

Georgia State University

ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University

English Faculty Publications

Department of English


2018

Sankofa; or 'Go Back and Fetch It': Merging Genealogy and Africana Studies

Kameelah L. Martin


Elizabeth J. West

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/english_facpub

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Editorial

Sankofa, or “Go Back and Fetch It”: Merging Genealogy and Africana Studies—An Introduction

Kameelah L. Martin ^{1,*} and Elizabeth J. West ^{2,*} 

¹ Director of African American Studies, College of Charleston, 66 George Street, Charleston, SC 29424, USA

² Department of English, Georgia State University, P.O. Box 3970, Atlanta, GA 30302, USA

* Correspondence: martinkl2@cofc.edu (K.L.M.); ewest@gsu.edu (E.J.W.)

Received: 6 October 2018; Accepted: 23 October 2018; Published: 29 October 2018



With the overwhelming popularity of genealogy-themed television series, genetic genealogy testing, online subscription services for research, and the enduring aphorism of *Sankofa*, people of African descent are consistently dispelling the long-avowed assertion that the ancestry of the enslaved in the United States and their descendants is, for the most part, unknowable. In the 21st century, the descendants of the enslaved are truly able to “go back and fetch” the origins of their past in tangible ways as a means to understand the present and to move, assertively, into the future. Genealogical communities and organizations such as the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Association are replete with stories of those seeking and recovering the names of enslaved ancestors, visiting the sites of enslavement, preserving oral histories, and confronting the descendants of slave-owning families. Only forty years ago, such achievements were only a reality for the most well-positioned and affluent of African Americans. Alex Haley’s *Roots* seemed the improbable exception. In recent years, advancements in digitized records, online ancestry communities, and advancements in DNA testing have paved the way so that almost anyone with the knack and patience for archival research can easily follow a familial line back to the slave-owning or original purchaser of an enslaved relative.

More than ever, people of the African Diaspora are better able to identify the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade’s erasure of their lineage, familial bonds, and complicated ancestries of enslavement. And those descended from the enslaved are not the only group riveted by the recovery of a direct connection to the traffic in human flesh. The frankness with which Edward Ball, descended from a wealthy slave-owning class of Charleston, South Carolina, confronts slave owners’ blood ties to their chattel property in *Slaves in the Family* (1998) underscores the tenuous nature of kinship haphazardly carved from the peculiar institution. Ball’s attempt to reconcile with his family’s past has brought much-needed attention to this phenomenon in and around contemporary Charleston. The success of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s Public Broadcasting Station’s series “African American Lives” and “Finding Your Roots” has equally contributed to the increased interest in genealogy as both a hobby and academic pursuit. While Gates’s genealogy exploits on public television are arguably lacking in the rigor of conventional academic research, Gates’s individualized historical biographies of his guests underscore a likely new wave in academic historical and biographical research. With respect to Africana Studies, Gates’s foray into popular genealogy has inspired an amateur public and is now hastening into the halls of academia.

African American genealogy is a growing field of inquiry, which carries a distinct set of research challenges, methodological approaches, and collective memories. It is at a constant interplay with the histories, cultures, and theories of Africana Studies. A focus on African American genealogy is, indeed, an exercise in the study of the Black experience. We see this readily with the recent acclaim of Isabel Wilkerson’s *The Warmth of Other Suns* (2010) and the gut-wrenching truth of Saidiya Hartman’s *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2008). Wilkerson humanizes what has become known as the Great Migration, the historical exodus from WWI through the early 1970s that underscored African Americans moving from the sharecropping South into urban centers such as Chicago, St. Louis,

Philadelphia, and Harlem. Using oral histories, archival records, and family histories, Wilkerson's research offers the public first-person insights into the experience of the Great Migration—shifting academic models of the historical moment that have been traditionally based on documentation alone. Conversely, Hartman uses her personal family histories and reflections about living in Ghana for a year to punctuate the old adage that sometimes one really cannot go home again. She provides a stark memoir of her search for “home” in West Africa while studying the slave trade, only to discover that Ghanaians did not offer her the “homecoming” she had imagined for African-descended people who returned to the continent. *Lose Your Mother* strips away the idealized return to Africa and reclamation of origins—much in the same way DNA profiles used for genealogy are troubled with the question of so-called racial origins—which has been the cornerstone of Africana Studies for so long. Hartman forces Africana Studies scholars to reconsider the political and cultural relationships between Africa and its Diaspora in ways that do not always lead to reunification and a Pan-African worldview. Other academicians, too, are shifting their scholarly focus to investigations of African American lineage and how it can humanize our understanding of race and the imperfect past of the Black Atlantic world. Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (2010), Lawrence P. Jackson's *My Father's Name* (2012) and Lisa Lindsay and John Wood Sweet's *Biography and the Black Atlantic* (2013) demonstrate just how seamlessly African American genealogy, genetics, and humanistic inquiry merge to produce some of the most cutting-edge research of the last decade.

Our scholarly interests in this Special Issue narrowly focus upon this innovative turn in interdisciplinary projects across the academy. Titled after the Akan mythology in which a bird flies with its head turned backwards to symbolize the exigency of reconciling one's past with the future, *Sankofa; or 'Go Back and Fetch It': Merging Genealogy with Africana Studies* collates essays from scholars, genealogists, and independent researchers that apply genealogical research to a wide range of interdisciplinary approaches to the study of the African Diaspora. We sought to initiate a transnational discourse in which innovations in genealogy research such as DNA analysis, the Freedman's Bureau digitization project, and online communities widen the scope of what we know and what we can learn as we consider the future of Africana Studies. The implications of genealogical research on African American, Black, and/or African Diaspora Studies are cast wide and far to include humanities, social sciences, and STEM research.

While historians have long called upon archival records and oral histories to inform their interventions and interpretations of historical narrative, genealogical research, we argue, is revolutionizing Africana Studies as a discipline. In areas as diverse as the arts, the sciences, autobiography, history, anthropology, and philosophy, studying the histories of families—and by extension, human population groups—genealogy is making inroads into the academy, advancing in particular new, incisive, and fresh ways to explore race and the African diaspora. Notably, publications such as the collection edited by medical doctors Lawrence J. Prograis, Jr. and Edmund D. Pellegrino, *African American Bioethics: Culture, Race, and Identity* (2007), and *The Social Life of DNA: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation after the Genome* by Alondra Nelson (2016) are changing the way one conceptualizes the possibilities of Africana Studies research.

The essays in this Special Issue of *Genealogy* illustrate current and promising contributions of cross-disciplinary engagement with the field of genealogy. A discipline that is itself interdisciplinary, genealogy connects and constructs family histories through resources such as oral narratives, public records, documented academic histories, archival materials, and linguistics. As a discipline, genealogy has in the past quarter century been propelled into the spotlight—both in and outside the academy—with an intensity arguably unmatched in the history of the discipline in the U.S. DNA science applied to the level of individual, as well as group populations, has fueled this heightened interest. As a collective, the essays in this issue, *Sankofa*, offer interdisciplinary analyses, spanning the humanities, the social sciences, and hard sciences, affirming the need for new historiographies to advance Africana Diaspora Studies and perhaps human diaspora studies in general.

We enthusiastically offer the following articles for public consideration of such questions and new directions in Africana Studies. Lekan Balogun's "Mythological Recuperation and Performance as Agency for Genealogical Return in Djanet Sears's *Afrika Solo*" examines Sears's one-woman play as an artistic medium that allows for a reaching back to Yoruba cosmology. Balogun argues for understanding Sears's trip to Africa that prompted her name change as central to a cosmological transformation that, in the aftermath, influenced her work. This renaming, or what Balogun calls *autogenesis*, echoes Yoruba practice and mythology and is enacted in Sears's play. Understanding *Afrika Solo* as reflection of Yoruba verbal art as text, Balogun calls for a reading of Sears's play beyond conventional western criticism that is too often positioned as the universal interpretive lens. Through Balogun's interdisciplinary analysis, *Afrika Solo* can be understood as a much richer and complex work, a work in which the author and performer sheds light on black female artistic reflection that grows out of a necessary look backwards. Sears's look back to Africa and specific Yoruba traditions and sensibilities lead to a work whose framework and message reflect a turn to and recovery of the past as a pathway to a meaningful present.

Sarah Abel's "Of African Descent? Blackness and the Concept of Origins in Cultural Perspective" warns against the impulse of some, particularly among U.S. researchers of "genetic genealogy," who anchor their work in the presumption that DNA can serve as a universal narrative or indicator of ethnic or racial origin. Through a comparative look at DNA studies in the U.S., France, and Brazil, this essay illustrates the problem of awarding such weight to DNA results. Abel concludes that "for the main part, genetic ancestry data gain their symbolic interpretations and political power from the local contexts in which they are produced, notably by intersecting with the myths of race and national identity that have shaped concepts of origin and Blackness there." Abel shows that the concept of and desires for nationality among African-descended people of the U.S. varies from those in France and Brazil, where instead of a focus of ethnicity and origins connected to a precolonial African connection, the emphasis is identifying and situating African-descended populations and their histories within the larger present national context. Abel's trination analysis of DNA interpretation suggests that the aim of Sankofa—reaching back to the past to understand and contextualize the present—will not be a universal African diasporic experience, nor will it render a universal African narrative of origin and belonging.

Jada Benn Torres, in "'Reparational' Genetics: Genomic Data and the Case for Reparations in the Caribbean," compels readers to consider the complex nature of genomic testing with respect to how this data can often complicate as much as it answers questions of individual, communal, and national identity. Torres illustrates this point by looking at the use of genetic data in recent debates on reparations in the Caribbean. In the case of the reparations debate, the science of DNA analysis—particularly to answer questions of ancestry—is a medium for the journey back. Reconciliation and understanding, however, are not the guaranteed outcomes. The hope that looking back through science might offer a clear road to the present is not altogether the end result of DNA analysis for the results and the interpretations may create divisions where coalitions are sought. Torres discusses this conflicting nature of DNA ancestry testing as it might be applied in calls for reparations among African descended and indigenous populations of the Caribbean.

In "Bridging Discussions of Human History: Ancestry DNA and New Roles for Africana Studies," Bessie L. Lawton, Anita Foeman, and Nicholas Surdel argue that through Africana Studies and the new wave of research and data in ancestry, western historiography and history that currently dominate studies of race and identity may not hold into the future. As DNA research complicates longstanding discourses of human history and origins, Africana studies, which has been a leading discipline in challenging western intellectual hegemony, is seated to lead the way in reading DNA as part of the human narrative. The conclusions in this paper are drawn from data gathered in a DNA discussion project with samples drawn from the Mid-Atlantic American region. Lawton, Foeman, and Surdel underscore the historically unacknowledged impact of the African diaspora in the west and across the globe. In particular, this study points out that "among other things—three centuries of systematic

dispersal of Black human beings . . . created the possibility of Western wealth,” and that through recent scientific advances, this is now “a story reinforced by new genetics.” Scholars of Africana history and culture, looking into both the lived experienced and the genetics of the past are uniquely positioned to lead the way to our understandings and interpretations of how these versions of history should be recorded for a larger human history.

Mario Chandler’s essay speaks to the theme of this Special Issue with its emphasis on merging genealogy and autobiography as a means to go back and get what has been lost or obscured—to understand oneself more completely by connecting to one’s past. As with Lekan Balogun’s essay in this Special Issue, Chandler’s essay explores the case where DNA results do not offer confirmation of anticipated conclusions. Through the account of his initial search for a quick link through DNA, Chandler’s intertwined critical autobio-historiography—genealogy, biography, and science—underscores the necessity for oral accounts and histories to accompany the scientific. Chandler’s essay illuminates, most poignantly, the danger of resting notions of identity in western patriarchal constructs. With his initial assumption that he would come to know his past, to connect the pieces of his history necessarily through his paternal biological line, Chandler echoes an entrenched cultural coding that defines family and lineage through the father. The damage to discourses on African American family and kinship structures—and particularly black women and motherhood—have been analyzed in notable works such as Hortense Spillers’s “Mama’s Baby Papa’s Mabye” and bell hooks’s “Sexism and the Black Female Slave Experience.” Spillers and hooks examine the longstanding effects of slavery in the U.S. that resulted in notions that absence of fathers in the household necessarily leads to familial disorder and disconnections to familial and kinship lines. In patriarchal cosmology, women and mothers do not signal bloodline connections or order; hence, women and their lineage are often disregarded or at best deemed inconsequential. Chandler’s quest to “go back and fetch it” through the patriarchal line shows that for African Americans, this patriarchal model may prove unsatisfactory. For Chandler, it is the matriarchal line that directs him to ancestors and histories that come together to offer a sense of identity.

It is our hope that the research and personal narrative offered here demonstrate how the marriage between genealogical research, genetic genealogy, and Africana Studies bears fruit that continues to complicate myopic views of what is possible within two areas of research that often get relegated to the margins. Since its inception as an academic discipline, Africana Studies has made its mark by looking to connections to Africa and its past. With the emergence of new technologies and digitizing of archival repositories, the scholar of Africana life, history, and culture is armed with tools that will assist in the evolution and increased relevancy of the discipline well into the future. It would seem that the concept of Sankofa is a fitting one indeed.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.



© 2018 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).