

Introduction

Looking at Faces

Our complete ancestry is within us. The individual is a result of a long chain of ancestors who are still present within us and exert power over us. Men must go inside themselves, to be connected to what they originally are.

—Gustav Landauer, Mike Nichols’s maternal grandfather (1870–1919)

ON JANUARY 3, 2001, Dr. Rick Kittles, Assistant Professor of Molecular Genetics at the National Human Genome Center at Howard University, sent me a letter that would answer a question that had haunted me since I was nine years old: Where had my ancestors originated in Africa? To what “tribe” or ethnic group did my original African ancestors, who had come to this country most probably in the seventeenth or eighteenth century in the slave trade, belong? For my part, I had longed to learn the identity of my ancestors in this country since July 2, 1960, the day on which my grandfather Edward St. Lawrence Gates was buried in Cumberland, Maryland. Immediately after my grandfather’s funeral, my father showed my brother and me the obituary, dated January 6, 1888, of our oldest known ancestor on the Gates family tree, a nurse and midwife named Jane Gates. My great-great-grandmother, she had been born into slavery in 1819. The very next day, I bought a composition book, interviewed my parents, and began to write down the names, dates, and places of birth of all the family members they could remember. I could trace my mother’s side of the family, on her mother’s line, back to Lucy E. Clifford, born free in 1863. I remember seeing her on her deathbed in 1956. She was my great-grandmother.

After I joined the rest of America in watching Alex Haley’s monumental *Roots* miniseries in 1977, you might say that I developed a serious case

of “roots envy”: I wanted to know the identity of my African American ancestors on this side of the Atlantic; and, as Alex Haley claimed to know, I also wanted to learn the tribal origins of my ancestors on the other side of the Atlantic, back “home” in the motherland of West Africa. Dr. Kittles had told me he could discover this information by analyzing my mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA), the genetic signature that every person, male or female, inherits from his or her mother. I couldn’t believe my good fortune, to be alive at a time when the science of genetics could do for all African Americans that which Alex Haley had done for himself: effectively reverse the Middle Passage to recover every black family’s long-lost ancestral origins on the African continent. To say that I was excited by this possibility is an understatement.

Dr. Kittles had come to my home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the fall of 2000 to take a blood sample, which at that time was necessary in order to collect enough DNA to identify a person’s haplogroup. (Today, with more sophisticated techniques, the sample is collected by a simple cheek swab or from saliva.) A haplogroup is a group of similar haplotypes, and a haplotype, as defined by the National Human Genome Research Institute, is “a set of DNA variations, or polymorphisms, that tend to be inherited together. A haplotype can refer to a combination of alleles [variant forms of the same gene] or to a set of single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) found on the same chromosome.” Each haplotype or haplogroup is defined by a particular set of mutations.

Joanna Mountain, Senior Director of Research at 23andMe, one of the major genetics testing companies, explains the process: “We identify a person’s haplogroup by examining their set of mutations and comparing them to the definitions of all haplogroups. A simple definition of mutation is a difference between a person’s genome and the genome of the common ancestor of all living humans.” 23andMe assigns about 500 haplogroups for the Y chromosome and another 750 haplogroups for mtDNA. Think of haplogroups as the 1,250 or so branches of the human genetic family tree, and haplotypes (further genetic refinements or variants of these groups of shared mutations) as the leaves on each of those branches. By analyzing a man’s Y-DNA (which males inherit from their fathers) or a person’s mtDNA, scientists can identify our deep ancestral origins, tracing back thousands of years to a common ancestor from whom those of us with this particular genetic signature or set of mutations descend. As Dr. Mountain explains, “The powerhouses of our cells, called mitochondria, have rings of DNA that are about 16,500 base pairs long. Because no mitochondrial

DNA from the sperm gets into a fertilized egg, the mitochondrial DNA is inherited only from mother to child, enabling the tracing of a person's maternal line."

It sounds incredible, but it is true, because both Y-DNA and mtDNA are passed down from parent to child without recombining and usually without mutating. So every human being can be assigned to one of the 750 haplogroups on his or her mother's ancestral line, and every man can be assigned to one of the 500 haplogroups on his father's ancestral line. We are living in an age in which not just African Americans but all the people in the world can trace our roots through a test tube. And while we all descend from our original human ancestors who lived in East Africa, most of these haplogroups evolved from genetic mutations in their descendants, who migrated out of East Africa to populate the rest of the world starting some fifty thousand years ago.

Back in the year 2000, when Dr. Kittles tested my DNA, this procedure was new, indeed revolutionary. I could not even imagine what it could possibly mean to learn this information about my African heritage. None of today's commercial genetic testing companies, such as Family Tree DNA, AfricanAncestry.com (Dr. Kittles's company), 23andMe, or AfricanDNA.com (a company I own along with Family Tree DNA), even existed. And the cost of these tests was much higher than it is today. Dr. Kittles was a pioneer both in the history of genetics and in African American history.

At last, my results arrived. And here is where things became "curiouser and curiouser," as Alice put it. I ripped open the envelope and read: "I compared your pattern of variation with those in my database, which now represents over six thousand samples from populations from west, central, and eastern Africa," it began. "No matches or related sequences were observed with West African populations. . . . I hope the test has been helpful and insightful, please let me know if you have any questions."

Say what? I reread his words: "No matches or related sequences were observed." What could this possibly mean? Where in Africa was I from? Wasn't this what the test had been all about? Was I to be denied what I thought of as my "Kunta Kinte" moment? Since family legend had long held that Jane Gates's children were fathered by a white man of Irish descent, if I was going to be able to trace my roots to Africa, it would have to be through my mother's line. I had to be from someplace in Africa; how else to explain my skin color and my facial features, my grade of hair? And if that place of origin was not in Africa, then where in the world could it possibly be?

This surprising and frustrating result of my first DNA test in the year 2000 launched me on a path that has resulted, a decade later, in three four-hour PBS series and a one-hour special on Oprah Winfrey's family tree. Shortly before I met Dr. Kittles, I had gotten the idea of doing a documentary series in which I would trace the family trees of African Americans. My friend Quincy Jones, the music producer, had told me that for several years he had given his friends their family tree as a Christmas present. He told me about the genealogist he had worked with, Johni Cerny, who excelled at analyzing African American family trees. While I was working on a treatment for what I hoped would become a four-hour series, it occurred to me that I could combine my passion for genealogy, born back in 1960, with this new science of ancestry tracing through DNA. It was one of those middle-of-the-night revelations. The next day, I phoned Quincy and asked him if he would be in the series. His interest in genealogy traced back to Alex Haley: Quincy had scored the music for *Roots*, and the two had become close friends. He agreed on the spot. I wrote to Oprah Winfrey, and she phoned me a week later from Quincy's house to say yes. Six other African Americans agreed to join as well, including Whoopi Goldberg, Chris Tucker, Bishop T. D. Jakes, Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot, Dr. Ben Carson, and Dr. Mae Jemison. That was the origin of the series that became *African American Lives*.

As the series progressed, I began to learn more about the science of DNA testing by having our guests' DNA and my own analyzed by several scientists, among them Dr. Fatimah Jackson, Dr. Bert Ely, Bennett Green-span, and Dr. Peter Forster, in addition to Dr. Kittles. One of the biggest surprises in my life came the day that Peter Forster informed me that my haplotype is not traceable to sub-Saharan or West Africa at all. It is named T2 (actually, its proper name is T2b2, a subgroup of T2). The T haplogroup originated about forty-five thousand years ago in the Near East "as modern humans first expanded out of eastern Africa," as the 23andMe website says. T2, as Dr. Kittles had told me in his original report, is common both in northern Africa and in Europe. About thirty-three thousand years old, the T2 haplogroup originated in Europe and the Near East and is common among northern Europeans and the Spanish. Perhaps the most notorious person known to have carried mitochondrial DNA from haplogroup T2 is Jesse James! Jesse James and I share an actual common ancestor on our genetic family tree.

How could this be? Well, it turns out that I am one of the small group of African Americans whose mitochondrial DNA and Y-DNA descend

from a European woman and a European man, respectively. The man who fathered Jane Gates's five children, just as family tradition claimed, was an Irishman. We now know this as a fact, since my father and brother and I have the R-M222 haplotype on my father's side of the family, which is called the Ui Neill Haplotype and traces straight back to one man, a king, in fifth-century Ireland. (Eight percent or so of all men in Ireland share his haplotype.) I came to understand that fully 35 percent of all other African American men can also trace their paternal ancestors, their Y-DNA, to European men who impregnated an African American female, most probably in the context of slavery. On my mother's side of the family, we descend from a European woman, who was most probably—judging from the number of exact matches in the Family Tree DNA database—from England or Ireland and whose child, our direct female ancestor, was fathered by a black man. In the year 2000, I embarked on a quest to find my long-lost African ancestry through my genes, and it turns out that my roots trace to that African kingdom called the United Kingdom! If someone were asked to judge my "race" simply from the analysis of my Y-DNA and my mtDNA, he or she would conclude that I was a white man.

"Race," I was made to realize, was infinitely more complicated than our superficial definitions—and I wanted to share this knowledge with the public. This new interest in the science of individual genetic makeup enabled me to return with a new disciplinary perspective to the subject of my Ph.D. dissertation: how race was conceived and represented, or "written," in Europe and America during the Enlightenment and, more particularly, how race was related by European philosophers and creative writers to what they saw as the absence or presence of "reason" among persons of African descent. Broadly speaking, my work concerned itself with what we call the social construction of racial identities. Now, some thirty years later, I returned to the academic exploration of this subject, using scientific tools in the rapidly developing field of genetics that weren't available (or even imaginable) when I was an English department graduate student. It turns out that the four or five "races" that scholars postulated back then have absolutely no basis in biology. But it also turns out that genetic variations among individuals are real and biologically identifiable—and are infinitely more complex than anyone could have imagined in the eighteenth century.

The resulting popularity of *African American Lives* led to two sequels, a one-hour documentary on Oprah Winfrey's family and another four-hour documentary in which I explored the ancestry of eleven more African Americans. Among the thousands of letters I received after the airing of

these shows, one, from a woman of Russian Jewish ancestry, challenged me to do a series about non-African Americans, about people like her. I consulted with Johni Cerny and other genealogists and with the scientists at Family Tree DNA and 23andMe, and the result was *Faces of America*, which aired in February and March 2010. This companion book to that series allows me to share in much greater detail the results of our genealogical and genetic research into the lives of these twelve people. We identified each person's mitochondrial haplogroup, as well as the haplogroup of each male and that of a male directly descended from the guest's paternal grandfather, and we tested each guest's admixture (the percentage of European, African, and Asian or Native American ancestry) through dense genotyping done by 23andMe and Dr. Mark Daly and Dr. David Altshuler at the Broad Institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Daly and Altshuler also performed a special analysis of each guest's entire genome, searching for long identical stretches of the autosomal regions of DNA, which would indicate that two individuals share a common ancestor as recently as 250 years ago. Whereas haplogroups trace back thousands of years, and admixture tests measure an individual's complex genetic ancestry back some 500 years (say, to the time of Columbus), this identification of what I think of as "autosomal cousins" can be even more recent, leading to all sorts of surprises on one's family tree.

In America, who we are is often associated with what we do. I make my living studying and teaching the history and culture of people of African descent. And that's why I was shocked to learn that, though I don't look like it, I'm actually quite a lot more white, genetically, than I am black. As a matter of fact, I am 56 percent European and only 37 percent African—with a sprinkle of Asian/Native American ancestry (7 percent), much to my cousins' collective delight. My father's complexion is so light that his African ancestry is barely detectable; it turns out that his admixture is 74 percent European, 21 percent African, and 6 percent Asian/Native American. And the rest of my family is a multiracial, multiethnic, multicultural gumbo: black and white, African and European, Irish and Yoruba, Puerto Rican and Danish, Native American and Asian. We're the melting pot that is America, in miniature.

The truth is, you can never tell who people are, or where their ancestors have come from, simply by looking at them. Our genetic identity is much more complicated than that: it is buried deep inside us, beneath the surface. It's a product of events and relationships we have very few clues about—things our ancestors did hundreds, and thousands, of years ago.

This gap between who we appear to be and who we in fact are genetically has made me curious about ancestry for as long as I can remember. I am, as anyone who knows me well will attest, a genealogy junkie. As I mentioned, I began making family trees when I was young boy, soon after I first learned that my oldest known ancestor had been a slave until the end of the Civil War. I have since learned from genealogists in the *African American Lives* series that I am also descended from seven pairs of Free Negroes. These people were once slaves—as all our black ancestors were, unless you are descended from a recent, voluntary migrant—but were freed as early as the middle of the eighteenth century. John Redman, my mother's third-great-grandfather, actually fought in the Continental army in the American Revolution, an enormous surprise to everybody in our family.

But just as I had realized that we could combine genealogical research with state-of-the-art DNA testing to trace the roots of living African Americans back in time, across the abyss of the dreaded Middle Passage, to provide a glimpse of our lost African heritage, I came to realize that we could also uncover the ancestors of people of Jewish, Arab, West Indian, German, Italian, Spanish, Irish, English, Swiss, Russian, Chinese, Japanese, and Native American descent—anybody. The appeal was obvious: Almost all African Americans wonder where their ancestors came from in Africa. What languages did they speak? What was their music? Their religion? Their culture? These are questions that generations of us have asked, but until recently the answers were long lost in the abyss of slavery. But that has begun to change. I now realize that all Americans—all people, really—share the same fascination with their ancestry that I had once thought peculiar to African Americans.

I have spent four years conducting genealogical research on some of the most compelling African Americans imaginable. It was a magical experience for me—indeed, one of the most intensely enjoyable experiences that I have had as a scholar. At the same time, it made me realize a larger truth about genealogy and American identity. I learned, in story after story, that America is a giant ethnic mishmash—a series of interlocking families, like my own, that are so thoroughly blended that any notion of racial purity is naive at best and a dangerous intellectual error at worst.

I conceived of the series that became *Faces of America*, a broader and even more ambitious series than *African American Lives*, because I wanted to explore the complexity of race, genetics, genealogy, and identity in American society. I wanted to celebrate the true triumph of American democracy—our ethnic, genetic diversity—by tracing the family stories

of Americans of very different backgrounds to see how their unique ancestries shaped both them and our nation. I wanted to tell the stories of people who identified themselves as English or German, Irish or Italian, Arab or Asian, Native American or West Indian, Jewish or Muslim, Syrian or Turkish, to see what it is we all share and what sometimes makes us quite different.

I wanted, in essence, to look at American identity through the lens of our immigrant ancestors. If you scratch an American family, sooner or later you'll find a historically recent immigrant. Even Native American ancestors, like those of my guest Louise Erdrich, migrated to this continent some sixteen thousand or so years ago. Between 1820 and 1924, no fewer than thirty-six million people migrated to the United States. The tide hasn't stopped: more immigrants arrive every day. As a matter of fact, between 1990 and 2000, more Africans migrated to the United States than the 450,000 of our African ancestors who came here involuntarily during the entire history of the slave trade. All migrants bring with them their cultures, their religions, their languages, their traditions, and, thank goodness, their food. Yet they have confronted a nation that is not always willing to welcome them warmly.

There is a great contradiction at the heart of the history of migration to America. America's prosperity has long depended on its immigrants' willingness to make sacrifices—to work long hours, in difficult occupations, often far from friends and family. Yet immigrants themselves have routinely faced discrimination, outright hostility, and sometimes severe hardships on the way to earning the right to call themselves Americans. Traces of their early struggles still surface generations later. The legacy of their experience is our dual identity: we are Americans, but hyphenated Americans, American from another country. Our roots connect us to somewhere else, across one ocean or another.

Faces of America was born out of a desire to explore these issues. The project took shape methodically. I asked twelve remarkable people to join me, people who have made a profound cultural impact on our nation and who come from different backgrounds: Mike Nichols, Meryl Streep, Queen Noor, Louise Erdrich, Yo-Yo Ma, Mehmet Oz, Mario Batali, Elizabeth Alexander, Malcolm Gladwell, Stephen Colbert, Kristi Yamaguchi, and Eva Longoria. I told them all that I wanted to help them understand the journey their ancestors made on the road to becoming an American. What drives people to leave their homeland, their family, everything they know? How did they build new lives once they got here? And how are we,

the descendants of immigrants, shaped by the actions of our ancestors? I wanted to explore with them how the experiences of our ancestors—their dreams, their aspirations, and their choices—have carried forward through the centuries. How much do these experiences still shape our identities as individuals and as Americans?

Our genealogists, under the direction of Johni Cerny, and I began by looking at the circumstances surrounding each subject's birth in the twentieth century and then carefully worked our way back through the branches of their family trees, to discover how events long ago and far away transformed their families' future: how the grand, impersonal sweep of world historical events interacted with personal stories to shape who we are as individuals, as families, and ultimately as a nation. The answers came from family stories checked against the historical record. We talked to our subjects' relatives and hunted down marriage licenses and birth certificates, land deeds, estate records, ships' passenger lists, immigration files, and gravestones, tracing their family trees from America back to countries all over the globe. And when traditional genealogy hit a wall and the paper trail ran out, as it invariably does, we turned to genetics to excavate the ancestral record that each one of us carries inside, in each and every one of our twenty-five thousand genes—our very own individual genetic signature. This investigation allowed us to explore the distinctive ancestral legacy that makes each of us unique, as well as the extraordinary genetic inheritance that binds us all together.

This book is a record, in words and images, of what I learned while tracing the branches of twelve very different American family trees. Each chapter looks at one of these families in detail, focusing on the stories and insights that I found particularly meaningful. It is a book about journeys, not destinations—because the secret of genealogy is that every family story, no matter how seemingly insignificant, and the name and identity of each of our ancestors, no matter how seemingly unremarkable her or his life, contain an abundance of revelations, both about them and about ourselves. As Mike Nichols's great-great-grandfather put it, "The individual is a result of a long chain of ancestors." The Temple of Apollo at Delphi in ancient Greece used as its motto the phrase "Know Thyself." After our experiences tracing the family trees of the individuals in this book, I would amend it to "Know Thy Past, Know Thyself."