

Q&A: Can genetic genealogy restore family narratives disrupted by the transatlantic slave trade?

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Many African Americans descended from enslaved ancestors are working to trace their family histories by combining genealogical records and historical documents. Such efforts can connect them to living relatives and forge new sense of identity rooted in specific ancestral lineages and homelands, says University of Illinois anthropology professor LaKisha David. Credit: Fred Zwicky

Some political figures seek to remove references to slavery from the study of American history, adding to the vast knowledge gaps that stem from the transatlantic slave trade. To better understand these histories, scholars and individuals are turning to genetic genealogy to discover and retrace descendant-family lineages.

[In a paper](#) published in the journal *American Anthropologist*, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign anthropology professor LaKisha David described these efforts. She spoke about the work to News Bureau life sciences editor Diana Yates.

What is genetic genealogy and how can it help people trace their family histories?

Genetic genealogy combines DNA testing with traditional family [history](#) research to help people discover ancestral origins and living relatives. Autosomal DNA tests from consumer companies like 23andMe and AncestryDNA can identify shared genetic segments that indicate cousin relationships going back several generations. By finding and connecting with genetic matches, individuals can extend their family trees beyond the limitations of historical records.

This technology is particularly valuable for descendants of ancestors who left little or no documentary trace due to social, political or economic marginalization. By engaging with distant cousins who share specific ancestral lineages, people can recover lost branches of their family trees and gain a more complete sense of the histories that may have impacted their lives.

What special genealogical challenges arise for the descendants of those who were enslaved in the U.S.?

For African Americans descended from enslaved ancestors, genealogical records alone are often insufficient to trace lineages prior to 1870 when the U.S. census began recording African Americans by name.

Sometimes the names of ancestors may be listed as property within bills of sale and estate inventories. This makes it incredibly difficult to trace family lineages through documentation alone. Moreover, slavery systematically fractured African American family structures through the domestic slave trade and forced family separations, leading to huge gaps in knowledge about ancestral identities, homelands and kinship ties. So, descendants today often lack a cohesive family narrative extending back prior to slavery. Genetic genealogy offers a way to restore some of these lost connections.

How might these explorations of family history connect people living today?

Finding living African relatives who descend from the same pre-slavery ancestors in Africa provides meaningful validation of family roots and a transnational network of contemporary relatives. It opens the door for African Americans and Africans to connect and learn from each other's family histories and lived experiences. These connections can forge a new sense of identity rooted in specific ancestral lineages and homelands.

Why are some descendants reluctant to engage in genetic studies?

Given the long history of unethical medical experimentation and discriminatory policies targeting African Americans, there is an understandable distrust of biomedical research among some African Americans.

People worry about the potential misuse of genetic information and the lack of transparency around the use of DNA samples. There are also concerns that genetic ancestry results can be misinterpreted in ways that reinforce biological views of race or impose essentialist notions of African identity onto complex diasporic cultures.

That said, it's important to contextualize African Americans' actual engagement in genetic testing. According to national surveys, Black adults are pursuing genetic ancestry testing at the same rate as the general U.S. population, which challenges the misconception that African Americans are universally distrustful of or disinterested in genetic research. The reality is more nuanced.

According to a 2019 survey by the Pew Research Center, 15% of all U.S. adults used [genetic testing](#) services. In a subsequent survey conducted in 2021 among the Black U.S. adult population, 15% of Black adults reported using these tests to learn more about their family histories. In other words, Black adults are engaging with genetic ancestry testing at rates comparable to the national average.

Many African Americans are strategically using consumer testing to fill in genealogical gaps and restore ancestral knowledge that was lost through the disruptions of slavery. The comparable participation rates suggest it is an overgeneralization to say descendants are reluctant to engage in [genetic studies](#).

A more accurate assessment is that African Americans expect genetic research to be relevant and accountable to their communal interests and needs. By centering descendant perspectives, more researchers will find willing research partners within the African American population.

How do the genetic findings inform individual and

community identities?

Genetic genealogy profoundly informs African American identities by restoring ancestral lineages, family narratives and diasporic relationships fractured by slavery. Discovering African relatives and hearing those new family narratives provides African Americans with new sources of socialization to reshape identity and belonging.

African Americans in my research experienced an intensified connection to African heritage and oftentimes incorporated the ethnicities and family histories of their African relatives into their self-concepts. This also provided an embodied sense of transgenerational continuity and cultural rootedness that extends beyond our histories in the U.S.

Genetic genealogy also contributes to dialogues about how slavery and colonialism have impacted Black identities worldwide. By revealing genetic relatedness across Africa and the diaspora, genetic genealogy empowers African descendants to redefine identities and kinship beyond the slaveholding frame.

Some African Americans also cultivated kinship bonds with African cousins and, as they engage in actual community-building, they advance new visions of family and ethnic belonging that challenge us all to reimagine identity.

You describe genetic genealogy as a potentially reparative process. What do you mean by that?

The inhumanity of chattel slavery relied on the legal and cultural negation of African family integrity and history. Efforts to restore descendant family ties, therefore, constitute a form of restorative justice—not as a substitute for material reparations but as a meaningful

reclamation of personhood and heritage.

For African Americans who have grown up with a sense of ancestral loss and disconnection, this reclamation of family history is deeply humanizing and healing. It replaces the genealogical unknown with tangible knowledge of ancestral histories and kinship ties. Furthermore, genetic genealogy creates pathways for descendants to build actual relationships with contemporary African relatives.

Cultivating kinship connections and exchanging family histories with African cousins can restore an embodied feeling of cultural continuity and communal identity.

Identifying African genetic relatives also contributes to a larger process of historical truth-telling, cultural healing and diasporic community reconstruction, supplementing our identification with one another based on psychological connections.

In this sense, identifying African ancestors and living relatives is an act of restorative justice. It is ultimately about (re)claiming the humanity, dignity and agency of enslaved Africans and their descendants, which is an essential component of repairing the harms of slavery.

More information: LaKisha T. David, Supporting the use of genetic genealogy in restoring family narratives following the transatlantic slave trade, *American Anthropologist* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/aman.13939](https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13939)

LaKisha T. David, Addressing the feasibility of people of African descent finding living African relatives using direct-to-consumer genetic testing, *American Journal of Biological Anthropology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1002/ajpa.24705](https://doi.org/10.1002/ajpa.24705)

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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