# GeneTiC AnCesTry TesTing As An eThniC opTion

by alondra nelson

Combating color-blind racism requires the restoration of color-*vision*—the return of visibility of inequality. In this "post-racial," post-genomic moment, DNA offers the unique and paradoxical possibility of magnifying issues of inequality quite literally at a microscopic level.

Diasporic Blacks in the United States are engaged in a constellation of activities in which information about their ancestral origins—inferred with the aid of genetic analysis—is deployed to bring racism's past and present into view. DNA is a contradictory lexicon for a political moment at which the moral language of social justice increasingly falls on unsympathetic ears.

In 1991 archeologists uncovered several graves on a plot in lower Manhattan. The unearthed burials turned out to be the "Negro Burying Ground," a former municipal cemetery for the city's enslaved African population. The rediscovery of this Colonial-era burial ground, with its promise of rare insight into the life and death of enslaved men and women in New York, was an occurrence of historical import.

Following exhumation, the contents of the gravesites were brought to the Lehman College (NY) laboratory for investigation, where the method of analysis consisted primarily of osteology—the scientific measurement of the skeletal remains—and the broad classification of them into several categories, including stature, age, sex, and race. This forensic approach was and remains standard practice among some physical anthropologists and was the perspective that the Lehman researchers brought to the project.

Other researchers, however, including those at Howard University—a historically Black university, found this strictly forensic mode of analysis and interpretation inadequate to the historical significance of the cemetery. Detractors of the Lehman approach, including influential African American physical anthropologist Michael Blakey, who would soon be appointed the project's new director, contended that the Lehman approach was unduly preoccupied with gross racial classification of the sort also used for criminal justice purposes. He further maintained that this methodology reduced the individuals in the burials to "narrow typologies" and thinly "descriptive variables," and thereby "disassociated" them from their "particular culture or history."

Local activists felt similarly. A group who referred to themselves as the Descendants of the African Burial Ground, for example, expressed their opposition to any forensic analysis of the remains that would yield classification of them solely by "skin color"; the activists argued that such an interpretation amounted to the "biological racing" of their ancestors' remains. Together, the community and the Howard-based researchers pushed for interpretive approaches that would generate more than gross racial sorting of the remains.

Scholar Stephen Jay Gould and others have documented the comparative scientific "mismeasurement" of bodies, from lung capacity to crania to genes—with white bodies serving as the norm against which all others are measured—that has long been employed to advance deliberate and erroneous claims about Black inferiority. Against the backdrop of this bitter legacy of biological discrimination, supporters of the Howard researchers' analytic method of interpretation sought to upend this history by using biometrics alongside other forms of both scientific and humanistic analysis in order to glean new information about the embodied experience of slavery as well as the particular African origins of some of the earliest Black Americans.

The eventual siting of the African Burial Ground research project at Howard, in response to pressure from the local community, marked not only a new temporary home for the remains while they were being analyzed but, moreover, a fundamental change in the framing of how and why the research was conducted.

If the question undergirding the investigations of the Lehman lab could be summarized as "are these the bones of Blacks?" the Howard researchers, to the contrary, sought answers to a more extensive set of questions, including "what are the origins of the population, what was their physical quality of life, and what can the site reveal about the biological and cultural transition from African to African-American identities?"

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Blakey's team hoped to use the rediscovery of these rare remnants of Black colonial life as an opportunity to more fully detail knowledge about how those buried at the African cemetery in lower Manhattan lived and died. At the Howard lab, in other words, the research orientation was shifted from an epistemology of racial classification to an epistemology of ethnicity (and therefore, also ancestry).

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## restoring ethnic options

According to historian Michael Gomez, the Africans brought to the Americas as slaves during the Middle Passage underwent a "transition, from a socially stratified, ethnically-based identity directly tied to a specific land, to an identity predicated on the concept of race." In the process, they "exchanged their country marks"—their myriad ethnicities—for a generic, subordinate and collective racial category. Race would in subsequent years become a "master status" for African Americans, a caste location.

Underscoring Gomez's point from a later historical vantage, sociologist Mary Waters notes that "Black Americans... are highly constrained to identify as blacks, without other options available to them, even when they believe or know that their forebears included many non-blacks." Thus the opening up of long-denied "ethnic options" to African Americans promised by genetic inference was a potential social watershed.

The African Burial Ground project was among the earliest and most public uses of genetic comparison to infer ancestral associations and ethnic affiliations in the United States. This research and, African Ancestry, the commercial venture it launched, established the groundwork for the social life of DNA; research on the recovered cemetery became a paradigm for how genetics could be used to constitute identity and reconstruct the past, for the circulation of genetic claims beyond the laboratory and the court of law.

The controversy that transpired over excavation methods and research priorities at the centuries'-old African Burial Ground reveals how genetics—despite its vexed trajectory in Black life—can become the building blocks for reconciliation projects that resuscitate public memory of chattel slavery, that shed light on its devastating effects into the present, and that may portend the future of American racial politics.

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# how biology supports Gender As A soCiAl ConsTruCTion

by kristen springer

One of the first things asked of any new parent is whether the baby is a boy or a girl. "Gender-reveal" parties are an increasing fad involving events such as slicing a cake to find pink or blue underneath the frosting. Biological sex is now routinely determined in advance of birth either through chromosome tests or ultrasound. However, it isn't the biology per se that people are interested in—as evidenced by the name "gender" reveal party not "sex" reveal party. Rather, biological identification (sex) signals how the new person will likely be treated and expected to act, and even what its life chances are.

Sociologists, as well as anthropologists and gender scholars, have long bristled at the conflation of sex (biology) and gender assignment (culture), especially to the extent that the latter continues to evoke an array of cultural myths about gender differences that are believed to be rooted in biology—such as men and women having different kinds of intelligence. A high profile example of this thinking is from the now decade-old statement by former Harvard president Lawrence Summers suggesting that fewer women are in engineering in large part because of "intrinsic" (read biological) aptitude differences in math.

> Paying attention to the biological sameness of men and women rather than the difference illuminates just how much social and structural factors (not biological factors) create the idea of men and women as different.

Sociologists have worked diligently (and effectively) to demonstrate that biology is not destiny. However, this does not mean that biology is unimportant for sociological understandings of gender. Indeed, based on my reading and research, I think there are many fruitful ways that biological research can illuminate our understanding of social patterns around gender, but not in the causal way presumed in much research as well as what passes for "common