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# The Social Life of DNA: racial reconciliation and institutional morality

*British Journal of Sociology Annual Lecture 2017*

**Professor Alondra Nelson**

President, Social Science Research Council

**Professor Nigel Dodd**

Chair, LSE

Thursday 26 October, 6.30-8pm, OLD THEATRE, OLD BUILDING

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# **The Social Life of DNA: Racial Reconciliation and Institutional Morality**

**Alondra Nelson  
Columbia University  
Social Science Research Council**

*2017 British Journal of Sociology* Lecture

## ***DNA Offers Link to Black History***

By CAREY GOLDBERG    AUG. 28, 2000

Add to the list of the wonders of DNA: the ability, in the not-so-distant future, to help African-Americans figure out where their ancestors probably came from before they were enslaved.

In Boston this fall, some 300 African-American schoolchildren are to be sent home with swabs to gather DNA samples from inside the mouths of their family members, part of a nascent project that a local molecular biologist hopes to extend to North Carolina and other sites with longstanding African-American populations.

At Howard University in Washington, a geneticist announced this spring that he would offer DNA analysis, possibly as early as this summer, to African-Americans seeking their ancestors' homelands, at \$200 or \$300 per test. He has since withdrawn that price and moved back his starting date to next year.





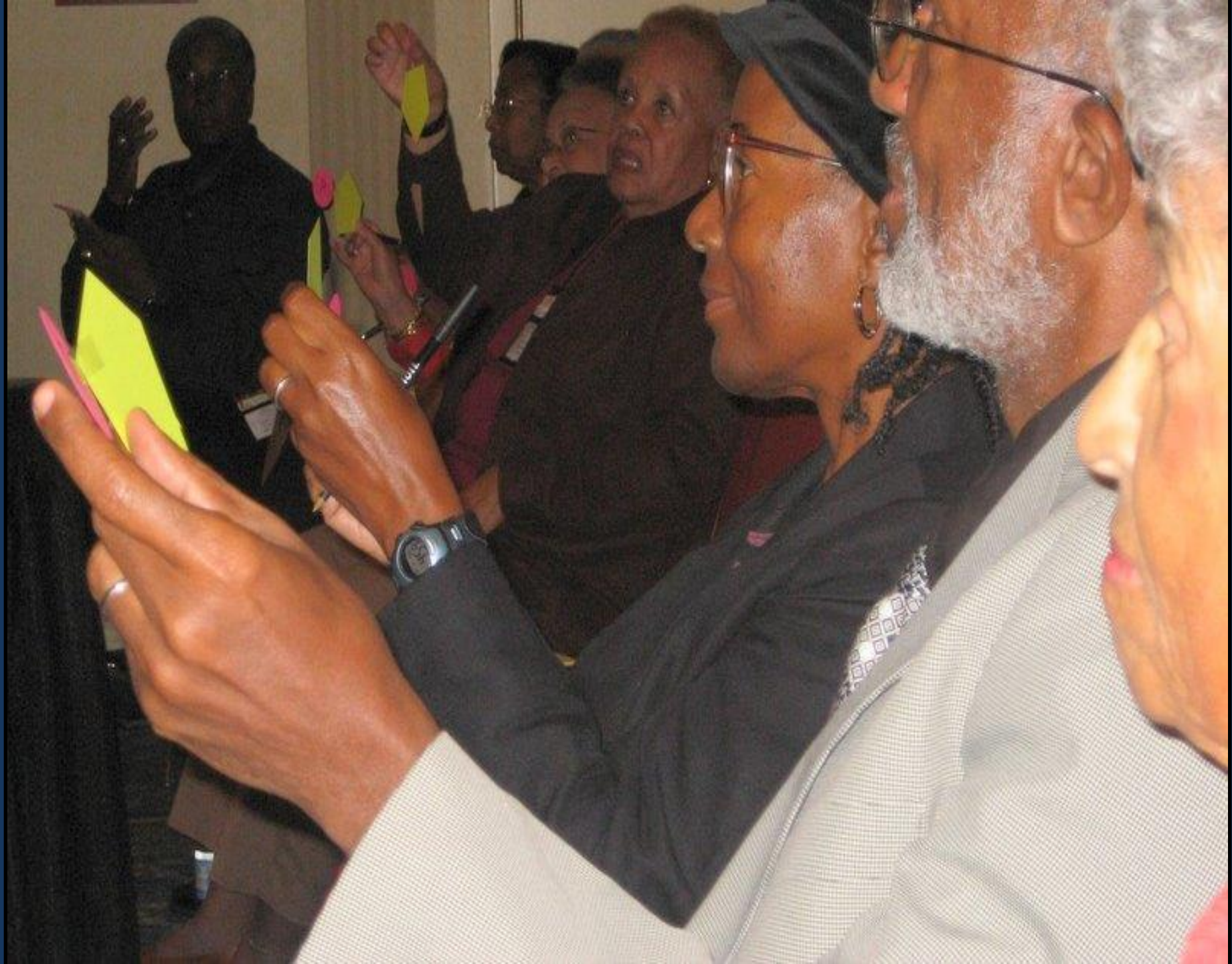










Photo: Harlem LDS



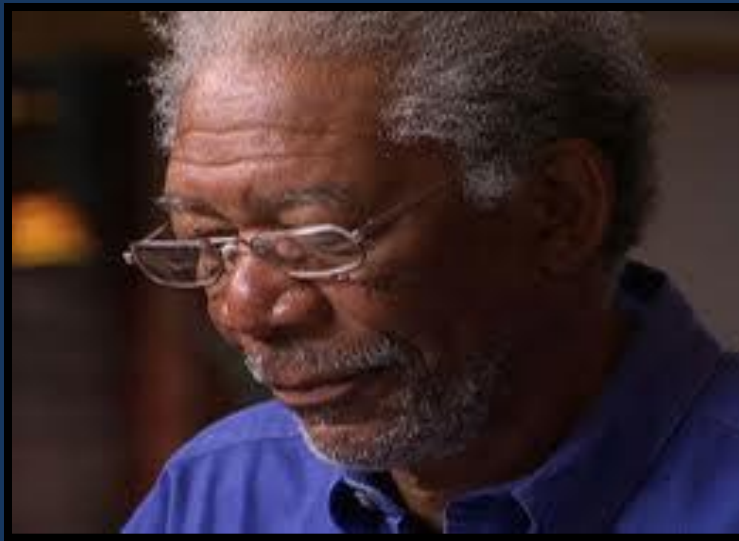


# **MOTHERLAND**

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## **A Genetic Journey**

Photo: BBC TWO



**Keywords** ethnicity, genealogical aspiration, genealogical disorientation, genealogy, genetics, race, self-fashioning

## Bio Science:

### Genetic Genealogy Testing and the Pursuit of African Ancestry

*Alondra Nelson*

[O]ur biographies are written, at least in part, in terms of structural chemistry. (Lock, 2005<sup>1</sup>)

The decoding of the human genome precipitated a change of paradigms in genetics research, from an emphasis on what then president Bill Clinton, in his announcement of this scientific achievement, described as ‘our common humanity’ (White House, 2000) to a concern with molecular-level differences among individuals and groups. This shift in research focus from lumping to splitting spurred ongoing disagreements among scholars in the

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JULY 1977 \$1.25

A JOHNSON PUBLICATION

# EBONY

**ALEX HALEY**

Author of *Roots* returns  
to Juffure, home of his  
African Ancestors



**VERONICA PORCHE**

An exclusive interview with  
the new Mrs. All

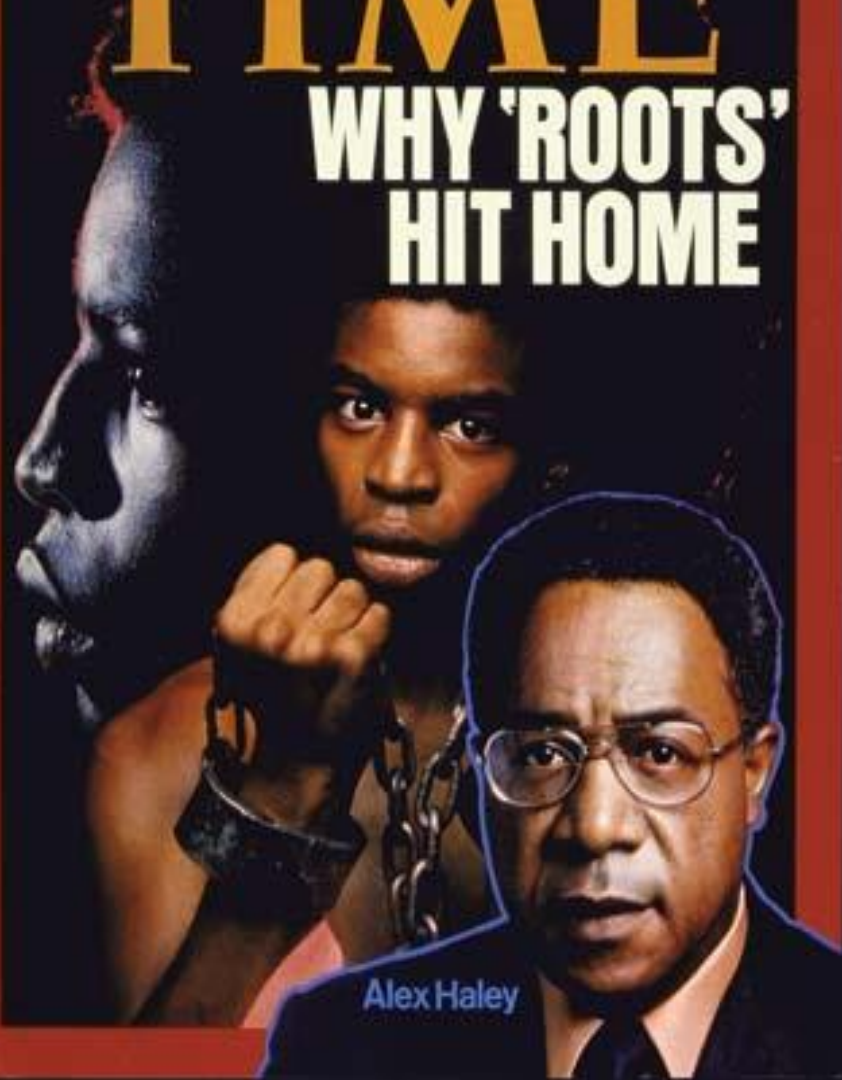


\$1.00

FEBRUARY 24, 1977

# TIME

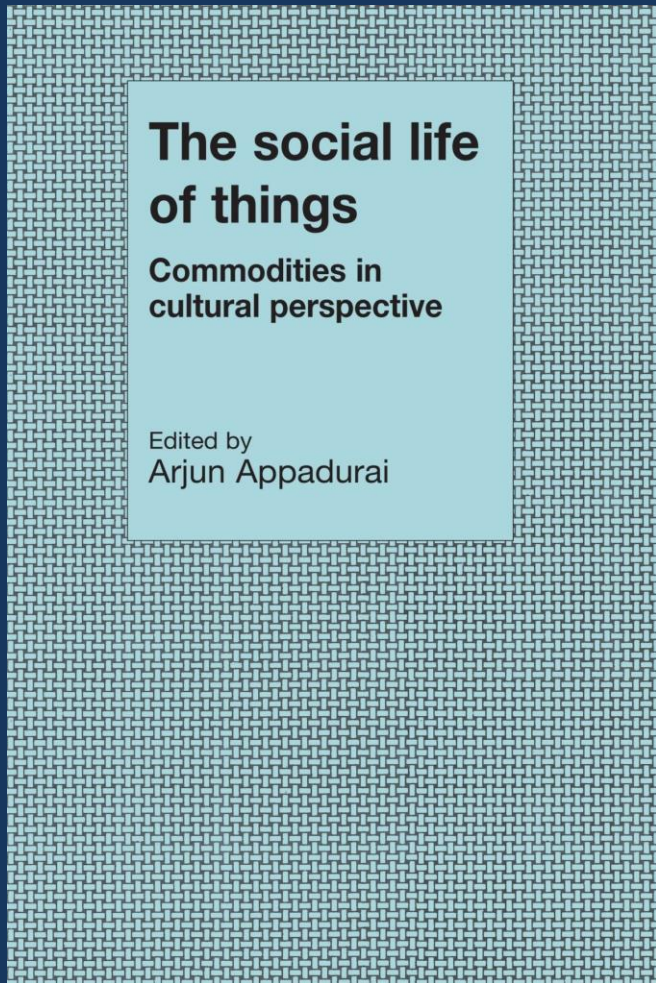
**WHY 'ROOTS'  
HIT HOME**



Alex Haley

# the social life of things

## Appadurai 1988

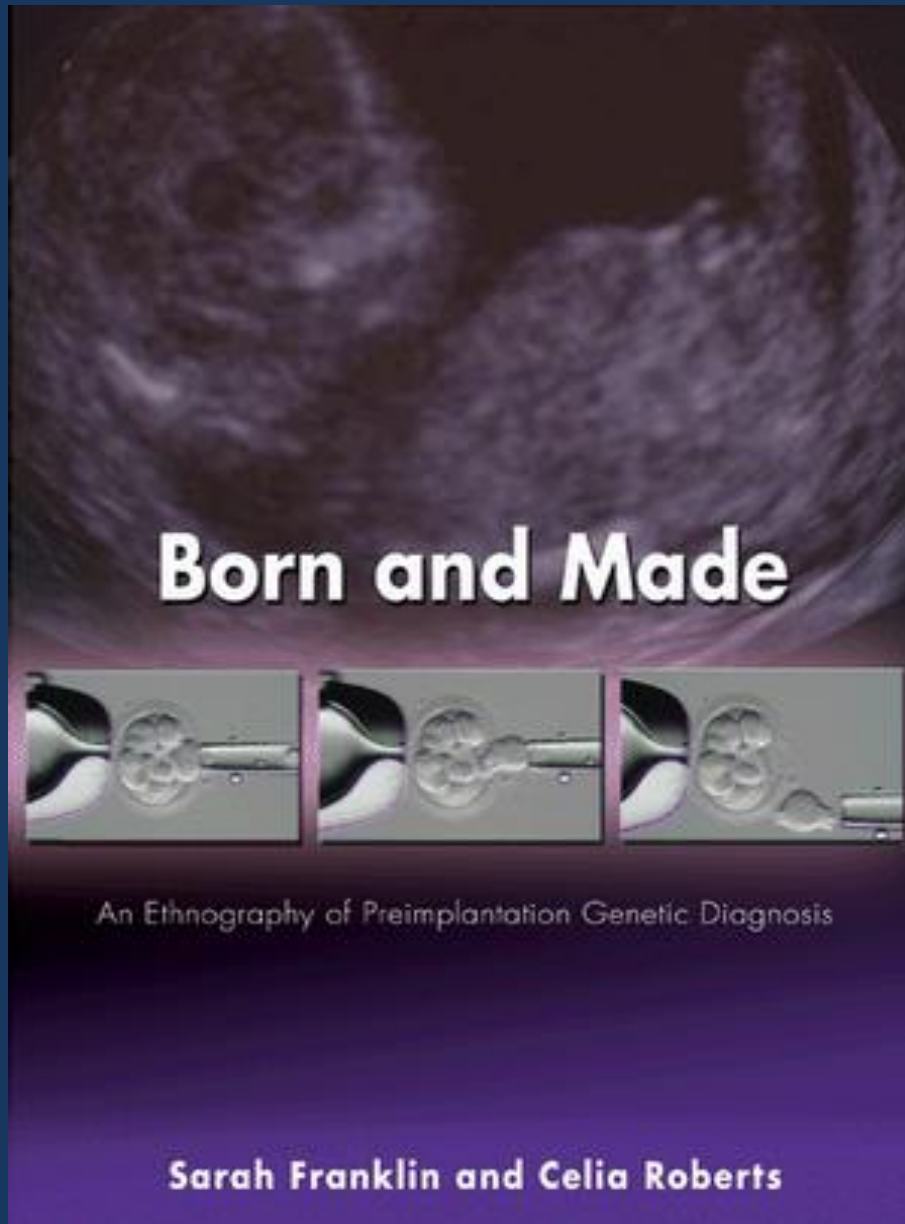


it is by following “the social life of things,” “things-in-motion” that we are able to “illuminate their human and social context”



**the social life of PGD**  
Franklin and Roberts 2006

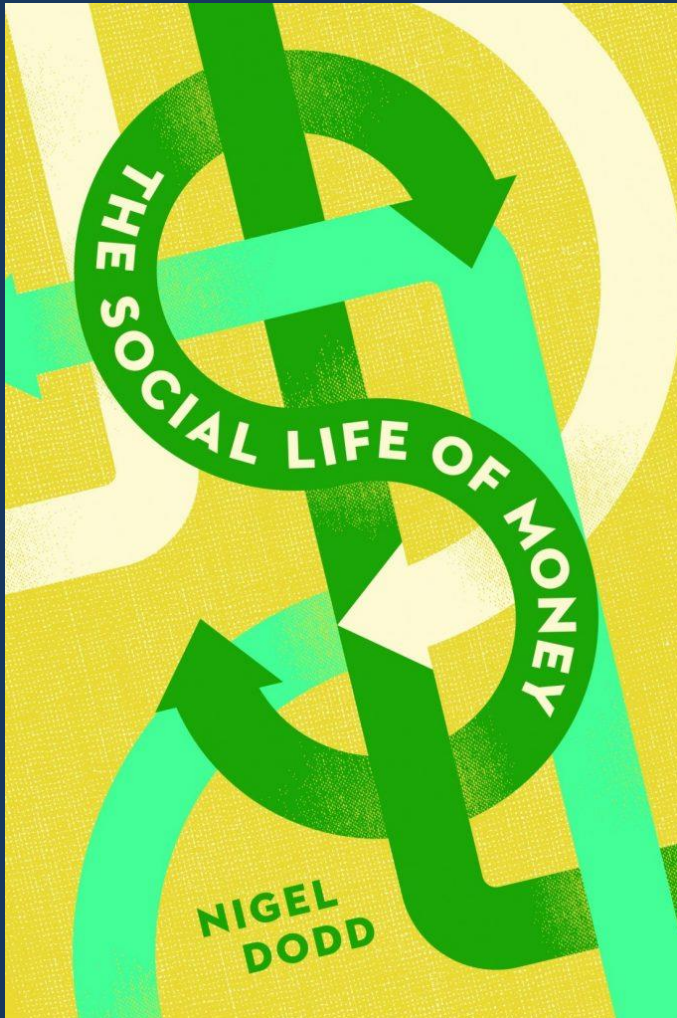
“account for the social dimensions of new biomedical technologies” through thick description and “following around”





# the social life of money

Dodd 2014



a process, not a thing...value  
derives from the dynamic,  
ever-changing, and often  
contested social relations that  
sustain its circulation

# the social life of DNA

- ❖ “spillover” between sites of genetic analysis, from genealogical uses to other domains (e.g., forensic or medical) and back again
- ❖ multiple uses to which one type of genetic analysis is put (e.g., genetic ancestry testing)







---

Venture Smith  
(1729-1805)

NARRATIVE

*Comas*

OF THE

LIFE AND ADVENTURES

OF

VENTURE,

A NATIVE OF AFRICA

1-00  
55  
37  
37  
17  
2,00

*But resident above sixty years in the United States of  
America.*







# reconciliation projects

sites and practices in which genetic analysis is put to the task of resolving controversies or answering questions about the past (e.g. *La Asociación Civil Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo*)



Mary-Claire King; Grandmothers of  
the May Plaza (*La Asociación Civil  
Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo*)



# reconciliation projects

e.g., resolution of the injuries produced by racial slavery is sought through the employ of genetic analysis



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## Scientific Correspondence

*Nature* **396**, 27–28 (5 November 1998) | doi:10.1038/23835

### Jefferson fathered slave's last child

Eugene A. Foster<sup>1</sup>, M. A. Jobling<sup>2</sup>, P. G. Taylor<sup>2</sup>, P. Donnelly<sup>3</sup>, P. de Knijff<sup>4</sup>, Rene Mieremet<sup>4</sup>, T. Zerjal<sup>5</sup> & C. Tyler-Smith<sup>5</sup>

**There is a long-standing historical controversy over the question of US President Thomas Jefferson's paternity of the children of Sally Hemings, one of his slaves<sup>1,4</sup>. To throw some scientific light on the dispute, we have compared Y-chromosomal DNA haplotypes from male-line descendants of Field Jefferson, a paternal uncle of Thomas Jefferson, with those of male-line descendants of Thomas Woodson, Sally Hemings' putative first son, and of Eston Hemings Jefferson, her last son. The molecular findings fail to support the belief that Thomas Jefferson was Thomas Woodson's father, but provide evidence that he was the biological father of Eston Hemings Jefferson.**

▲ Top

1. 6 Gildersleeve Wood, Charlottesville, Virginia 22903, USA

e-mail: Email: [eafoster@aol.com](mailto:eafoster@aol.com)

2. Department of Genetics, University of Leicester, Adrian Building, University Road, Leicester LE1 7RH, UK


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## ABSTRACT


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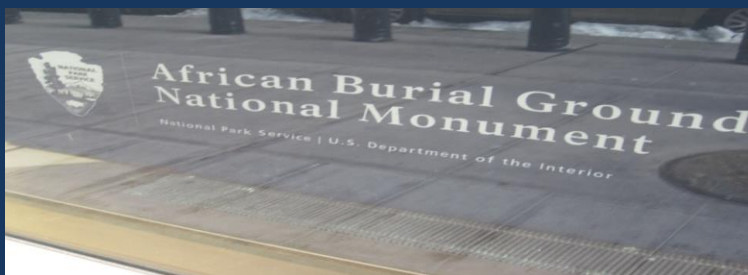
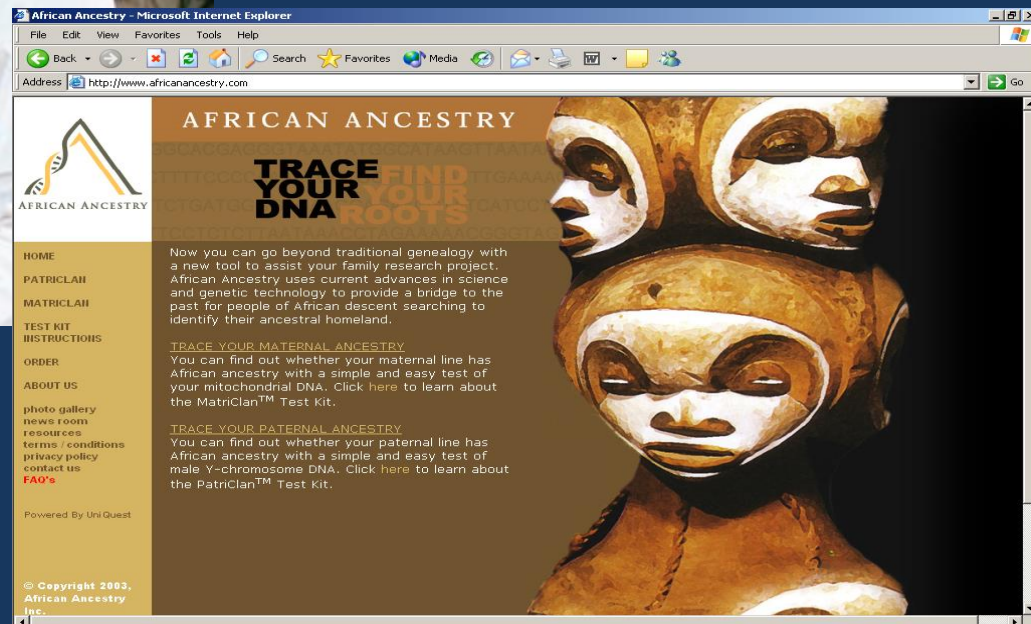
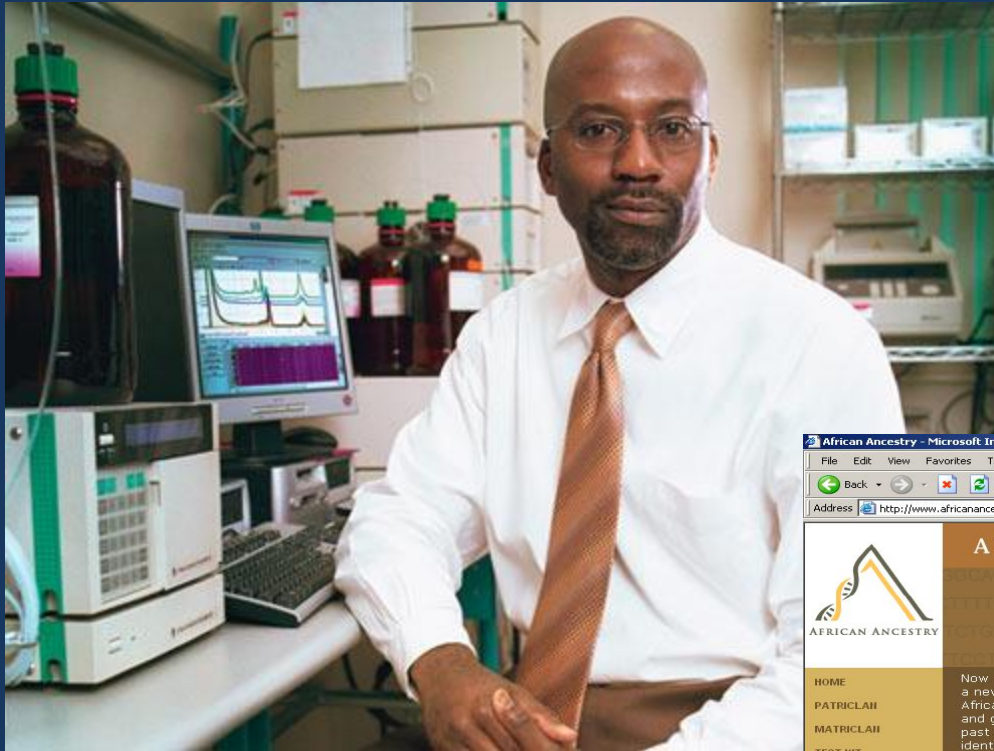
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# From the African Burial Ground Project African Ancestry, Inc.



# African Ancestry, Inc.





## GENETICS

# The Science and Business of Genetic Ancestry Testing

Deborah A. Bolnick,<sup>1\*</sup> Duana Fullwiley,<sup>2</sup> Troy Duster,<sup>3,4</sup> Richard S. Cooper,<sup>5</sup> Joan H. Fujimura,<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Kahn,<sup>7</sup> Jay S. Kaufman,<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Marks,<sup>9</sup> Ann Morning,<sup>3</sup> Alondra Nelson,<sup>10</sup> Pilar Ossorio,<sup>11</sup> Jenny Reardon,<sup>12</sup> Susan M. Reverby,<sup>13</sup> Kimberly TallBear<sup>14,15</sup>

Commercially available tests of genetic ancestry have significant scientific limitations, but are serious matters for many test-takers.

At least two dozen companies now market “genetic ancestry tests” to help consumers reconstruct their family histories and determine the geographic origins of their ancestors. More than 460,000 people have purchased these tests over the past 6 years (*1*), and public interest is still skyrocketing (*1–4*).

Some scientists support this enterprise because it makes genetics accessible and relevant; others view it with indifference, seeing the tests as merely “recreational.” However, both scientists and consumers should

## The Impact of “Recreational Genetics”

Although genetic ancestry testing is often described as “recreational genetics,” many consumers do not take these tests lightly. Each test costs \$100 to \$900, and consumers often have deep personal reasons for purchasing these products. Many indi-

African communities. Other Americans have taken the tests in hope of obtaining Native American tribal affiliation (and benefits like financial support, housing, education, health care, and affirmation of identity) or to challenge tribal membership decisions (*7*).

## Limitations

It is important to understand what these tests can and cannot determine. Most tests fall into two categories. Mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) tests sequence the hypervariable region of the maternally inherited mitochondrial genome. Y-chromosome tests analyze short tandem repeats and/or single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) in the paternally inherited Y-chromosome.



# Science





the “sara”: a reconciliation project







**TO BE SOLD** on board the  
Ship *Bance-Island*, on tuesday the 6th  
of *May* next, at *Ashley-Ferry*; a choice  
cargo of about 250 fine healthy



**NEGROES,**

just arrived from the  
Windward & Rice Coast.



—The utmost care has  
already been taken, and  
shall be continued, to keep them free from  
the least danger of being infected with the  
**SMALL-POX**, no boat having been on  
board, and all other communication with  
people from *Charles-Town* prevented.

*Austin, Laurens, & Appleby.*

**N. B.** Full one Half of the above Negroes have had the  
**SMALL-POX** in their own Country.







Photo: Jane Aldrich



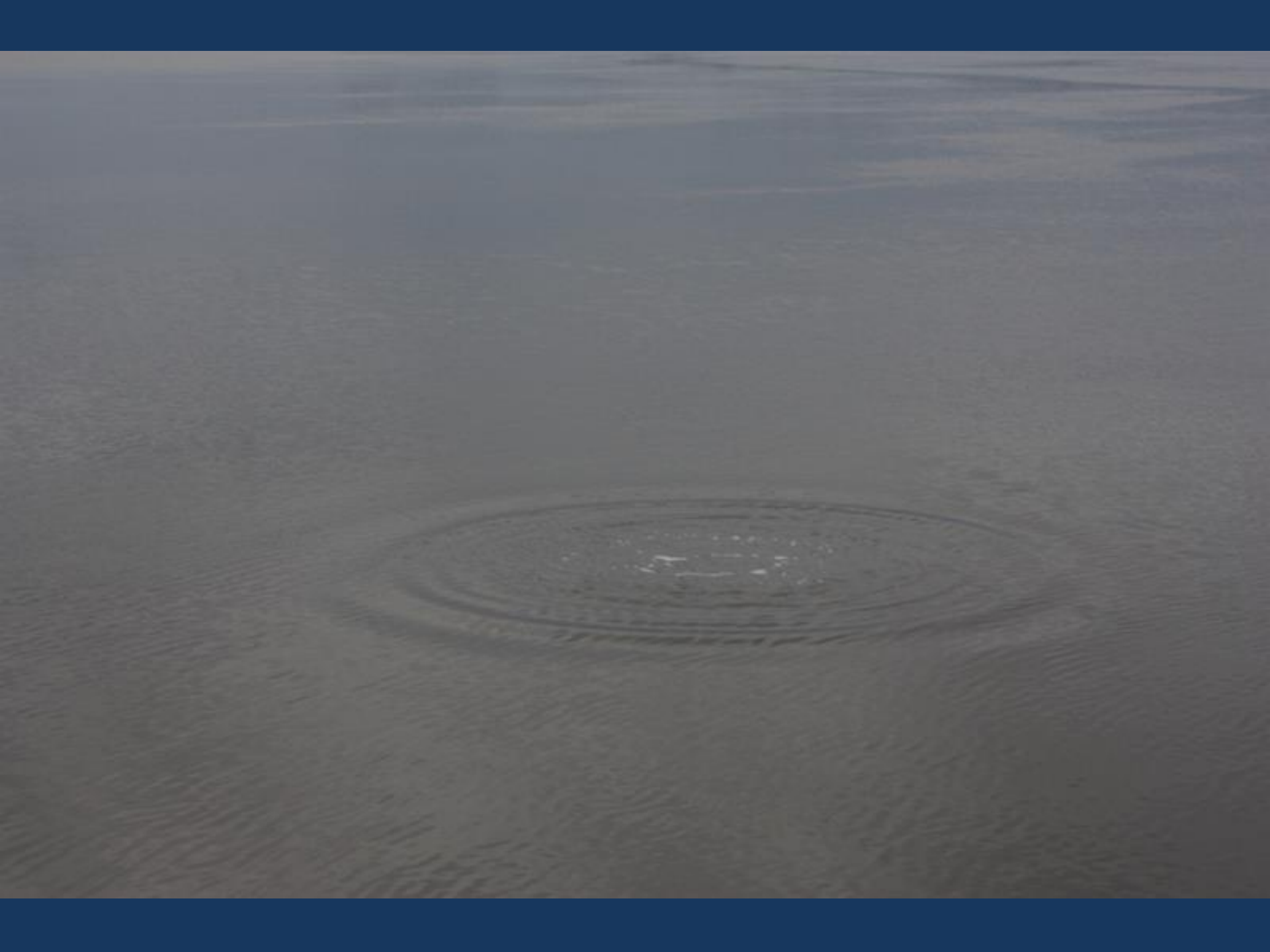




Photo: Jane Aldrich



Photo: Jane Aldrich





Deadria Farmer-Paellmann

# Farmer-Paellmann v. FleetBoston (2002)

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
For The  
EASTERN DISTRICT OF NEW YORK

-----X	:	CIVIL ACTION #
DEADRIA FARMER-PAELLMANN,	:	
	:	
On behalf of herself	:	
and all other persons	:	CLASS ACTION
similarly situated,	:	
	:	
PLAINTIFF,	:	
	:	COMPLAINT
vs.	:	AND JURY TRIAL DEMAND
	:	
FLEETBOSTON FINANCIAL CORPORATION, AETNA:	:	
INC., CSX, and Their predecessors, successors	:	
and/or assigns, and CORPORATE DOES NOS. 1-1000,	:	
	:	
DEFENDANTS.	:	
-----X	:	

Plaintiffs, on behalf of themselves and all other persons similarly situated, state, upon information and belief, as follows:

## INTRODUCTION, JURISDICTION AND VENUE

### Introduction

1. Over 8,000,000 Africans and their descendants were enslaved in the United States from 1619 to 1865. The practice of slavery constituted an "immoral and inhumane deprivation of Africans' life, liberty, African citizenship rights, cultural heritage" and it further deprived them of the fruits of their own labor.

# *Companies Are Sued for Slave Reparations*

By ROBERT F. WORTH    MARCH 27, 2002

Citing the persisting legacy of slavery, a Manhattan woman yesterday filed what appears to be the first class-action lawsuit that seeks compensation from United States companies for allegedly profiting from the slave trade.

The suit was filed in federal court in Brooklyn in behalf of all living descendants of slaves in this country. It seeks unspecified damages from the FleetBoston Financial Corporation, Aetna Inc. and the CSX Corporation, stating that they or their predecessor companies profited from slave labor. Lawyers said the suit would be followed in coming weeks by similar ones against a number of other corporations in courts around the country, including one in New Jersey.





# *National Briefing | Midwest: Illinois: Judge Dismisses Suit On Slavery Reparations*

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS JAN. 27, 2004

A federal judge in Chicago dismissed a suit by descendants of slaves from across the country that sought reparations from corporations that they contend profited from slavery. The judge, Charles R. Norgle of Federal District Court, said the plaintiffs had shown no clear link between them and the companies. The suit combined smaller suits from courts around the country as part of a movement calling for millions of dollars in reparations for slavery from 18 companies, including railroads, banks and cigarette makers.



## January 2004 dismissal:

“[the Plaintiffs cannot establish a personal injury sufficient to confer standing by *merely alleging* some genealogical relationship to African-Americans held in slavery over one-hundred, two-hundred, or three-hundred years ago.”



Outside the U.S. Court of Appeals (Chicago)





# *Illinois: Court Rejects Slave Reparation Claims*

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS DEC. 14, 2006

A federal appeals court rejected most claims by slave descendants that they deserve reparations from some of the nation's biggest insurers, banks and transportation companies. The panel affirmed a lower-court ruling that the plaintiffs had no standing to sue for reparations based on injustices suffered by their ancestors and that the statute of limitations ran out more than a century ago. But the United States Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit, in Chicago, kept alive a part of the suit that claims corporations may be guilty of consumer fraud if they hid past ties to slavery.



## March 2005 dismissal:

“Genetic mapping, or DNA testing, ...alone is insufficient to provide a decisive link to a homeland.”

A REPORTER AT LARGE

## PECULIAR INSTITUTIONS

*Brown University looks at the slave traders in its past.*

BY FRANCIS FITZGERALD

On May 14, 1778, John Brown laid the foundation stone for Rhode Island College, on a hill overlooking Providence and Narragansett Bay. According to the Providence Gazette, "a Number of Gentlemen, Friends to the Institution," attended the ceremony, and, in tradition lost to Brown, seated them to punch. He and his brothers—Nicholas, Joseph, and Moses—had come to celebrate that day. All four had worked hard to establish the college, later known as Brown University.

The Browns themselves had no formal education. They were Baptists—their great-great-grandfather, Chafin Brown, had been baptized by Roger Williams soon after Brown's arrival in Providence, in 1638—and, until their grandson, Baptists had regarded Biblical and classical learning as no more than obstacles to the direct experience of God. The brothers, like their forebears, and like most people in their largely Baptist town, had gone to work at around the age of fourteen. Their father, Captain James Brown, died in 1739, when Moses, the youngest, was less than a year old, and they learned their trade from their merchant uncle, Obadiah. Brought up on the wharves and amid the stench of Obadiah's gunnery-and-candle works, they succeeded where many failed in the sticky world of maritime trade, whaling, piloting, and small manufacturing. Ambitious, frugal, and hardworking, the brothers went not only building a successful empire but also turning Providence into a major seaport, and, in the process, challenging Newport's commercial and political supremacy in the colony. Along with a number of other merchants and Baptists, Hopkins, a governor of the colony and Providence's political champion, they believed that education was the key to the future.

The Browns brothers raised the

money for the college, and the family line, Nicholas Brown Jr. Company, took charge of constructing the College Edifice, which is today University Hall, the main administrative building. The Edifice was fashioned after Nassau Hall, at Princeton University, where the Reverend James Manning, a Baptist minister who was the founder and the first president of Rhode Island College, had studied. Both in design and in scale—four stories and fifty-six rooms—suggest the ambitions that Manning and the Browns had for the college. According to the records, the building contained a variety of libraries for different periods of time. A few were listed as "Negro." At least three of them, and perhaps four, were done.

On November 9, 2000, Ruth J. Simmons was elected the eighth-tenure president of Brown University by its trustees. Announcing the decision at a press conference, Brown's chancellor, Stephen Robert, pointed out that the election made her the first African-American to become president of an Ivy League institution. "This is a historic occasion," he said. Robert praised Simmons's accomplishments as the president of South College, where she had established an engineering program, increased the number of minority students, launched several new building projects, and doubled the college's endowment. "She is truly beloved by faculty, students, and staff at South," he said, "and we have every reason to believe she will be a star at Brown." Simmons thanked the Chancellor and said, "It's very hard for me to explain what's going through my mind and through my heart right now. It would be impossible for you to understand, because you don't know my personal circumstances yet. But when I was told I had been elected this afternoon as president of Brown,

I said my ancestors were smiling."

Simmons often talks about her past. She was born in 1945, the twelfth child of sharecroppers on a farm near the town of Grapeland, in East Texas. During the poor childhood, she recalled that her first day of kindergarten was "magical," because "there was a place that was bright and orderly, and something wonderful happened there. I could have a pencil and paper. I could have books to read." When she was a little older, the family moved to Houston, where her father found work in a factory and her mother cleaned homes for white families. They lived in the Fifth Ward, which she remembered as "a very impoverished area of Houston just in the shadow of the Houston skyline" and "brutally segregated." As a child, she knew no one who had been to college, but, with support from her family and her teachers, she went to Oxford, a historically black university in New Orleans.

Simmons usually speaks about her background in the context of how education can transform the lives of poor and minority children. After graduating, she came from Oxford to Harvard and earned a Ph.D. in Romance languages and literature. She studied in France on a Fulbright scholarship, then taught French at the University of New Orleans, where she became an assistant dean of the College of Liberal Arts. Then and at the University of Southern California, in the early eighties, she found her vocation as an academic administrator. In 1983, she was hired as director of studies for one of Princeton's residential colleges. "Finally, it was administrative-education," a former university officer said. "There were hundreds of applicants and she got a second look. Then she called immediately." Two years later she was brought into central administration, in Nassau Hall. The next



Ruth Simmons, the university's president, launched a study of the Brown family business. Photograph by Steve Pyke





# *Slavery and Justice*

REPORT OF THE Brown University  
Steering Committee on  
Slavery and Justice





# *Slavery and Justice*

REPORT OF THE Brown University  
Steering Committee on  
Slavery and Justice



WHO YALE HONORS | ENDOWMENTS | ABOLITIONISTS | TOWN-GOWN

SUMMARY | ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

## Yale, Slavery & Abolition

Yale University and its legacy

The SUMMARY is a good place to start...

★ What's New





UNIVERSITY of VIRGINIA

# *President's Commission on* Slavery and the University

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# HARVARD

— — — — — AND — — — — —

# SLAVERY

Seeking a Forgotten History

Yale, Slavery & Abolition

Yale University and Its legacy

The SUMMARY is a good place to start...

★ What's New





# *GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY*

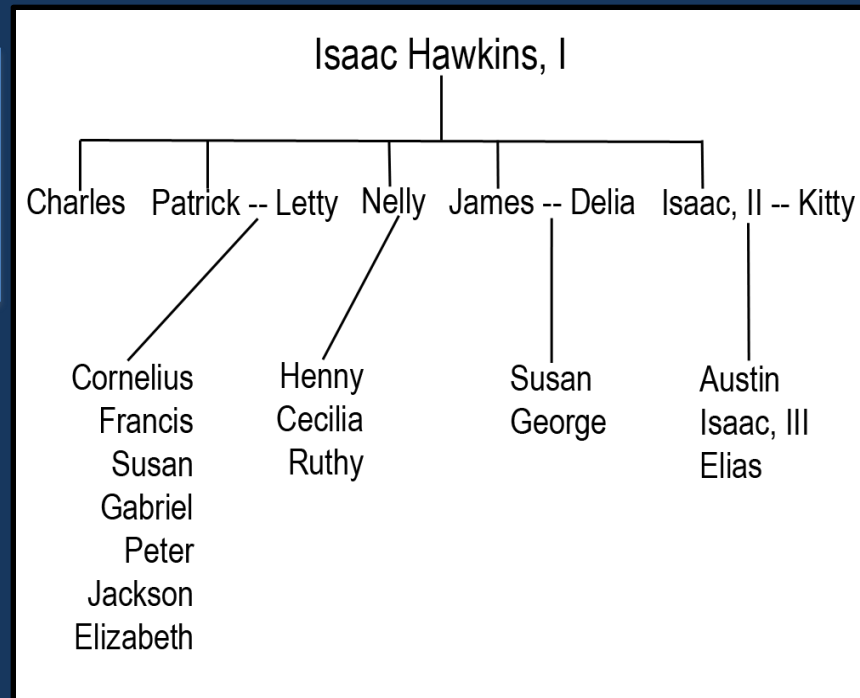
Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation

The SUMMARY is a good place to start...

★ What's New



"This is not a disembodied group of people, who are nameless and faceless...These are real people with real names and real descendants." –Richard Cellini in *The New York Times*



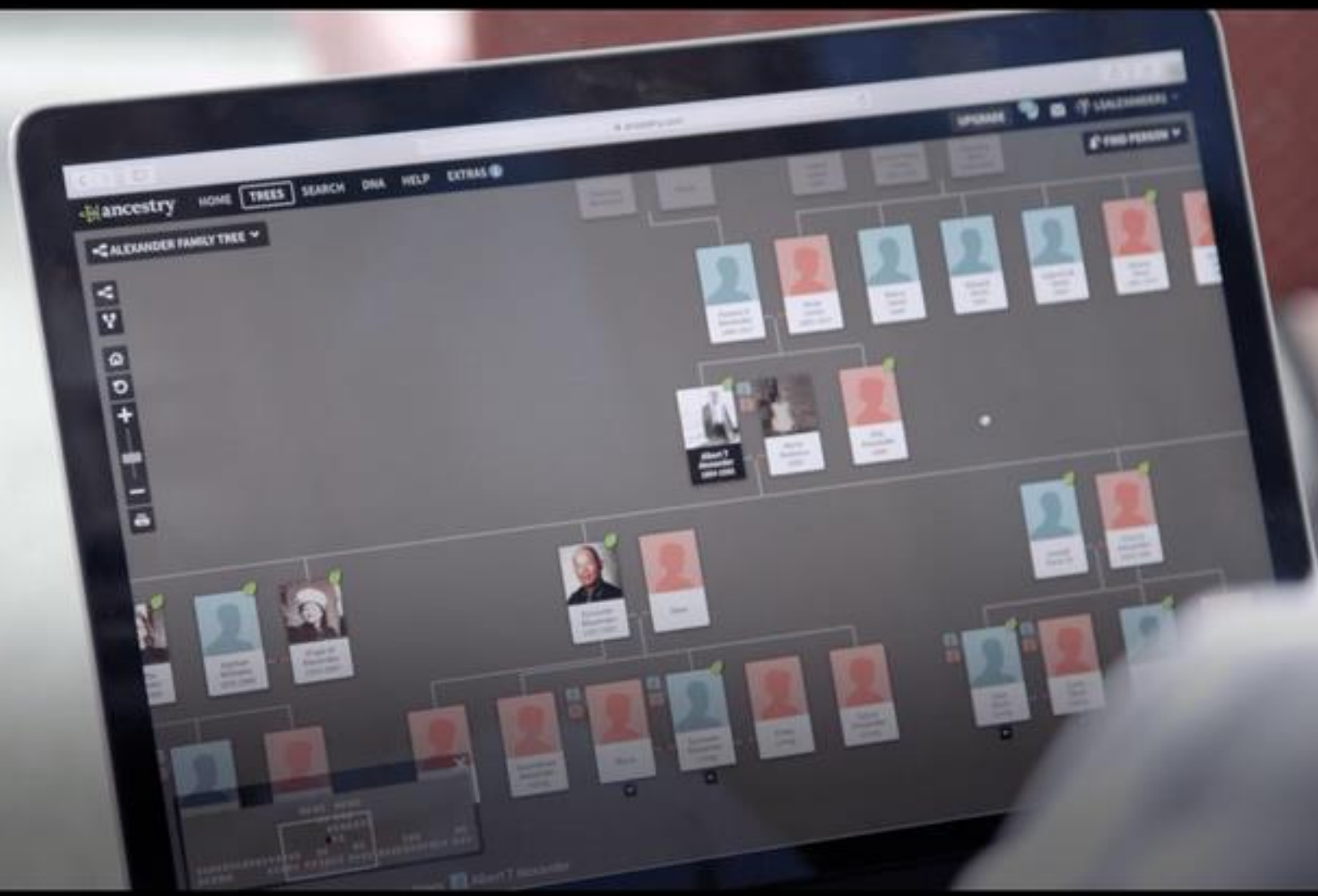




Seeking the GU 272

Judy Riffel

Patricia Bayonne-Johnson









Earlene Campbell-Coleman, great-  
great-great grand-daughter of Frank  
Campbell

# Georgetown Will Offer An Edge In Admissions To Descendants Of Slaves

September 1, 2016 · 10:13 AM ET



CAMILA DOMONOSKE



Patricia Bayonne-Johnson holds a photo of her great-grandparents and their son. The retired science teacher discovered that some of her ancestors were sold by the Jesuits of the Maryland Province in 1838, to pay off Georgetown University's massive debt.





Washington Post


Liturgy of “remembrance,  
contrition and hope”



# moral institutions and institutional morality

Moral economies... are connected in the daily activities of institutions through the values and affects which crystallize around social issues and the responses that are given in concrete situations

*-At the Heart of the State, Didier Fassin*



# THE SOCIAL LIFE OF DNA

RACE, REPARATIONS,  
AND RECONCILIATION  
AFTER THE GENOME

Alondra Nelson

"Eye-opening, provocative, and deeply humane."  
—Isabel Wilkerson