

A FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF AFROFUTURISM

We are gathered under the banner of Sun Ra—the iconoclastic composer, musician, philosopher, and poet. We are enthralled by his multi-mediated revelations. We are spellbound by the flash of his brilliance.

He was another kind of *race* leader. A black man forged in the acid cauldron of Jim Crow and the alienation of racial apartheid, who claimed membership in the “Angel Race,” and who carried this message for the human race: Another world *is* possible.

He has become another kind of father. Family law cautions us that “the father is always uncertain” (*pater semper incertus* est). But in the genealogy of Afrofuturism, Sun Ra is the unequivocal progenitor of a post-black tomorrow. It is the mothers who are uncertain. As the shadows took shape, some were eclipsed.

My black feminist consciousness drew me to the possibilities of Afrofuturism. In 1998, I started an online community dedicated to this theme. In my introduction to a special issue of *Social Text* (2002) on this theme, I described how representations of science and technology often cast people of color and women as throwbacks and speed bumps. We are depicted as impediments on the road to progress, never agents in, or of, the future. Afrofuturism was a possible way around—if not an escape from—the matrix of technology, colorblindness, and false gender equivalence that was being laid as a cornerstone of a brave new world in the making. This critical perspective acknowledged the bruising violence of oppression (past and present), but did not cede the future to it. Its aesthetics were the audacious new imaginaries of marginalized folks that situated us in time, space, *and* politics, on our own terms.

Yet, in the zeal for a liberatory detour, Afrofuturism came to be more likely embodied by Sun Ra, George Clinton, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Ralph Ellison, and “The Brother from Another Planet” than by LaBelle, Ellen Gallagher, Layla Ali, Jewelle Gomez, or “Star Trek’s” Nyota Uhura. And, the queerness (in the broadest sense) of past-future visionaries such as Samuel R. Delany, Octavia Butler, and Nalo Hopkinson, too often goes unappreciated as a central feature of Black futurist aesthetics. In other words, there are *still* “voices with *other stories to tell* about culture, technology, and things to *come*;” tuning in to these can both deepen and complicate how we think about Afrofuturism twenty years after Mark Dery coined the term.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE FUTURE OF AFRICAN DIASPORA IDENTITY

Just wanted to take ya'll through the steps of me doing my paternal African roots... I'm going to send you all on a trip with me. And, hopefully... ya'll will have positive feedback about my results... Give me questions, give me comments, share this video with your friends and family, because I want ya'll to do this, too.

--yeamie, genetic genealogist on YouTube

As is widely acknowledged, parallel developments in computing and molecular biology precipitated the genomics era. A noteworthy extension of this interdependence of bytes and genes is the budding role played by social network sites (SNS) on the terrain of consumer genetics. The Google-backed personal genomics company 23andMe that sells consumers genetic inferences about their “health, disease and ancestry,” for example, was launched in 2007 as an e-business with a social networking component. As envisioned, this feature allows 23andMe’s clients to tap into the wisdom of the crowd by sharing and aggregating data about their respective genetic analyses. Virtual communities have also risen up more organically around other types of direct-to-consumer (DTC) genetic testing in the form of listservs and blogs through which users disclose and discuss the SNPs (“snips”), Y-chromosome DNA (Y-DNA), mitochondrial DNA (mt-DNA) and haplotype group results they purchased from various enterprises toward the end of conjecturing identity, familial origins or disease predisposition. In this project, I examine another iteration of the interplay between on-line community and DTC genetics—the use of the video-sharing SNS *YouTube (Broadcast Yourself)*TM by African American genealogists, who have purchased DNA testing to learn about their ancestry.

With this phenomenon, the authoritative “imprimatur” of genetic science and the practice of genealogy are married to the media cultures of Web 2.0 and reality television. These broadcasts that predominantly feature men and women in their twenties and thirties suggest the centrality of social networking to community formation among young adults. This phenomenon also suggests the broadening demographic appeal of genetic root-seeking; interest in genealogy, a practice that has long been the provenance of older adults and retirees, may be growing in a younger generation, owing in part to the recent technological mediation of root-seeking.

SNSs such as Facebook, Twitter, Flickr and YouTube capture the public’s imagination because of their capacity to facilitate the creation of community. These sites share Web 2.0 features such as information sharing, interaction and customization. But YouTube, established in February 2005, is unique among SNSs for the ease with which it can be used to upload and circulate videos. In just a few years’ time, YouTube has become the most important virtual space for the sharing of music videos and songs; news segments and current events; memorable moments from movies and television shows; how-to demonstrations and homemade viewer videos, as well as opinions about this posted material. The prominence of this SNS is reflected in the ability of its videos to rapidly draw the eyes of millions of viewers: that is, in the language of social media, “to go viral.”

The founding of YouTube followed by just a few years the emergence of DTC genetics. Recently a genre of broadcasts that we describe as *roots revelations* has emerged on this SNS. With these videos, genealogists use YouTube’s functions to disseminate and court reactions to their root-seeking journeys. In these tightly shot, almost confessional videos, genealogists describe the genetic ancestry testing process and their reactions to it. They try on genetically derived identities. Using image, sound and text, they perform the new or elaborated selves made available to them through genetic ancestry testing.

The practice of genealogy was popularized in the late 1970s after the publication of Alex Haley's book *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* and, soon after, the debut of the eponymous television mini-series. The roots journey involves the reconstruction of family history, principally through the use of archival documentation dutifully assembled by the root-seeker over many years or decades. More recently, a spate of genealogy-themed, unscripted (or "reality") television shows, such as prominent Harvard University academic Henry Louis "Skip" Gates Jr.'s successful *African American Lives* franchise, have highlighted the ease and immediacy with which the roots endeavor can currently be undertaken, be it carried out for a root-seeker by another individual (e.g. a certified genealogist) or a company (such as Gates' African DNA that sells traditional and genetic ancestry tracing). On this novel family history landscape, the apex of the roots journey is "the reveal"—to borrow a concept from reality television—the revelation of new or surprising information, often based upon genetic test results, to a subject who expresses astonishment or elation or both before an audience. Thus, in the post-Haley era, the practice of root-seeking might be said to now require not simply the reconstruction of a familial narrative or excavation, but also the performance of one's response to this genealogical account, as well as the presence of an audience to observe it. Broadcasting oneself on YouTube is one means to these ends.

Moreover, as an SNS, YouTube is inherently a vehicle through which the audience can express its opinions about roots revelations back to the videos' creators. These broadcasts provide not only a way for genealogists to circulate their genetic test results, but also an audience with whom to share their experiences and, potentially, with whom to develop affiliations. In the words of *yeemie*, from the epigram that begins this essay, genetic genealogists use the site, in part, to generate "positive feedback about [their] results." A diverse array of viewers differently bears witness to the roots journey: Viewers' reactions indeed include "positive" responses. Audience members claiming ties to the ethnic groups or countries to which a root-seeker has been associated by a testing service, for example, may enthusiastically receive (and thus authenticate) a broadcaster's results. At the same time, some in the audience may reflect skepticism about genetic ancestry testing and, implicitly, also about the presuppositions about kinship and community that undergird it. In both instances, the circulation of roots revelations offers a small window on public perception of the growing use of genetic ancestry testing.

As I described previously, "affiliative self-fashioning"—the constitution of individual identity, through and toward the goal of association with others, including ancestors and DNA "kin"—is a significant aspiration for consumers of genetic ancestry testing. As we detail here, roots revelations are one manner in which this affiliative identification and interchange is achieved. The videos thus serve not only as a forum for the evaluation of new selves by a multifaceted social network, but also a vehicle of self-making. In other words, although prompted by the consumption of genetic ancestry testing, our root-seekers and their viewers interrogate and assess identity and community membership via social network interaction. More specifically, drawing on the work of the anthropologist John L. Jackson, roots revelations might be understood as enactments of "racial sincerity"—that is, a race-based yet non-essentialist forms of negotiated, interactional identity.

Alondra Nelson is professor of sociology and director of the Institute for Research on Women, Gender, and Sexuality at [Columbia University](#). An interdisciplinary social scientist, she writes about the intersections of science, technology, medicine and inequality. These themes are taken up in her most recent book, [Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight Against Medical Discrimination](#), winner of four professional prizes, including the [Distinguished Contribution to Scholarship Book Award](#) from the Race, Class and Gender section of the American Sociological Association.

She is also an editor of [Genetics and the Unsettled Past: The Collision of DNA, Race, and History](#), [Technicolor: Race, Technology, and Everyday Life](#), and “Afrofuturism,” a special issue of [Social Text](#).

Her next book, [The Social Life of DNA: Race and Reconciliation after the Genome](#), is forthcoming from Beacon Press. Drawing on interviews and fieldwork, this book traces how claims about heritage and ancestry are marshaled together with genetic analysis in a range of social ventures, including kin-keeping, reparations politics, citizenship projects, and public commemoration.

Alondra’s essays, reviews and commentary have appeared in the [New York Times](#), the [Washington Post](#), the Boston Globe, [Science](#), Scientific American, the Chronicle of Higher Education, [Dissent](#) and the [Guardian](#), among others venues. Her publications also include articles on race and digital culture; “scientism” in black power politics; the use of racial categories in medicine; and the social implications of direct-to-consumer genetic testing, genetic genealogy and [social media](#).

The Ford Foundation, the Woodrow Wilson Foundation and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation have supported her research. From 2006-2007, she was an external fellow at the W.E.B Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard University and a visiting scholar at the International Center for Advanced Study at New York University. An internationally recognized scholar, she has also been a visiting fellow at BIOS: Centre for the Study of Bioscience, Biomedicine, Biotechnology and Society at the London School of Economics; the Bavarian-American Academy in Munich; the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin; and, most recently, at the University of Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies. Prior to joining Columbia, Nelson was on the faculty of Yale University, where she received the Poorvu Family Award for teaching excellence.

Nelson received her B.A. in Anthropology (*magna cum laude*), from the University of California, where she was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. She earned her Ph.D. in American Studies from New York University in 2003.

[Read Professor Nelson's blog](#), [follow news about her book *Body and Soul* on Facebook](#), and [follow her on Twitter](#).