



GENETIC DIASPORA: Producing Knowledge of Genes and Jews in Rural South Africa

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I met Hilda Mpaketsane in December 2005 at a wedding in a small village in the Greater Sekhukhune district of the Limpopo Province of South Africa. Hilda lived nearby, worked as a cleaner for the local municipality, and was a cousin of the bride, at whose elderly parents' house we were celebrating. It was after dark but still hot out; the ceremony and meal were finished and music played from speakers set up outside while some danced and others sat in groups enjoying cold drinks and beer, both store-bought bottles and libations home-brewed by the bride's mother. Hilda walked up and joined a conversation that I was having in English and Sepedi with a group of women about what it means to them to be Lemba people, an ethnic identity made internationally famous after geneticists looked for and found a link between the Lemba and Jews.¹

One woman explained to me that she was proud to be Lemba because of their cultural uniqueness and reputation as business people. Another said that her parents had told her from an early age that the Lemba were part of the Jews. Hilda agreed that they had always known their unique history and culture, but she elaborated that they had only recently learned that they were the black Jews and that this would connect them to other Jews in the world. She told me, "We discovered [it] after the arrival of [Tudor] Parfitt.² He was doing the research, he took the saliva. You go to the laboratory. After that he came back and told us you are the Jews, the black Jews in Africa." Wanting to understand further, I

told her that I was a Jew and asked if there was a relationship between us because of that. She explained, “The research made that relationship. Because we didn’t discuss that we were the Jews. After [the research] we discovered that we are the Jews.”

The genetic test to which she referred was the second of two DNA studies that investigated potential links between the Lemba and Jews; Parfitt collected saliva samples for the study in 1996, just two years after the first postapartheid democratic elections had taken place and nine years after blood samples had been collected for the first Lemba DNA study beginning in 1987 (Spurdle and Jenkins 1996; Thomas et al. 2000). In the eighteen years between the beginning of the Lemba DNA studies and my conversation with Hilda, much—but not everything—had changed. In South Africa, especially in the rural areas that had been designated as homelands under apartheid and where my research took place, political landscapes had transformed, though economic precarity remained the norm for many, including many of the women at the wedding with whom I spoke. In molecular biology, the mapping projects of genomics had partially given way to postgenomic epigenetic inquiry, rendering these types of studies more peripheral than cutting edge (Abu El-Haj 2007). And internationally and especially in the United States, the study of genetic ancestry had transformed into a robust industry, marketing the idea of scientific certainty to individuals seeking personal connections to their unknown pasts.

In the wake of the Lemba DNA studies, the BBC, NOVA, and the History Channel had produced television documentaries that featured prominent Lemba leaders alongside scientists and other scholars. Unlike Hilda’s assessment that the genetic research newly *produced* a relationship between Jews and the Lemba, these media representations encouraged an approach to Lemba people as a newly *discovered* lost tribe of Israel. Prompted by this representation, American Jews had traveled to South Africa beginning in the late 1990s to connect with Lemba people on the basis of the presumed commonalities of a shared Jewishness.

By the time I met Hilda, she and many others strongly identified with their knowledge that they were the Lemba people, black Jews genetically certified as such. But Lemba concepts of Jewish genetics and diasporic connection do not simply mirror discourses established elsewhere, and Hilda’s repetition of Parfitt’s message to the Lemba that they were Jews does not necessarily replicate his meaning. Consider, for example, the perspective of another Lemba woman who was part of our conversation. She told me that my own Jewishness “means you are a Lemba.” How does her framing, which reverses which group might be

incorporated into the other, challenge the ideas of diaspora, DNA, and agency that create an image of the Lemba as a lost tribe of Israel? Brought together by the idea of genetic connection, how do Lemba people and their Jewish interlocutors navigate their different understandings of the biological and cultural commonalities they hope to have with one another? Finally, how do divergent genomic knowledges articulate with the politics of belonging and the pursuit of citizenship in South Africa and transnationally?

I frame Hilda's and others' assertions about their identities in terms of knowledge production rather than history or categories like "genetic Jews" because it was knowledge—both its source and its implications—that was at stake. Following Hilda's insistence that the genetic research created a relationship between Lemba people and Jews, in this article I contend that genetic data has enabled a novel way of imagining and enacting diaspora. I use the concept *genetic diaspora* to theorize how new connections, marked by inequality, are tenuously forged through national, racial, and religious differences imagined to be the same. Genetic diaspora constitutes an assemblage through which knowledge and belonging are contested (Deleuze and Guattari 2009; Ong and Collier 2005; Stewart 2012). It continually re-emerges through new connections that some (but not all) participants experience as the rekindling of old ones.

Recent research has examined the epistemologies of genetic history, the politics of selling personal genomic ancestry, and the subjectivities of American seekers of such information (Abu El-Haj 2012; Nelson 2008; Palmié 2007; Pálsson 2012; TallBear 2013). But commentators have paid little attention to encounters between American ancestry seekers and those they imagine as their genetic kin; they have likewise mostly ignored the subjectivities, genomic knowledge practices, and political stakes of the people on the other side of such encounters. In this article, by privileging the perspectives of Lemba South Africans and the historical and ethnographic contexts through which Lemba genetic data emerged and circulated, I offer an alternative reading of the social and political significance of DNA.

Drawing on fourteen months of ethnographic research conducted in South Africa between 2004 and 2006 and two additional months of research in 2010 and 2013, this article examines the Lemba DNA studies, the media archive they have enabled, and a series of Lemba encounters with American Jews, including myself. I include myself in this way because most Lemba people read my presence as a researcher equally as my presence as a Jew. I demonstrate that those impli-

cated in genetic studies transform DNA into a resource that authorizes their own histories and politics of race, religion, and recognition. I argue that DNA and diaspora converge to create new sites of political belonging, ones marked by precarious connections that balance on the production of knowledge and its refusal.

LEMBA DNA AND GENETIC DIASPORA

American Jews and Lemba South Africans have become imagined as two parts of one whole through a series of mediations: the genetic data mediates the possibilities of representation; the Lemba media archive mediates the projected desires of Lemba leaders, filmed researchers, and television hosts; and different Lemba and Jewish interpretations of genetics mediate their desires for Jewish diasporic connection. [Deborah Heath, Rayna Rapp, and Karen-Sue Taussig \(2004\)](#) introduced the idea of “genetic citizenship” to describe the blurring of state and civil society, and of public and private spheres, evident in the lobbying efforts of parents of children with rare and debilitating genetic diseases. Their idea of genetic citizenship as a new kind of public within a nation-state enables me, by contrast, to examine a public—what I am calling genetic diaspora—that is organized through genetics but that falls outside any concrete recourse to states and claims of citizenship. For the Lemba, South African citizenship was indeed at stake in Lemba DNA, but genetic diaspora instead organizes a public in which it was hypothetical Israeli citizenship, both undesired and unrealizable by Lemba people, that was at stake.

The DNA studies newly thrust the Lemba into a transnational spotlight, but the studies’ premise was more reiterative than novel. All Lemba origins studies, including those involving DNA, relied on the words and bodies of Lemba informants, and Lemba authors repeatedly asserted themselves: knowledge production about Lemba origins was always multidirectional and interconnected. In the nineteenth century and the early twentieth, for example, Christian missionaries wrote about the Lemba as potential “Semites” possibly descended from Jews or Muslims. They based their analyses on oral history, embodied cultural practices like circumcision, endogamy, and dietary laws, and in one instance, comparisons of Lemba and Jewish noses ([Jaques 1931](#)). In 1936, Manasseh N. Mphelo published his own account of Lemba history and culture, adding to and critiquing earlier missionary writings and identifying his grandfather Maphangwa as Jaques’s informant “Moshe,” whose knowledge and nose provided much of Jaques’s evidence

(Mphelo 1936). Later work by Nicolus J. Van Warmelo, South Africa's chief government ethnologist from 1930 to 1969, played a critical role in the apartheid legal status of the Lemba; Lemba researchers in turn played an important role in Van Warmelo's access to and interpretation of African culture and history. During this period, essays by the Lemba author M. M. Motenda were in direct conversation with Van Warmelo; like Mphelo, Motenda (1940, 1958) critiqued the work of others while supplementing it with his own knowledge and analysis.³

Missionaries, ethnologists, Lemba authors and informants, and geneticists and their coauthors each pursued inquiries into Lemba origins for different reasons and with different effects. The DNA studies built directly on earlier interconnected forms of knowledge production, emerging from already established relationships between researchers and Lemba leaders.⁴ Both of the Lemba DNA studies that supported links to Jews were published in the *American Journal of Human Genetics*, the first in 1996 (Spurdle and Jenkins 1996) and the second in 2000 (Thomas et al. 2000). It was possible for Trefor Jenkins in the first case and Tudor Parfitt in the second to collect Lemba biological samples because Lemba leaders, who had for decades sought ethnic recognition from the South African state, felt that genetic data could potentially corroborate what they already knew in a way that might help their cause.

My reading of these studies builds on recent work in race and genomics that highlights the production and political implications of research involving genetic ancestry (Abu El-Haj 2007, 2012; Duster 2003; Fullwiley 2008; Hartigan 2013; Montoya 2007, 2011; Palmié 2007, Reardon 2005; Reardon and TallBear 2012; Royal et al. 2010; TallBear 2013). My point in what follows is not to call Lemba identity into question by calling genetic data into question. Rather, I aim to illustrate that Lemba DNA is not one fixed thing but rather continually co-constituted, emerging as labeled samples in laboratories, reported findings in published studies and documentaries, and through encounters among Lemba people and between Lemba people and Jews.⁵

From the perspective of Lemba leaders, both studies succeeded in scientifically substantiating their oral history; however, each study relied on different categories to do so. Duana Fullwiley (2008, 727) argues that the racial categories used in genetic research design are not given or fixed; rather they reflect which social categories are meaningful to researchers. These categories will therefore change depending on researchers' objectives; analyzing them suggests the politics of knowledge production at work within a given study. In the Lemba studies, different ideas of race and political belonging converged, positioning the Lemba

in two distinct analytic frames. The first compared Lemba genetic samples to “Caucasoid,” “Negroid,” and “Khoisan” samples and found that a greater percentage of Lemba Y chromosomes had Caucasoid than Negroid origins (Spurdle and Jenkins 1996). The second study found that Lemba samples were significantly similar to so-labeled “Ashkenazic Israelites” and “Sephardic Israelites”; they differed significantly from, among others, samples labeled “Yemeni” and “Palestinian Arab” (Thomas et al. 2000).

The Lemba were thus drawn into two distinct racial-political imaginaries that exceeded their own desired test outcomes. In the first study, the categories that researchers used mapped onto apartheid categories of racially defined citizenship, but they disrupted the idea of known, fixed, and developmentally significant racial difference that formed apartheid’s ideological core. The second study, in contrast, implied a measurable difference between Jews and Palestinians, an idea of consequence in Zionist projects (Abu El-Haj 2012). I have no interest here in the overt intentions or politics of the researchers, but rather in how Lemba DNA emerged through these studies as three distinct racial-political objects that nevertheless became unevenly conflated for Lemba people, researchers, and visiting Jews.

The studies’ different conclusions, both markedly cautious, were not only conflated in the media archive, they were also transformed—sometimes by the studies’ coauthors themselves—into proof that the Lemba are a lost tribe of Israel. Consider the most recent documentary featuring the Lemba, produced in 2008 by the History Channel. Parfitt narrates:

The Lemba were convinced that they were a lost tribe of Israel. The problem was that no one believed them. They appeared to be completely African. But I discovered a number of mysterious legends and customs that were very un-African. Men from other tribes were not allowed to marry into the Lemba, they refused to eat pigs . . . they practiced the ritual slaughter of animals with a special knife, and they circumcised their male children at an early age. I had become convinced that the Lemba claim that they were of Jewish origin could be true . . . but final proof only came when the science of genetics was applied to Lemba oral history. (Kemp 2008)⁶

Parfitt conflates the Lemba DNA of oral history (they were “convinced that they were a lost tribe of Israel”), South African racial categories (“they appeared to be completely African”), and Jewish genetic essentialism (genetics provided final proof that they were of Jewish origin).

Here and in other documentaries, two images exist in tension: on the one hand, the Lemba are shown as already practicing Jews, while on the other, they are represented as genetic Jews whose knowledge about Judaism is of the past rather than of the present. Through the lost tribes discourse, these documentaries trafficked in familiar tropes about Africa as spatially and temporally isolated. The Lemba are presented as long-forgotten and now-reconnected members of a Jewish diaspora that is at once ancient and contemporary and that has normative histories and traditions, which can—indeed, must—be learned to facilitate a Jewish “return.”

From 1999 to 2002, the American Jewish organization Kulanu attempted to bring about exactly such a return: informed by media reports about the Lemba as a lost tribe of Israel, it sponsored so-called recapture seminars to bring the Lemba back to Judaism. Kulanu’s choice of name for their activities with the Lemba, recapture seminars, implied a double meaning: that the Lemba might recapture their Judaism, presumably lost over the years, and that they might be recaptured *for* Judaism, in a spiritual as well as a biopolitical sense. But the seminars did not proceed as planned.

Several of these seminars were led by [Leo Abrami \(2009\)](#), an Arizona-based, reform-ordained, “post-denominational” rabbi who had survived Vichy France as a child by disguising himself as Catholic. He framed his work as “a mission to the Lemba tribe,” part of his larger lifelong mission to return secular Jews, or ones otherwise adrift, to Jewish religious practice. Abrami initially expressed enthusiasm about Lemba recapture, but he suspended his involvement after Lemba leaders included their own Christian prayer services at a weekend session during which Abrami had planned to teach Judaism to Lemba youth. He had imagined Lemba Christianity as an artifact of colonialism that only persisted because of isolation from Jews, and he was dismayed when confronted with Lemba resistance to giving up their religion. For Abrami, the Lemba remained lost Jews because they would not commit to learning and practicing Judaism as a religion necessarily distinct from Christianity ([Abrami 2009](#)). For their part, Lemba leaders at first enthusiastically welcomed Abrami and others as *emissaries*, there to exchange knowledge and form new connections. But in retrospect, some viewed the seminars as *missionary* encounters instead: they resented the implication that current Lemba practices were not Jewish enough, especially the suggestion that if they wanted to be recognized as Jews, they would need to convert to Judaism.⁷

Genetic diaspora, as it emerged through Kulanu’s recapture seminars, was full of hope and frustration all around. Lemba DNA prompted seminar teachers

to believe that they were saving lost Jews; but while it prompted Lemba leaders to consider Jewish visitors as potential kin, it also renewed their conviction that their own knowledge about their history surpassed the expertise and understanding of others, missionaries and scientists alike.

DNA, RACE, AND CULTURE: Lemba Jewishness Reframed

Initially, three men carefully managed my research with the Lemba Cultural Association (hereafter LCA). I was hosted exclusively by Ephraim Selamolela, who facilitated meetings for me with him, Samuel Moeti, and F. C. Raulinga. The LCA began in the late 1940s as a way to formalize already extant gatherings and burial societies among Lemba families and clans, and to link them into one coherent group. The Lemba author M. M. Motenda had founded the LCA and presided over the organization until his death in 1982. By the 1950s, the LCA had become the dominant space through which Lemba South Africans could make claims as Lembas on each other and on the state, and it subsequently became the dominant Lemba site of genomic knowledge production.

Selamolela presented himself as the third-most expert in Lemba history and culture, after Moeti, who ranked first, and Raulinga who ranked second. Moeti at the time served as the LCA's leader and the executive mayor of his municipality. Raulinga had long been the LCA's secretary; he was also a member of the state language board and had translated biblical texts into Tshivenda on behalf of the Catholic Church. Selamolela was a successful businessman with the means, the time, and the desire to be a gracious host to me, as he had been to others in the past. These three men by then had a long history of working with researchers, journalists, and visiting Jews. From them I learned how LCA leaders had represented themselves to visitors and what lessons from visitors they had found most resonant. The instruction I received from them about Lemba history, genetics, and Jewish connection provided me a window into the context and content that had informed the production of knowledge about the Lemba during the previous decade.

Every day for two weeks, I accompanied Selamolela as he drove his truck between his home in a village not far from Machado and the Bhubha Game Lodge, where the recapture seminars had taken place. The lodge was an event venue and farm that Selamolela had built in the 1990s as a resort for American Jews who he hoped would continue to visit South Africa. Bhubha was Selamolela's clan name; his use of it for his resort constituted an important part of his marketing

strategy that played on presumed American Jewish knowledge about the details of the second genetic study, published in 2000. That study pivoted on the presence within Lemba Y chromosome samples of a genetic sequence called the Cohen Modal Haplotype (CMH), named for its presence among Cohenim, or Jewish priests. The significant finding was that the CMH was present in seven of the thirteen samples collected from Bhubha clan members, a rate similar to the fifty percent of self-identified Cohenim found to have the CMH in an earlier study (Thomas et al. 2000).⁸

Selamolela's vision for the lodge stands as an example of the kind of identity-based self-promotion for tourist consumption examined by John and Jean Comaroff (2009) in *Ethnicity, Inc.* Yet the resort was strikingly empty of visiting Jews. Its emptiness raises an important question with a broader significance among economically marginalized groups throughout Africa and elsewhere who have turned to cultural tourism as a means of income generation: What happens when this kind of product is on offer, but nobody is buying? In this case, Selamolela recouped his losses by marketing his lodge to locals as a wedding venue, and much of the surrounding land was a working farm. He also continued to hope for future visiting Jews.

Selamolela, Moeti, and Raulinga greeted me as a fellow Jew, informed me of plans to build a synagogue, and instructed me at length about Lemba history and culture. The tone of instruction was set by my youth and their status as elders but also by my role as a researcher and their roles as star informants who had previously appeared on television: Raulinga in particular asked his own questions, which he then proceeded to answer. He included references to the Torah and to Hitler, as well as explanations of kosher laws, Lemba endogamy, and Lemba migration into Africa after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 586 BCE. Through this instruction, I was assumed to be already enacting a Jewish connection with these three Lemba men, and I was also prompted to extend that sense of connection outward in both directions, so that it was not just between me and the three of them, but between all Jews and all Lemba.

This was genetic diaspora in its Lemba institutional emergence: as Raulinga explained to me, people do not become Lembas by circumcision, language, religion, or by their place of residence. People become Lembas by blood, which for him slipped easily into DNA. He explained: "DNA will show you who you are. That is blood. At least fifty percent of the Lemba genes are of Jewish blood. . . . We had the test. We are one. The Jews have said openly color is not the

issue, it is the blood.” His message was clear: we shared the same blood, the same DNA, and therefore regardless of ritual, linguistic, religious, geographic, or phenotype differences, we were one. The ground of our common Jewish identity (Boyarin and Boyarin 1993) was DNA, understood as shared blood, while everything else was variable.

In her work on assisted conception in Israel, Susan Kahn (2000) has demonstrated emerging Halakhic distinctions of Jewishness by birth and by blood: Jewishness is conferred at birth when one is born to a Jewish mother, and not at conception, when the Jewishness of the sperm and egg donors cannot confer or deny Jewishness to a resulting child. But the stakes here differed from the Jewishness of populations to the gender of Jewishness. Rather than the differential power of birth and blood to determine Jewishness in a context where gametes are sparse but increasing a Jewish population is paramount, what emerged here is a Lemba/Jewish blood essentialism not linked explicitly to gender, even though it follows from the DNA of Lemba men. This idea neutralizes concerns that Abrami had raised at the recapture seminars that modern Jews determined descent from the mother, while Lemba Jewish DNA was derived from men only.

The extent to which I was implicated in ideas of a physical, essential Jewish connection perplexed me, partially because my personal trajectory as a feminist and a transsexual had led me to embrace ideas of anti-essentialism and indeterminacy. It was also partially because I knew that the Y-chromosome tests that formed the basis of our supposed genetic commonality could not include me personally, nor any women: Jewish, Lemba, or otherwise. And it was partially because I wondered, if our supposed point of connection dated back 2,500 or 3,000 years as the CMH hypothesized, why not 5,000 years, or 10,000? For me, diasporic time as enacted through genetic data fell off the grid of intelligibility.

Subsequent conversations with other LCA leaders after months of fieldwork actually did reframe the time scale of genetic diaspora in a way that also reframed the origins, content, and authenticity of the concept of Jewish diaspora informing the genetic studies and documentaries. Moeti told me that all original Jews had been black and that intermarriage had turned European Jews white. M. J. Mungulwa, now the LCA’s president and at the time an executive board member, explained to me that the Lemba were “original Jewish, not nowadays for the changing things for the reform and the Christianity and the orthodox . . . we’re African Jewish, because all Jews are from Africa, even the white . . . we’re not the same as the white Jew because we don’t change, we stick on the law!”⁹ In his framing, the Lemba sustained Jewish ancestral pasts, and Reform Judaism,

Orthodox Judaism, and Christianity were all equally divergent; it was not the old that needed to be brought up to date, but the new that needed to reconnect with what had been lost over time.

Ephraim Selamolela inverted Mungulwa's ideas of race and Jews. He was deeply invested in Judaism and in Israel, and for him, our supposed genetic connections were also racial. He told me that Jews were white, and because we shared the same blood, he was also white despite his dark skin. He enjoyed immensely having greater economic success than the white Afrikaners from whom he could demand service when we went to town to buy groceries or plants for the farm, and on several occasions he took my hand as he told these white workers, "Look, he is my son, he is my white son." In this way, he conflated whiteness, Jewishness, wealth, and power.

In our time together, Selamolela made a point of eating only at Nandos and not at KFC because the chicken at Nandos was halal, which he explained was just the same as kosher. Over meals, he told me about his childhood under apartheid as a laborer on white-owned farms, and how everything he had, he had built himself through becoming a businessman. Like many other Lemba people who told me that being Lemba meant success in business—although many of these same people worked as miners, cleaners, teachers, nurses, or lived entirely on government pensions—Selamolela felt that his Jewish ancestry was directly responsible for his business acumen. He linked this explicitly to DNA when he explained his personal success through his membership in the Bhubha clan, which meant, as he said, that he had "the best gene," by which he meant the CMH.

Selamolela's pride at having "the best gene" is in two ways an unexpected outcome of the DNA tests in which he participated. He took personal pride in his result from a test that aimed to determine population frequencies rather than individual genetic profiles, and he inverted the studies' underlying logics of biology and culture by attributing his own business success to genetic predisposition and his own Jewishness not to a matter of culture or choice but rather to an incontrovertible fact.¹⁰ His understanding of the test's purpose and the meanings of the results demonstrates that the reception and interpretation of genetic data by specific audiences can significantly alter their meaning.

The biological and cultural commonalities that these Lemba leaders expected to have with me included a blood connection that demonstrated either our common black African ancestry or our common Jewish whiteness. Despite this divergence, I was widely assumed to share whichever Jewish cultural attributes or practices each Lemba person held personally important, whether business success,

Torah and prayer, or not eating pork. In our interactions, I felt claimed through genetic diaspora by LCA leaders and others as a former African who had over time become racially and religiously less authentic, although I was still connected to them by blood, which in turn defined me as part of a Lemba nation in South Africa, especially to the extent that I could learn about and know Lemba culture.

This point about me learning Lemba culture, as opposed to the idea that they should learn Jewish religion, was the unintended result of the recapture seminars. These encounters had prompted a serious rethinking and a formal decision about the relationship between being a Lemba and being Jewish. By 2005, most LCA members referred to the partially built “synagogue” as the “cultural center,” and the LCA had issued an executive decision separating out religion from what it meant to be a Lemba, concepts that documentaries and visiting Jews had conflated. The decision was entered into the LCA minutes as follows: “It was agreed that Lembas are a Nation and not a religion. The Lembas may belong to different religions, but are unified by their culture.”¹¹

The decision hinged on the need to reaffirm Lemba ideas about religion, culture, and nation through the LCA, so as to not alienate the very people whose consolidation was the reason for the organization’s existence. The LCA stance of one culture, many religions inverted the logics of one religion, many cultures that had motivated Lemba inclusion among Jews invested in genetic ideas of Jewish diaspora. As they brought me into *their* production of genomic knowledge, they also inverted the flow of knowledge production: no longer the recipients of others’ expertise, they expected me to circulate their own.

DEMONSTRATING JEWISH AND LEMBA LEADERSHIP: The Exchange of Knowledge and Its Refusal

The recapture seminars had stopped in 2002, but occasional Jewish visitors continued to attempt to connect with the Lemba on the basis of assumed religious commonality. One such visitor was Roby Simons, who had grown up as a member of the American Conservative Movement and many years later became Modern Orthodox. Roby had heard about the Lemba DNA tests, as well as about other Jewish genetic studies, and he felt that they proved his own and the Lembas’ irrefutable and essential Jewishness, and therefore their diasporic connection.

In 2005, Roby and I were both in South Africa conducting research funded by Fulbright. He had heard about my project and wanted to know if he could visit one of my field sites. I was reluctant, but when I mentioned the possibility, people expressed interest.

At the time, I was in the midst of following the chieftaincy struggles of Kgoshi Mpaketsane: the South African state refused to acknowledge his status as a traditional leader. Mpaketsane was one of the 136 Lemba men who had offered a DNA sample to researchers in 1996. Postapartheid South Africa has an ambivalent relationship with chieftaincy, now renamed “traditional leadership” (Oomen 2005; Williams 2010). On the one hand, many South Africans hold up traditional leadership as a symbol of precolonial power—and therefore, also, of postcolonial strength (Ray et al. 2011). But others see it instead as a symbol of apartheid (Mamdani 1996; Ntsebeza 2006). Mpaketsane’s village intensely supported chieftaincy, all the more so because four traditional leaders—two middle-aged men and two elderly women—each claimed the status, while the government only recognized one of them.

In the 1950s, with the support of the LCA, Mpaketsane’s father had petitioned the apartheid government to recognize his chieftaincy. The younger Mpaketsane carried these efforts forward after his father died in 1989. As the LCA was busy articulating the difference between culture and religion, Kgoshi Mpaketsane was preparing his claim to a newly convened commission for traditional leadership disputes. His submission included several published accounts of the Lemba as genetic Jews, including the first DNA study (Spurdle and Jenkins 1996). His logic in including the article with the rest of his claim was that proof of Lemba biological difference would support his contention that they were culturally distinct from their neighbors—and therefore necessarily subject to their own traditional leader. Since the only legally recognized traditional leader was not Lemba, he reasoned that evidence of Lemba difference would compel the South African government to acknowledge the legitimacy of his claimed position.

During his visit, Roby asked many people about Lemba Jewish practices and beliefs, and in turn he shared his own. When it became clear that most people were members of the Zion Christ Church, Roby pointed out that Jews don’t believe in Jesus—but unlike Rabbi Abrami, he did not dwell on it. Instead, he instructed, both verbally and by example. His two-day visit involved frequent conspicuous prayer. Roby traveled with his prayer book, yarmulke, tallis, and tefillin.¹² He prayed outside, chanting softly in Hebrew and swaying back and forth, while the chickens, goats, and dogs ran around him and people stared and wondered. Many asked me about it later because they knew I was a Jew like him (white and American and presumably religious); they hoped I might be able to explain his prayer, wondered if I prayed similarly, and considered his presentation against their own religious practices.

Roby's visit culminated with his encounter with Kgoshi Mpaketsane. Roby wanted to hand-deliver the leather-bound Torah he had brought as a gift, and he wanted to demonstrate directly to Mpaketsane as the resident Lemba authority how to properly pray as a Jew. When he explained about kosher laws, Mpaketsane interjected that the Lemba knew about that, and that he had written about it in his application to the government for recognition. When Roby explained that when a boy has a Bar Mitzvah at thirteen, "for a while he's a chief, he's the leader," Mpaketsane seemed a bit put out, since his entire adult life had been dedicated to securing that status for himself. But he let it pass. And when Roby put on his tallis and yarmulke, wrapped his tefillin and started to pray, Mpaketsane chuckled uncomfortably.

Roby saw the Lemba's genetic Jewishness as a point of departure leading into Judaism. Identifying with the Lemba, he imagined that they might choose to become observant, much as he had in his adult life. But Mpaketsane and most other Lemba South Africans considered Jewishness something they *had*, not something they had to prove, choose, or learn: DNA had simply reinforced their certainty. Many people in the village and elsewhere, including Mpaketsane, had told me that they were *Bajuta amaso* (black Jews). But their politics of identity and ethnicity were not primarily directed at any recognition of Jewishness, and their Jewishness was not primarily understood as a religion. Although Roby's religious instruction failed to resonate with Mpaketsane, the American left the encounter feeling connected, and Mpaketsane left feeling properly recognized because of the gift, though disconnected from Roby's idea of Jewishness.

Their encounter demonstrates how much must be overlooked for American Jews and Lemba South Africans to experience connection as two parts of one Jewish whole. Furthermore, since this was something Roby experienced but Mpaketsane did not, it demonstrates that one person's experience of disconnection could go completely unrecognized in another's experience of profound connection from the same encounter.¹³ The connection that they did have hinged on both men affirming their own and each other's positions as leaders—Roby as prayer leader and Mpaketsane as traditional leader. Roby's leadership was affirmed through Mpaketsane's polite, though ultimately detached attention, and the Lemba man's leadership was affirmed through Roby's Jewish presence in his home and its potential to affirm his cultural difference. Ultimately, their connection proved contingent on a precarious balance between the exchange of knowledge and its refusal.

THE PRECARIY OF CONNECTION AND THE PRODUCTIVENESS OF DISCONNECTION

The diaspora literature suggests that its power as a category of belonging lies in its articulation of cultural, racial, and/or religious commonality over distance, often in the face of more proximate experiences of exclusion and discrimination. Diaspora invokes common history, common culture, or common identity, but in the encounters that I have described, these do not exist. It is precisely under such conditions of absence that DNA becomes significant as a diasporic technology, and diaspora re-emerges as a necessary site of analysis.

Diaspora is made, not given, and as such it is always being remade; furthermore, it is remade within and across global hierarchies (Brown 2005; Patterson and Kelley 2000; Thomas 2009). African diaspora and Jewish diaspora, each the focus of genetic ancestry studies, provide a productive comparison: both are entangled in global hierarchies in which Americans are the seekers and Africans the objects of projected desires.¹⁴ Like the Jewish connections I have explored here, the articulation between African diaspora and genomics can be theorized through genetic diaspora: both phenomena hinge on a desire to find one's past in Africa's present, reiterating a trope of African belatedness and isolation that is a primary object of postcolonial critique (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012; Cooper 2005; Ferguson 2006; Mbembe 2001; Piot 1999).

But it is the differences rather than the similarities that most interest me here. Genomics has emerged as a technology through which Jewish diasporic belonging is explicitly expanded, bringing entire populations into its newly imagined parameters. In contrast, in African American ancestry testing, people seek ethnic differentiation through DNA and then find meaning in learning about their specific newly found possible ethnic group (Nelson 2008; Palmié 2007). This difference turns diaspora on its head: research about diaspora that considers it a critical alternative to exclusive or coercive practices of belonging within nation-states, and as a critical analytic to denaturalize the nation-state form, assumes that diaspora is desired and chosen as an alternative site of identification (Boyarin and Boyarin 1993; Clifford 1997; Gilroy 1993; Ho 2006; Thomas 2009). But Lemba people, including LCA leaders, did not use the concept of diaspora to explain their connections to each other or to Jews.

Lemba people regarded their new Jewish connections not as ends in themselves but rather as means toward two ends not shared by their Jewish interlocutors: Lemba ethnic recognition in South Africa and Lemba communication of their own knowledge production about genes and Jews. But DNA enables the

Lemba to be claimed by the idea of diaspora, which demands both their difference *and* their assimilation. This is, to borrow Michael Montoya's term, a kind of "bioethnic conscription" through which the Lemba are brought into a story about Jewish diaspora via media dissemination of scientific data (Montoya 2007). Crucially, however, it is a conscription that Lemba people speak through and against, using the connections it conjures to further their own politics of recognition and to disseminate their own truths about their histories.

Nadia Abu El-Haj (2012, 217) introduces "diasporic Zionism" to name the power of the Israeli state as a point of reference for American Jewish questions about who is a Jew. She demonstrates this power in part through American Jewish debates about whether the Lemba should have to undergo Orthodox conversion to be granted citizenship in Israel as Jews, or whether the genetic evidence should be considered "proof" enough. This American Jewish use of genetic data to imagine potential Israeli citizenship not for themselves but for a group of black South Africans, who they mistakenly imagine desire it, underscores a need to revisit the ideological work of diaspora.

Genetic diaspora points to a space beyond diasporic Zionism and beyond genetic citizenship—a space where the rights at stake and the rights imagined to be at stake slip past each other completely, in two separate conversations imagined to be the same. Only two other American Jews visited the Lemba while I was conducting ethnographic research in South Africa. This suggests that genetic diaspora is a failed project of connection. But despite the almost complete absence of Jews, Lemba production of genomic knowledge thrived among themselves, while the image of Jewish connection continues to be promoted to American Jews in television documentaries, on the Internet, and through speaking tours that emphasize a Lemba Jewishness that is both genetic and religious. Ephraim Selamolela's hopeful business vision of a thriving Bhubah Game Lodge and the ongoing international promotion of the idea of the Lemba as Jews demand an understanding of genetic diaspora as a *partially* failed, and yet also always potentially emergent, project of connection.

The convergence of diaspora and genomics examined here is a complex site of aspiration for social and political belonging. Actors like Jewish teachers and researchers and Lemba leaders and their constituents each attempt to communicate their divergent, situated knowledge (Haraway 1988) of what they understand to be a collective, trans-situational self, and in doing so reconstitute relationships between biology and culture while also reconfiguring the possibilities and the politics of precarious connection. The ongoing interplay between failure and po-

tential emergence that I have illustrated illuminates a wide range of attempts at connection, genetic and otherwise, in which identification and difference entwine. We can thus think of genetic diaspora as one example of the precarity of connection on unequal ground.

For Lemba South Africans, both the disconnections and the connections of genetic diaspora mattered. Whether I was being asked or being told about our Jewish connections, I was also invariably being asked to reexamine my own knowledge about Jews to account for Lemba histories. Ultimately, disconnections like those between my existing knowledge and theirs provided possibilities through which new knowledge about genes and Jews could be produced and circulated. Diaspora emerges here as a site through which knowledge is contested, and DNA as an opportunity to rewrite the meaning of race, religion, and culture.

Months after I met Hilda Mpaketsane at the wedding, and after I had stayed at her home with her family, we had the following conversation:

HM: "You say you are a Jew; what tribe are you from?"

NT: "I don't know which tribe, just that I am a Jew."

HM: "Is that like black . . . or like being Pedi?"

NT: "It is complicated because it is more than one thing. . . . What is Lemba? Is it like Pedi?"

HM: "Not exactly. You see, we did not come from this place and now we are scattered."

Hilda then recounted for me how Lemba people came to be where they are: they followed a star, and each time the star rested, they stayed and settled there.

For Lemba South Africans, having Jewish blood confirms their oral history of migration, and it *also* confirms their distinctness as an indigenous African people, *different* from other ethnic groups but also belonging along with them to the continent of Africa and to the South African state. So while the genetic tests have aimed to determine the Jewishness of the Lemba, I found that Lemba South Africans actually feel more compelled by the *Africanness* of Jewish history, culture, and identity.

ABSTRACT

After Lemba South Africans participated in genetic tests that aimed to demonstrate their ancient links to contemporary Jewish populations, American Jews began to visit the Lemba to connect with them on the basis of an assumed shared Judaism. Some Lemba people welcomed and endorsed these visits, but they also maintained their own

ideas about the meaning of their “genetic Jewishness” and the terms of their new diasporic relationships, which often contradicted the understandings of visiting Jews. This article privileges the perspectives of Lemba South Africans, and the historical and ethnographic contexts through which Lemba genetic data emerged and circulated, to offer an alternative reading of the social and political significance of DNA. It poses the question: How do divergent genomic knowledges articulate with the politics of belonging and the pursuit of citizenship in South Africa and transnationally? I argue that DNA and diaspora converge to create new sites of political belonging, ones marked by precarious connections that balance on the production of knowledge and its refusal. I introduce the concept of genetic diaspora to theorize how these connections, marked by inequality, are tenuously forged through national, racial, and religious difference that is imagined to be the same. Genetic diaspora offers Lemba South Africans the possibility to produce and circulate their own new knowledge about Jewish history and genetic belonging. This article demonstrates that those implicated in genetic studies transform DNA into a resource that authorizes their own histories and politics of race and religion. [genomics; genetic ancestry; diaspora; citizenship; race; religion; knowledge production; South Africa; Judaism; black Jews]

NOTES

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1. The bride’s brother, John Mpaketsane, was also present for part of this conversation.
2. Tudor Parfitt is a Jewish studies scholar who began researching the Lemba in the late 1980s. He collected samples for the second Lemba DNA study and is listed as the second author of that study (Parfitt 2000; Thomas et al. 2000).
3. As a government ethnologist, Van Warmelo compiled language and cultural surveys of Africans to facilitate colonial rule. The discrete groupings that he described formed the basic units of apartheid policies of separate development (Lekgoathi 2009). Although

Van Warmelo included the Lemba as a distinct group in his surveys, he also noted that they did not have chiefs, no longer spoke a distinct language, and were few in number (Van Warmelo 1935, 1937, 1974). Under apartheid, manipulations of chieftaincy escalated, and the idea that language and nation were one became part of the ideological apparatus of the homeland system (Beinart and Dubow 1995). The Lemba became ethnically subordinate within homelands designated for the Venda and the Pedi, both demographically larger groups with distinct languages and hierarchical structures of chieftaincy (Tamarkin 2011). See Lekgoathi (2009) for a detailed analysis of the co-production of cultural and political knowledge between Van Warmelo and the Africans with whom he worked. Van Warmelo worked closely for decades with the Lemba researcher W. M. D. Phophi (Van Warmelo and Phophi 1967), and Motenda's first publication occurred in one of Van Warmelo's edited collections (Motenda 1940).

4. The ethnomusicologist Margaret Nabarro facilitated the first genetic study; she had been working with the Lemba since the 1960s (William Masala, interview with the author, Sinthumule, South Africa, October 16, 2005). Parfitt facilitated the second study after nearly a decade investigating Lemba origins (Parfitt 2000).
5. See Donna Haraway (2008) on co-constitution and Sheila Jasanoff (2004) on coproduction. My point here is twofold: it is not just that science and society coproduce one another but also that scientists and those they rely on for samples and stories co-constitute genetic data, which I understand as material-semiotic (Haraway 1997).
6. These are the same Lemba characteristics noted by missionaries and others as proof that the Lemba might be Jews. The assertion that these practices are un-African tethers culture to place, while also erasing African practices of endogamy, food taboos, ritual slaughter, and circumcision.
7. Dr. Rudo Mathivha, interview with author, Johannesburg, South Africa, September 1, 2013.
8. A haplotype is a group of alleles with a distinct mutation; they become "modal" through their presence at a greater frequency in any given group when compared to any other group that has been deemed relevant within a particular study. As a measure of relative frequencies, modal haplotypes thus say more about the classificatory interests of the researchers than they do about biologically or historically significant relationships in and of themselves. Haplotypes have been useful to geneticists looking to measure ancestry probabilities, because they represent a very small, and therefore easily measurable, amount of genetic data, often with no discernable biological significance per se. Nevertheless, once haplotypes are identified, they are imbued with classificatory power, which easily slips into claims about biological or historical significance. It is thus necessary to interrogate a methodology that has the effect of granting disproportionate importance to such a small amount of genetic data to find a statistically significant link among certain populations that also marks them as different from others. For example, while the CMH has been used in the Lemba study and in earlier studies to highlight similarities among Jews and differences between Jews and others, other genetic loci could demonstrate opposite results, and would have if researchers had been interested in demonstrating other relationships. The small number of samples also lends itself to potentially misleading interpretations. In this study, 136 Lemba samples were collected, and 108 of those were labeled according to clan affiliation. About half of the Lemba clans are represented by 10 samples or more. The Bhubha clan is one of these, represented here with 13 samples, 7 of which showed the CMH as it was defined in this study. In total, the CMH was found on 11 Lemba Y-chromosomes. See also Abu El-Haj (2012) on the significance of the CMH in the larger context of Jewish genetics, and Palmié (2007) for an analysis of tautological research design in genetic ancestry testing.
9. M. J. Mungulwa, interview with the author, Thohoyandau, South Africa, November 2, 2006.
10. Nadia Abu El-Haj (2012) argues that in the view of its practitioners, genetic history reinterprets the relationship between biology and culture: from their perspective, in-

stead of culture being biologically determined, biology inadvertently retains historical evidence.

11. Minutes of LCA executive meeting, August 5, 2005, F.C. Raulinga personal archives.
12. A yarmulke is a head covering, and a tallis, also spelled tallit, talit, or tallith, is a shawl wrapped around one's shoulders. Tefillin are small black boxes containing written prayers that are fixed to one's body with leather straps.
13. I draw here from *Anna Tsing's Friction* (2005), specifically on how different actors can come together through and for a social movement that is both the same and very different in terms of motivations and desired outcomes.
14. See, for example, the literature on African American efforts to connect with Africans as long-lost kin (Ebron 2002; Hartman 2002).

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