THE REVIEW

# Henry Louis Gates's Extended Family

*By Alondra Nelson* February 12, 2010

**Malcolm Gladwell hears some shocking news in Gates's latest PBS show.** BROOKE WILLIAMS

In "Root Worker," a short story by Edward P. Jones, a chronically ill African-American woman who migrated to Washington, D.C., from North Carolina returns to the South with her husband and daughter, a physician, in search of the cure that has eluded her for decades in the North. The woman's suffering is assuaged at long last when she revisits the land and people that indelibly shaped her, including a local herbal healer.

Ostensibly one family's illness narrative, the story is also an allegory about how the experience of migration—whether forced through slavery, pogroms, or economic vulnerability, or motivated by hope for a better future—may generate a latent or conscious yen for community. That yearning manifests itself in many ways, from anomie to ethnic mutual-aid associations. Jones's tale offers some insight into the appeal of genealogy, another effort at reconnection with home and kin, and ballast against the tumult of modern living.

The current PBS documentary miniseries *Faces of America* traces the family histories of 12 prominent people who, over the course of several hours and with the aid of conventional and genetic genealogy, come to fasten their varied tribulations and successes to the arc of ancestry. Coproduced, hosted, and written by Henry Louis Gates Jr., director of the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research and professor at Harvard University, the series's subtitles—"The Promise of America," "Making America," "Becoming American," and "Know Thyself"—suggest assimilation, a "melting pot" rather than a "tossed salad" notion of the United States.

The series is the latest iteration of Gates's innovative, fascinating foray into the nexus of genealogy and genetic ancestry testing that began four years ago with *African American Lives* (and continued with *African American Lives 2* and *Oprah's Roots*). *Faces* expands on those outings in topic and technique, branching out from the genealogies of prominent blacks to those of a multiracial, multiethnic group of notables, including the actors Eva Longoria and Meryl Streep, the writers Louise Erdrich and Malcolm Gladwell, the musician Yo-Yo Ma, the poet and scholar Elizabeth Alexander, the comedian Stephen Colbert, and Gates himself.

Gates collaborates with genetic scientists, including Eric Lander and David Altshuler, of the Broad Institute of Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; the Harvard professor George Church, progenitor of the Personal Genome Project; and personal genomics companies such as 23andMe and Knome Inc. The show makes use of gene-sequencing techniques that have become widely available since *African American Lives* first aired, like whole-genome sequencing, which entails the mapping of all six billion base pairs in a person's DNA. On hand again is admixture analysis—testing that

probes a person's full nuclear DNA for genetic indicators said to be suggestive of ancestry; percentages of African, American Indian, European, or Asian descent are inferred from those "informative" markers.

Both conventional and genetic tracing yield unanticipated results in *Faces of America.* The surprising "reveals," coupled with the celebrities' raw reactions to the information conveyed by the host, deliver moments of high drama and genuine emotion. Gates's own genealogical narrative, unfurled against the backdrop of images of his family gathering in the kitchen or tender interactions with his nonagenarian father, Henry Louis Gates Sr., is also quite moving.

In some instances, we are left wanting to know much more. Amid discussion of Malcolm Gladwell's roots, Gates discloses that the best-selling author's Jamaican maternal ancestor, a free woman of color, owned slaves of African descent. That shocking news is relayed to Gladwell in an exchange pregnant with anxiety and uneasiness on the part of both men.

Discomfort is also experienced by the viewer. Yet no lens is provided through which to interpret this genealogical bombshell. Surely, most people of African descent do not expect to find a black slave owner in their family tree. Is this instance of intraracial slavery an anomaly? Because the series is so successful in demonstrating the intersections between world history and personal history, the lack of contextualization here is notable.

Historical evidence suggests that intraracial slavery was uncommon, and that when it did occur, sometimes free men and women of color purchased enslaved relatives and friends to rescue them from the cruelty of the chattel system, if not the social death of slave status. On other occasions, though it was rare, blacks did enslave other blacks for their labor.

One wishes that Gates, an inimitable literary scholar well before he became a pathbreaking Renaissance man, might have alluded to another of Edward P. Jones's works, *The Known World,* a historical novel exploring life in an antebellum community in which both blacks and whites hold black slaves, by way of even partial explanation. Or

even to the slave narrative of Venture Smith, in which blacks are purchased by other blacks for both slavery and freedom.

Even with the aid of cutting-edge 21st-century genealogy—digitized archival records and genetic analysis—we may never know the ins and outs of how Gladwell's fifth-great-grandmother came to be a slaveholder. As Elizabeth Alexander comments in *Faces* about her own family history, "We don't even know the half of it." That profound uncertainty makes it all the more troubling that Gladwell translates the peculiar institution into a personal burden. Such information "forces you to contemplate your own history," he observes.

If the findings of conventional genealogical research produce fireworks, the results of the DNA analysis generate shock and awe. "Know Thyself," the final episode, which shares its title with the slogan of Knome Inc., focuses mostly on genetic genealogy. Whereas prior shows relied heavily on analysis of mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) and Y-chromosome (Y-DNA), yielding results that included at most about 2 percent of one's complete genetic inheritance, in *Faces* techniques are used that probe deeper into more of the genome.

The technical aspects of genetic ancestry tracing are explained, but without sufficient social context, much the way a manual can tell you how to operate a car without explaining automobiles' role in modern industry, the development of suburbia, or the emergence of youth culture. We can't hold a documentary for a general audience responsible for not presenting a complex metanarrative on the philosophy of genetic science. But we can expect some acknowledgment and interpretation of technology's limits.

Each of the genetic analyses used in *Faces*—admixture analysis, haplotype grouping, and relative mapping—incorporate underlying assumptions and algorithms that may be incompatible with the other techniques. For example, while haplogroups—sets of single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNP's), which are gene-sequence variants that are inherited together and categorized by letter and number (A, L3D, R, U5b, etc.)—supply information about human population groups dating as far back as 150,000 years, the time horizon of admixture testing is the past 500 years. And, although full genome sequencing

is becoming more common and affordable, haplotype grouping relies upon the more narrow analysis of mtDNA and Y-DNA.

Moreover, these genetic techniques may be inconsistent with the aims of conventional genealogy. While assignment to the haplogroup L3x, for example, indicates an ancestor in what is now Ethiopia at least 50,000 years ago, this interesting detail does not fill in the contours of the family tree. DNA-derived genealogical information may also collide with other ways of rendering kinship and relation. The Native American writer Erdrich refuses to assent to genetic ancestry testing, because she understands her DNA to belong to her community. That belief is shared by Native groups that similarly objected to the Human Genome Diversity Project, as described in the work of Jenny Reardon and Kimberly TallBear.

Based on admixture testing, Longoria is told that she is 70 percent European, 27 percent Native American, and 3 percent African. Still, as the sociologist Troy Duster wrote in *The Chronicle Review* ("Deep Roots and Tangled Branches," February 3, 2006) regarding the use of this analysis in the first *African American Lives,* these tests "rel[y] excessively on the idea of 100-percent purity, a condition that could never have existed in human populations." We learn, too, that Yo-Yo Ma is "100 percent Asian," that Streep is "100 percent European," and, in a nod to comedy and to how quickly "ancestry" can become racial classification, that Colbert is "100 percent white man!" What is one to make of an "admixture" test that reveals no mixture at all?

As *Faces of America* concludes, the connections among several of the participants are revealed using a technique developed by Altschuler and his colleague Mark Daly that is similar to 23andMe's "Relative Finder." These "DNA cousins" share several million of the three billion base pairs, suggesting a common ancestor a few or tens of generations in the past. Alexander's relation to Colbert or Longoria's to Ma underscores a central theme of the series: Underlying the many faces of America is a fundamental genetic unity.

In 1974, Carol Stack's important ethnography *All Our Kin* (Harper & Row) suggested the plasticity of the designation "cousin" well beyond consanguinity. As I have written elsewhere, this new kinship category, DNA cousins, or what Gates calls "autosomal

cousins," suggests that flexible kinship is being made on the new (or is it the rather old) terrain of biology. In the face of migration and movement and so-called nontraditional family forms, both conventional and genetic genealogy allow us to freeze for a moment the flux of the modern human experience.

The forms of genealogical tracing that star in *Faces* function doubly: both splitting and lumping. Root seeking, on the one hand, produces idiosyncratic narratives. These American faces, we learn, are the descendants of colonialists, aboriginals, overseers, bondspeople, interned citizens, and religious pilgrims. Yet genealogy is, at the same time, put to the task of heightening awareness of human relatedness, be it experiential or biological.

Will we reach "consilience"—William Whewell's term for the combining of information from different domains toward the unity of knowledge—between conventional and genetic genealogy (and, moreover, among the types of genetic analysis at play)? That seems to be one of the program's aspirations. Time will tell. But it is clear, in any case, that we fully inhabit a "genealogical society"—to use the anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli's phrase. We delineate our individual and collective identities based upon inclusion in *and* exclusion from groups. The fruits of the unearthed family tree—historical coherence; redemptive narratives of migration and assimilation; intergenerational social mobility—are unevenly dispersed. We might think of *Faces of America*, then, as an allegory of the simultaneous diversity of our experiences and the deep interpenetration of our histories.

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