

Somatosphere Presents

A Book Forum on

**The Social Life of DNA: Race, Reparations, and
Reconciliation after the Genome
by Alondra Nelson**

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In [The Social Life of DNA: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation After the Genome](#), Alondra Nelson traces the multiple ways in which genetic testing and related technologies have become entangled in contemporary debates, projects, politics, and interventions surrounding race in the United States. This wide-ranging and incisive book manages the difficult task of being a key addition to the scholarly literatures on race, science, and society, at the same time as it reaches out to broader, non-specialist audiences. We are very happy to offer the following commentaries on this important book.



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The Big Reveal, Thoughts on The Social Life of DNA

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I read Alondra Nelson's powerful book in Buenos Aires, a pinnacle example of the use of DNA testing for political restitution, where I was surprised to read that the front-page news case of the adopted children of the *Clarín* newspaper owners was finally settled. Adopted during the height of Argentina's political dictatorship, the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo had long insisted they be tested, suspecting they were one of the many children appropriated from disappeared families, the same process that had led to the discovery of over one hundred disappeared children. The grown adopted children, however, had vehemently refused the test, engaging in a long dispute that I was surprised to see announced as "settled." After a battle that dragged on for over a decade, the forced DNA test had finally settled the issue: the *Clarín* children lacked linkages with living disappeared relatives and were thereby legitimately adopted by their parents. Yet I place "settled" in parenthesis because, as Alondra Nelson observes concerning DNA, while a lot may be revealed, little is ever settled.

This is because DNA is always about politics. The *Clarín* children's case was all the more political because it evoked the similarly long struggle between Cristina Kirchner's more socialist Peronist policies and *Clarín*, the newspaper most aligned with the country's pro-capital right-wing elites. The fact that the judge's "settlement" was announced a month into the Presidency of Mauricio Macri, the unabashedly pro-business, neoliberal new president-elect, was also very political. It represented a "win" for *Clarín*, and for Argentina's right, and a devaluation of the political integrity and work of the "Madres de Plaza de Mayo," which Cristina Kirchner had patronized and, some argued, exploited for political means. That the test was conducted by Banco Nacional de Datos Genéticos, the only institution carrying out genetic testing in the country, also raised many questions about the accuracy of the tests, and the intersection of DNA and contemporary politics.

It is these kinds of questions that are triggered by Nelson's book, and, in relation to the *Clarín* children's case, questions about those who don't want to be found, tested, and revealed. In particular, I kept thinking about the implications of the popularization of a technology, that while limited and highly speculative, has become the ultimate "big data," the ultimate truth. This to me is one of the most powerful issues raised by Nelson's book – the way in which the

popularization of DNA has made it almost impossible to evade questions of heritage – and the violence, terror, and racist past that almost always lies beneath such questions.

Ads for genealogy testing companies like Ancestry.com promise the discovery of instant social communities. Viewers are urged, “Come find me,” “I clicked and there you were,” “Just one leaf will lead you,” while the website’s soft music and similarly softly colored background promote ease, harmony, and discovery, and an instant solution to loneliness and meaninglessness. But the fact is that few ancestry reveals will yield happy endings; one click could be the determining “big reveal.” This is perhaps why scores of Puerto Rican families, my mother included, refused to recall their ancestry to their children, leading generations to wonder “Y Tu Abuela, Dónde Está?” This popular reckoning of “where is your grandmother” was a vernacular response to a legacy of racist *blanqueamiento* policies and the ensuing cultural amnesia over matters of race on an island where everyone recalled their Spanish forebears, but never their Taino or African ones, and where many people forgot, because few could don “Spanish” forebears.

Nelson’s book brings these matters to the forefront, urging that the popularization of DNA testing cannot be analyzed in isolation of the social and political economic contexts that force histories to be covert, and populations historically displaced, whether through slavery, genocide, colonization or everyday forms of empire. Nor can the social impact of DNA be gauged without accounting for the ideologies of race, nation and empire – from *blanqueamiento* to *mestizaje* to contemporary pluralism – that forge cultural amnesia. In a similar manner, Nelson carefully establishes that the social life of DNA is always about politics, and its big reveal will always be similarly political: whether it is the terror of the disappeared, as in the Clarín children’s case in Argentina, or the politics of race in Puerto Rico and elsewhere across the Americas.

For sure, Nelson cautions us that DNA’s currency can lead to the racialization of culture, through the tendency to assign “racial” and cultural value to rediscovered bits of one’s heritage. I’m thinking here of a friend’s “DNA cousin” (an Irish born and raised woman) who discovered her “musical rhythm” upon learning she had Puerto Rican ancestry. But readers of *The Social Life of DNA: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation after the Genome* will have a lot more to think about upon reading this book. Especially if we follow Nelson’s provocation to think about DNA matters in terms of today’s politics, exploring its different social uses and politics to uncover its multiple big reveals.

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"Are These the Bones of Blacks?" An African American Social Construction of Justice

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In May of 2016, President Barack Hussein Obama, the first Black President of the United States, signed a legislative amendment banning the use of 'Negro' from federal documents. The amendment replaced the word Negro with 'African-American' and imposed other changes in nomenclature for the "modernization of terms relating to minorities."^[1] These changes speak to the social construction of racial identity, in particular, the way naming—naming oneself and being named—is a tool wielded in the present-day that sifts the residue of past trauma with an eye toward mining future social relations. In stunning detail, *The Social Life of DNA: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation after the Genome* outlines the ways genetic technology has been used in discussions around reparations, reconciliation, and representations of African American history to do something similar. Nelson demonstrates that DNA, like nomenclature, is far from neutral, and the DNA molecule does not comprise unbiased, discrete bits of data. DNA, in fact, is meaningless outside of a social context. Nelson argues lawyers, scientists, scholars, genealogists, community organizers and activists using genetic data to correct the continued presence of slavery's violence in financial, legal, educational and penal institutions today gave it a significant and powerful social context--DNA as a technology of justice and restitution.

In *The Social Life of DNA*, Nelson draws ties between a number of phenomena. From activists using genetic data to obtain information on the "Negros Burial Ground" uncovered in Manhattan and protests which led to its commemoration as the African Burial Ground National Monument; to the formation of the genetic testing company African Ancestry by Rick Kittles, to the history of reparations from 1865 (with General William T. Sherman issuing Special Field Order #15) into the 21st-century with the court case filed in 2002 by Deadria Farmer-Paellmann and seven other plaintiffs against eighteen corporations involved in slavery or the slave trade. Nelson also explores the cultural phenomenon of the DNA "ancestry reveal" and DNA diasporas created by individuals who, after receiving their DNA tests, forged new, if complicated, affiliations with communities and countries across the African continent as a result. Each instance, layered and connected to the next, reveals much about ideas of justice and race in the United States. And nowhere can DNA be reduced to pure nodes of data. Instead,

as Nelson argues, the social life of DNA is rooted in the impact of chattel slavery on the United States, and the legacy of disenfranchisement, racial inequality, and carceral violence it left behind.

Nelson's book is part of a tradition of people of African descent troubling the nineteenth-century biological determinism of the one-drop rule and the binary between scientific and humanistic study. In 1991, the discovery of the Negroes Burial Ground in Manhattan became a moment when these challenges bore some fruit. The 1990s were an important decade for the study of slavery more broadly. Historical debates around ethnicity versus race pushed the boundaries of rudimentary understandings of blackness and identity. Scholars like Ira Berlin, David Eltis, Michael Gomez, Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, Paul Lovejoy, John Thornton and others argued that the African experience of slavery in the Americas required *at least* two points of analysis. First, an examination of the lives of the enslaved as dynamic, placed in time and place historical context with all of its generational ebbs and flows. Second, an immersive engagement with the experience of Africans on the continent as part of the experience of Africans arriving in the Americas and therefore crucial to understanding how Afro-Atlantic communities across the ocean formed. By 2004, the multi-episode PBS documentary, *Slavery and the Making of America* would premiere, outlining a history that centered Africans men, women, and children (in all of their ethnic and regional diversity and difference) as the making of the United States. A year later, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture would launch its phenomenal exhibit, catalogue book, and digital project, *In Motion: The African American Migration Experience*, under the direction of Howard Dodson (chairman of the Advisory Council on the African Burial Ground in 1992) and Sylviane Diouf.

Nelson's text reminds, however, that as late as 1992, there was nothing unscientific about viewing a set of bones and determining, from shape and texture only, whether or not these were the bones of blacks—in other words, the forensic study of bones to determine skin color or race was common and privileged. Moving the excavation and the study of the 419 individuals uncovered at the Negroes Burial Ground from the Metropolitan Forensic Anthropology Team at Lehman College (CUNY) to Howard University allowed the Howard Lab to employ a different methodology. Nelson notes the change in methodology as moving from “an epistemology of racial classification to an epistemology of ethnicity (and therefore, also ancestry).” The methodology deployed used craniometric analysis, dental morphology, and molecular genetic assessment to piece together evidence of African ethnicity and historical context. Instead of destroying the site, the Howard Lab also involved historians,

anthropologists, and archaeologists who could speak to the material evidence found around the bones themselves—the cardinal direction bodies were buried in, carvings on the coffins (some were determined to be West African Adinkra symbols, including the Sankofa symbol), items like buttons or cowrie shells found with the dead—and explain or explore these as potentially historical markers of African lifeways, ritual practices, and kinship rituals reappearing in the Americas and redefined by enslaved and free people of African descent.

Most important, Nelson describes this shift as occurring as a result of political organizing. Scientists from historically black Howard University's Cobb Laboratory were concerned about the destruction of the site, which appeared to destroy contextual evidence and the bones themselves. Community activists (like Deadria Farmer-Paellmann, who organized a protest at the site to stop construction) and members of New York's African-descended community, including descendants of those buried at the site, likewise demanded a true commemoration and accused the city of attempting to bury important history. In *The Social Life of DNA*, the discovery of the Negroes Burial Ground and the creation of the African Burial Ground National Monument becomes a powerful origin story. Rick Kittles, who later founded the genetic testing company African Ancestry, worked as a geneticist on the project at the Howard Lab. Farmer-Paellmann, who would join others in suing several major corporations for reparations, was an activist in New York and helped organize stop-construction protests at the site. And history, in fact, as Nelson takes care to point out, was itself invoked as a matter of social justice. Farmer-Paellmann's demand, "We want to be a whole people," referred to claims on material wealth made by corporations involved in slaving as much as to histories and genealogies lost and broken by slave traders, slaveowners, and everyone who benefitted from chattel bondage. As Nelson notes, reparations activists charged genocide, and identity was being claimed as a human right.

In this, the Negroes Burial Ground forms an explanatory bridge. Genetic testing, by restoring African Americans to their past, their descendants enslaved in the United States, or their African ancestry more broadly, became a tool for social justice which also *outlined the terms of what that justice entailed*. Scientists, empowered with new methodologies and, then, transgressive claims about race and histories of slavery, used DNA to embolden these claims. They helped transform a cacophony of bones into the enslaved and ancestral dead. Genetic data provided researchers a clue to the time, place, and ethnicity of the enslaved. The social justice was also the extent to which the newly identified dead could be used by descendants to grieve the horrors of slavery, force businesses and public institutions to reconcile with the

slaveholding past in affective and material ways through reparations, and provide descendants a sense of roots and identity understood to be lost or denied by the violence of slavery.

However, genetic testing, as noted by Nelson, is also “Janus-faced.” Databases of genetic material used for DNA testing are limited. Tests are only as accurate as their databases. But because science is constructed as neutral, hard, and determinate, using genetic data has the potential to disconnect African Americans from oral or archival family histories. It may also be wielded against reparations plaintiffs in court cases. At the same time, and it is here that Nelson demonstrates her deep care for the genealogical and DNA diaspora communities being studied, Nelson finds power and promise in the hands of individuals and communities, in the way genetic testing gives shape to African Americans' dreams of freedom already in existence. Individuals using the kits, according to Nelson, often do combine the data received with existing or on-going work in archives or with oral family histories. African Americans, in this study, remain savvy, creative, and skeptical of hard results, instead creating diasporic affiliations in response to their "genealogical aspirations." This is the labor of kinship, the powerful work at the heart of community formation, and part of a tradition of resistance to losing kith and kin and lineage. And in *The Social Life of DNA*, this creative work of making family and history with—and in spite of—the resources available is foregrounded as intellectual, scientific, and theoretical. Drawing on Jacqueline Nassy Brown, Nelson describes genetic technology as a "diasporic resource" mobilized and given shape through individuals and communities who utilize it. Whether in kits purchased from African Ancestry or in court cases filed against insurance magnates, African Americans' creativity, hope, and active resistance against injustice shapes the social life of DNA.

In this, *The Social Life of DNA* is deeply committed to and accountable to those now deemed African American, to their practice of self-making and modes of resistance. This accountability makes Nelson's beautiful and important book an example of the best kind of social justice research. It is what black studies scholarship should strive to be.

Note

[1] These changes include use of the word 'Oriental' to 'Asian American' and 'American Indian' to 'Native American.'

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Molecular Biological Ambivalences

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As someone who has written rather skeptically about commercial Personal Genomic History services targeting African American consumers, what I find most remarkable about Nelson's book is her intellectual honesty. Nelson goes to great length in demonstrating how the "master's tools" (in this case genomic technologies and their inferential architectures) might be mobilized – not so much to dismantle the master's house, as to rearrange its furniture. The aim in this is to enable novel forms of reckoning with past injustice and present injury, so as to achieve a measure of reconciliation. Given the unassailable discriminatory power publicly invested in genomic information (not the least in the sphere of criminal forensics!), it is perhaps only logical that the technologies productive of such information would come to be harnessed to a wide variety of projects among African Americans. Such projects range from individual attempts to restore (or create) a genealogical sense of "rootedness" and transatlantic kinship obliterated by the violence of slavery, to highly publicized ventures at setting the record straight (such as the eventual corroboration of Jefferson's fathering at least one of Sally Hemings's children), to public debates about commemorating the victims of slavery (e.g. in the context of New York City's African Burial Ground), and on to innovative strategies of establishing collective legal "standing" in the case of the Reparations Movement.

But Nelson also repeatedly pulls back, aware as she is of the "Janus-faced" nature of the "ultimate" (but in themselves meaningless) "big data" that have come to inform contemporary attempts to retrieve history by molecular biological – and that is: fundamentally ahistorical – means. Does knowing Venture Smith's genomic data tell us anything beyond – or, to rephrase the question: anything more *significant* – than what he himself wrote about his life? Does Nelson's own eventual genomic "reveal" add anything to her own sense of self? The anguished tone of her description of the latter ritual (and a ritual it is, borrowing its genre conventions from – of all things – American reality TV) bespeaks both her fundamental humanistic hopes invested in, and doubts concerning, the divinatory instrument – genomic science – that appears to issue verdicts as impartial as they are notionally truthful (never mind the black boxes of "proprietary data bases": the science behind all this is, in itself, so complex as to invite reactive enchantment on the part of its consumers, anyway).

It is this ambivalence that grows from an understanding of both the principally amoral quality of the scientific process and its possibilities for ambiguous social moralization that I most value about Nelson's book. Nelson is fair to all of her constituents and audiences – including academic stakeholders like me or her mentor Troy Duster who expressed worries about a “backdoor to eugenics” or a reinvigoration of what Karen and Barbara Fields aptly called American “racecraft” by genomic means. But that is not to say that “racecraft” cannot be turned upon itself, at least to some degree. Not that this would be a radical move. It may be an attempt at melioration, in the spirit, perhaps, of W.E.B. DuBois's attempts to put the – then equally novel – science of sociology in the service of resolving what was then known as America's “Negro Problem,” or of Melville J. Herskovits's efforts to recover black Americans' African Past (rather than in the tradition of, say, Marcus Garvey, Frantz Fanon, Malcolm X, or the Black Panther Party). As we all know, such science, sociological or anthropological, perhaps achieved little in the short run. But it arguably contributed to the protracted struggle for Civil Rights and the emergence of new forms of black political consciousness in the 1960s.

Paraphrasing Bob Marley, genomics might genuinely help some people, some of the time, especially if they are economically empowered to consume the identity goods that it offers. But it won't help all of the people all of the time. This is yet another story. Still, given that the so-called “colorblind” racism of the early 21st century exemplifies how – as de Tocqueville had presciently argued – American racism would retreat into “customs” once purged from the law, a serious reflection on the kind of genomically driven anti-anti-essentialism that Nelson's book exemplifies is called for at this juncture.

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Genetic Ancestry as an Optic: Reconciliation Revised, Diaspora Revived

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Throughout Alondra Nelson's book *The Social Life of DNA*, we learn that what matters about genetic ancestry testing is not the extent of its scientific accuracy or its efficacy in achieving the goals to which it is applied, but rather where and how it focuses our attention. Genetic ancestry thus is not only a technology that can be used towards disparate goals, but also an optic through which we might learn to see differently.

Much of Nelson's text examines a series of what she terms "reconciliation projects" that use genetic ancestry to accomplish more than just extended kinship connections; these illustrate the central concept of the book, "the social life of DNA," which describes how DNA travels, how and by whom it is taken up, and to what ends. Her examples of the use of genetic ancestry to address the ongoing injuries of slavery are incredibly compelling and tell a story in which genetic ancestry's development and increasingly varied application is inexorably intertwined with African American history and pursuits of racial justice. What becomes visible through the prism of genetic ancestry, Nelson argues, is racial inequality. What matters then about genetic ancestry testing is its ability to bring racial inequality into focus in a cultural milieu that insistently clings to "color-blindness" as a desirable achievement and the "post-racial" as something that has already been achieved. No matter, then, that Deadria Farmer-Paellmann's reparations lawsuit was dismissed, despite the fact that it utilized genetic ancestry testing to establish explicit links between African American plaintiffs and African ethnic groups in an attempt to demonstrate their standing to bring suit against companies that had profited from the slave trade. The case kept the question of reparations in public conversation and consciousness. Furthermore, the use of genetic ancestry to establish standing, combined with widespread public perception of genetic evidence as more true than other forms of evidence (what Nelson refers to as "the social power of DNA"), ensured that many people could see more clearly an explicit, direct link between the plaintiffs and their enslaved ancestors, even if the court could not.

What also becomes visible through the optic of genetic ancestry is a revitalization of diaspora that is animated through particular images of Africa. Genetic ancestry has breathed new life into how people produce and contest diasporic connection, and how Africa is envisioned in the process. For example, in my work on the afterlives of genetic ancestry research studies, Africa simultaneously came into focus for different people as a site of Jewish diaspora and as a site of Jewish origin (Tamarkin 2014). The phenomenon that Nelson investigates brings Africa into focus in a different way. Nelson demonstrates that through personalized genetic ancestry test reports, Africa comes into focus as a static map of ethnic groups that links ancestry seekers to ethnic identities that are in turn linked to particular places. Reading Nelson's accounts of interlocutors who began to learn about or travel to the specific African countries to which they had been genetically matched, I was reminded of Paulla Ebron's book *Performing Africa* (2002), which includes an ethnographic account of African American heritage tourism to Senegambia that took place before the popularization and widespread availability of direct-to-consumer genetic ancestry testing products. The tour that Ebron writes about was framed to participants as a pilgrimage home. It strikes me that the "home" envisioned through this pre-genetic ancestry heritage tour was constituted as such as a generalized image of Africa. To what extent, and to what end, does the optic of genetic ancestry focus attention to a different, more specific, and yet inevitably still generalized, "home"? Nelson argues that genetic information works as a diasporic resource (Brown 2005) that "occasions the weaving of a social mesh between African communities and their dispersed members, even in the absence of specific kinship ties" (Nelson 2016: 145). But it struck me that one of the most enthusiastic African responses to the invitation to become socially enmeshed with African American genetic ancestry test-takers came not from Africans encountered through heritage tourism but rather from an Angolan expatriate community in a U.S. city. The expatriate community sponsored an event in the U.S. that celebrated the anniversary of Angola's independence. Marvin, who lived in the same U.S. city and who had recently learned of his genetic ancestral affinity with Mbundu people in Angola, was invited. Upon arrival at the celebration, he was welcomed "home" (Nelson 2016: 144). In this vision of home, how is Africa envisioned? This vision of genetically-mediated home appears to be not a place at all but social enmeshment itself. In this way, the optic of genetic ancestry testing brings into focus a multi-directional African diaspora in which the meaning of "home" is anything but fixed, even while Africa as a place comes into focus as a series of ethnicities fixed in time and space.

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