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Induction, deduction, abduction, and the logics of race and kinship

C O M M E N T A R Y

In drawing a comparison between divinatory witchcraft and recent genomically structured craftings of race as heredity, Stephan Palmié (this issue) suggests that both practices have an inductive dimension. He argues, “If one can accept that divination . . . is a principally rational procedure to uncover previously unknown facts about the world by placing known facts under novel descriptions allowable within a specific epistemic order, then there is little reason to reject, a priori, a formal comparison with science as logically inappropriate or outrageous.” In other words, induction—reasoning by inference from particulars toward general conclusions—always unfolds with respect to a set of taken-for-granted knowledge claims about what the world is made of. Perhaps fittingly, and foreshadowing Palmié’s critical take on contemporary attempts to anchor African American “race” in some notional biogeographic and genetic heritage, induction has historically been the mode of reasoning employed by social scientists seeking to locate “African survivals” or “retentions” in African American material culture and practice—a tendency most recently diagnosed by Bill Maurer (2002) in his exploration of “the problem of induction” in the work of Melville Herskovits (see, e.g., Herskovits 1941; see also Ebron 1998). In both the old and new cases, inductive reasoning operates on elements that have already been conjured as “facts” (“African” customs or L2 haplotypes) within the epistemological frame (a trait-tracking historical particularism or a genetically backboneed genealogy) within which the reasoning is to take place.

I propose that an additional mode of logical operation is at work here as well, a mode that explicitly folds an emotionally freighted will-to-knowledge into epistemology and, indeed, that places hope and desire at the center of rationalist reconstruction. That mode is known as *abduction* and was defined in 1903 by semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce as “a method of forming a general prediction without any positive assurance that it will succeed either in the special case or usually, its justification being that it is the only possible hope of regulating our future conduct rationally” (1998:299). Peirce’s

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definition has abduction primarily as a mode of reasoning from an unknown future state (a not altogether unfitting mode, given that divination also works on the future). But I think the concept of “abduction” is also quite useful to describe the retrodictive reasonings that shape personalized genomic histories (PGHs), which, after all, as Palmié illustrates so well, reimagine the past to secure new futures in relation to it. More, resonating with the more common meaning of abduction—an unexpected capture against one’s will—this genre of reasoning can have unanticipated effects, such as the sudden “revelation” of unknown ancestors that shifts the suite of possible origin stories one might tell about one’s genealogical history. Such abductions in the logical register, like abductions in the more corporeal sense, also have the potential to do violence to kin stories secured through other means (e.g., oral history)—as one can see from Palmié’s report on the suddenly disenfranchised members of the Thomas Woodson Association, who, after endorsing a genetic retelling of their genealogy, found themselves kicked out of the Jefferson family tree.¹

Thinking through Palmié’s case studies with induction and abduction, however, leads me to wonder whether his central comparison of race-making to witchcraft is necessary to his argument. I think that burrowing into the logical operations and slips of PGH technologies in themselves, and in the frame of U.S. racism, might have served his purposes equally well or better. Palmié holds up witchcraft in his article, it seems to me, not so much for its peculiar logical armature as for what he would have his readers see as its irrationality. That is, to foreground the superstitious constitution of race thinking, Palmié paints it with the brush of deluded divination.² That rhetorical move risks flattening out the variety of practices that travel under the name divination (Tedlock 2001) as well as dismissing such activities as always in the last instance power plays that obscure some deeper, more calculating social rationality.

I think that Palmié’s digging into the realm of U.S. antikinship, of hypodescent and systematic erasure, works more effectively than the witchcraft gambit to set the stage for his critique of PGH precisely because it unearths the historical and racial formations conditioning today’s genetically modified quests for self- and family knowledge. Instead of using witchcraft as a foil, then, he could have undertaken a parallel dig into the technical and theoretical histories of genetic genealogies themselves. Scientific models of descent, ever since Charles Darwin, have the outdefinition of ancestors as their basic condition of possibility. The very structure of the family-tree model of relatedness functions to place some people in shadow (a fact that then demands a social history of the uses of the tree model borrowed by Darwin from European and Christian modes of kin reckoning; see Beer 2000; Klapisch-Zuber 1991). This is so both because branches only become legible as such when their reticulated relations are pruned to reveal only one line at a time

(see Helmreich 2003) and because the privilege accorded to reproduction through heterosexual relations makes any persons not in the gene stream irrelevant to identity construction (see Blackwood 2005; Borneman 1996).

Which brings up the place of gender and sexuality in Palmié’s article. As Palmié’s stories themselves indicate, gender is inextricably implicated in modes of kin inclusion and exclusion—and gender works differently in different racialized circumstances (so, yes, white women can birth black children, and, under the sign of Native American blood quantum, they can also birth “half” Indian ones—a historically contingent social fact that the fetish of mitochondrial DNA + Y chromosome offered by PGH does nothing to illuminate or to critique, except in the most conservative way, by pitching a bilateral heterosexual form of inheritance as more “inclusive” than patriliney). Gender, in other words, is a potent tool of hypodescent and one well worth elaborating on in Palmié’s tale, particularly as it centers on a case—that of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings—for which gender is a crucial condition in the particular crafting of race at issue.

The simultaneous operation of gender, race, and sexuality in the dynamics of hypodescent calls up the ghost of another logical operator haunting kinship imaginaries: deduction. Insofar as kinship systems operate—for anthropologists and social actors alike—as logical machines for drawing conclusions, inclusions, and exclusions from grounding principles and theories (e.g., patriliney and fractional racial inheritance), they can be imagined as deductive apparatuses, with logical deduction functioning to induct some people into kinship accounts while (arithmetically and socially) deducting others. The world of practice, of course, is never that neat.³ In the thick historical world of racial formation and racial economy, deductive and inductive reasoning are, as Palmié’s examples make clear, always crosscut by the operations of hope, desire, violence, and the unexpected: abduction.

[induction, deduction, abduction, race, kinship, gender, sexuality, personalized genomic histories, African American genealogy]

Notes

1. Doyle 2003 and Battaglia 2005 examine the hopeful register in which people who believe they have had extraterrestrial encounters now frequently report alien abductions. Both authors employ Peirce’s notion of “abduction” to develop their analyses. Scholars examining the optimistic tales of Afrofuturism (see, e.g., Nelson 2002), meanwhile, note how the trope of alien abduction is employed to describe the Middle Passage and then, in the work of musical visionaries such as Sun Ra and George Clinton, restaged and turned upside down, as slave ships are reoutfitted as space-age starships of liberation, science-fiction versions of Marcus Garvey’s early-20th-century Black Star line, a shipping line premised on the dream of a return to Africa. In these stories, Afrodiasporic people, once alien abductees

(see Dery 1994), become aliens, piloting UFOs that promise hopeful abductions into the utopian zones of outer space.

2. If the reader will permit me an egregious anagrammatical summary: In such an analysis, as scientists group people to put *them in a race*, such researchers reveal themselves as nothing more or less than *the Nacirema* (Miner 1956).

3. See Cargal 1996 for a critique of those mathematical, deductivist models of kinship inspired by André Weil's (1968) call in 1949, in an addendum to Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, for algebraic models of marriage.

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