

Victoria Massie

Paper: (Re)Connection: Networking African American Identity in Genetic Ancestry Testing

Introduction

In late June 2010, Gina Paige, the president and co-founder of African Ancestry, Inc., and I traveled down I-95 toward Hampton, VA. Gina was prepared to give a presentation at the community's African American Cultural Forum. An all-day event, the forum would highlight topics such as genealogy and family trees for the local Black community, and feature presentations by local African-American writers. The trip was also a kind of dress rehearsal for the upcoming "We Are Africa" 2010 Road Tour, which was scheduled to begin in August. The tour entailed a 19-day itinerary through 14 cities from New Orleans to Boston "to engage the local Black community in a celebration of Africa." I was officially designated as the tour's "Road Dog"—a travel assistant—and my accompanying Gina to the Hampton event was going to give me a tangible idea of my future responsibilities.

Meeting Margaret

We had a local contact: Ms. Margaret. A widowed 60-something and a major organizer for the Cultural Forum, Ms. Margaret had much more energy than I, at twenty-one, had at the time. She took us to a sports bar, one of her local favorites,, and when we arrived, Margaret recommended we order the fish and chip platter. For the next two hours, Margaret regaled us with other exciting details about her life. Indeed, our only moment of silence came when she left the table to wash her hands before our food was served. Married to a military man, Margaret traveled through Europe and lived in Germany for quite some time while her children were growing up. During her stay, she and a friend, even embarked on a road trip to find an elementary school pen pal from England. Not only was she reunited with her pen-pal but, to her amazement, regardless of the time that had passed, she was also welcomed with open arms. She

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then talked about her deep roots to this particular area of Virginia. At one point, she even asked Gina about genealogy techniques. Gina, however, is not a genealogist, and to Margaret's surprise, Gina suggested that she could learn a lot from Margaret about those things. All the same, Margaret was still excited to have her ancestry revealed the following day.

Revealing Margaret

Gina concluded her presentation with three public reveals. Pam, one of the coordinators for the Cultural Forum, had just found out that she was a descendant of the Bamileke people in Cameroon today. However, it was now Margaret's turn to "know" her roots:

Gina: Now the person who initiated our visit to Hampton was Ms. Margaret and she'll join me [at the front of the room].

Margaret laughed, leaving her back row seat to join Gina at the front. An anxious quietness had come over her.

G: And she was very kind to host us last night. She knows a lot about her family history but she didn't know where she was from. She could tell me her great-great-great-great grandfather and this grandmother and all these cousins. But you, like the rest of us, have no idea whether or not your ancestry is found in Africa on your maternal line or where.

Margaret, standing against the wall with her hands in her pockets, nodded slowly in agreement, biting her lower lip and pinching the corners of her mouth.

G: So we did find your ancestry in Africa. Congratulations.

Margaret slowly raised her eyes from the floor toward the audience.

G: You look so nervous. Are you nervous?

The audience laughed.

Margaret: I was just laughin' because I went to [a local] High School, but last night I said, "I want to know who I is."

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The audience, again, laughed. Regardless of learning proper English syntax, Margaret's excitement about finding out her "true" identity could not be expressed within the rules of grammar she had mastered decades before. With this quip, it seemed that the vivacious spirit I had met earlier was reappearing.

G: Well your ancestry is found in a very unique place. You share ancestry with the Bubi people living in Bioko Island. And Bioko Island is a small island off the coast of Equatorial Guinea. This is Equatorial Guinea [Gina points to the slide of Africa, with a star noting Bioko Island] so you and Pamela were neighbors, kind of. And the Bubi people were actually resistant to slavery. And that's how they got to that island: because they were resisting slavery. When they got to the island...

Margaret tilted her head slightly and then nodded more emphatically.

M: There you go.

Margaret began laughing.

G: Does that sound consistent? Some resistance?

The audience provided a collective, "Yeah."

M: Yeah.

G: And then when they got to the island they began a practice of tattooing where the chiefs [and] the elders of the community would carve deep grooves into the cheeks of children to make them less attractive to the enslavers...

Audience: Uhm humm.

G: ...because the Westerners viewed it as disfigurement. It also became a symbol of identity for those who did come here [the West] because then when you saw people with those grooves, you knew those were your people.

This is your flag. [Slide shows a picture of the Bioko Island flag]

M: I like my flag. [Looks and points toward Pam who is in the back of the room videotaping the event.]

G: It's a beautiful country. It actually has every ecosystem on it. So it has tropical, it has desert, which makes it very unique.

The other thing about Bioko Island is it was colonized by the Portuguese.

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Now one real interesting fact—and then we’ll move on—there’s a documentary that was done by the BBC [British Broadcasting Channel] called “Motherland: The Genetic Journey.” And they took three Black Brits and traced their DNA and tried to determine their ancestry. Well one woman, they found her ancestry on Bioko Island. Because it is a small community—unfortunately, during the period of colonization, many of the Bubi were killed either by disease or murder by the colonizers, so there is a very small intact community—they actually paid to test the DNA of people throughout the community, and they found somebody with the same yellow dot [Gina’s symbol for mitochondrial DNA] as this Black British woman. They took her to Bioko Island and it showed her experience meeting the family.

So anyway, maybe you can go and meet some of your family.

M: I know. We got our own island.

Margaret swiftly approached Gina to exchange a hug. Margaret had been officially welcomed to the African Ancestry “family.”

When I returned to work the following Monday, I couldn’t wait to discuss the event with my coworker, Karen. She had worked at African Ancestry for the past five years, and, after traveling to conferences and serving as the primary customer service representative, had seen and heard it all. Thus, when I told her about my shock about Margaret’s reaction—my surprise that such a lively woman, an active member in Hampton, could become stiff as a board in front of a small cohort of familiar faces—Karen just smiled.

“It’s a testament to the power of these tests,” Karen remarked.

I agreed. As demonstrated by Margaret as well as the PBS documentaries *African American Lives* (2006) and *African American Lives 2* (2008), there is no denying the emotional impact of genetic ancestry testing on African American consumers. Most African Americans, regardless of their extensive genealogical research, like Margaret, have almost no information about the names of their African progenitors due to the institutional racist legal and social practices of slavery. Yet, this genetic biotechnology presents a once impossible situation as an

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ostensible reality: Individual African Americans are (re)discovering their specific African origins, creating compelling new stories that are rewriting the role of slavery and Africa to the formulation of their identity.

Margaret's reveal, however, also calls attention to broader questions about the power of the knowledge embedded in genetic ancestry testing that makes her individual identity construction possible. When I arrived in Hampton on Friday, I met Margaret the African American. By the time I had left the following day, I knew her as Margaret the descendant of Bubi people in Bioko Island in Africa who had continued to uphold the trait of resistance that typified her ancestor's historical approach to slavery. Several questions were raised in my mind: What exactly is "ancestry"? How are particular narratives naturalized and traits ethnocized? By having a particular array of nucleotides in her mitochondrial DNA isolated, sequenced, and analyzed, what was Margaret's new role as a member of the African Ancestry family? Lastly, as a training session, how did this event correlate with Gina's vision of the company's imminent "We Are Africa" Road Tour campaign due to begin in August?

In the twenty-first century, due to the pervasive use of technological intervention, one must understand scientific information, even at the molecular level, as nature in practice in which scientific "truths" are both the product and the source of cultural understandings of the self. This is particularly true for understanding "ancestry." Genetic ancestry testing companies, including African Ancestry, are the byproduct of the increasing merger between scientific and entrepreneurial innovation. As a result, biological material, such as the genome, has transformed into an information science, gaining an increasingly social characteristic that is commodifiable and valued through capitalistic exchange. The information, however, that is being engendered, articulated, and negotiated through the circulation of "ancestry,"—as demonstrated by

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Literature Review

Scholars of science and technology studies have built an extensive literature critiquing the ostensible nature-culture binary. As discussed by Bruno Latour and others, neither science nor society can be thought of as distinct transcendental entities (Latour 1993). Involved in the process of creating scientific “facts” is a network of relations that are contesting, negotiating, and transforming the universal “truths” produced within and outside of the traditional laboratory (Nader 1996; Rose 2007; Latour 1993). Whether made explicit or left implicit, contemporary epistemological approaches toward science are the product of a network of actors, institutions,

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Paper: (Re)Connection: Networking African American Identity in Genetic Ancestry Testing and governmentalities that sustain a feedback loop that not only provides scientific and technological innovation but also engenders new spatial and temporal terrains through which nature becomes implicated in social, economic, and political subjectivities. In this paper, I explicate this approach through an analysis of multiple nodes within African Ancestry, Inc.'s network—from working in the headquarters in Washington, D.C.; to traveling across 14 different major cities on the East Coast between New Orleans and Boston for the company's "We Are Africa" 2010 Road Tour campaign.

I ground my analysis in Paul Rabinow's theory of biosociality. Defined as "nature...modeled on culture understood as practice" (Rabinow 1996: 99), Rabinow argues that, "nature will be known and remade through technique and will finally become artificial, just as culture becomes natural" (Rabinow 1996: 99). As illustrated by a June 27, 2000 *New York Times* headline, "READING THE BOOK OF LIFE; Now, the Hard Part: Putting the Genome to Work (Wade 2000)," the transition from the twentieth to the twenty-first century was marked not solely by a sociobiological predisposition to define who we *are*—now available in nucleotide format—but, more importantly, the first decade of the new millennium was to be characterized by the development of applications to utilize the code of life to define who we *can be*. Life was now in the making, and through biology, imagined possibilities could become a "naturalized" reality. As a result, Rabinow discusses the proliferation of new identities, and unique social relations and institutions to mediate these hybrid biological and social configurations (Rabinow 1996: 102).

The marketplace has been a critical means toward developing biosocial identities. With the increased presence of biotechnology, beginning in the 1980s, biology has become subject to market rationalities, coded by biocapitalism. According to Stefan Helmreich, "theories of biocapital posit that [biopolitical] calculations no longer organize only state, national, or colonial

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governance, but also increasingly format economic enterprises that take as their object the creation, from biotic material and information, of value, markets, wealth and profit (Helmreich 2008: 464).” Following Sunder Rajan (2006), I aim to articulate how genomic “truths” are constructed, assuming and generating value through various forms of exchange, also paying attention to how production and reproduction of genomic “truths” reconfigure biosocial boundaries (Franklin & Locke 2003). More specifically, I offer a preliminary evaluation of “ancestry” by examining biosocial negotiations of race and identity among agents in African Ancestry’s network.

Quantitative Reification?: The Relationship Between Science and Race in Contemporary Genomics

The debate about race as a biologically (ir)relevant category has been and continues to be contentious. A critical reflection of the discipline of anthropology over time mirrors the debate over the status of race as a biological and/or cultural concept. In the latter half of the 19th century, the founding fathers of anthropology, Lewis Henry Morgan, Herbert Spencer, and even Edward B. Tylor—whose definition of culture has remained pivotal to the discipline—were guilty of propagating a teleologically racist agenda, whereby non-western European societies were “proven” scientifically inferior. Early physical anthropologists legitimized these claims through meticulous measurements of skulls, nose and eye shape to infer a biological basis for racial stratification. With emerging perspectives of social thinkers such as Franz Boas and W.E.B. DuBois, and particularly in the wake of World War II as a counter-response to Nazism, however, anthropology increasingly dismissed the legitimacy of race as biological. The category of race and the implications of that category were no longer considered to have any relationship

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Scholars now have begun to recognize a more complex relationship between race and biology. Alondra Nelson (2008), describes two types of race scholars today: “pragmatists...who emphasize the practical outcomes for lived experience of the historically contingent processes of racialization” and “naturalists [who] contend that humans can be classified into groupings that confirm the biological reality of ‘race’ (Nelson 2008: 760).” Nelson notes that neither of these two polarized positions account for the continued utility of race (see also Duster 2003). For the pragmatist, though rewriting historical disenfranchisement (Gates 1986; Gilroy 2000), fails to acknowledge the practical applications of race for attending to complex factors relating to treatment of diseases that are based on interactions between both biological and environmental factors. Naturalists, conversely, in assuming scientific objectivity, ignore the historical and social practices that have contributed to development of racial categories and fail to take responsibility for how their work becomes implicated in the biological reification of racial stratification [see Duster 2006].

The debate continues unresolved. Though the Human Genome Project—which, as noted by geneticist Craig Venter, sequenced the DNA of five individuals who self-identified themselves as either Hispanic, Asian, Caucasian, or African American—illuminated no apparent genetic differences among races (White House Press Conference: Human Genome Project, June 26, 2000), genomics has further complicated the definition of race. Describing the 21st century “as an era marked by confusion,” Jenny Reardon (2004: 58) argues that articulating the meaninglessness of race (counterproductively) reinscribes the meaningfulness of race. Thus, contemporary race discourses have expanded beyond the problematic nature/culture binary, and

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instead call attention to how the meaning of both science, including genomics, and race is subject to continual negotiation (El-Haj 2007; Bliss 2009; Fujimura et al. 2008; Haraway 1997; Skinner 2006).

Recent scholarship examining genetic ancestry demonstrates this shift in the analysis of race. Some have critiqued the unarticulated limitations of genetic ancestry testing, particularly the tendency the technology may have to subtly reify racial categories, verifying (or negating) a participant's claim to a particular racial or ethnic group (Bolnick et al. 2007). Additionally, the ethnographic research of Nelson, Duana Fullwiley (2007), and Michael Montoya (2007), suggests that these debates about the place of race in genetics research is particularly contentious when applied to marginalized groups. While genetic ancestry has the potential to empower groups—whether to encourage research by and for unaccounted racial groups to address health disparities or to transcend the historical, social, cultural, and political atrocities of slavery—it also has the potential to confine these groups to older notions of race that constrain the perceived autonomy this genetic technology provides, making an “‘iron cage’ of the genome” whereby race “unfold[s] from within less mutable social structures” (Nelson 2008: 776). As race becomes increasingly conflated with the genome, at stake are not only issues of race as either a construction of nature or culture, but also questions of whether race—and the historical baggage of race—is being problematized or propagated in a molecular form.

Addressing the dialectics of race in genetic ancestry testing, however, requires considerations of the political economies of race in which the materiality of ancestry is circulated, which recent scholarship has fallen short of addressing. Many scholars raise concerns about the fact that companies are not held accountable for the social and political repercussions of engendering new genetically racialized identities. Yet to substantiate these concerns, scholars

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fail to ethnographically examine how cultural assumptions of race are distributed in networks of relations in the genetic ancestry testing industry in tandem with the construction of racial identities. In this paper, I analyze the conflicting cultural assumptions of race I witnessed among African Americans while working at African Ancestry, Inc. in summer 2010, most specifically during the company's "We Are Africa" 2010 Road Tour.

Methodology: "We Are Africa" 2010 Road Tour

I must admit that my fieldwork was unconventional. Quite frankly, the only ostensibly conventional aspect of this ethnographic adventure was that it was unexpected. Recently arriving back in the United States after studying abroad in Ghana, with no particular job prospects solidified, I sent an email to African Ancestry. I chose African Ancestry first for practical reasons. African Ancestry is the only genetic ancestry testing company that was headquartered in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area in which I resided. Second, since its inception in 2003, African Ancestry has become a Mecca for many African Americans who seek to have their DNA tested to unveil the secrets to their ancestry. They have revealed the ancestry of media mogul Oprah Winfrey, actor Isaiah Washington, and director Spike Lee, and many other notable members of the black community in the United States as they display on their "Wall of Return" page on their website. But additionally, what struck me about the creation of African Ancestry was that it was (and continues to be) the only genetic ancestry testing company that was founded by African Americans to cater to the needs of African Americans, and others in the African Diaspora. So to say the least, as an aspiring anthropologist attempting to gain greater acumen into the complexities of genetic ancestry testing among African Americans, the company had become my own ethnographic Mecca. To continue with this project, making some form of

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contact with the company seemed almost inevitable, and mid-morning on a Wednesday early in June I sent an email to Gina.

The email was a bit long. In a 20 line single-spaced email, I described my previous work on my research project, conducting literature reviews and careful examination of the PBS documentaries. I also noted a mutual contact I had made while studying abroad in Ghana. But, in an attempt to “actively place myself within the discourse,” I wanted to volunteer or intern at the company possibly for the summer. I attached my curriculum vitae, highlighting my experience both in genetic and ethnographic research. Looking back at the email, I can’t help but think that it was pretty audacious, especially sending it to the president of the company. Nevertheless, later that afternoon I received a voicemail, and after an interview the following Friday morning, I had become the latest member of the African Ancestry family.

As I learned during the interview, my project at African Ancestry was to help Gina with the company’s latest endeavor: the “We Are Africa” Road Tour. The company began planning for the tour in late May, and the tour was to begin on August 1st. Hoping to travel to 16 cities, later reduced to 14, in 19 days, there were multiple reasons for the tour. In one sense, traveling to areas other than metropolitan cities like Atlanta, Washington, D.C. and New York, the company was hoping to demystify the perceived socioeconomic exclusivity of genetic ancestry testing. While the PBS documentaries legitimized the possible emotional value of genetic ancestry testing, lay consumers do not necessarily have the same access to resources as Oprah does, and may thereby feel they are unable to have their DNA tested. In another sense, the tour was an attempt to expand the market base, to prevent market saturation. While I was answering replies to the general interest email sent to African Ancestry customers, many were surprised that Atlanta was not included in the initial 16 cities. These customers failed to realize, however, that

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in the midst of African Ancestry's attempt to travel the country, it was not economically advantageous to visit a city that already generates a significant amount of sales. The third reason for the tour was to "engage the local black community in a celebration of our historical, cultural, and genetic connections to Africa." African Ancestry, unlike other companies, specializes in information about *African* ancestry for the utility of black people in the African Diaspora. The proprietor of the world's largest database of "indigenous African lineages"—over 25,000—African Ancestry is the only company that will provide customers with information about contemporary groups of people in specific country(ies) and ethnic group(s) with whom an individual shares ancestry if it traces back to Sub-Saharan Africa. But through the tour, the company was also intending to (re)produce ancestry, putting its particular form of genetic ancestry into practice. I devote much of the following analysis to examining the multiple ways that the company produced "ancestry" for African American consumers.

To engage people with ancestry, however, required a careful creation of a crew with whom those practices could be realized (Figure 1). At the center of crew was Gina who, as president, was the face of the company who would most often and most directly engage each respective audience with the company's ancestry commodity. Additionally, in an age characterized by twitters, facebook, youtube videos and Internet blogs, it was also imperative to utilize media resources to include audiences who could not physically attend but could virtually celebrate African ancestry with African Ancestry. For this reason, Gina included Ralston Smith, a local D.C. videographer who has shot all of African Ancestry's promotional video since its inception. Kea Taylor, a local D.C. event photographer who has worked with the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) and shot the Inauguration of President Barack Obama, served as the Road Tour photographer. Between the two, anything and everything that occurred on the tour—from

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the expected event presentations to crew reflections along rural highways in the southeast to dancing—was recorded and then uploaded to the company blog, as well as facebook and twitter pages. Indeed, at times it felt like I was having my own African Ancestry “Real World” reality TV show experience, one that, as someone who is quite camera shy, I tried my best to avoid.¹ My role on the Road Tour, however, was to help Gina with travel logistics. As “Road Dog,” I helped Gina solicit (but mostly confirm) venue hosts and public ancestry reveal(s) for each respective city in June and July. On the tour, I was in charge of setting up the information table and taking kit and Road Tour T-shirt orders, as well as helping Gina, Ralston, and Kea with any other tasks they needed.

Constructing “Ancestry”: The Political Economies of Race

Genetic ancestry tests offer two types of analyses: lineage and biogeographical ancestry (Shriver & Kittles 2004). Lineage-based analyses examine mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) and the Y-chromosome, which, due to their sex-specific inheritance patterns, are used to deduce maternal or paternal ancestry, respectively. mtDNA is non-nuclear DNA that is inherited from mother to offspring, regardless of the sex of the child. The Y-chromosome, one of the sex-determining chromosomes, is inherited from father to son. Biogeographical ancestry, however, examines autosomal DNA—genetic material that does not include sex chromosomes or mtDNA—and provides an estimated mixed ancestry from different geographic locations. Despite the fact that different types of genetic material are being analyzed, each test compares mutations, the source of any and all genetic heterozygosity.

These mutations, although found in biological material, do not naturally reveal ancestry. The epistemological transition from arbitrary mutation to ancestrally informative marker (AIM)

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occurs through the geneticist's distinct sampling methodology. In order to provide genetically distinct differences among "populations," scientists isolate sequences of the genome that have high mutation rates (Shriver 1997). If the mutation occurs at a frequency greater than 50 percent in one population in comparison to another, the mutation is then deemed ancestrally informative, and geographic origins are then deduced.

The parameters of the discrete "populations" compared in genetic ancestry testing are influenced by cultural assumptions of the involved geneticist and/or company. For instance, Nan Yang et. al., in a paper detailing the potential use of genetic ancestry and "ethnic affiliation" for epidemiological purposes, describes populations as "European Americans, East Asian, Mexican American, Mexican, South Asian, Amerindian, West African, African American, and Puerto Rican" (Yang et al. 2005). Mark Shriver only includes "U.S. resident populations (namely, European American, African American, and Hispanic American)" (Shriver 1997). Likewise, as Fullwiley observed in her own ethnographic research of Esteban Gonzales Buchard's laboratory, the construction of ancestral groups follows a pattern in which samples for Africans are taken from West Africa, most European samples are taken from northwestern countries in Europe rather than eastern—408 to 100 samples, respectively—and the Asian samples are taken from China, Japan and Insular Southeast Asia. Thus, although not made explicit by the geneticists themselves, nineteenth-century racial categories, informed by a historically American racial narrative, are being remade within a genetic context (Haraway 1997; Skinner 2006).

But one critical dimension of genetic ancestry testing that makes race a potentially salient genetic category is its entrance into the marketplace. Described as "America's latest obsession" (Hornblower 1999), genetic realization of ancestry (and consequently race) is an effect of the tendency for genomic information to be commodified through biocapitalism. Sunder Rajan

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(2006) notes that, with the advent of the Human Genome Project, due to the private and public business investors associated with the project, genomics is at the forefront of economies of knowledge and capital. Companies like Family Tree DNA, Ancestry.com, Genebase and the Genographic Project—a corporate partnership between National Geographic and the technological giant IBM, as highlighted on the ancestry certificates—are not just providing genetic information at an affordable price (to sustain each respective company’s position in the marketplace). They are also profiting from a product that reinscribes race as biology, only this time with a characteristically ethnic molecular label—for instance, one’s results might describe one’s ancestry as “Haplogroup E3a: The Language People” above a map of the African continent with the region below the Sahara desert highlighted in orange.

To say that race is being produced in a new genetic context, however, naturalizes cultural assumptions about race. Sarah Franklin and Margaret Lock note, “the definition of biology-as-capital involve[s] a prioritization of reproduction, rather than production, as the primary generator of wealth, agency, and value” (Franklin & Locke 2003: 7). How then is knowledge in the form of biocapital—race information in the form of a genetic ancestry commodity—sustained? How is this done in the midst of heterogeneous, and at times conflicting, political interests? This became particularly evident when I received a phone call from a potential customer at African Ancestry:

July 15, 2010 Field notes

The caller was an elderly woman from Maine who had recently had her ancestry traced with another company offering genetic ancestry testing. Upset, speaking in terse sentences, she was calling African Ancestry in hopes of having her results reanalyzed. She described her discontent with her previous results by describing how the company

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had told her that she was from the general region of West Africa, but nothing beyond that. She then followed up her description with the blunt statement, “They might as well have told me I was a Negro from Negroland!” Her problem was that she had paid so much money for the test—she did not give the exact price—and found that the company told her information that she already knew.

One place to start in elucidating the significance of this call is to make explicit the assumption that the woman I was speaking to was an African American. This is not completely farfetched: among American racial groups, African Americans historically have geographic origins in the African continent, specifically West Africa, which was information that the caller already knew. Yet the interpretation of the results as condescending—making her feel like she was no more than a Negro, a racially degrading and now (with exception to the most recent U.S. Census) politically incorrect term for African Americans, from an equally degrading imagined Negroland—is the effect of a specific racial history on which her preexisting knowledge of ancestry is based. African Americans, descended from Africans who were enslaved in North America, have little (if any) knowledge about their ancestral origins. Due to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, kin groups and other social groups were separated along the Middle Passage. Moreover, once Africans were enslaved in the U.S., they were restricted from perpetuating traditional cultural practices in America under racist legal policies and social violence. Because of these factors, “Africa” or the specifics of an African origin remain ambiguous for African Americans. It is true that American racial policies such as the “one-drop rule” concretized Africa by assigning racial blackness to African Americans based on the assumption that they had at least one ancestor who was of African descent. But the historical paradox of an African American racial identity has been that as a person of African descent, one has not historically

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Paper: (Re)Connection: Networking African American Identity in Genetic Ancestry Testing and does not currently have access to knowledge—and, consequently, the powerⁱⁱ that might accrue from that knowledge—about the specifics of one’s African origins. For this woman, obtaining information from the genetic ancestry testing company, which promised to unlock previously unknown information about ancestry, was not enlightening but instead ambiguous and disenfranchising.

But ancestry remains contentious. Considering the fact that the woman did not dismiss her ancestry results, but instead transferred them to African Ancestry, suggests that African Ancestry provides a unique form of ancestry (and consequently representation of race) that can be realized in relation to others, a point that deserves attention. African Ancestry has been (and continues to be) the only genetic ancestry testing company exclusively founded, owned and operated by African Americans. Co-founded by African-American geneticist Dr. Rick Kittles and African-American businesswomen Gina Paige, MBA, the company is not only an exemplary partnership of the merger between biological research and market innovation needed for biocapitalist enterprise, but it also demonstrates how social agents, due to their own racial affiliations, can shape how genetic “ancestry” value is generated in the marketplace. “Committed to providing a unique service to the black community, working daily to improve the cultural, emotional, physical, spiritual and economic wellbeing of people across the African Diaspora” (africanancestry.com), unlike other companies, African Ancestry is a company created exclusively by members of the black community to cater to the needs of this community, as demonstrated by my caller. Already aware of African Americans’ imagined origins in Sub-Saharan African continent, the company attempts to “particularize” Africa by offering information about a contemporary country(ies) and ethnic group(s) with whom a consumer—

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most likely African-American, or another member of the African Diaspora displaced from the continent as a result of the trans-Atlantic slave trade—shares ancestry.

Thus, discussions of genetic ancestry testing need not reduce the industry to a reification race. Rather various forms of ancestry exist, demonstrating racial subjectivities that shift in form, purpose, and value—social, cultural, historical, political and economic—depending upon the agent(s) involved, which must be made our primary concern. African Americans at multiple critical nodes of genetic ancestry testing—as scientists, as business entrepreneurs, and as consumers—are “(re)fashion[ing] identity, to (re)animate cultural subjectivity, to (re)charge collective self-awareness, to forge new patterns of sociality, all within the marketplace” (Comaroff & Comaroff 2009: 26). Race is implicated in the recreational production and circulation of genetic ancestry in the marketplace, but there are multiple meanings of race and ancestry being made depending on racial positionings of various social agents.

In the remainder of this paper, I attend to how African Ancestry puts their form of ancestry to practice for the construction of a biosocial black racial identity through genetic ancestry testing as illustrated during the Road Tour.

“We Are Africa”: But Who Are “We”?

On August 1st, we began the tour in New Orleans. Earlier in the day we drove around the city, having breakfast at “Viola’s Restaurant & Gospel House,” a “mama’s kitchen” of sorts, which offered a characteristically Southern home-cooked soul food breakfast with either bacon or sausage, eggs, toast, and grits. We then made our way through the French Quarter, filming some of the architecture and a large mural of a clarinet. But as 3:30 p.m. approached, we made our way to Ashé Cultural Center, our host for the 5 p.m. event. We were all a bit anxious, mostly

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because we had no way of knowing how the event would go. We knew there would be public reveals of local officials—each person’s respective results package had been assembled and was ready to be delivered by Gina. We knew there would be a presentation—over breakfast, Gina had finally figured out how to modify the introduction specifically for the Road Tour. But it was only once we arrived at the Center that we could have sense of how ancestry would unfold.

After we unloaded all of our boxes and suitcases, the work began. Kea adjusted her camera for the lighting inside the center. Ralston began searching for phrases and figures that reflected the notion of ancestry such as a drum with the Asante adinkra symbol Sankofa carved on the side of a drum, and a poster with a heading “How to Build Community,” and another phrase on a separate poster stating “Know your heritage.” I consulted with Gina on how to setup the information table. Draped in a large black cloth, I began decorating the 2.5’ by 8’ table by placing a quilted table runner, made up of an array of earthy greens, oranges, and yellows within a deep purple border, down the center. At the left corner, would be a display of the items included in the ancestry kit: a pack of three swabs, a swab envelope, an informational brochure describing the test and steps detailing the swabbing procedure, a specimen form, and a self-addressed envelope in which one would place the swab envelope containing the used swabs and the specimen form. Next to the ancestry kit would be three Road Tour T-shirts, neatly folded and positioned in a semi-circle within which a bobble-head figure representing Rick Kittles resided for the next two hours. The right corner was then saved for the mock-results package. In front of the folder “Welcome to the African Ancestry Family,” I created a semi-circle of a letter of ancestry, a copy of the sequence data, and a starred map to note the country of origin on one display stand, the certificate of ancestry in the center, followed by the African Ancestry guidebook to West and Central Africa containing information about the specific countries and

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ethnic groups with which the company finds matches. Around these primary items, would be brochures about African Ancestry, the promotional “We Are Africa” Road Tour pamphlet, the free Road Tour bumper stickers, and Gina’s business cards. There were also two sign-up sheets: one to join the company’s mailing list and another to sign up for ethnographic interviews. We both stepped in front of the table, Gina gave the thumbs up, and I had a few moments to breathe before people began arriving.

A constant stream of people began entering at a twenty minutes before 5 o’ clock. Since the information table was located at the entrance, I quickly manned my station to direct people through the different materials as well as to answer any of their questions prior to the presentation. As people stopped or passed by the table, I couldn’t help but think the event was off to a good start. Quickly, the room was filling with black faces who were anticipating learning more about their African ancestry. But at one point, as I looked to my right toward the entrance, I witnessed the unexpected: a white person. As a middle-aged white woman with gray hair down to the middle of her back wearing an elbow length white blouse paired with an ankle length jean skirt perused through the information at the table, I smiled in an attempt to be hospitable but also to remain quiet because I had not anticipated this type of situation coming about and did not know exactly what to say. We had marketed the event to the *black* community, and in a twist of fate the demographic had changed.

What did this mean for the event? I had no idea. But aware of her anomalous position, the woman was quick to find out for me. As she made her way to the end of the table, she approached Gina and asked frankly, “I’m going to ask what everybody is thinking. Is it okay for me to be there?” Gina reassured her that there was no problem with her being at the event. The racial tension dissipated, but her presence nevertheless spoke to a fundamental question: In the

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creation of a “We Are Africa” Road Tour, who are “we”? Though the tour, as suggested by the tagline, was predicated on the existence of an imagined black community with whom a genetic biosocial relationship with Africa is self-evident, this encounter suggested that the assumed fixity of the imagined “we” was unstable, shifting in relation to people and places in which the tour emerged.

Though Gina was able to travel during the tour, her business partner Rick was unavailable. Making the best of an unfortunate situation, Gina had a bobble head made in Rick’s likeness that would accompany us across the country. In an attempt to engage the African Ancestry “family”ⁱⁱⁱ with the tour before it began, Gina offered people the opportunity to name the bobble head. “Dokita Ayoka,” which from Yoruba translates to “doctor who causes joy all around,” was runner-up, but the winning name was “Dr. Gene Sankofa” (figure 2). The name is a play on the molecular term’s homophony with a common Euro-American first name followed by a last name referencing an Asante adinkra symbol I had come to know quite after studying abroad in Ghana, “sankofa” which means “going back to reclaim our past in order to move forward.” The bobble-head’s name thereby cemented the African American biogenetic connection to the African continent at the heart of this campaign.

Presenting the black community’s biogenetic (re)connection to Africa, however, was primarily the product of networking with local black businesses in each of the cities. Partnerships with black organizations included but were not exclusive to Afrocentrically oriented institutions. The company’s events in New Orleans, Jackson, and Washington D.C. substantiated the notion of a simultaneously black and African identity by partnering with Ashè Cultural Center—“ashè” is a Yoruba term for “Amen” or “let it be done”—the Afrika Book Café—though evident in the name, the café included traditional African clothing and had made a display of a T-shirt with

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Pan-African figure Marcus Garvey with the text “Said Marcus Garvey Red for the blood that flowed like a river, Yellow For The Blood That They Stole, Green For The Land of Mother Africa, Black For The People They Looted—and the Embassy of the Republic of Nigeria, respectively. The Road Crew also invoked a black ideal that was rooted in Africa: The four crew members wore a uniform of either “We Are Africa” T-shirts or the classic African Ancestry shirt “[COUNTRY, potentially Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon, Guinea Bissau, or Sierra Leone]—know your roots.” Additionally, while not a prerequisite to the tour, that all three women on the Road Tour had “natural” hair was a racial signifier: showcased in hair styles such as two strand twists, or a curly and blown out Afro, propagated a form of black authenticity that was rooted in Africa, and made manifest through apparel and an aesthetic of beauty that, in relation to a genetic ancestry testing company, was conflated with our genetic makeup.

Many of the other institutions, which included educational landmarks such as Alabama A&M University and Fisk University, a number of African American cultural museums, as well as an African-American church, Union Baptist Church, in Hartford, CT, served as bastions of the local and national Black community, without being contingent on Africa. The Road Crew could also be included as a consortium of Black, but not necessarily African, enterprises. Though not a “business venture” in a traditional sense, my purpose on the tour was not only to assist Gina, but also to conduct fieldwork and recruit informants for interviews for the project you are reading now. Ralston was self-employed with the company Globaleyes Productions, LLC., which specialized in recording live concerts and documentaries. Finally, Kea had recently self-published book “I Still Do,” a photographic collection of her most inspiring weddings to celebrate the idea that black people (in general) can (and still do) fall in love. Through mutual support of these institutions, groups and individuals of the black community, the assumed black

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“we” was not dependent upon Africa, but—by partnering with African Ancestry—could emerge in relation to Africa.

Finally, the way in which an imagined community through which a black “we” realized our ontological Africa was made possible by financial sponsors that neither represented a racial blackness nor the African continent. Cracker Barrel offered to cover our meals during the tour by providing golden meal ticket vouchers. And Road Scholar, “the best not-for-profit educational travel organization” for adults interested in “adventures in lifelong learning,” like Cracker Barrel, was an overall tour partner that also hosted us for the final event in Boston. While both of these mainstream, racially-neutral organizations were an integral part of promoting a potential black community’s connection to Africa, through their participation the articulated racial particularity was problematized. Though described as racially black, as we traveled from south to north, stopping between each city for our daily racially (in)conspicuous consumption of a few delicious buttermilk biscuits with apple butter spread and an occasional Friday “Fish Fry,” the boundaries of who “we” were and could be in relation to race, race based on geographic origins, and genetics remained contingent.

Becoming Africa: The African Ancestry Presentation and the Appropriation of an African Ontology

... While the presentation was informative for the audience, it was merely a precursor to the climax of the event, which is the ancestry “reveal.” A marketing “revival,” the reveal offered a visual and visceral experience of African Ancestry’s African ancestry for the audience. With the exception of two cities, African Ancestry offered notable community members—ranging from government officials, pastors, professors, elders in local churches, a reality TV celebrity in

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G: Our next reveal is actually a dear friend of mine, Carla Hall. You guys saw Carla bouncin' all over the screen on Top Chef. She couldn't tell anybody where she was and I would call her phone and be like, "Are you on Top Chef? Where are you? Why aren't you calling me back?" So I'm very honored, Carla, for you to join us. And if you would...

The crowd cheers as Carla makes her way to the front of the room to give Gina a hug.

Gina returns to the podium as Carla takes her place literally front and center, smiling as she waves her hands in front of her face with anxious excitement, soon clasping them to compose herself with a pinched smile.

G: Now tell us why you were motivated to take the test. She's been saying for years, "I've gotta do this Gina..."

Carla: Oh wow.

G: "...I've gotta do this." What finally motivated you to take the test—besides the fact that I gave it to you and made you do it but...

C: Oh, that was my answer.

Collective laughter erupts.

C: No, I mean I think it's a curiosity because I've been wanting to do it. It's something great about saying, you know, this is where you're from. And you know I've been to Africa: I've been to Guinea-Bissau and Sierra Leone, and Egypt. And so I've been to these places. And when you go to Egypt, they say, "Welcome home," and I'm like, "Really?..."

Audience laughs.

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C: ...Is this where I'm from?" So um...but *although* when I went to the museum, you know, Nefertiti.

Carla strikes a profile pose. A "natural" comedian, she holds the pose long enough for comedic effect that has the audience lost in laughter.

C: So let's see what you have to say?

G: So, Carla we found your ancestry on the *West* coast of Africa...not the East coast.

Carla makes a face of disappointment only to quickly shake her head in approval of her new African possibility.

G: And, let's see here. Oh, okay! So you come from a very deeply religious group of people [Carla begins staccato marching and jumping simultaneously]. Despite having Christian or Muslim beliefs, they also practice the traditional faith of their ancestors that is centered around orishas. And I happen to know Carla personally and know that she is a very spiritual person—not necessarily religious but very spiritually grounded and directed so I thought that was very interesting.

Carla gives two thumbs up with a smile.

G: They have the highest rate of twins in the world.

Carla's eyes open with intrigue.

C: People have come up to me and said, "You know Tracey Ross...like you...Tracey Ross?"

The crowd again laughs. Carla's comedic flair strikes again.

G: You come from one of the largest ethnic groups in West Africa—there are 30 million of your people.

C: [As she waves] Hey y'all.

G: And you share ancestry with...duh duh duh duh...the Yoruba people living in Nigeria today.

A collective articulation of awe, shock, and applause is demonstrated by the audience as Carla moves away from Gina with excitement, clapping her hands with a smile.

G: Well is Stella...is Stella here? I asked Stella if there were any...

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C: Stella!

G: ...if there were any...

C: *STELLA!* Sorry I can't resist.

Carla pays homage to the classic Rocky film. Stella then approaches the stage to offer Carla a hug.

G: Stella is the PR [public relations person here at the embassy and apparently speaks Yoruba...

C: Awesome!

G: ...and apparently can talk to you about the culture and everything. Who else is Nigerian? Come on up here and meet your cousin.

Carla lets out a big scream of excitement as she continues embracing Stella, who also invites fellow "Nigerians" to the front.

A line of people approach to welcome Carla to the African, more specifically Nigerian, ancestry family as Gina closes, "It's a family reunion, y'all!"

Through the reveal, genetic ancestry knowledge is produced, but more importantly the knowledge is transferred and put into practice by allowing the revealee, Carla, to experience ancestry and to perform immediate kinship with audience members. She, like other African Americans, is initially unable to engage in the unique experience of "know[ing] this is where [she's] from." And though she has been to Africa, multiple times visiting different countries, and has been identified—both by self and outsiders—as belonging to the respective African nation she has visited, her "African"-ness remained speculative ("Really? Is this where I'm from?"). DNA, nevertheless, provided her with the secret to the elusive Africa within. As Gina describes ethnicized "traits" of the people with whom Carla shares genetic ancestry, for instance their sticking to traditional religious beliefs in orishas and twinning, certain circumstances become

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less coincidental and more natural. Indeed, Gina, a close friend of Carla, finds it interesting that her friend's demonstrated spirituality falls in line with the description of her "people;" and Carla, by joking about her resemblance to celebrity doppelganger Tracey Ross, is less an issue of mistaken identity and more the manifestation of her people's striking tendency to meet more than one person with an identical or similar physical structure. It seems that, unbeknownst to her, Carla has been living an African ancestry hidden in her mitochondrial DNA, but through the reveal—as someone who is related to the Yoruba living in Nigeria today, followed by a hug from the Nigerian Embassy's public relations representative who speaks Yoruba and fellow "Nigerians" in the audience—her genetic African ontology is realized and buttressed.

Through the physical embraces with her "kin" she is not only reunited with fellow Nigerians but more importantly history is integrated with contemporary experience. Though the legacy of slavery initially made Carla incapable of stating a country (or a specific ethnic group in a country) to which she belonged, after five minutes on stage, the representation of Africa, slavery and ancestry was revised, just as Gina had explained in the presentation. Carla's reveal signified an alternative representation of a broad Africa by offering a depth not previously available to African Americans or through genetic ancestry testing companies. An African ontology was neither just the conglomeration of 53 countries with thousands of cultures, traditions, and languages, nor the general region below the Sahara desert, but could be understood as the Yoruba people in Nigeria. Slavery in the context of the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade was a moment in which Africans who were enslaved abjured their language, culture, religion, names etc. in the West. But now, in a time marked by the ubiquitous usage of genetic technology, cultural identities of those who were enslaved could be revived and revealed by and for their decedents to (re)claim an Africa by (re)connecting it to an assigned black African-

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American identity. Finally, the corporeality of ancestry also transformed: ancestry was no longer inscribed in genetic information—a process that Gina thoroughly outlined in the presentation—but it was also ascribed to the genome. Gina had discussed her own social practices—annoying her mom like her father—as being a product of learned habits and genetic inheritance, but Carla’s reveal provided the quintessential conflation of “ancestry” as a social construction and a biological reality. Carla acquired certain traits such as an undeniable spirituality over the years, but now, as a biosocial agent in which her genetic identity could be practiced, it seemed her idiosyncrasies were less a choice and more a natural manifestation of her “self” at a molecular genetic scale.

Indeed, Carla’s reveal was an undeniable “success.”^v Carla did not know where she was from in Africa and used comedic anecdotes to articulate her sense of wanting to know, but never “knowing.” She went through bouts of anxiety demonstrated by explosions of laughter and jokes, composure by clasping her hands, or a negotiation of the two through quick movements of her hands or jumping in place without speaking. But eventually, through Gina, Carla and the audience working in concert, ancestry was realized. Africa became something more than a homogenous continent. Gina (the producer) was able to easily translate claims of ancestry to Carla (the consumer) due to her present proclivities. Ancestry was then reproduced through the interplay of Gina and Carla, and the participation of other audience members—“Nigerian” and otherwise—who cheered and clapped for Carla as she received her results, making her Yoruba ancestry appear to fit “naturally,” legitimizing the literal and metaphorical return home for a biogenetic “family reunion.” Furthermore, Carla’s immediate response to her ancestry—screaming with excitement and her unthinking willingness to receive hugs from people who, in other contexts, might be considered strangers—affirmed the emotional viability of this particular

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form of ancestry that African Ancestry provides for the black racial demographic overwhelmingly represented in the audience.

As the celebration came to a close, I manned my station at the African Ancestry information table. There, more often than not, people would flock to order an ancestry kit at the discounted price of \$225 (as opposed to \$350) and the exclusive Road Tour T-shirt I was sporting to become members of African Ancestry's African ancestry family that I, the rest of the Road Crew, as well as new initiates like Carla, represented. Many of the women ordered the matrilineal test to have their mitochondrial DNA analyzed, though some bought the patrilineal test for a male relative. Men, able to take both tests, would sometimes choose between purchasing one or both tests. If facing the former dilemma, in which case they would have to choose between the matrilineal or the patrilineal test, and were unsure which route to go, they would often ask, "Which one [ancestry test] is better?" Usually referring to "better" as the test is most likely to show African ancestry results, I would tell them the matrilineal test—92 percent among matrilineal tests taken versus 65 percent among patrilineal test taken. Nevertheless, there was always a risk that this particular interpretation of the statistic would not be relevant to each individual consumer—even for the matrilineal tests taken, eight percent of tests did not find African ancestry. But as Gina had described in the presentation, this did not mean that African ancestry, as African Ancestry has produced it, was unattainable; rather there remained the possibility of finding it in the future through examination of a different lineage which was predicated on the purchase of another kit from the same company.

Through Gina's careful pedagogy of African Ancestry's brand of ancestry, using color coded symbols that are made intelligible through the reveal performance, the market value of this

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form of biocapital was realized, and through purchase, could be acquired through the exchange of money at a price that had over the course of the event, proven its worth.

Conclusion

To conclude this paper, I refer back to my initial impressions of working at African Ancestry.

Erika and I were the two summer interns working in the office. Though each of us had respective projects to work on—Erica, a recent high-school graduate who was about to go to college in a few months having earned a full-scholarship, managed the social media; I tried to help Gina organize the logistics of the Road Tour—being a member of the African Ancestry, Inc. “family” also entailed helping out with any and all other areas whenever and wherever possible, which included answering phones.

When I spoke with prospective African Ancestry customers, there were varied ways in which they would ask about the product. Some would ask for a general description of genetic ancestry testing or the company itself; others would inquire about the price—sometimes hanging up the phone immediately when they heard the \$309 price tag (which included shipping and handling); others would ask how they might have their DNA tested. The most striking response that I received, however, was, “Yes, I’d like to get my DNA done.”

It’s an interesting proposition—a person casually requesting to have their genome “done”—one that I, prior to that moment, associated with cosmetic surgery. It has become commonplace to consult a local Dr. 90210 on how to proceed toward a potential procedure to augment, reduce and/or lift anything and everything from one’s hairline to one’s thighs. But the *genome*? How had the double helix emerged as a source and subject of recreational aesthetic transformation? In what ways could one’s sequence of over three billion nucleotides, arranged in

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a unique array of adenines, thymines, guanines and cytosines in 23 chromosomes and
mitochondrion, be reconstructed?

After working in the office and on the “We Are Africa” Road Tour, I think I can provide some insight into the way in which genetics is being reconstructed in the context of genetic ancestry testing. As demonstrated by the story of African Ancestry’s inception and the creation of the collective “we” of the Road Tour, we are living in a time in which race, and race histories are neither purely socially constructed nor purely biologically based. Rather, race, which continues to emerge in relation to discourses of the “body,” can be understood as a salient biosocial reality. American notions of race are deeply embedded in the production of genetic information. And while many scholars have discussed concerns about the genetic reification of race—with good reason—based on my fieldwork with African Ancestry, I argue that we must first acknowledge there is a multiplicity of race and race histories being circulated through this biotechnology. African Ancestry has a unique market niche not only because of their company name, but also because they construct ancestry, specifically African ancestry, within an American race history from an *African-American* perspective. As a result, scholars should more appropriately ask, “What form of race is being reified within a genetic context?” African Ancestry, like other companies, trace ancestry to a historical period of 500-10,000 years ago—a temporally exclusive sampling methodology that is informative to American racial categories—but African Ancestry qualifies African ancestry through its own sampling so augments the representation of Africa. Indeed, by historicizing racial blackness, notions of Africa are problematized by qualifying Africa within the context of contemporary country(ies) and people(s) in these countries, which reshape understandings of racial identities and racial histories that are used to construct those identities.

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Multiple representations of ancestry are illustrated even as African Ancestry attempts to construct ancestry for one racial category. The Road Tour was marketed to an explicitly black racial demographic, and yet how this imagined racially black “we” with whom a biogenetic relationship to Africa would come into being, was constantly hanging in the balance. African Ancestry’s partnerships with black institutions that were characteristically Afrocentric made an assumed biogenetic relationship between racial blackness and Africa more obvious. Yet, other sponsorships with institutions that were bastions of the black community such as a black church and historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) like Fisk University and Alabama A&M University, suggested that blackness did not assume Africa but could be put in relation to Africa, even in the context of genetics. Additionally, by partnering with companies with a mainstream consumer base like Cracker Barrel and Road Scholar, the “we” with whom an assumed biogenetic relationship to Africa emerged was also contingent on non-racially black agents. As a result to move a discourse of race and genetics productively forward through an analysis of genetic ancestry testing, we must treat our object of inquiry not as “*the* ancestry” but “*a representation* of ancestry” (and additionally not “*the* race” but “*a representation* of race”) that shifts at different times and in different spaces among social agents.

As a result, we are then equally obligated to consider the motivation for these emerging representations of ancestry and race in the context of genetics. African Ancestry, a company founded and operated by two African-Americans, puts nature to work in an attempt to rewrite the “African”-ness of their African identity. Due to the atrocity of the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, so often Africa, for people of African descent in the United States, is Sub-Saharan Africa or some elusive origin in West and Central Africa. But knowledge about a more specific origin—a country and group of people with whom one share’s ancestry—which, as evidenced by Rick’s

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story, many people want to know, has remained unattainable until now. Now in an age where biotechnology is increasingly utilized to understand the self, an African-American geneticist can emerge to fill a void in one's historical genealogy by examining one's genetic genealogy. Rick, acting in his self-interests, considering his own particular race history, made connections between certain genetically and historically objective information: mitochondrial DNA and the Y-chromosome follow sex-specific inheritance patterns, and the African-American racial identity assumes descent from at least one ancestor from Africa, more specifically, West and Central Africa. And through meticulous sampling of different groups of people in these regions of Africa who contributed to the trans-Atlantic slave trade—collection of over 25,000 African lineages to ensure results statistically sound—a new biosocial representation of African ancestry emerges and consequently broadens understandings of what a black racial identity can be in America.

Now are these intentions behind a company's representation of genetic ancestry, particularly in relation to race, made explicit? For African Ancestry, the answer is an undeniable yes. As evidenced by the road tour presentation, Gina carefully and clearly describes how the company constructs ancestry and their purpose for their representation thoroughly and intelligibly to the lay audience members. Their political subjectivity is made known, particularly in relation to their target demographic, a group to which they belong and consider when they are putting genetics to work, even in the midst of acquiring a profit. Whether other companies do the same requires greater ethnographic fieldwork that escapes the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, considering how race and genetics are becoming mutually constituted through this biotechnology, it is an important question for scholars to raise, particularly for issues of ethics and potential points of exploitation. Genetic ancestry testing industry is predicated on a market guided by political economies of race, and scholars must consider not only how a form of race

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There are, however, other means of illustrating how DNA is getting done through genetic ancestry testing, which extends beyond the scope of this paper. According to feminist anthropologists Sylvia Yanagisako and Carol Delaney, “A productive question is to ask how culturally-specific domains have been dialectically formed and transformed in relation with other cultural domains, how meanings migrate across domain boundaries, and how specific actions are multiply constituted” (1995:11). To better understand the relationship between race and genetics, which I argue is continually in negotiation, it would be also be productive to incorporate how kinship is enacted. As demonstrated by the hugs Carla gave and received at her reveal, notions of exclusion and inclusion also put ancestry to work. Additionally, considering notions of transnationalism would prove useful theoretically. In the creation of African Ancestry, and more explicitly demonstrated through the Road Tour, the representation of Africa traverses the continent’s geographic boundaries, and is being remade by African-American, not exclusively African, actors, which further complicate what genetic ancestry, race, and genetic information can be.

Indeed, by expanding the scale of analysis, as I have done ethnographically for this paper and hope to do in the future, I call us to consider that in an age of biosociality, race is still socially constructed but so too is scientific information about race. We must then consider that the meaning of race, of science, and of the relationship between the two, is infused with social, historical, and political subjectivities that are being negotiated by many social agents in relation to one another.

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Victoria Massie

Paper: (Re)Connection: Networking African American Identity in Genetic Ancestry Testing

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Figure 1: “We Are Africa” 2010 Road Tour Road Crew



Photo Credit: Kea Taylor, Imagine Photography

(From left to right): Gina Paige, Ralston Smith, Victoria Massie (me), Kea Taylor. The Road Crew posing at the Ashe Cultural Center in New Orleans, La.

Figure 2: Dr. Gene Sankoka



Dr. Gene Sankofa (a.k.a. Rick Kittles bobblehead) posed in the French Quarter of New Orleans, La.

ⁱ As anthropologists find themselves exploring new ethnographic terrain that call for indirectly recording one's fieldwork, such as the marketing campaign to which I found myself a part, it may be worth examining the repercussions this may have on ethnographic data collection.

ⁱⁱ I use power as it is related to social capital and empowerment, both individually and collectively, as suggested by ethnographic interviews that I have conducted thus far. How that power is negotiated, however, remains to be seen.

ⁱⁱⁱ Family refers to those within African Ancestry's network, which includes staff, customers, test takers, and others interested in ancestry as offered by the company.

^{iv} This can be found on the "We Are Africa" Road Tour website:

<http://www.africanancestry.com/roadtour/>.

^v There were reveals that were "unsuccessful." Regardless of the measures taken by Gina—for instance asking participants to take a matrilineal test because it is statistically more likely to show African results—some reveals, though very few, did not trace back to Africa, which was a risk from a marketing standpoint. However, the interpretation of this information as "successful" or "unsuccessful" was also depended upon the consumer. Some revealers, dressed in African garb were disappointed to find Native American ancestry. Others, who found the same type of ancestry, would not be so easily discontented. The success of some reveals, even if it traced back to Africa, was contingent upon the participant's emotional response to the information. Further work will be done to take better account of the multiple factors contributing to a "successful" reveal.