair can make western-ness, but not always. It does that in relation to other objects: humans, things, circumstances. In this case, short hair linked to a scarf helped to produce a non-western man, an immigrant, an Arab man. The woman with the short haircut embodied all these qualities, temporarily. She received the punch on the head. But her body was not by itself. Her body, and more specifically her hair, was linked to the scarf on the body of another woman, and to the specific environment in which both bodies were located.

A couple of years later, my head made space for curls again. Yet another war was going on in Iraq. The dichotomy between the western and the Muslim world had taken dramatic turns. In 2004, I attended a debate in deBalie (a cultural centre in Amsterdam). The theme discussed was individuality, diversity and collective behaviour. Instead of hyper individualism and individual choices, people, so the hypothesis went, reside and build their identities within communities in which they can be different from members of other communities. They thus 'choose' and express herd-like behaviour. As an opening to the debate, the moderator asked the panel to mention one aspect of their identity in which they thought they did not express this herd-like behaviour, something that made them truly unique and individual. One of the panellists brought his uniqueness forward. He indicated that he was married to an immigrant man (an allochtoon) and that he expected to be unique in that, at least during that evening.<sup>9</sup> The moderator did his



reality check and looked for potentially similar cases among the audience. I raised my hand and was actually surprised not to see more. 'Well', I said, 'I am married to a German man. Isn't he an immigrant too?' The panellist started laughing and accepted 'point taken'.

During this event very different relations were made and different identities enacted, namely sexual identities. Homo- and heterosexuality make a binary couple that cannot come together, as part of one's identity. Homosexuality relates to heterosexuality as the Other. However, in this ethnographic account, it was not homosexuality, but heterosexuality that was Othered. Although the panellist wished to bring forward his uniqueness as an individual, the question directed towards the audience was self-evidently aimed at (a group of) men, homosexual men. But because homosexuality was linked to the immigrant husband, an exceptional relation could be established between homosexuality and heterosexuality – not in Otherness, not at the cost of one another. They existed simultaneously through the link with the immigrant husband. This sexual difference produced an ironic moment, a moment where it was not the difference between the sexes and sexual identities, but rather a similarity, namely an immigrant husband, that was made relevant.

Some notes on the materiality of differences

Differences and similarities do not lie out there for us to be collected or uncovered, so as to give colour and contours to a social landscape. They are not given, but enacted in moments of tensions – in antagonistic tensions as a result of conflicts between enemies, or agonistic tensions as a result of conflicts between friends (Mouffe, 2000). Differences and similarities may be stable or not, depending on the maintenance work that goes into the relations that help to produce them. They are neither fundamentals nor qualities that are always embodied. A scarf helps to make short hair masculine. A war in Iraq helps to make dark, curly hair Arabic. An immigrant husband helps to enact hetero- and homosexuality simultaneously and destabilize differences between them. Differences are relational. They do not always materialize in bodies (in the flesh, genes, hormones, brains, or the skin). Rather they materialize in the very relations that help to enact them. The link between short dark hair and a scarf on the body of another woman is the very materiality of the difference that is being enacted. With Haraway, we can conclude that differences are the *effect* of interferences in specific practices.

## **Case 2. Marcus van Eindhoven: Or how to do history with bones and DNA**

On 13 March 2002, Nico Arts, the city archaeologist of Eindhoven, discovered a grave dating back to the 13th century. It appeared to be the grave of a 10-year-old child. Based on the DNA retrieved from the teeth, the Eindhoven skeleton was identified as that of a boy who came to be called Marcus. The skull was sent the Netherlands Forensic Institute to attempt a facial reconstruction (see Figure 1). The excavation of Marcus's remains indexed a much greater discover, namely a collection of 700 graves of burials spanning from the 12th to the 18th century. The project soon became a collaborative project between archaeologists, genealogists and geneticists. The added value of the collaboration with geneticists was to learn more about genetic genealogy and therewith about the identity and history of Eindhoven (Anonymous, 2005). This was deemed highly



**Figure 1.** Facial reconstruction of Marcus van Eindhoven

important since Eindhoven does not have a written record of the Middle Ages (Arts et al., 2005). Genetics was therefore called upon to produce genealogical lineages and to infer the descent of these retrieved Eindhoveners.<sup>10</sup>

The reconstructed skull of this young boy became a key figure in the Eindhoven project. My following analysis is therefore focused on Marcus as he is conducting a quasi-interview with his 'father', the city archaeologist Nico Arts. This interview is obviously a technology of naturalization, and there are many more. But there are also interferences, instances that help to denature Marcus. I consider how both technologies are at work and unravel the kinds of practices and worlds they mobilize.

The quasi-interview opens as follows:<sup>11</sup>

*My father Nico . . .*

Ever since the emergence of human beings, a great importance has been attached to the relation between a father and a son. The ecclesiastical history even begins with a Father, who long after that origination sacrificed his Son for the benefit of humanity. Also for me, a 10-year-old

whippersnapper from the 13th century, this relation is pivotal. I am therefore happy that I can turn to Nico Arts, city archaeologist and my spiritual father to ask him some pressing questions. After all, he has given the history of Eindhoven a face. My face.

This opening evokes a well-known, almost iconic scenery where a father and a son are having an intimate conversation. It is in many more ways a gendered story. One could read this as a story of male lineage making, a lineage leading all the way back to the ecclesiastical Father. It could also be read as a story of religious and/or scientific sacrifice.<sup>12</sup> In this light, the 'pressing questions' become even more urgent. In analogy with the sacrifice of Christ by his Father, might Nico Arts also be willing to sacrifice his son for the benefit of Eindhoven and beyond?<sup>13</sup>

The quote assigns a specific role to Marcus. His face represents the history of Eindhoven, as if that history is resting there, awaiting to be collected. But what if it is not representation, but interference is at issue here? What if Marcus is viewed as a pattern of interferences drawing together different historical and contemporary concerns and practices?

*Marcus:* You call me your 'youngest son'. Why?

*Nico Arts:* Your 'rebirth' in 2002 became possible thanks to test-excavations in front of the current church, the coincidental finding of your grave, the discovery of your own DNA in one of your milk teeth, the reconstruction of your face and the fact that a book could be written about you and your era. . . . Modern techniques that did not exist during your first life were indispensable for the task. I have been very closely involved in this process. I even gave you your name. This is why I sometimes – with a smile – call you 'my youngest son'; I myself have two older sons.

Marcus is, thus, a product of science and technology. It is through this scientific investment that Nico Arts can appropriate Marcus and make him part of his family, his youngest son.<sup>14</sup> He does this, though, with a smile and not tongue in cheek, indicating – one could say – romanticism rather than irony (see Haraway, 1991b). In addition, the book that was written about Marcus (Arts, 2003) bears the subtitle 'An Archaeological *Biography* of a Medieval Child'. The qualification 'biography' suggests a matter of fact-ness rather than a construction of a life-story and it contributes to the naturalization of Marcus's identity. At the same time, in that very biography, one can read about the location where Marcus was found, about the scientific work that went into identifying him and about how his face was reconstructed. Then again in juxtaposition to this process of *making* and the range of scientific interventions, we also encounter various technologies of naturalization. For example, Marcus's burial is represented in a realist painting from September 2002, in St Catherine's Church, and is recounted with many (assumed) details. In a second painting, from September 2002, which represents how Marcus was sewn into his shroud by three women, one can see his reconstructed face, produced in August 2002, and projected back into history, to a day somewhere around 1300 when he was prepared for his burial.

One could say that knowledge and concerns of the 'here and now' are playfully connected with events from the 'then and there'. Through the biography Marcus has become a kind of *topological fold* in the way that Michel Serres has theorized it:

An object, a circumstance, is thus polychronic, multitemporal, and reveals a time that is gathered together, with multiple pleats. . . . If you take a handkerchief and spread it out in order to iron it, you can see in it certain fixed distances and proximities. If you sketched a circle in one area, you can mark out nearby points and measure far-off distances. Then take the same handkerchief and crumple it, by putting it in your pocket. Two distant points suddenly are close, even superimposed. If, further you tear it in certain places, two points that were close can become very distant. This science of nearness and rifts is called topology. (Serres and Latour, 1990: 60)

In Marcus, time is crumpled and practices that are as distant as eight centuries apart are folded together in a surprising and engaging story. It is vital to attend to the technologies involved in folding, for they do not only allow for naturalization by suggesting an alleged linear development, but also for interferences and surprising relational effects once we take these technologies into account.

As the interview excerpt indicates, many more practices are drawn together (Latour, 1990) in Marcus. Given the young age of Marcus, it was not possible to sex his body based on archaeological techniques, that is, by studying the bones. He was made into a boy, 'the son of', with the help of DNA analysis. DNA, however, was also used to determine genealogical descent, in terms of a belonging to a specific population. As Arts (2003: 63) points out, 'The results further indicated a relationship with population groups found across the central Mediterranean and North-West Europe region.' Now to be sure, such DNA analyses are probabilistic and do not guarantee that an individual stems from one population or the other (M'charek, 2000, 2005a). Yet, given that both Mediterranean and North-West European populations are mentioned, it is striking that Marcus's facial reconstruction had led to a fair looking boy with red-gold coloured hair. Or, in the words of his makers, 'Neutral colours were chosen because we have no information about the actual hair, eye and skin tones' (Arts, 2003: 100). One could say that to make Marcus into the face of Eindhoven, that is, a passage point into the history of this city, Marcus himself had to become somebody that a mainstream Dutch audience could identify with – a beautiful, 'neutral' white boy:

*Marcus:* What kind of a boy was I in former times?

*Nico Arts:* You were buried at an important spot in Eindhoven: near the altar of the old Catharina church. On your body we have found a silver coin, probably a souvenir of a crusader. . . . You are a child who stems from an important and wealthy family. You did not have a nice life though. You were often ill, since your teeth are not full grown. You suffered from anaemia and during your first life there was no cure for that. You died much too young: only 10 years old. Maybe you never had a chance to play outside and spent most of your days in bed.

Again Marcus's complexion makes us wonder. The bone tissue of Marcus was found to be very porous, an indication of anaemia. But Marcus could not have suffered from malnutrition. Given that his body was buried in a prominent position in the church, in front of the altar, his family must have had a high social status. But imagining a medieval child who was chronically ill, and probably never had a chance to play outside, does not quite correlate to the facial reconstruction that Marcus has gained. There we see a young boy

in the pink of health, a boy with a chubby face and blooms on the cheeks. Obviously, Marcus brings about more than his own life course.

In his biography, Marcus is loosely connected to a whole range of historical figures, dukes, lords and earls from the area of Eindhoven who were involved in crusades during the 12th century (Arts, 2003: 74). The coin that was found on Marcus's body helped to evoke this history of crusaders. It was identified as a coin from Venice and was stamped with a portrait of St Mark, hence Marcus's name.

The link between St Mark and Venice had not always been there. St Mark was in fact imported to Venice in about 828. At that time the Venetians felt that they deserved a more prestigious patron for their prosperous city and had cast their eyes on St Mark. The skeleton of St Mark was, however, in Alexandria. So the Venetians had it stolen and 'Their excuse for this was that the Muslims wanted to put the church which contained the relics of St. Mark to new use, non-Christian use' (Arts, 2003: 66). The relics were smuggled out of Egypt. And to succeed in this, or so the story goes, the smugglers had covered the relics with pork, forbidden food for Muslims. The history is not left behind. By contrast, the opening of the interview between Marcus and Nico Arts sets the stage for the link between Marcus van Eindhoven and his relevance in the 'here and now', on the one hand, and the history of the crusaders, the presence of St Mark in Venice and the historical conflicts between Christian and Muslim societies, on the other. They are drawn together in Marcus. Or, as argued above, Marcus is a topological fold reflecting the proximity of alleged distant histories and places.

*Marcus:* Do you think that you will also find the graves of my little sister Beatrijs and my parents?

*Nico Arts:* . . . If your family was buried in the choir of the Catherina church, we will find them. After all, with DNA we can determine lineages between the dead and investigate if they are relatives or not. In fact, I hope that your family did not live long, because old people often don't have their teeth anymore. And without teeth we cannot examine the DNA. Because teeth are the only places where DNA is preserved over a long period of time.

This interview started out as a conversation between a father and a son. In this excerpt, it seems that different versions of the family are clashing: a version of blood kinship and of scientific kinship. Earlier we encountered the care of Nico Arts for his son (a scientific kinship). The joy of telling him who he was, the sombreness about his chronic illness and being deprived of a carefree youth. By evoking his blood relatives (his parents and alleged sister), Marcus helps to articulate different versions of kinship but also a difference in interests between him and Nico Arts. Obviously, Marcus is interested in the lives of his parents and siblings and in finding out who they were. But this interest might not quite coincide with wishing them a short life. For his scientific father, Nico Arts, DNA is what saves the day. As the interview indicates, a long life clashes with the availability of DNA when time passes by. Thus, his care for Marcus flips into cruelty – cruelty because in order to identify Marcus's blood relatives, Arts cannot but wish them a short life. One could say that by taking care of his scientific interests, namely determining genealogical descent based on the DNA, Nico Arts sacrifices his

son, Marcus. Just like the Father who sacrificed his son for the benefit of humankind, Nico Arts sacrifices Marcus as his son for the benefit of science. In this instance Marcus stops being a son, and becomes a scientific object that could teach us about the genealogical history of Eindhoven.

### **Differences: From matters of facts to matters of concern<sup>15</sup>**

Throughout this article, I have been concerned with differences and how they materialize in specific practices. I have presented two cases to underline the specificities of differences and how they are enacted. Rather than taking differences as 'matters of facts', as a given factor or a stable object that can be found out there, I have approached these as 'matters of concern'. Bruno Latour (2005) has argued that the so-called 'matters of facts' involve the deleting of the processes that helped to produce them as well as the backgrounding of the various practices that are (even though invisible) crucial for their existence. This deleting and backgrounding contributes to the impression that facts speak for themselves (matters of facts!) and that they are indisputable. They are cool facts. By contrast, matters of concern embrace morals and ethics, and gather various practices in them. They are messy, historically situated, infinitely complex and engaging in often contradictory ways. They have to be populated (Latour, 2005: 48). Matters of concern have to be 'liked', they have to be cared about in which ever way. To put it differently, or rather, in the words of Donna Haraway, one could say that matters of facts are the result of a 'God's eye view' that claims to *represent* and contributes to the backgrounding of the technologies of vision. And by consequence, matters of concern are the effects of diffraction that embraces complexity and situatedness.

Haraway's metaphor of diffraction has been guiding my analyses of the two cases. In the first case, I focused on fragile differences, the kind of differences that emerge and vanish in split seconds. I argued that differences, such as race, sex or sexual differences, are neither stable nor given. Rather, they are enacted in specific practices as effects of interferences. Differences materialize in the form of relations between various interfering entities. In addition, even if this case did not involve technoscientific practices, it indicates that to appreciate the biological does not necessarily mean that differences are then to be found in the body as given markers, in the form of, for example, the flesh, the mind, hormones, genes, sex.<sup>16</sup> For, if markers of difference were to be taken as matters of facts, the subject would risk growing an obese body – a body in which an endless list of markers of differences are locked up. But no body can carry that weight!

The analysis of the relationality of difference also informs the second case study of this article. It is tempting to view Marcus's body as a materialization of ideological investments. However, I contend, with Haraway, that bodies are not ideological constructions (Haraway, 1992: 298). They are more specific and engaging than that. By contrast, taking his body as a pattern of interferences helps to unravel the various practices that Marcus draws together. The differences articulated here are just like in the first case – relational. What seemed stable, began to shift and change. I have mobilized the notion of the topological fold to, first, attend to the surprising relations between remote places and times that are established in Marcus. Second, the fold also indicates that such relations do not sediment in the body of Marcus. They are a matter of doing, a matter of

crumpling the handkerchief. Differences can be enacted in specific practices. In the interview, we encountered various different practices. An antagonistic relation between the Christian and Muslim world is enacted, but it is not there all the time. A kinship relation between Marcus and Nico Arts is made, but it is also unmade.

Yet, and in contrast to the focus in the first part of the article, analysing Marcus has shown that some differences can be made much more durable than others. Whereas Marcus's Mediterranean identity has somehow moved to the background, in the Dutch context his supposedly 'neutral' features have been given pride of place. This indicates that differences are not transient. Their duration is dependent on a series of other differences that are in place. Although Marcus can be seen as a wonder of science and technology, he is also performed as a real existing young boy. The naturalization of Marcus and his biography helps to naturalize the very history of Eindhoven. This linking between Marcus and Eindhoven rendered some versions of Marcus more durable than others. It would take quite some work to make the 'neutral' white boy into a marked Mediterranean one.

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### Notes

1. By now, it has been widely acknowledged that humans are more than a bag of genes. Complex interactions between genes and environment are currently the centre of attention in research. In addition, it seems that the century of the gene (Keller, 2000) has made room for the century of the brain.
2. In forensic science biological traces are referred to as 'silent witnesses', and contrasted to 'eye witness' accounts; for an unravelling of this notion in the context of forensic DNA and its relation to race, see M'charek (2008).
3. For two recent and different genealogies of feminist technoscience, see Lykke (2008) and McNeil (2008).
4. In this, I have been inspired by Sally Hacker (1989), the work of Evelyn Fox Keller (especially 1992), Donna Haraway (especially her 'Cyborg Manifesto') and Annemarie Mol (especially her 'Wie weet wat een vrouw is?', 1985). The field of science and technology studies, especially the branch called actor network theory, has contributed further to my theorizing of materiality.
5. The example par excellence in this field is the book, or should we say books, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* and the political work it has done in drawing attention to the issues that women

themselves have raised about health, reproduction, sexuality, etc. For an important analysis of how this book (multiple) travelled to and changed various places of the world, and of the kind of feminist politics it brought with it, see Davis (2002).

6. This title is borrowed from Caldwell (1991), from her paper on the political (especially concerning racial and gendered politics) and legal aspects of hair.
7. A version of this case has been published in Dutch (M'charek, 2005b).
8. This article is in conversation with theories of intersectionality in which the listing of markers is a recurring issue of debate in/about intersectionality studies. As Nira Yuval-Davis (2006) and Gail Lewis (2009) have indicated, the problem of listing is a relevant point to address when discussing difference. See also Ingunn Moser (2006), who goes beyond intersectionality and analyses differences in terms of interferences.
9. For the notion of *autochtony* and *allochtony* in a number of African countries and the Netherlands, see Geschiere (2009).
10. In the project 'Dutch-ness in Genes and Genealogy: Following Genetics around in Science and Society', of which this article is a part, we are investigating collaborations between geneticists, genealogists and archaeologists and are especially interested in the doing of Dutch-ness and the racialization of identities.
11. The quasi-interview was published in 2005; available at: [www.historisch-openluchtmuseum-eindhoven.nl/middeleeuwen/column/marcus.html](http://www.historisch-openluchtmuseum-eindhoven.nl/middeleeuwen/column/marcus.html) (translation by the author).
12. On the performativity of the sacrifice in US-based Evangelic communities, see the astonishing ethnography of Harding (2000).
13. To be sure, in my analysis I evoke Nico Arts as a stylized figure. Here I focus on what the text does and what it helps us to see, rather than on the actual intentions of Arts.
14. As many feminist scholars have argued, when men do the birthing, a lot of technology is involved and it is foregrounded. See, for example, Keller (1992) and also Petchesky (1987) on how the foetus is appropriated by pro-life physicians with the help of technology. There are exceptions to the foregrounding of technology when it comes to IVF. In such practices, scientists, their work and technologies are presented as merely giving nature a helping hand (see, for example, M'charek and Keller, 2008; Strathern, 2002).
15. The subtitle is borrowed from Latour (2005).
16. Even in sophisticated theorizing of materiality, there is a tendency to return to some nature 'out there'. For a sharp and thoughtful analysis of the so-called 'new materialism' in feminist science studies, see the discussion paper of Ahmed (2008).

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