

Essay

Techno-Ethno Genealogy: An African Ancestry Narrative in the Digital Age

Mario Chandler 

Department of Foreign Languages, Oglethorpe University, Atlanta, GA 30319, USA; mchandler@oglethorpe.edu

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Abstract: This article explores ways in which advances in genetic testing have both facilitated and democratized genealogical research for individuals in search of their “roots” or ethnic heritage. These advances coincide with the quests of people of African descent to pinpoint their precise origins and ethnic backgrounds in Africa, revelations that have been denied to many African descendants in the diaspora from slavery times to the present. Genetics and DNA as the “great truth teller”, however, frequently yield results that go contrary to expectations. In this article, the author explores at a personal level the tensions that the “Genetic Revolution” produces between biology and society.

Keywords: Africa; Ancestry; black; Diaspora; DNA; genealogy; genetics; narrative; slavery; technology

This paper grew out of a panel presentation that I was invited to give at the 2017 meeting of the South Atlantic Modern Language Association (SAMPLA). I found the panel title, “Black Biotechnographies: Grafting Humanities and Sciences to Excavate Black Atlantic Narratives”, intriguing because of the extent to which it illustrated the evolution of black narrative to keep up with the complex, technologically-dependent reality of the 21st century. At first glance, biotechnology, a profoundly scientific discipline, seems far outside the purview of a humanities professor like myself. Yet, at closer glance, I came to the conclusion that the dissemination of black narrative has always relied on the use of contemporary innovation and technology, broadly defined, to tell and share the stories of men and women of the African diaspora. Recently, I’ve found myself caught up in the ardor of the African-ancestry-discovery-through-DNA trend gaining a great deal of momentum from Henry Louis Gate’s *Finding Your Roots* Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) series. DNA and genetic testing would certainly approximate more closely the “biotechnography” titling of my SAMPLA panel. Biotechnography, loosely defined as “the exploitation of biological processes for the service of ethnography”, seems to fit with respect to the genetic testing revolution that is presently at the heart of black diasporans like myself who are concerned with or interested in connecting more fully and more completely with their discovery of their African ancestry. This digital age and the technologies that accompany it have provided me with a unique narrative that has enriched my adult life and redirected my footsteps in both career and personal goals. I will have attempted to share my African ancestry quest story and to illustrate how emergent technologies such as DNA testing, have aided me and others in the process of heritage discovery and reconnection to disjointed African ancestry. Undoubtedly, biotechnology has helped Afro-diasporans achieve what was extraordinarily difficult, laborious, or even impossible in previous generations.

The efforts of black diasporans to seek out their roots is by no means the untrodden, 21st-century endeavor that the contemporary employment of cutting-edge technology in genealogical research may seem to suggest. Following the U.S. Civil War, for example, many Black Americans employed early genealogical techniques such as the consultation of hard-to-find birth and slave records in a formidable attempt to piece together the familial fragmentation left in the wake of the peculiar institution of chattel slavery in the United States. Undoubtedly, that personally-guided research was a laborious

process for ex slaves and their immediate descendants which frequently lead to dead ends and blind alleys due to the scant availability of records for people hardly considered human by the dominant society, and therefore, lacking in any pedigree worthy of preservation for posterity. African American Nobel Prize laureate, Toni Morrison (Morrison [1987] 2004), in her masterpiece novel, *Beloved*, provides an excellent example of an African-American character, Baby Suggs, whose primary preoccupation upon having been bought her freedom from the Sweet Home plantation in Kentucky and setting foot on free soil in Ohio, is the reconnection-through-research with those lost in the shuffle of slavery, namely her children and husband. The text makes clear that Baby Suggs, the mother-in-law of the protagonist, Sethe and grandmother of the troubled ghost child, Beloved, never managed to bridge the documentation threshold that first had to be overcome in order to facilitate a successful background search at that time: "But the news they dug up was so pitiful, she quit. After two years of messages written by the preacher's hand, two years of washing, sewing, canning, cobbling, gardening, and sitting in churches, all she found out was that the Whitlow place was gone and that you couldn't write to 'a man named Dunn' if all you knew was that he went West" (p. 173). This episode from the novel emphasizes some of the inherent obstacles faced by African Americans in seeking out familial details from the past. Granted, Baby Suggs was not seeking out her distant, African ancestry, but rather, the immediate family ties that had been broken through slavery. And yet, the parallel between the two is obvious: reconstituting lost ties (whether immediate or distant) is a vitally human act of yearning.

As much as black Atlantic narratives, whether African, American, British or Caribbean, thrive in spaces of hybridity that recognize distant, but significant African diasporic foundations preserved and maintained throughout the Atlantic realm, what recent technologies offer is the ability to dissect and to pinpoint those foundations with a precision that practical limitations from previous generations did not allow. Paul Gilroy's groundbreaking work, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* published in 1994 is remarkably forward thinking in its recognition that black Atlantic identity, far from than being one dimensionally nationalistic, is complex and lends itself, in fact, to transnational manifestations. Concerning black British social and political movements from the 1960/70s to the 1980/90s, Gilroy (1993) highlights a shift in focus from narrow definitions to more expansive if not transcendental ones in the arena of black identity. If allowed to provide a parallel movement in focus from the African-American experience, the U.S. movement of cultural awareness and affirmation, "Black is beautiful", began in the 1960s and was an articulated voice of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. While the coining of the term, "black is beautiful" is credited to the 19th-century African American physician and abolitionist, John Stewart Rock, the movement itself of the 20th-century United States had as an objective the creation of a counter voice to prevailing notions of the day that affirmed a lack of black and/or African aesthetic compared with white and/or European standards. Curiously, 1960s technology played a role in the dissemination of the tenor of the "black is beautiful" movement. For example, radio and television both had an enormous impact. The song that would become the anthem of the "Black Power Movement" was the 1968 funk classic written by Alfred "Pee Wee" Ellis and performed by none other than the Godfather of Soul, James Brown (1968). "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud", was not only progressive in its addressing of anti-black racial prejudice as well as preaching the need for African American social empowerment, but the style of the song itself maintains a Sub Saharan African democratic participatory musical tradition. In essence, the song is a call-and-response chorus in the vein of an African elder-junior civic exercise, whereby the elder, Brown, calls out, "Say It Loud", to which some 30 children invited from Watts and Compton in the original recording to voice their unified, youthful response, "I'm Black and I'm Proud". The call-and-response exercise reflected in the song begs parallels with traditions still maintained in Akan ethnic groups in present-day Ghana and Ivory Coast in West Africa. The *Agoo-Ame* call and response is a lively ritual used in all manners of social interaction from the quotidian to the customary. "Agoo", an expression that can take on a meaning akin to "are you listening", evokes a response of "Ame", which could be translated as "you have my attention". Brown's rhythmic exhortation of funk held the number-one spot on the Rhythm and Blues chart for six weeks and peaked at number 10 on the Billboard Hot 100,

the music industry's standard record chart since 1958, which means that Brown's classic song peaks at the 10-year anniversary of the billboard's charting system.

Despite radio's Golden Age having waned by the time we enter the 1960s, audio recording technology makes important advancements around this time, especially with magnetic tape-recording technology such as Stereo 8, also known as 8 Track. Simultaneously, television continued to develop as an important medium during that time. By 1969, there were nearly two dozen black characters on primetime U.S. television shows. Undoubtedly, the late 1960s can be considered the so-called "Golden Age" of blacks on television in the United States. Without question, many of those television representations of African Americans were less stereotypical and more redeeming representations of blacks; consider non-traditional African American portrayals in popular TV shows of the day like *I Spy* (Culp 1965–1968). The point being emphasized here is the evolution of not only the representation, but also of the need and function of the representation. In 1970, Don Cornelius (Cornelius 1971–2006) launched *Soul Train* on WCIU-TV, a local station in Cornelius' hometown of Chicago. *Soul Train* was the first U.S. television venue for "soul music", and the television airwaves were the technological vehicle for introducing African American music, culture, and style to a wider U.S. audience. The decade of the 70s, therefore, is a vital period in the United States with respect to black cultural collective awareness and affirmation as well as the recognition, whether openheartedly or begrudgingly, by non-African Americans of said black cultural affirmation. If manifestations of media constitute the epitome of technology shaping black narrative in the 1970s, then at least one key media icon and one key television event crystallize this very notion in dramatic fashion. Media icon, the boxing great, Muhammad Ali, coupled with the 1977 airing of the television mini-series, *Roots*, based on Alex Haley's novel (Haley 1976), both impacted me personally and profoundly as a child of the seventies. Both segue into the personal ancestral journey that is the focus of this paper.

I was born in a housing project, at that time named Cotter Homes, in an area of Louisville, Kentucky called Southwick; a neighborhood dubbed "Little Africa" as early as the late 19th century due to the predominant population of African American residents post-slavery. The housing project of my birth was exactly 1.1 miles—less than 10 blocks—from 3302 Grand Avenue, the birth home of Cassius Clay, aka Muhammad Ali. Of course by the time of my birth, Ali no longer lived in the modest, pink, 1200 square-foot one-story home. No doubt, Ali had moved on to bigger and better things by the time that I enter the world, and in fact, around the time of my birth, Ali's 1967 boxing ban had been lifted and he was making his historic comeback in the arena of boxing. One memorable African-connected Ali boxing event was the famous "Rumble in the Jungle" of 1974, a match against George Foreman which took place in Kinshasa, capital of the then-named Central African country of Zaire. Leading up to the main boxing event was a three-day music festival called "Zaire 74", a musical bonanza with an undeniable African diasporic objective by virtue of the diversity of performers billing the musical event. Black artists from the United States were James Brown, B.B. King, Bill Withers, and the Spinners. Representing Afro-Latin America: Cuba's Celia Cruz as well as Fania All Stars. Talent from the continent itself included Mama Africa, Miriam Makeba from South Africa and Cameroon's Manu Dibango. The Ali-Foreman fight in Zaire had enormous implications in shaping a generation of Afro-diasporans in Europe and in countries throughout the Americas who felt an authentic connection to Africa that went beyond romanticized notions of the continent. Television footage of the event showed a rugged, but youthful, Africa that welcomed with open arms, Afro descendants who were returning to the continent of their distant ancestors despite vast geographic, social, cultural and psychic separation. Ironic that an epic Battle Royale between two Afro-descended foes fought in the African space, no less, also provided an invitation for much needed continental healing, a healing that is essential for any desire by an Afro-descendant to quest for a more profound relationship with Africa on the basis of ancestry. That is to say, Africans and Afro-descendants had and continue to have a great deal of "unfinished business" left in the vicious wake of slavery and colonialism.

Earlier, I referenced the importance of the 1977 miniseries, *Roots*, as a watershed moment in television history because of its effectiveness in inspiring millions of Americans, African Americans

in particular, to seek out and to attempt to connect with their ancestry. I vividly recall the sensation of importance that our parents and grandparents were attempting to bestow upon us through our watching the debut of the *Roots*. Many African Americans remember the sudden emptying of the streets in our neighborhoods just prior to show time and the gathering together in our living rooms in front of the singular TV set that most of our families had the luxury of owning back then. What Alex Haley achieved in piecing together his African ancestry decades before the facility with which we are able to do so today by a simple saliva swab test sent in the mail with results to follow within a few weeks' time, is truly remarkable. According to the methods that Haley himself cited, he found his ancestry the old-fashioned way. He used the technology and techniques available to him: he worked with a linguist in order to discover his ancestral language, Mandinka, from the Senegambia region of West Africa; he consulted slave-ship records to determine the arrival of an ancestor on the Lord Ligonier slave ship at Annapolis, Maryland in 1767; he also traveled to the Gambian bustling port hub of Juffere and met with a local griot, who relayed to Haley the story of his great, great, great, great grandfather, Kunta Kinte. In discussing the emotive and inspirational impact of *Roots* for many African Americans as well as black throughout the diaspora for that matter, it is important to state that I acknowledge, but choose not to give much attention to the multiple controversies that have surfaced since the novel's publication, including charges of plagiarism by the author as well as accusations that Haley's narrative blurred the line between history and fiction. Black narrative predecessors of *Roots* as far back as Equiano's (Equiano [1789] 2003) 18th-century *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, also found controversy long after their publication, and yet the controversies in no way diminished the reception, the impact of the narratives on people who have an insatiable desire for stories about themselves and their ancestral origins. The yearning of Afro descendants to connect at some level with the land of their ancestors is often more powerful than the scholarly minutiae that keeps researchers busy and fed.

As much as DNA testing can provide a shortcut to the nagging questions of one's African ancestry, as many of us have seen on recent programs such as the Henry Louis Gates' (Gates 2012–2017) "Finding Your Roots" series among other programs, the answers are not always what we expect, and in addition, when the origin answers are available, the end result, "I came from Tribe X" or from "Country Y", that definitive answer is a terminal point for many. The terminal point without the narrative can be anti-cathartic, which is the beauty and glory of Alex Haley's story: a terminal point with a narrative to fill in the spaces in between.

While the whimsical pondering on my African origins has certainly been present since as early as my teenaged years, actively seeking out and using available methods in order to piece together my own African genealogical narrative came relatively late in life. This is to say that I did not enter into the endeavor earlier on by means of the traditional archival techniques that would have been available to me as I was coming of age in the late 1980s. To be honest, without knowing for certain, I simply imagined that the archival route would be more time consuming than I was willing to invest in the effort especially given my assumption that starting from my Anglo-Saxon surname would lead me to a dead end. "Dead end" for me was defined by results that would only reinforce my European, specifically, my Anglo-Saxon heritage. While I had peers, both Black and white, who relished about the idea that their surname might connect them to some noble European pedigree, I was totally disinterested in unearthing such a discovery for myself. That the ancestors of my slaveholding forefathers could have been royalty had zero emotional trickle-down effect on me. My gaze was fixed firmly toward the African pieces of myself, and I highly doubted that a laborious genealogical research of my European surname would get me closer to Africa. But the apathy and even distrust that I had felt toward traditional genealogical methods made a major shift with the accessibility of DNA-based research. When I realized that I could use my DNA as a means of jumping straight to the source of my African origins (and more importantly, that I could afford it), the apathy and distrust that I had felt earlier on gave way to a tremendous sense of optimism and excitement.

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and the cultures of the Spanish-speaking world. Further, I had studied in northern Spain as a young man during the 1990s, and had very frequently suffered racism during my time living and traveling throughout the Iberian Peninsula. My black skin made me a visible target by some Spaniards who saw me as an 'other' who didn't belong in their midst, walking their streets, speaking their language, dating their women. Discovering that I shared ethnic heritage with those same Spaniards constituted a tremendous irony, but that irony did not manifest itself as a poetic justice for me. It only reinforced the genotype-phenotype conundrum that still has not found a way to reconcile itself after generations of racial conflict and animosity on this planet. Needless to say, the results of the PatriClan test threw me for a loop, such that it took me two or three years before I had the courage to order the MatriClan test. Those results yielded a more satisfactory, if not fascinating, discovery: the mitochondrial results of the MatriClan test evidence that my maternal ancestors came from an ethnic group called the Bubis, who occupy the island of Bioko in the Gulf of Guinea, territory of the modern Republic of Equatorial Guinea, the only Spanish-speaking country on the African continent. The pain of not being able to connect fully with my European Spanish heritage made discovery of my ancestral connections to Africa's only Spanish-speaking country both savory and redemptive. Further, the fact that I had interacted abundantly with Bubis and with other ethnic groups from Equatorial Guinea during my time studying in Spain (decades before my genealogy-through-DNA breakthrough), made these results nothing less than stunning, because they not only provided me with the precise historical link to the African continent that I had been longing for, but in addition and most importantly, the discovered link had real, immediate, and tangible connections to a community of Africans that I had already come to know in collegiality and love in friendship, friends who provided a protective and supportive buffer for the negative incidents that I was experiencing while navigating life as a young Black man in Spain. The co-authored work, *Genetics and the Unsettled Past: The Collision of DNA, Race, and History* is an essential text exploring the use of genetics testing to answer for black diasporans the burning and buried questions of their ethnic origins prior to slavery. Alondra Nelson's chapter contribution entitled, "Reconciliation Projects: From Kinship to Justice" is particularly relevant to my own journey. Throughout her chapter, Nelson stresses the many ways in which "DTC (direct to consumer) genetics" provides an important reparative access to people seeking some form of justice for historical wrongs committed against their ancestors and by extension their own wellbeing and sense of self. Nelson makes clear her position with respect to Black Americans in the United States: "In order to better understand the relationship of DNA and reconciliation projects, it is instructive to look closely at the role that the company African Ancestry has played in such endeavors in the United States. Given the schismatic force of racial slavery, colonialism, and imperialism—and the enduring effects of this fracturing—it is unsurprising that efforts toward reunion and repair have also been long-standing in African-descended communities" (pp. 22–23).

And yet, while answers are abundantly available and more easily facilitated through innovation and technology, I am clearly aware that new questions and conundrums also reveal themselves. Once again, Alondra Nelson's work (Nelson et al. 2012), while reinforcing the potentially restorative outcomes of DTC genetic testing, also understands all too well that "it may not be possible to settle political controversies and correct historical misdeeds on strictly technical grounds" (p. 27). My own unexpected discoveries about my ancestry illustrate this point, for while my results did indeed strengthen my personal sense of connection to my African-born peers and colleagues, they did not at all address the original wrong that created the separation in the first place . . . and much less achieve any material compensation for that wrong. On the contrary, my discoveries in some ways created for me new burdens and fresh, penetrating interrogatives. Does quick and easy access to the terminal point, in other words, where I come from, weaken the strength of the connection? Better said, is there something edifying, sustaining, and value-affirming in the hard fought quest itself? What is to be said about the shifting sands of black narrative in light of the evolution of technology? If slavery was the centerpiece of the Africa-to-America saga of Haley, or the Africa-to-America-to-Britain saga of

Equiano, does slavery remain the centerpiece of the Africa-Atlantic sagas of those of us from the DNA generation? And if not, what now lies at the center?

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