

## THE ELUSIVE VARIABILITY OF RACE

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The question of race is, at its core, a questioning of humanity itself. In various eras and locales, race has been marked by color of skin, texture of hair, dress, musical prowess, digital dexterity, rote memorization, mien, manners, mannerisms, disease, athletic ability, capacity to write poetry, sense of rhythm, sobriety, childlike cheerfulness, animal anger, language, continent of origin, hypodescent, hyperdescent, religious affiliation, thrift, flamboyance, slyness, physical size, contamination and/or presence of a moral conscience. As random as such presumed markers may be in the aggregate, they have nevertheless been deployed to rationalize the distribution of resources and rights to some groups and not others. Behind the concept of race, in other words, is a deeper interrogation of what distinguishes beasts from brothers; of who is presumed entitled or dispossessed, person or slave, autonomous or alien, citizen or enemy.

In the contemporary United States, race is based chiefly on broad and variously calibrated metrics of African ancestry.<sup>1</sup> To get a full sense of the ideological incoherence of race and racism, however, one must also include the longer history, in other contexts--whether the centuries-old Chinese condescension to native Taiwanese Islanders,<sup>2</sup> the English derogation of the Irish for "pug noses,"<sup>3</sup> the plight of the Dalit (i.e., untouchables) in India,<sup>4</sup> or comprehensively eugenic regimes like Hitler's that threw into the ovens Jews, homosexuals, tinkers, conceptual artists, nomadic peoples, the sick and anyone else designated less than "well-born."<sup>5</sup>

Despite the enormous definitional diversity of what race even means, and despite the fact that the biological studies—from Charles Darwin's observations to the Human Genome Project--have patiently, repetitively and definitively shown that all humans are a single species, there remain many determined to reinscribe a multitude of old racist superstitions onto the biotechnologies of the future. Despite that biological evidence--and in the social sciences, a towering body of social science that is cumulative (observations over time), comprehensive (multiple levels of inquiry) and convergent (from a variety of sources, places, disciplines)---still we are asking the same centuries-old questions.

That said, for purposes of this paper let us stipulate that race is not a "scientific" or biologically coherent category. I ask for such stipulation because it is beyond my scope to prove or disprove creationist theories of polygenesis, or theological tracts about God's intention to keep races separate, or essentialist polemics about whether black women are more or less endowed with testosterone than white men. It is true that race-as-biology

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remains a major hurdle in the cultural imagination: at one extreme, there are those zealots who actively deploy races as the innate mark of beings so different that they constitute another species altogether--aliens, sun or moon types, untouchables, non-persons, beasts. And at the other end of the ideological spectrum are those ordinary creatures for whom discussions of race remain heavily inflected by assumptions of biological difference, //if// as a largely unexamined and unconsciously malleable mush of assumptions about genes, social history, law and culture.

Ergo, let us just agree that, as hard as many have tried to find it, there is no allele for race (as distinct from skin color); there are no separate proteins indicating that some of us are chosen by God over others; and there is no distinct cellular pattern that distinguishes the tribal intelligence of any one group on the planet as opposed to another. At the risk of being tedious, I underscore this point precisely because it, like some of the most reproducible of scientific consensuses--like evolution, climate change and the value of vaccinations--remains fiercely disputed as "mere" contestable "theory".

So what is race if not biology?

Race is a hierarchical social construct that assigns human value and group power. Social constructions are human inventions, the products of mind and circumstance. This is not to say that they are imaginary. Racialized taxonomies have real consequences upon biological functions, including the expression of genes. They affect the material conditions of survival--relative respect and privilege, education, wealth or poverty, diet, medical and dental care, birth control, housing options and degree of stigma--freedom from stigma being something like permission to be happy, or to live unburdened by the constant disapprobation of others.

In ante-bellum America, race was determined by a number of variables, depending on the state: color, ancestry, ethnicity, association, behavior, property records. During the Jim Crow era, appearance became foregrounded as singularly important. Since the civil rights movement, class and speech have sometimes been included among the criteria of line-drawing.

In the industrialized west, racism (as well as related prejudices like class bias, sexism, and religious intolerance) is constructed from a complex intermingling of individual vision, historical happenstance, social milieu, political decision-making and legal structure. If not actually rooted in biology, race is nevertheless the subject of relentless biologizing. From the slavery-apologist Samuel Cartwright to Adolf Hitler, each generation has brought new utensils to the enterprise of racial demarcation: calipers to measure the size of buttocks or length of leg muscles or circumference of skulls or width of noses.<sup>6</sup> There have been mathematical models to measure percentages of "blood" or wavelengths of skin color or degrees of curvilinearity in the arcs of kinky hair.<sup>7</sup> But over and over, race has been proved and proved again to be illusory as a

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matter of hard science.

Yet still the questions come: If we are one species, what about sub-species? As in: "Blacks, Jews, Asians—you can't deny they're different. It's like a poodle or a dachshund or a St. Bernard is to the species of dog" according to one of my former students. This sort of perception is a not a matter that will be resolved by yet more scientific testing. Rather, I think this reiterated resistance to data is testament to the persistence of human imagination. That we still wonder if there aren't significant disparities in human intelligence that might be logically tracked through the randomness that is race is testament to the power of belief over documentary evidence.

This infernal miasma invites a bit of consideration about the Manichean constructs of determinism and free will, mind and body, choice and constraint, illogic and sheer destiny. Like Dostoevsky's annoying man from the underground we must wonder: Am I a mere piano key, an organ stop? A mathematical inexorability, or a creation of my own intelligent design? The more we tease this out, the more important becomes the narrative lens through which we seek our truths, and the more aware we become of humanity's own constructive power. Am I three fifths of a human? Ninety-six percent of a chimpanzee? One hundred percent pure tragic mulatta? One fourth of a nuclear family? An atomistic rational actor? A deficit expenditure of an impoverished underclass?

What, in other words, makes "race" both so dangerously essentialized as well as so fleetingly, maddeningly, beyond definitional containment?

Let's begin with a story. A few years ago, there was an article in the *New York Times* titled "DNA Tells Students They Aren't Who They Thought,"<sup>8</sup> about a sociology class at Pennsylvania State University. Sociology Professor Mark Shriver regularly administers DNA tests to students and has them analyzed for what the article calls "genetic ancestry." Shriver is also a founding partner of the now-defunct company DNAPrint Genomics, which devised a test that "compares DNA with that of four parent populations, western European, west African, east Asian and indigenous American."

The first indication that this was a more romantic than wholly rational enterprise is the classification of these as "parent" populations. The four categories are overly broad for purposes of meaningful ancestry-tracking, and unduly, randomly narrow in terms of geographic exclusivity. Given the actual diversity of present-day American populations, the only logic behind this choice of the four groups is that it roughly segregates according to older anthropological descriptions of race-as-color: white, black, yellow, red.

And indeed, that's exactly what the students in Shriver's class read into their test results. The article in the *Times* went on for three full columns discussing the degree to which the Penn State students were revealed to be "white" or "black."

"About half of the 100 students tested this semester were white," according to an

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instructor. "And every one of them said, 'Oh man I hope I'm part black,' because it would upset their parents... People want to identify with this pop multiracial culture. They don't want to live next to it, but they want to be part of it. It's cool."<sup>9</sup>

But the test purported to show (albeit flawed) geographic origins; it is interesting to see how quickly that was conflated with the matter of color and then from there into the politics of exoticized inclusion against a backdrop of ritual exclusion.

There is no allele for race, however. As a sociological matter, skin color is a presumptive indicator but historically it is not the exclusive marker. And as a biological matter, melanin concentration merely reveals how one's ancestors adapted to more or less sunny climates—and dark skin is more or less distributed around the equator, no matter which continent. Similarly, evolutionary selection for sickle cell anemia, often mischaracterized as a “black” disease, is an inherited defensive response to having ancestors who lived among malarial mosquitoes.

That Shriver's test could reveal ancestry based on broad migratory patterns over human history is not a surprise. Certain clusterings of genetic mutations over millennia occur more frequently among specific populations. But those kinship populations cannot be scientifically correlated to the malleable social designations of race.

There is, nevertheless, a remarkable persistence in re-inscribing race onto the narrative of biological inheritance. This science is always pursued for only the noblest of reasons: in Shriver's instance, "the potential importance of racial or ethnic background to drug trials."<sup>10</sup> I will save for another paper my concern about the feckless commercial competition for "race-specific" medicines and suggest only that a more coherent enterprise might center on individualized genomic medicine rather than on the ever-changing political variables of racialized bodies.

For now, consider the description of one student who "discovered" she was "58 percent European and 42 percent African." The young woman "has always thought of herself as half black and half white because her mother is Irish-Lithuanian and her father West Indian."<sup>11</sup> Yet the "parent populations" tested for were described only as "western European" and "west African." Lithuania is generally considered a part of Eastern Europe, and therefore not technically part of the population tested for. While "West Indian" is clearly used as a cipher for her African ancestry, one can be "white"--like Alexander Hamilton--while being West Indian. And the Irish were not considered white in colonial times.

Similarly, East Asians have gone in and out of being considered white in our history. South Asians, many being the closest descendants of the original "Aryans," are generally not thought of as white in this country. Yet the incoherent use of Aryan is apparent in any

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dictionary, to wit, Webster's: "1. Indo-European.... 2. Nordic... 3. Gentile...."

The degree to which these indivisible habits of thought work despite us, or unintentionally, is perhaps evident in what the Irish-Lithuanian-West Indian student--the one who thought she was half and half--had to say about the test results: "I was surprised at how much European I was, because though my father's family knows there is a great-great-grandfather who was Scottish, no one remembered him... I knew it was true, because I have dark relatives with blue eyes, but to bring it up a whole 8 percent, that was shocking to me." What is remarkable—yet not uncommon as a cultural construct--is her flat conception of half and half ancestry, a kind of assumed "purity" of blackness and whiteness. One side had to be entirely African by her measure, one side entirely European. If she's 58 percent European, she assumes the embodied 8 percent must be on the "black" side. The discussion never moves into the more difficult recognition that most West Indians probably have more than 8 percent European ancestry (but, like so many American families, hers might "know" but "not remember" the complicated, often clandestine couplings of the slave trade among Europeans, Africans and indigenous island peoples). It certainly does not seem to occur to anyone that her white parent might also have an African ancestor.

The jumble of who we are, particularly as residents of the New World, with its centuries of rapid, recent migrations, is not explored in the *Times* article. The single mention of migratory patterns is misleading: The students whose DNA revealed both African and European ancestors were described as "members of the fastest-growing ethnic grouping in the United States...mixed race." But to the extent that a DNA swipe shows "mixing," there is nothing "new" about it; our ancestors have been mixing it up since the first mothers left central Africa--in the long-ago, ancient sense, of course, we are all "African."

Not only do genes not assign race, neither do they have anything to say about the cultural practices we usually refer to as ethnicity or identity. The absurdity of thinking otherwise is highlighted by one of the Penn State students, a warm-brown-colored young man pictured in cornrows, who said that even though he tested at "48 percent European" he values his blackness, since "both my parents are black." He went on to muse: "Just because I found out I'm white, I'm not going to act white." The article ended with an observation that "whatever his genes say," the young man will likely always "be seen as black--at least by white Americans."

Consider the narratives therein: Genes "speak" race; whiteness is a biological inheritance that can be consciously "acted"; blackness is defined by the eye of the white beholder.

If history has shown us anything, it's that race is contradictory and unstable. Yet our linguistically embedded notions of race seem to be on the verge of transposing themselves yet again into a context where genetic percentages act as the ciphers for culture and status, as well as economic and political attributes. In another generation or two, the privileges of whiteness may indeed be extended to those who are "half" this or

that. Indeed, some of the discussions about candidate Barack Obama's "biracialism" seemed to invite precisely such an interpretation. Let us not mistake it for anything like progress, however: biracialism always has a short shelf life, and by the time he was elected, President Obama not our first "half and half president" but had become all African-American all the time. Indeed, Obama himself seemed to acknowledge the more complex reality of his own lineage in an off-the-cuff aside, when, speaking about his daughters' search for a puppy, he observed that most shelter dogs are "mutts like me."

In fact, of course, we're all mutts. And as Americans, we've been mixing it up faster and more thoroughly than anyplace on earth. At the same time, we live in a state of tremendous denial about the rambunctiousness of our recent lineage. The language by which we assign racial category narrows or expands our perception of who is more like whom, tells us who can be considered marriageable or untouchable. The habit of burying the relentlessly polyglot nature of our American identity renders us blind to how intimately we are tied as kin, as family, and as intimates.

In the United States' vexed history of color-consciousness, anti-miscegenation laws (the last of which were struck down only in 1967) enshrined the notion of hypodescent. Hypodescent is a cultural phenomenon whereby the child of parents who come from differing social classes will be assigned the status of the parent with the lower standing. There are many forms—most parts of the Deep South adhered to it with great rigidity, in what is commonly called the "one drop and you're black" rule. Take for example, *New York Times* editor Anatole Broyard, who denied any relation to his darker-skinned siblings and "passed" for most of his adult life: there were many who expressed shock when it was uncovered that he was "really" black. Some states, like Louisiana, practiced a more gradated form of hypodescent, indicating hierarchies of status with vocabulary like "mulatto," "quadroon," and "octoroon." And even today, and despite our diasporic, fragmented, postmodern cosmopolitanism, there is a thoughtless or unconscious tendency to preserve these taxonomies, no matter how incoherent. Consider Essie Mae Washington-Williams, the daughter Senator Strom Thurmond had by his family's black maid. She lived her life as a "Negro," then as an "African American," and attended an "all-black" college. But in her 70s, when Thurmond's paternity became publicized, she was suddenly redesignated "biracial." Tiger Woods and Kimora Lee Simmons are alternatively thought of as African-American or "biracial," but rarely as "Asian-American."

In contrast, many parts of Latin America, like Brazil or Mexico, assign race by the opposite process, hyperdescent. That's when those with any ancestry of the dominant social group, such as European, identify themselves as European or white, when they may also have African or Indian parents. As more Latinos have become citizens of the United States, we have interesting examples of this cultural cognitive dissonance: Just think about Beyoncé Knowles and Jennifer Lopez. Phenotypically they look very, very similar. Yet Knowles is generally referred to as black or African-American; Lopez is generally thought of as white (particularly among her Latino fan base) or Latina (among the rest of us), but she is never called black or even biracial.

Among Native Americans in the United States there is a combination of both hypo- and hyperdescent, encouraged by the interventionist history of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Anita Hill, for example, is part Creek, but the narrative about her is entirely about African-American origin. And membership in many tribes remains closed to those who have any discernable mixture of African ancestry, but not to those with European ancestry.

The *New York Post* regularly offers up fascinating tabloid renderings of these contradictions in our culture. When Angelina Jolie adopted her son Pax from Vietnam, the *Post* featured a breathless front page story, complete with what was described as "a stunning mother-child portrait" of the two.<sup>12</sup> Their faces were aglow with interracial bliss.

But the lower half of that day's very same front page was given over to a second, more somber story. Entitled "Baby Bungle: White Folks' Black Child," it trumpeted "a Park Avenue fertility clinic's blunder" that "left a family devastated--after a black baby was born to a Hispanic woman and her white husband." Long Islanders Nancy and Thomas Andrews had had trouble conceiving after the birth of their first daughter. They employed in vitro fertilization and baby Jessica was born. Jessica is darker skinned than either of the Andrewses, a condition their obstetrician initially called an "abnormality." She'll "lighten up," said that good doctor. Subsequent paternity tests showed that Nancy's egg was fertilized by sperm other than Tom's. The couple sued.

If this were the end, the story might simply fall within the growing body of other technological mix-ups resulting in what are sometimes called "wrongful birth" suits, for lost eggs, failed vasectomies, malpractice, broken contract and so on. There is, after all, a legally recognized expectation that a certain standard of care will be observed in the handling of genetic material.

What was distinctive about the Andrews case was that the parents also tried to cite (ultimately without success) *Jessica's* pain and suffering for having to endure life as a black person. The Andrewses expressed concern that Jessica "may be subjected to physical and emotional illness as a result of not being the same race as her parents and siblings." They were "distressed" that she is "not even the same race, nationality, color...as they are." They described Jessica's conception as a "mishap" so "unimaginable" that they had not told many of their relatives. (Telling the tabloids all about it must have come easier.) "We fear that our daughter will be the object of scorn and ridicule by other children," the couple said, because Jessica has "characteristics more typical of African or African-American descent." So "while we love Baby Jessica as our own, we are reminded of this terrible mistake each and every time we look at her...each and every time we appear in public."

One wonders what this construction of affairs will do to Jessica when she is old enough to understand. But here's the really interesting part. When I turned to other media accounts I found a picture of the family--from a 2006 greeting card, no less.<sup>13</sup> And

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Jessica looks exactly like her mother and elder sister. It is true that Jessica is slightly darker than her mother and that her hair is curlier than her sister's, but all three females are pretty clearly African-descended. As one of my students put it, if anything it is the paleness of the father's skin that marks him as the "different" one.

The picture underscored the embedded cultural oddities of this case, the invisibly shifting boundaries of how we see race, extend intimacy, name "difference." According to *The Post*, Ms. Andrews was "Hispanic" and apparently, by the *Post's* calculations, one Hispanic woman plus one white man must equal "a white couple." The mother is "a light-skinned native of the Dominican Republic," which seemed to indicate that while she may not be "white," she's also not "black."

No matter which of many media accounts I looked at, each narrative implied that if the correct sperm had been used, the Andrewses would have been guaranteed a lighter-skinned child. But as most Dominicans trace their heritage to some mixture of African slaves, indigenous islanders and European settlers, and as dark skin color is a dominant trait, it could be that the true sperm donor is as "white" as Mr. Andrews. But that possibility is exiled from the word boxes that contain this child. Not only was Jessica viewed as being of a race apart from either of her parents; she was even designated a different nationality--this latter most startling for its blood-line configuration of citizenship itself. According to this logic, discrimination is no longer a social problem that implicates all of us and our institutions as unloving or under-inclusive. Discrimination becomes destiny, the normative response to biologized "abnormality."

Racial constructions not only oppress by normalizing inequality, they can also make the lie of race seem liberating, attractive, romantic. A small digression to clarify what I mean: a few years ago, there was an interesting convergence of inquiries into the nature of truth. James Frey published his book *A Million Little Pieces*, a wholly fictional account that he proffered as personal memoir. When the fraud was discovered, he defended himself saying that the book was concerned with "emotional truth" rather than literal truth. This triggered deep epistemological soul-searching about whether simple lies can signify, represent, or constitute any kind of figurative truth at all. After a swirl of media confusion, a sound tongue-lashing from Oprah Winfrey seemed to seal up the answer as a resounding Not On My Dime.

At the same time that Frey's soap opera was playing itself out, researchers in France were searching for any charred relics at the site where Joan of Arc was said to have been burned at the stake. They wanted to subject any putative remains to DNA testing. Why one would want to do this became something of an issue in the European media: She didn't have children, the site of her martyrdom is in dispute, and the legitimacy of any so-called relic would be highly contested. But the pursuit of "the truth" in so attenuated a context raised questions about the hunger for certainty in the face of such uncertainty. What are the limits of historical insight? How many graves shall we dig up to settle old scores? What are the possibilities of knowing absolutely?

At the same time, there was a similar pursuit unfolding in the American media. Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates was hosting a series exploring his roots and those

of a handful of other prominent African-American figures, including comedians Chris Tucker and Whoopi Goldberg, scholar Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot and, of course, Oprah Winfrey. It was a fascinating series of TV programs, particularly from the perspective of the discipline of history. It revealed the peculiar difficulties of tracking lines of descent through slavery--the sales of human beings that acknowledged no family ties, the absence of last names, the absence of first names in some cases and the necessity of consulting not just census records but also "the master's" property holdings for listings of possible relatives. The reconstruction of family history was like an archeological dig, part intergenerational storytelling, part study of migratory patterns, part recovery of commercial transactions, and part science.

The science du jour is, of course, DNA testing. On the one hand, DNA testing can be quite useful in establishing certain kinds of family relation. (Since the program aired, Gates has set up his own ancestry-tracking company, AfricanDNA.) Gates' own test results showed that he had no relation to Samuel Brady, the white patriarch he'd grown up "knowing" as the man who impregnated his great-great-grandmother. Nothing had prepared him for Brady's *not* being his direct ancestor. Indeed, one of Gates's cousins remained adamant that the test must be wrong. If the test was right, he insisted, there would have to be "two truths": One would be the story he grew up with, the other what the DNA says.

Somewhere in between what the DNA says and what shaped the family account is a gap that is something like a lie. A secret passing from black to white? An act of assimilation or aspiration? A myth to hide some shame, some rape? A change of identity to escape to freedom? Yet I do hesitate to think of it as precisely on the same moral level as the kind of "lie" that James Frey is said to have told in his book. There is something very human about the repetition of family stories until they become epic rather than literal, the burying of family secrets, the lying of ancestors, the reinventions of migrants, the accommodations of raw ambition, the insulations from terrible shame. This is, I suppose, distantly related to James Frey's addled manipulations; it might also be related to, but of a different order than, the magical thinking of mental patients or character-disordered people or victims of great trauma.

There is something so commonplace about the kinds of family mysteries that Gates' inquiries reveal--particularly in the American context. It is part of how many, many of our ancestors, regardless of where they came from, reinvented themselves in the New World. New York University Law School Professor Jessie Allen describes the "magic" of legal remediation as follows: "What ought to have been prevails over the past." Family stories ritualize the past in a very similar way. It is part of what Professor Robert Pollack, head of Columbia University's Center for the Study of Science and Religion, calls the "eschatology of repair."

If there is value to this kind of "emotional truth"--if I can be permitted that term--it is important not to confuse it with the sort of truth that DNA tells us. So while DNA can undoubtedly pinpoint certain aspects of our ancestry through sequencing and matching mitochondrial DNA, it does not make literal sense to say, as Gates did to Oprah

Winfrey at one point: "You've got education in your genes." Of course, he was speaking metaphorically at that moment, using the human genome as a metaphor for a pattern of socialization, a family habit, a thirst for knowledge modeled by parents.

But at other points in the program as well as in our daily parlance, that metaphoric dimension is applied rather more carelessly--and more dangerously. We have a long history of thinking of identity as genetically based, but again, there is no more an allele for being "white" or "Latina" than there is for "education." These are malleable political designations that expand and contract with time and human circumstance.

It behooves us to be less romantic about what all this DNA swabbing reveals. I worry about the craving to "go back to Africa," to "connect with our Yiddishkeit" or to feel like new doors have been opened if we have an Asian ancestor. The craving, the connection, the newness of those doors is in our heads, not in our mitochondria. It is a process of superimposing the identities with which we were raised upon the culturally embedded, socially constructed imaginings about "the Other" we could be. The fabulous nature of what is imagined can be liberating, invigorating--but it is fable. If we read that story into the eternity of our blood lines, if we biologize our history, we will forever be less than we could be.

## **References**

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<sup>6</sup> For an excellent compendium of such experiments, see Harriet Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans From Colonial Times to The Present* (Doubleday, 2006)

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<sup>8</sup> Daly, "DNA Tells Students They Aren't Who They Thought," *New York Times*, April 13, 2005

<sup>9</sup> Id.

<sup>10</sup> Id.

<sup>11</sup> Id.

<sup>12</sup> "Title," *New York Post*, March 22, 2007

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