The Holocaust did happen. Elvis is gone. And Thomas Jefferson fathered Sally Hemings’ children.


As to who is a Negro in the United States, I have come to the conclusion after long and careful thought that to be an expert on that subject the first qualification is to be crazy. Only those who are able to throw all logic, all reasoning to the winds, can ever hope to be authorities on that matter.


A few months after my wife and I had moved into an apartment in Takoma, Washington, D.C. in the summer of 1997, our neighbor, Donald Washington asked us if we had ever met a white person with the last name Washington. After some hesitation, and somewhat to our own surprise, we found ourselves answering in the negative. Having anticipated our reply, our neighbor then began to enlighten us about what he thought was an incontrovertible fact – viz. that the majority of the Washingtons in the District of Columbia were black descendants of the first president of the United States. Upon the end of slavery, they had simply appropriated the name of the man who had denied legitimacy to the children he had sired with enslaved women, and so not only deprived
them of the immediate privileges of free birth, but of the lasting ones of presidential
descent as well.

Were one to give credence to my neighbor’s theory\(^1\), the more than 350 entries for
the surname Washington in the D.C. phonebook – of which at least two thirds could then
be localized in notionally “black” neighborhoods – would not only bespeak the existence
of a tradition of systematically disqualified knowledge, but (and equally in Foucault’s
sense), testify to the heterogeneity of those fictions which tend to represent themselves as
facts of monolithic origins, and so as legitimations of the privileges derivative thereof. At
the same time, however, this anecdote illustrates a classical anthropological issue that
continues to weigh heavy on the minds of students in anthropological introductory
classes. For it provides a striking demonstration of the fact that the notion of “biological”
(i.e. principally folk-Mendelian, cognatic) descent, common and legally operative as it is
in most Western societies today, represents only one among a multitude of known
cultural mechanisms by which human individuals are recruited into social categories and
collectivities. At least in the case at hand, the so-called principle of hypo-descent, i.e. the
exclusion of individuals with known African (or, perhaps better: “black”) ancestry from
collectivities self-defined as “white”, crucial as it historically was for the formation of
“racial” collectivities in North America, continues to inform the public genealogical
imagination; and it does so by guaranteeing the “unthinkability” of kinship relations
between George Washington and individuals socially classified as “black”. This is, of
course, not just a taxonomic issue. Rather, what we are facing is an instance of those truly
imponderable, indeed axiomatic forms of social “memory loss” which anthropologists

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\(^1\) Perhaps not surprisingly, Bryant (2004) has recently added certain weight to it. See also
have long been wont to describe as the results of “structural amnesia” and assign considerable importance in the reproduction in kinship-based social formations. For in contrast to “phenotypically oriented” or situative practices of allocating “racial identities” (characteristic, as they are said to be for Latin American societies), in the US, the social phenomenon of “whiteness” (of which “presidentiality” to this day forms a sub-category) reproduces itself not just in accordance to strictly dichotomous descent ideologies, but through steady processes of out-defining or dis-enrollment. Hence the common wisdom, largely valid in the U.S. until to the advent of gestational surrogacy, that a white woman could give birth to a black child, whereas a black woman could never give birth to a white one – a cultural fact that all too obviously recalls the ostensibly paradoxical manner in which members of societies with unilineal kinship systems are apt to banish from their genealogies people whom we would readily regard as their biological ascendants.

That this is not merely a cognitive, but political problem is easy to demonstrate in both cases. As Stuckert (1976) has pointed out in an ingenious statistical extrapolation from historical records, by the time of the 1970 U.S. census, some 24% of all persons listed as “white” might reasonably have been presumed to have had African ancestors, while more than 80% of all “blacks” would have had non-African ancestors. Transformed into numerical values, this means nothing less than that the overwhelming majority of all Americans of African ancestry – i.e. about 42 millions at the time – had not been counted into the black population (which then stood at 22 millions), but classified as white. Put differently, there were (and surely still are) almost double the number of “white”

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2 To pick a famous case, if every Nuer man is potentially the founder of a lineage, and if Nuer lineages are always full of assimilated Dinka, then some mechanism of systematic forgetting (e.g. Evans-Pritchard 1940:199-200) must operate to keep a.) the lineage “system” from atomizing, and b.) merging into what it (notionally) is not. Cf. Barnes (1947), Bohannon (1952), or Turner (1957).
Americans of African descent as “black” ones (cf. Palmié 2002). The “mark one or more” option in Census 2000 notwithstanding, this, however, is no less admissible to current U.S. folk demographics (including those statistical representations to which lay demographic consciousness tends to react) than it would be for members of, say, a society with a matrilineal kinship system to grant paternal title or inheritance rights to one of its members on juridically principled (and so, among other things, structural) grounds.

What speaks for such an interpretation in the case of my neighbor’s theories is that in the U.S. such – systemically necessary – blind spots or dark zones of genealogical consciousness can only be illuminated in individual cases, and even then, only by means of the seemingly extrapolitical authority of scientific expert discourse. As I will argue below, this moment recalls another time hallowed anthropological theme – viz. the rationality of divination. For much like the classical oracular systems on ethnographic record, certain genomically enhanced practices of genealogical identity arbitration in contemporary American society, particularly the pursuit of what has come to be called Personalized Genetic Histories (Shriver and Kittles 2004), perform their cultural work by establishing Wittgensteinian “angles”: propositions, around which doubt can turn, but which can never be subject to doubt themselves. In the case at hand, such “angles” pivot on the idea of “racial identity” as an objectively occurring phenomenon whose reality, history and social conventions notwithstanding, ultimately resides in the realm of the biotic. In particular, I want to suggest that in establishing such “angles”, genomics, like divination, give material shape to, and thereby reproduce as social reality, the ideologies of invisible essences and agencies on which they are based – for example, the notion of
witchcraft as an embodied, hereditary trait in the Azande case, or, in the case under discussion, that of race as an embodied, hereditary trait in contemporary U.S. society³.

While the Clinton-Lewinski scandal rocked the nation in the fall of 1998, Donald Washington’s theories thus found surprising, if indirect, reinforcement in an article in *Nature*, a journal not normally suspected of pandering to daily news-interests. There the pathologist Eugene Foster and a team of researchers reported that comparative analyses of Y-chromosome polymorphisms had enabled them to establish a relatively plausible genealogical linkage between the descendants of Thomas Jefferson’s paternal uncle and the male descendants of Eston Hemings, the youngest son of Jefferson’s slave Sally Hemings (Foster et al. 1998). This is not the place to rehearse the multiple ironies uncovered – as well as entailed! – in Foster’s findings. The most glaring ones, however, bear mentioning. For although Foster and his collaborators managed to effectively launch a genealogical relation between Fields Jefferson (i.e. the president’s Fb) and Eston Hemings into the realm of the journalistically plausible, the descendants of Eston Hemings would seem to have disappeared into the same definitional ciaoscu ro that, to this day, has enabled Thomas Jefferson’s white progeny to monopolize burial rights in the cemetery of Jefferson’s former plantation Monticello.

For when Eston Hemings was freed along with his brother Madison upon Jefferson’s death, he moved to Ohio and then Madison, Wisconsin, changed his name to Eston H. Jefferson, and took on a “white” identity – as did two of his sisters. We know that Eston’s red-haired son John W. Jefferson was wounded as a Lieutenant Colonel of the Union troops at Vicksburg (Brody 1976, Murray and Duffy 1998, Stanton and Wright 1999:169), but he and his other siblings were soon to disappear into what white

³ This comparison owes its inspiration to Fields (2001) and Lock (forthcoming).
Americans would nowadays be inclined to call “the mainstream”. In keeping with the logic of a peculiarly North American culture of race, his descendants, whom Foster laboriously tracked down, had not only forgotten their slave ancestry, but – and necessarily so – their presidential one as well. Not so in the case of the 1400 self-identified black members of the Thomas Woodson Association, founded in 1978, and named after Sally Hemings’ oldest son. For while the Thomas Woodson Association had actively supported Foster’s research, its results severely disappointed their expectations that had rested on more than a century and a half of intra-familial oral tradition – providing as they did, incontrovertible evidence for the non-correspondence of the DNA of their male members and the crucial haplotype of the Jeffersonian Y-chromosome.

Yet what exactly did that mean? What was Foster and associates’ evidence of? Why the disappointment on the part of both the Woodson Association, and the Monticello Association, an incorporated group of descendants of Thomas and Martha Jefferson who likewise, if for different reasons, publicly deplored the outcome of Foster’s efforts (Chang 1998)? Why the journalistic furor over a bunch of amino acids? What role might the correspondence (or lack thereof) between seven bi-allelic markers, eleven microsatellites, and the mini-satellite MSY1 in the DNA samples taken from five descendants of Jefferson’s paternal uncle, one descendant of Eston Hemings, and five of Thomas Woodson have possibly played in the decision of the Monticello Association, to continue to deny members of the Thomas Woodson Association the privilege of burial in Monticello’s graveyard (Smith 1999, Lord 2001)? How could such genomic data have motivated, as Staples (2001) implies, Eston Hemings “white” descendant Julia Westerinen to check the category “black” on the 2000 Census forms? And most
strikingly, perhaps, in what ways might they have influenced the Bush administration’s invitation of a Woodson descendant, Mary Jefferson, to the White House’s celebration of Thomas Jefferson’s 258th birthday (Lord 2001)?

Perhaps expectably, Foster and associates quickly backpedaled. In a letter to the New York Times on November 9, he wrote that the “genetic findings my collaborators and I reported […] do not prove that Thomas Jefferson was the father of one of Sally Hemings’ children. We never made that claim” (Foster 1998), adding in a rejoinder to his critics in Nature that while

it is true that men of Randolph Jefferson’s family could have fathered Sally Hemings’ later children […] we know from the historical and the DNA data that Thomas Jefferson can neither be definitively excluded nor solely implicated in the paternity of illegitimate children with his slave Sally Hemings. When we embarked upon the study, we knew that the results could not be conclusive, but we hoped to obtain some objective data that would tilt the weight of evidence in one direction or another. We think we have provided such data and that the modest, probabilistic interpretations we have made are tenable at present (Foster et alii 1999, emphasis mine).

The genie however was out of the bottle. Seeming to cut a bright path through the murky terrain of a voluminous literature produced by biographers and historical Jefferson scholars, storehouses of uncollected and unanalyzed public documents relating to what today must be tens of thousands of bearers of Thomas Jefferson and/or Sally Hemings genetic material, and the webs spun by family traditions and other insubstantiable forms of knowing, Foster’s amino acids appeared to prove so much precisely because they
themselves were the artifacts of a research design that beautifully illustrates David Schneider’s (1984:111) maxim that “biological kinship is always and everywhere a set of cultural conceptions”, and Marilyn Strathern’s (1992) more general point that the natural is always – and everywhere, including in genomic laboratories – a cultural construction. For what, if anything, might Foster and associates have uncovered, had they not previously defined their sample universe and variables in accordance to a hypothesis they derived from the historiographical literature and popular imagination? Probably nothing of great public interest. For who knows, chances are that another research design might have unearthed correspondences with the Jeffersonian DNA in male residents of Ulan Bator, Ibadan or Bogotá (or, given what we know about trans-species genomic continuities, in mice, fruit flies, or yeast cells). Which proves not only the methodological point, but also goes to show that discriminatory folk epistemologies – in this case, a US-style racial will to knowledge – pick up and give diagnostic value to principally opaque data not just because they issue from discursive locations associated with unquestionable (in this case: scientific) authority, but because they already fit – and were designed to fit – into pre-existing “discourses of heritable identities” (Austin Broos 1994). Although the specific historical origins of such discourses in regimes of slavery and segregation may have become subject to public disavowal, their knowledge-producing modus operandi obviously still serves to conjoin new epistemic means with an old epistemic end: that of arbitrating “racial” identity and difference by recourse to empirical data interpreted as diagnostic signs of the presence or absence of traits or qualities, thought to constitute indicators of racial essences, in the bodies of those judged in this fashion (cf. Guillaumin 1995). i.e, "science"

4 For unless intended as self-validating tautological exercises in what Bourdieu (1977)
Whichever other conclusions one may thus be inclined to draw from Foster’s findings, and quite apart from the immediate political relevance of such constructions of “racial knowledge” at the time\(^5\), what interests me here is not just the ease with which once called the investigating subject’s transference onto the object of investigation of his or her relation to it, such diagnostics cannot well – but often do! – proceed by e.g. comparing subjects pre-assigned to “racial” groups in order to then prove their difference. Obviously, once we take this route we can easily prove that “white men” can’t jump or play the blues (or similar such nonsense) for “genetic” reasons. In either case, we might do well to heed Macbeth’s (1997:62) injunctions regarding the construction of “units” of genetic (or other) comparisons: “Despite their probable knowledge of genoclines,” she writes,

human biologists are themselves members of society and socialized into discussing the socially defined ethnic groups as units. Once described as a unit, means and variances of biological variables in any ethnic group can be compared with, and shown to be statistically different from, those in any other ethnic group or in the majority population. Many of these characteristics will be multifactorial and a few may have no genetic component at all, and yet, unless worded carefully, the human biologist may add to the concept that the ethnic group is not only biologically different, but a genetically discrete population.

\(^5\) In the fall of 1998, the political significance of Foster et alii (1998) was, of course, hard to overlook. As a Washington Post journalist rightly remarked (Murray 1998), the commentary of Eric Lander and Joseph Ellis (1998) printed in the same issue of Nature as Foster’s findings could hardly be classified as disinterested natural science:

Politically, the Thomas Jefferson verdict is likely to figure in upcoming impeachment hearings on William Jefferson Clinton’s sexual indiscretions, in which DNA testing has also played a role. The parallels are hardly perfect, but some are striking. Both “improper” relationships involved women about 28 years younger – although there is a world of difference between a slave and master at the close of the eighteenth century, and a White House intern and a marred man at the end of the twentieth. Both presidents seem to have engaged in politically reckless conduct; in Jefferson’s case, father Eston six years after allegations appeared in the national press. And both offered evasive denials of the charges. In 1805 the Massachusetts legislature staged a mock impeachment of Jefferson, citing several grievances including the accusations about Sally Hemings. Jefferson acknowledged one charge positioning a married woman in his youth), but asserted that all the others wee false. Otherwise he remained silent, leaving denials to political supporters and family. Nor did the scandals affect Jefferson’s popularity. He won the 104 elections by a landslide, and his abiding position was that his private life was nobody else’s business, and should have no bearing on his public reputation.
principally meaningless microbiological data were translated into weighty “social facts”, but the manner in which they simultaneously transformed into the key elements of a form of historical revisionism based on essentially extrahistorical – in fact, antihistorical – forms of knowledge production. Consider the following remarks by Denver Post writer Diane Carman (1998) who gleefully implied that the task to uncover “wie es eigentlich gewesen” (how it really was) Leopold von Ranke famously assigned the historical profession would soon be taken over by sturdier forms of epistemic practice. “One discovery that historians ignore at their peril”, she wrote under the headline “Truth, justice, and DNA” amidst the media spectacle unleashed by Foster’s study in the fall of 1998,

Is the scientific breakthrough by Francis Harry Compton Crick and James D. Watson in 1953 to identify the molecular structure of genes. By unlocking this storehouse of information, they not only changed history for the future, they have made it possible to change the past. They have allowed us to seek truth even after centuries have elapsed. And they made a whole passel of effete scholars look like complete bozos.

Whatever half-baked theories and useless subjectivisms social scientists may be mongering for reasons one can only guess at, according to Carman there is hope that truth will eventually be revealed to us – by genomic sequencing and other robust microbiological means. And indeed, there is increasing evidence for just that. Think for example about the stir caused by the discovery (Thomas et alii. 2001) that the Lemba, an ethnographically little known ethnic group in northeastern South Africa whose members

Given such historical precedent, Landers and Ellis seemed to imply, it would be absurd if the molecular-genetic analysis of a sperm-stain (and not the “will of the people”) were to prove decisive in the up-coming impeachment proceedings against Clinton.
had “always” believed (much like scores of other African social formations with access to the colonial literature on them) to be related to the biblical Jews, actually “bore” what has become known as the “Cohen modal haplotype” (cf. Azoulay 2003). Or consider the somewhat less well-publicized, but equally remarkable studies by Alves Silva et al. (2000) on “The Ancestry of Brazilian mtDNA Lineages” and Carvalho-Silva et al. (2001) on “The Phylogeography of Brazilian Y-Chromosome Lineages” which essentially replicated, in genomic language, and thereby ratified in the form of carbon molecule distributions, the founding myths of the ideology of “Brazilian racial democracy”. For lo and behold, what Gilberto Freyre once called “miscibilidade”, and defined as a historically long-standing, and eminently pre-adaptive proclivity on the part of male Portuguese colonizers not to spurn opportunities for having sex with “racially alien” women under their domination, shows up in their mtDNA and Y-Chromosome analyses as well. Good for the Lemba, perhaps (cf. Parfitt 2003). But probably bad for the racialized subjects of a lasting internal – as well as international (cf. Bourdieu and Wacquant 1999) – ideological consensus about the merits of Brazil’s “racism in the

6 Of course, as Marks (2001: 370) notes in regards to the original discovery of the “Cohen modal haplotype”, there is no telling what might have resulted had that study’s research design not been based on an ingenuous correlation between the Book of Exodus and the kind of isonymic first principle logic that led Skorecki et al (1997) to disregard the fact that “[i]n the absence of information on the distribution of Y chromosome haplotypes of a sample of Horowitzes or Steinbergs” any inference from genetic data shared by their sample of self-designated Hebrew priests (many of whom, of course, were Cohens or Cohns) must be dubious.

7 Brodwin (2002:325), however, certainly has a point when he asks what might happen if they were to press for Israeli citizenship and the right to “return” on the basis of their “genomically verified” Jewish descent.
absence of corporate races”, as Roger Lancaster (1992) once characterized the situation in the (largely analogous) Nicaraguan case.

Yet what is it that makes a person say, a Cohen, a Limba, or someone with burial rights in Monticello if not historically mutable patterns of recruitment into social categories and groups of variable inclusiveness? Clearly, excepting “situations where common socioeconomic factors have so insulted the biology of development and daily existence [of specific groups] as to cause convergence” (Keita 2001) between genomic patterns and socially recognized group boundaries, what makes a person “black” or “white” in the U.S. – but maybe not in Brazil or Nicaragua – a Limba or a publicly acknowledged descendant of Thomas Jefferson, simply cannot be predicted from a person’s biological endowment, however defined. It is the product of the thoroughly conventional, and eminently changeable rules of recognition by which societies selectively allocate their members to specific subject positions. In some instances such rules are based on considerations pertaining to genealogical conceits, however arbitrary these may appear from a biologist’s point of view (think of unilineal kinship systems, or marriage to commoners among European nobility). In many others they simply recur to socially routinized perceptual markers – be their diagnostic value grounded in (genotypically entirely underdetermined) appearances, or simply a set of culturally overdetermined performative capacities and acquired dispositions.

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8 Compare Sheriff (2001) on the truly tragic nature of the “silences” with which the victims of such ideological constructions confront their own predicament. For historical background on the issues at hand see e.g. Viotti da Costa (1985), Skidmore (1990), Borges (1993), and Needell (1995). Another recent case concerns the genomically mediated expulsion from the Seminole Nation of a good number of the so-called Seminole Freedmen or black Seminole (descendants of slaves who took side with the Seminole in their wars against the U.S.). See Johnson (2003) and Elliot and Brodwin (2005).
Part of the trouble here is that already in their research design studies such as the ones cited above tend to define their units of analysis by mapping population concepts capable of e.g. allowing biologists to genomically distinguish regional sub-species of drosophilia, onto what, in the case of human collectivities, are the self-naming, self-delimiting artifacts of culture and political maneuver (Ardener 1989, cf. Keita 2001, Bamshad et al. 2003, Gannett 2003, 2004, Duster 2005). More often than not, the result is sheer nonsense on logical grounds, or what Kahn (2003) calls instances of “statistical mischief”. As Duster (2003:265, emphasis mine) notes apropos the former case, from a strictly genomic point of view,

It is possible to make arbitrary groupings of populations (geographic, linguistic, self-identified by faith, identified by others by physiognomy, etc.) and still find statistically significant allelic variations between those groupings. For example, we could examine all the people in Chicago, and all those in Los Angeles, and find statistically significant differences in allele frequency at some loci. Of course, at many loci, even at most loci, we would not find statistically significant differences. When researchers claim to be able to assign people to groups based on allele frequency at a certain number of loci, they have chosen loci that show differences between the groups they are trying to distinguish”.

Much as in the case of Marx’s famous criticism of Darwin for “recogniz[ing] among beasts and plants his English society with its division of labor, competition, opening of new markets, inventions, and the Malthusian ‘struggle for existence’” (FIND CITE), here the discovery of natural forms in the social, is pre-structured by antecedent projection of social forms onto the natural. Of course, much of what one might say in regards to this
would be contingent on whether one countenances the epistemological possibility of accessing a “realm of nature” free of discursive entanglements, or other man-made encumbrances. Yet even were we to bracket this rather fundamental question, the sheer possibility that practices of genomic knowledge production could, in principle, very well authorize such otherwise counterintuitive entities as “biologically identifiable” Chicagoans or Los Angelinos – entities that on a moment’s reflection reveal themselves as the products of elementary category mistakes – should give us reason to ask about the nature of the collective representations they generate and endow, in the public imagination, with uncanny degrees of legitimacy and truth value. Why, in short, do the models of “biosociality” (Rabinow 1996) genomics appears to place at our disposal seem so good to think and – possibly – act upon?

The answer I would like to venture in the remainder of this essay is simple, and it hinges on the proposition, defensible as it seems to me in light of the above, that genomic forms of identity arbitration, ultimately partake of the ethnographically well-known logic of systems of divination that, in disclosing the “hidden” agencies and essences that appear to shape particular social arrangements and events, stabilize and reproduce the cultural order which throws up the question such oracular systems purport to answer in the first place. Obviously, like all divinatory systems, genomic practices of knowledge production can easily engender happy tautologies – as when e.g. Cohen genes are found in a population whose members already self-identify with “priestly descent” or think they are a lost tribe of Israel to begin with. Nor should it be overly puzzling that historians

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9 One could, perhaps, write this off as the unfortunate result of research designs currently still forced to rely on biologically underdetermined units of analysis which further research will bring into sharper focus. Yet apart from the fact that in the initial planning stage of the ill-fated Human Genome Diversity Project, a (biologically perfectly rational)
have, by and large, not protested the way in which geneticists are replicating their findings by methodologically as well as epistemologically dubious (let alone ethically troubling) interpolations of the ontolog(ies) of post-1950s biological population genetics into the realm of human sociality. For much genomic research proceeds from assumptions it culls from ostensibly “unscientific” constructions of the past (including historians’ writings), and eventually restates them in the form of tabulations of allele-frequencies – thereby oddly lending “scientific” legitimacy to what everyone (or at least some people) had already been arguing before. More contentious cases, however, are not hard to imagine. Although it may still be too early to tell, the impact of the rapidly multiplying, web-based commercial purveyors of “personalized genetic histories” (PGH’s) targeting African Americans in the U.S. may well result in substantive controversy between consumer of such products and scholars aiming to preserve their public authority in the face of microbiological forms of historical revisionism applauded by journalists, and avidly consumed in the U.S. by an increasingly broader, increasingly web-based, public. The question here, or so I would argue, is not at all whether or not

pattern of random sampling along a simple geographical grid was rejected in favor of DNA sampling among named human social groups (Lock 1997, Marks 2001), what is taking shape not just in genetic research labs, but e.g. in FBI or NIH databases are genomic “identity profiles” produced by an unholy alliance between sophisticated microbiological methods, and a naïve, if not willful, neglect of the fundamental distinctions obtaining between natural and social kinds, and an equally complacent obliviousness regarding the moral implications of such forms of parameter collapse – such as the ample feedback loops beginning to open up between genomically mediated arbitrations of “identity” and patterns of identification with, recruitment into, and exclusion from named human collectivities that long antedated the advent of molecular genetics.

10 It is, of course, none of my business, but if I were George Reid Andrews, I would think that some public remarks about the way Fejerman et al. (2005) transformed his fine study (Andrews 1980) of the ideological factors responsible for the “disappearance” of Buenos Aires’ Afro-Argentines into a set of biological “facts” would be in order.
such genomic revisionisms are open to falsification (a classical, if blatantly mistaken, criterium for distinguishing between “science” and “non-scientific” modes of knowledge production). It is how the knowledge so produced figures into processes of social reproduction. And in that regard it is rapidly becoming clear that historians and other social scientists may already have altogether missed the boat.

Since the late 1990s, commercial PGH services have been widely hailed in the press as a key to unlock the African past of contemporary U.S. African Americans, and hence an important resource for undoing the psychological and social damage done to them through the obliteration, through slavery and its aftermath of racist oppression, of the kind of genealogical linkages to extra-American ancestral origins so important for any group aiming to place itself within the U.S. national narrative, and reclaim its dignity as a distinct and distinguishable contributor to what is nowadays termed “American Diversity” (e.g. Goldberg 2000, Kristof 2003, Joiner 2003, Franklin 2004, Karkabi 2005, Harmon 2005, Hamilton 2005, Glanton 2005). Now whether these journalistic claims hold water remains a fascinating, but to my knowledge, so far unexplored, ethnographic question. Nonetheless, given the current interest in “identity” and “heritage” as scarce and potent symbolic resources in the politics of recognition often held to characterize patterns of “multicultural” sociality in liberal western societies (e.g. Handler 1994, Hall 1997, Harrison 1999, 2002, 2003, Brubaker and Cooper 2000, Essed and Goldberg 2002, Comaroff and Comaroff 2003), it is surprising that, so far, anthropologists have largely seemed to steer clear of addressing the epistemological and political implications of what

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11 That TV talk show host Oprah Winfrey has happily discovered her Zulu roots by genomic means does not tell us much about the motivation or expectations of the majority of consumers of such services.
Brodwin (2002:327) aptly calls “African American ancestry projects” enabled through commercial PGH services\(^\text{12}\).

One of the clearest statements to date, of some of the problems involved, comes from the Nigerian-born geneticist Charles Rotimi (2003) based at Howard University’s National Human Genome Center. Predictably, methodological concerns figure high on Rotimi’s list for why African Americans should exercise caution when aiming to ground their contemporary sense of self and social relations in the kinds of services provided by commercial DNA labs. Yet for Rotimi, the conundrum that “the nature or appearance of genetic clustering (grouping) of people is a function of how populations are sampled, of how criteria for boundaries between clusters are set, and of the level of resolution used”, or the well-established fact “that African populations have more genetic variation between them (estimates are as high as 95%) than when Africans are compared to other peoples who migrated out of Africa thousands of years ago (estimates are as low as 3%)” (Rotimi 2003:153-54) are merely the tip of an iceberg of unexamined presuppositions about the possibility of bringing units of genetic analysis into concordance with units of human social identification. For apart from the fact that relatively safe levels of analytical scale and resolution may not generate much public interest (ultimately we all are Africans, though only some of us continue to reside on the continent), the closer the focus, the more non-biological factors begin to overwhelm the models population genetics are capable of generating. This, in Rotimi’s view, not only pertains to the dubious nature of establishing genomic profiles for named African demographic entities whose patterns of self-identification are the result of recent geo-political events. It also

\(^{12}\) Apart from Brodwin’s own contributions (Brodwin 2002 and Elliot and Brodwin 2005), the only other article explicitly focusing on this issue is Banton (2005).
concerns the existence of a plethora of mechanisms of recruitment into named social collectivities that have nothing to do with genetic relatedness (cf. Keita 2001, Gannett 2004). While no one would thus aim to come up with the idea of establishing Ancestry Informative Markers (AIMs) for populations generated by the naturalization laws of even only modern micro-states (think of Lichtenstein, Tonga, or Antigua), the maps of contemporary DNA-data bases for Africa are full of ill-sampled entities (aka “aboriginal populations” or even “tribes”) that have long been known not only *not* to be bounded by “natural barriers to interbreeding”, but to have liberally assimilated genetically unrelated personnel through mechanisms such as exogamous marriage, initiation or enslavement.

Yet it is not only that deeply flawed conceptions of units of analysis mar genomic ancestry searches from the get go. For Rotimi, the models of identification and belonging created by such means are similarly problematic. Indeed, to anyone familiar with the historical and ethnographic literature on the Yoruba, his conclusion that “[i]t cannot really be said that a Diasporan African with genetic affinity to the Yoruba [of today] is more ‘Yoruba’ than, for example, Suzanne Wenger, an Austrian Anthropologist who is also Chief Priestess of the Oshun Goddess, the keeper of the Beaded Comb in Yoruba land” (Rotimi 2003:156) will probably not seem overly far-fetched. Note here that Rotimi does not deny “Africanity” to “Diasporan Africans” (nor “Austrianness to Suzanne Wenger, for that matter). What he worries about is collapsing the very real complexities of history and social maneuver into the spurious transparencies afforded by statistical notions of “genetic affinity”. This, however, would seem to be precisely he kind of “cultural work” PHG analyses are geared to perform.
Despite the caution proponents of commercial PGH services display in their publications directed towards scholarly audiences (e.g. Kittles and Royal 2003, Shriver and Kittles 2004), what is available on the web would thus seem to support Rotimi’s (ibid.) plea “to avoid cosmetic and euphoric linkages that may prove, in the long run, to be unsatisfactory for everyone involved”. The explanations of the genetic findings for in a sample “African DNA Ancestry Report” posted on the Santa Fe-based DNA Consulting corporation’s website www.dnaconsulting.com (February 3, 2005) may serve to exemplify this point. There the prospective consumer – who presumably has flipped over the technical details of the genetic analysis – will get the following explanation:

L-Haplogroups

The subject’s likely haplotype L2 is associated with the so-called Bantu expansion from West and Central sub-Saharan Africa east and south, dated 2,000-4,000 years ago […]. Between the 15th and the 19th centuries C.E., the Atlantic slave trade resulted in the forced movement of approximately 13 million people from Africa, mainly to the Americas. Only approximately 11 million survived the passage, and many more died in the early years of captivity. Many of these slaves were traded to the West African Cape Verde ports of embarkation through Portuguese and Arab middlemen and came from as far east as the Horn of Africa and as far south as Angola. Among the African tribal groups, all Bantu-speaking, in which L2 is common are: Hausa, Kanuri, Fulfe [sic], Songhai, Malunjin (Angola), Yoruba, Senegalese, Serer and Wolof […].”
This fanciful condensation of garbled African historical geography and ethnolinguistics is followed by a section entitled “About the Bantu” culled, in its entirety, from the 1911 (!) edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and eventually leads to the following “Conclusion”:

The subject’s mother descends from an L2 African female who lived in West Africa between 20,000 and 30,000 years ago, and whose descendants joined the Bantu culture. Possibly, one of her female-linked descendants was a slave traded to the Spanish or Portuguese colonies in America from Sierra Leone in the 17th-19th century. A SNP test and sequencing of HVS2 would provide more information on the subject’s particular sub-group of L2 and its geographic origins in Africa before the Bantu expansion.”

Yet what in the world might it mean to be related to someone who lived 20,000 to 30,000 years ago (let alone “before the Bantu expansion” – whatever that phrase may be taken to mean)? Even though one would have to reckon with what geneticists call “lineage convergence” in the increasingly distant past, given that (biologically speaking) ascendants multiply exponentially, the propositional value of a statement such as “I am related to this particular African woman” might be of the order of statements such as “The Queen of England and I share a distant ancestor” – a proposition that is, after all, true for every human being on this planet, including me, Sally Hemings, Thomas

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13 All other problems aside, the list of “tribal groups” not only includes units of highly different scale and orders of salience (e.g. “Senegambians”, “Serer”, “Wolof” – where the latter might be interpreted as subordinate members of a class of “Senegambian tribal units”), but also curiously does not feature a single unit – excepting perhaps the mysterious “Melunjin (Angola)” – whom linguists would regard as speakers of a (contemporary) Bantu language. On the nonchalance with which geneticists are wont to lump oftentimes entirely incommensurable and generally ill-conceived African “populations” under regional, ethnic, or linguistic rubrics (with oftentimes patently colonialist pedigrees) see McEachern (2000).
Jefferson, and my former neighbor Donald Washington. But ascendants and the relationships we construct to – and through! – them, are, of course, not biological, but cultural facts.

What is problematic here is thus not that facile applications of genomic technologies might come to underwrite historically spurious strategies of self-enracination and identity management. All forms of ancestry tracing do – if only because they inevitably operate in highly selective fashions (for who could – let alone might want to – base his or her sense of contemporary selfhood on any but a semantically marked minimal set of the thousands of ancestors on acquires once reckoning beyond the fourth of fifth generation?). Recurring once more to the travails of students in the anthropology introductory lecture on kinship and descent, the crucial issue here is not just that genealogies are always and everywhere cultural contrivances, but that – and no matter how much they, at times, may approximate what biologists might be inclined to tell us about the “natural facts” of sexual reproduction – they always and everywhere are, or at least can be made to perform the work of, political charters as well: and what better case to adduce to illustrate this basic anthropological fact than the case of North American “races” which, for the longest time and despite all common sense regarding historically documentable mating patterns, have demographically behaved as if they constituted mutually exclusive corporate groups that reproduce themselves by simply dis-enrolling individuals with conceptually inconvenient ascendants from their membership rosters.

Hence the utility of genomically enhanced projections of alternative – even oppositional – descent lines capable of occasional subversions of the reigning genealogical consensus by e.g. bringing “blackness” and “presidential descent” into
spectacular alignment. More importantly perhaps, such pronouncements enable “ancestry projects” promising to fill the void created by the condition of ultimative social de-racination – the brutal “anti-kinship” (Meillassoux 1991) of slavery – that to this day casts its shadows on the narratives of collective origin U.S. public culture tends to prescribe for people recruited (by birth, appearance, or, more recently individual choice) into that nation’s “black minority”. No doubt, surmounting (by whatever means) the oppressive conceit of genealogical erasure rationalized as having been effected by enslavement and the slave trade constitutes a political act – a fact that became amply evident in the aftermath of the airing of the TV mini-series based on Alex Hailey’s bestselling novel Roots in the late 1970s. Nonetheless, given North American common sense conceptions of race and relatedness, PGH service providers would seem to have little to offer, in this respect, that substantially improves upon what e.g. adherents of the American Yoruba Movement call “roots readings” – oracular ceremonies performed to discover African ancestries occluded by slavery (cf. Clarke 2004)\textsuperscript{14}. Based in the notionally infallible authority of the Ifá-oracle\textsuperscript{15}, though open to mistaken or interested interpretations on the part of the oracle’s human manipulators, “roots readings” are perhaps the closest functional equivalent to PGH’s – except that while genomic ancestry searches displace the source of divinatory authority downwards from the social towards the realm of the biotic, “roots readings” do so by upward allocation toward the realm of

\textsuperscript{14} On the American Yoruba Movement more generally see Hunt (1979), Omari (1991), Palmié (1995) and Brown (2003). Probably because its core, the African Kingdom of Oyotunji Village near Sheldon, South Carolina, is currently experiencing an interregnum (its founder Oba Osejeman Adefunmi Adelabu I died in early 2005), its current web-site no longer features advertisements for “roots readings” by internet or phone. My thanks go to Stefania Capone for confirming my thoughts on this issue.

\textsuperscript{15} A divinatory system of Yoruba-origin, but derived in this instance, at least in part, from Cuban sources.
the divine thereby depriving their users of much of the legitimacy that the American public tends to invest in forms of knowledge production that manage to sail under the label of “science” (even when they concern matters such as “intelligent design”). But credibility, public or other, is hardly the issue here. If all ancestry is ultimately a cultural contrivance, and all genealogies “cooked” in one way or the other, why should it even matter?

But of course it does. And since this is so, what is genuinely troubling about the explosion of a market in PGH-services geared toward African American ancestry projects is that two of the major technologies involved – mtDNA and NRY Chromosome tracing – not just construct curiously “unilinear” forms of relatedness, but, once taken on their own, reproduce the forms of structural amnesia that long underwrote the operation of the principle of “hypo-descent” in North American patterns of racial exclusion. For they not only allow for, but actually invite patterns of racial profiling along upwardly constricting – rather than branching – lines of descent, which population geneticists, in a terminology that ought to particularly irk social anthropologists, are wont to call “lineages”\(^\text{16}\). In other words, the consumer choice between mtDNA and NRY Chromosome tracing (each tend to be offered separately) ironically tends to provide justification for further naturalizing the conceit of exclusive racial membership that my neighbor Donald Washington’s theories about why the name Washington is not distributed in a pattern of (racially) random isonymy aimed to expose as fictitious. What is worse, they do so not because they could not, in principle “prove” the contrary – as Foster and Associates’s research

\(^{16}\)Worse yet, African Ancestry Inc., the PGH company run by the trained biologist Rick Kittles thus issues Certificates of Ancestry based on what Kittles is content to call MatriClan™ and PatriClan™ analyses (see the website of www.AfricanAncestry.com). Fortunately, totemic animal ancestors defining the boundaries of human social groups have not yet been found by genomic means – so far, at least.
amply demonstrated. Rather, such is the case because they partake of, and biotechnologically reinforce, a peculiarly all-American racial volonté de savior that tends to predefine structurally necessary forms of genealogical amnesia – so that even in the face of better knowledge, present social arrangements would seem to suggest that “black” people ought to have “black” ancestors, and “white” people “white” ones. Of course, there are no a priori reason whatsoever why self-identified African Americans ought to identify with those of their forebears socially classified as “white” (or, at least, any more reason than self-identified Caucasians might have for remembering socially “black” forebears). Indeed, morally cogent arguments might be ventured for why the former might want to refrain from choosing to engage in such patterns of identification. But there is also no reason why commercial genomic service providers, let along academic geneticists, should translate the complex histories and social arrangements from which such social choices likely spring into the language of (per definitionem) absolute and seemingly transparent biological “realities”\(^\text{17}\).

Here we have, it seems, the high-tech equivalent to that particular mode of circular reasoning Karen Fields (2001) has described as characteristic of the cultural moment she – in a particularly apt turn of phrase – calls “racecraft”. Fields is concerned with the question of the rationality of belief in the reality of “race”, and in an ingenuous theoretical move she pulls in E.E. Evans-Pritchard’s (1937) famous defense of the rationality of Zande witchcraft beliefs. I cannot engage here Field’s arguments about a

\(^{17}\) For just as we have no clue as to how much “African ancestry” might be found in the genetic make-up of self-identified “Caucasians” (not that we could reasonably determine any cut-off point at which individual genomic patterns would cease to carry “African signatures”!), so it is hard to say at which point self-identified African-Americans may be too genetically “admixed” to be useful as, for example research subjects in clinical studies aiming to control for “race”.
philosophical double standard that readily concedes the irrationality “race” beliefs in the U.S., but fudges the issue when it comes to propositions concerning mystical agents in the ethnographic world. Still, what I think is eminently pertinent to the issues under discussion in this essay is the function of DNA testing as a divinatory practice designed to visualize and give materiality by evidentiary proxy to entities whose ontological characteristics include the crucial feature of invisibility (Lock forthcoming). For no less than the famous hereditary organic substance hidden in the belly of otherwise seemingly ordinary, and indeed entirely unsuspecting Zande condemning them to (however unwitting) nefariousness, the subcutaneous “biological facts” that are made visible in personal and collective genomic profiles (however constructed) can assign their bearers to specific, and potentially highly pernicious identitary positions. Moreover, just like in everyday practice the Zande can live with, i.e. conveniently disregard, the idea that since the witchcraft substance is heritable, all members of the clan of a detected witch ought to be regarded as witches, so do early twentyfirst century Americans not normally worry about the potential “biotic alterity” of people whom they routinely interact with on the presumption of shared “racial identity”. In fact, such convenient disregard is once more structurally necessary in order for such “moral artifacts” (Fields 1985) as “witchcraft” or “race” to remain operative in daily social practice (including the routine operation of

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18 This moment has received particular attention in regards to the political and ethical problem posed in the construction of “populations at risk” through predictive genetics – see, among many others, Kenea (1994), Rabinow (1996), Davison (1996), Lock (1997, forthcoming), Greely (1998), Finkler (2000), Goodman (2000), Schwartz (2001), Bestard (2004). Since heritable disorders such as the sickling trait or Tay-Sachs disease had become conceptually linked to populations presumed to be “racially distinct” long before the advent of genomics (cf. Wailoo 2003), the multiplication of genetic risk factors may well lead to a situation where imputations of “biotic otherness” to individuals “at risk” (e.g. by employers, or insurance companies) will induce group formation on the part of those so singled out (cf. Rabinow 1996:102)
what Kuhn called “normal science”\textsuperscript{19}). For just like it would make no sense to propose that given the rate of witchcraft detection Evans-Pritchard observed in Zandeland in the 1920s, all male Zande must (if not then, at least nowadays) routinely regard each other as witches, so the recognition of the continuous, clinal nature of all human biological difference (including the embodied differences on which gender identities are notionally based, cf. Epstein 2004) \textit{ought to} make individual distinctions based on ideas of biological race (or sex for that matter) appear eminently absurd.

This, as we know, is not the case. And not just because hurricane Katrina revealed that in contemporary America misfortune strikes in patterns that are all but “racially” random, or because – as it turned out – the pharmacogenetic “science” behind the FDA’s recent approval of BiDil’s as the first-ever “race specific drug” was geared more towards salvaging an expiring patent than towards changing the epidemiological incidence of hypertenson or congestive heart failure in American society (Kahn 2003, 2005, Duster 2005, Jones and Goodman 2005). Such instances, involving as they do, forms of voluntarism detectable in overtly “racially inflected” policies arguably only represent excess performances generated by a far more insidious logic. In fact, one might say that they obscure rather than illuminate the workings of a process driven not by individual or collective decisions that one might readily identify as informed by “racist” considerations or objectives, but that is perpetuated through the force of structurally ingrained \textit{doxa} concerning the racialized nature of American sociality that, since they define the

\textsuperscript{19} A point well made by Tapper (1995) and Wailoo (1996) in regards to the truly heroic resistance to reason exhibited by North American clinicians and epidemiologists in the history of the diagnostics of sickle cell anemia, a disease long held to be indicative not just of a hemopathological disorder, but of “blackness” as well.
conditions of possibility for social praxis, effectively represent imponderables to most actors involved even if they, themselves, may not believe in the “reality of race”.

As a result, and oftentimes against better knowledge population geneticists, medical researchers and clinicians, demographers, state agencies of various sorts, and hosts of private enterprises actively produce the forms of “structural amnesia” which underwrite the operation of “racecraft” in American life. They do so by e.g. setting up clearly demarcated discontinuous “racial” population series for control in medical and other research, or by using Census data to design actuary tables, apportion school districts, or administer affirmative action funds, to name just a few domains to which a handful of “races” (and “pseudo races” such as Hispanics) are stubbornly endemic. That many of those who routinely use “racial data” may sincerely deplore the pernicious effects of racial discrimination, and indeed may perceive their efforts as directed towards the amelioration or even undoing of persistent social inequalities based in racial discrimination does nothing to change that fundamental fact. This is so because the context in which they operate systematically forces them to disregard that race – like witchcraft, kinship class, or indeed capital – is not a thing, but a social relation. Just as no investment banker or stock broker who wants to stay in business will belatedly join Marx

20 See e.g. Caldwell and Popenoe 1995, Schwartz 2001, Kaplan and Bennett 2003, and Pearce et alii 2004 for critiques, by medical practitioners, of what Schwartz calls “racial profiling” in medical research and practice. One of the more interesting examples of this type of literature comes from a forensic anthropologist who asks “if races don’t exist, why are forensic anthropologists so good at identifying them?”. His answer is as honest as it is astounding: when identifying skeletal or other human remains in the context of e.g. missing person searches, the use of “race labels” in their description of unidentified human remains “is not a vindication of the traditional notion that there are four human races, rather it is a prediction, based upon skeletal morphology, that a particular label would have been assigned to an individual when that individual was alive” (Sauer 1992:110).
in exposing the erroneous nature of the assumption that “value” is a substantial quality inherent to commodities, so is the conceit of “race” indispensable to anyone who aims to make a difference in the fields of, say, American public policy, health care, education, or law enforcement. Even the best intentioned anti-racists (or strategic essentialists, for that matter) may, thus, find themselves unwittingly joining the likes of those notorious police officers positioned along the New Jersey Turnpike, whose racist ill-will in stopping and searching motorists they considered “non-white” produced a good deal of “falsely race positive” crime statistics before the scandal about what came to be known as “driving while black” eventually broke (Harris 1999).

That is so because once essentializing vocabularies of anthropological difference – such as those provided by idioms of “race” or “witchcraft” – have come to structure and semantically saturate everyday life worlds to a degree that the “effects” of “race” (or “witchcraft”) become experienced as differentials in the chance of being caught walking underneath collapsing termite-infested granaries, getting laid off from work, incarcerated, accidentally shot in the course of a nearby drug-raid, having your neighborhood flooded, prematurely dying of prostate cancer, or, indeed, congestive heart disease due to hypertension (and so forth), the search for alternate, perhaps multifactorial, perhaps historicizing explanations may no longer be a particularly attractive, or even only reasonable choice\textsuperscript{21}. Putting the matter in the bluntest of terms, given that “race” not only

\textsuperscript{21} As Kahn (2005:656) puts it apropos the blatantly market driven science behind the FDA’s consent to re-label a drug (whose patent was expiring) “race-specific”, “BiDil […] is part of a much larger dynamic of reification in which the purported reality of race as genetic is used to obscure the social reality of racism” and, or so I would add, make money in the process of doing so (cf. Duster 2005). There is a larger, and politically highly incendiary, question that looms in this regard – viz. why forms of knowledge production associated e.g. with what became known in African American communities in the 1980s as “The Plan” (to exterminate black people by launching crack-cocaine,
will not, but literally cannot, “go away” on account of its embeddedness in what Edwin Ardener (1989) might have called the “world structure” of American society, neither the victims of its operation, nor those concerned with undoing its pernicious effects can have much of a stake in abandoning the belief in its existence\textsuperscript{22}. If anything, the geneticization of “race” with which I have been concerned here, will in all likelihood only provide an alternative (if powerful) ideological technos for dehistoricizing and obscuring the social relations that “race” conceals. And it will do so by systematically removing such attributes as witchcraft substances or individually embodied racial biology from the realm of contestable social construction – not by relegating it to the shady realms of mystical forces (where one might argue it belongs), but to that ever changing cultural contrivance we tend to call “nature”. As in the case of kinship, with which – as the Jefferson-Hemings issue amply illustrated – “racecraft” closely articulates “nature” will simply change its shape. If, as David Schneider (1980:23) once wrote, Americans define kinship in accordance to biogenetic relationships, and if “kinship is whatever the biogenetic relationship is”, then it is clear that “[i]f science discover new facts about biogenetic relationships, then that is what kinship is and was all along, although it may not have been known at the time”. The same, or so it seems, would hold for “race”.

\textsuperscript{22} Or at least the belief that others believe in its existence, as Žižek (1997) has noted in a somewhat different context.
It would, of course, be grossly insufficient to reduce racial domination to a mere category mistake – however socially pervasive, and, indeed “structurally necessary” for the maintenance and reproduction of specific social arrangements such a mistake may be. Yet by the same token, unless we realize that “race” may be conceptually indispensable to the maintenance of an ideology positing that society is (or at any rate should) represent the sum of choices freely made by unequally endowed but otherwise unencumbered individuals in the marketplace – as indispensable, in fact, as the concept of “witchcraft” may have been to Evans-Pritchard’s Zande – we will delude ourselves in treating racism as a “tragic flaw” or irrational “historical residue” marring the project of a democratic society of free and equal individuals where poor Rodney King’s question “why can’t we all get along?” would and could have no (racial) meaning, and where my former neighbor’s question “have you ever met a white person named Washington” would make no sense at all.
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