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*'Are You Paying for Somebody Else's?'*<sup>1</sup>  
*The value of secrecy in the uses of DNA paternity tests in USA*

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September 2016, DNA Lab, Brooklyn, New York<sup>2</sup>

The Indian summer's midday heat has plunged Jacob's office into a gentle state of torpor. This Tuesday in the DNA testing center, clients are few and far between. They succeed each other at irregular intervals, leaving the waiting room empty. The day before, Jacob had warned me not to come in. He was worried I'd have nothing to observe or listen to other than him giving instructions to Toinette, his assistant, on the backlog of files. I had insisted. So now here I am, counting the squares in my notebook in a silence that is highly unusual for this center usually bustling with people and noisy children. We are therefore awoken all the more brutally from our torpor by the rapid approach of a man who appears in the doorway, visibly out of breath, without bothering to knock. In his arms, he is holding a baby, not yet a year old, sporting only a nappy. He apologizes for bursting in like this and explains why he is in such a hurry: "His mother's asleep next door. I've not got much time before she wakes up. I want to know if he's my son". The man lives two streets away from the lab, in a neighborhood in the heart of Brooklyn. He was born in Jamaica 34 years ago and was 12 when he moved into the house in which he still resides today with his widowed mother. He works as an electrician and decided that he wanted his "girlfriend", unemployed and pregnant with their first child at the time, to move into the family home. He has come to do this DNA test in secret, while his partner sleeps, at his mother's behest. I understand better why he is so agitated. The two women live together but do not get on. The mother suspects the girlfriend of lying about her son being the baby's father. She intends to prove this with DNA so as to "free" her son from his unjustified obligations... and get the "intruder" out of her home.

[except from field notes]

At the entrance to the DNA Lab, located on a particularly busy street in the Flatbush neighborhood in Brooklyn, visitors are greeted by a poster. A man, facing away from the camera, is holding a baby at arm's length. This affectionate gesture signals family intimacy but also suggests the need for recognition: does the man in the photo recognize the child before him as his own? The poster also features a slogan: "Are you paying for somebody else's?"<sup>3</sup> Who is this question addressing and to what kinds of expenses does it refer? It would be tempting to answer that it is mainly about child support, one of the key issues at stake in divorce and declarations of paternity. However, the costs and responsibilities cited as the reason for lifting uncertainty can be completely different, as illustrated by the field notes above: family conflicts, morality, inheritance, respectability, or living arrangements can all be in play. This article will focus on these different costs, looking at the ties between the individuals concerned by the results of a DNA paternity test. Whether a mother is trying to defend her son's interests or a man wants to check the genetic authenticity of his parentage, the ethnographic material drawn upon here reveals the issues at stake in situations understood as enigmas that can be solved. What is the value of these enigmas, at the heart of family histories? In other words, what uncertainties do people want to resolve by identifying a biological father? Rather than taking a reductive approach framing the relationship to secrets as relating to a deep-seated or even imperative "need to know", this article intends, instead, to problematize the current preoccupation with "truth making".

*Mater semper certa est; pater autem incertus*<sup>4</sup>

Does the power to establish a tie between two people by analyzing their DNA offer a way of removing uncertainty about the identity of a biological father or does this new possibility, instead, mean that something that used to be unknown, uncertain, or perhaps even unimportant or insignificant, is now framed as a secret? Even without being directly

concerned ourselves, we have all heard of tales of “revelations” among those around us. When these family histories are not experienced as traumatic, they are at the very least presented in terms of a “critical moment” testifying to the shock that ensues when a “secret” comes out about a biological father’s identity, kept hidden by a mother. The father who discovers decades later that he has been “tricked”, the siblings who learn that they actually have “different fathers” – in all these tales, the moment of “revelation” is the point when the “truth” is finally exposed. Viewing the moment of “revelation” as an upheaval in terms of both family and subjectivity is part of an on-going preoccupation that has its own genealogy. The question of “family secrets” invites us to examine the question of “subjects’ belonging, their past, their memory, and, more broadly, the contemporary forms through which biographical truth is established” (Roux, 2017a). Far from not having a history, the notion of “family secrets” is part of a very clear history, particularly in terms of the evolution of parentage laws.

While parentage law has varied considerably across historical periods and geographical contexts, it seems to have emerged as the juridical compensation to the Roman adage “the mother is always certain; the father is always uncertain”. Studies in both classical canon law and contemporary family law show that paternal filiation is based on a conception of “shared blood” within the institution of marriage (Fine and Martial, 2010). This is the case in French law, for example, where paternity was long defined within marriage and strictly linked to the mother. The mother’s husband was declared the legitimate father and it was not possible to legally challenge his paternity. Profound changes to the family—due to divorce and separation, but also legislation that has eliminated the distinction between “legitimate” children (born from married parents) and “natural” children (born from unmarried parents)<sup>5</sup>—have all contributed to separating paternal filiation from marriage. The law on shared parental authority has been one of the most significant ways in which these changes have been

written into law.<sup>6</sup>

Studies conducted in other societies also reveal laws and customs aimed at fostering stable social paternities capable of circumventing the vicissitudes of reproduction (male infertility, uncertainty about the identity of a biological father). Anthropologist Françoise Héritier has shown how the predominance of patrilineal systems can be understood as a symbolic, legal, and political way of taking filiation in hand so as to compensate for the uncertainty of paternity (Héritier, 1996). For example, among the Samo in Burkina Fasso, there can be no “fatherless” child. In the absence of a husband, the mother names a man as the father. This designation is rarely rejected insofar as a child is considered a blessing for the patrilineal group. When a legitimate union has not produced any children, women can call on “secondary husbands” and then ascribe the children to their first husbands. In this case, the group is perfectly aware of the biological father’s status and identity “But, in line with the *idée-force* that filiation derives from words as much as it does from bloodlines, these different forms of knowledge produce no visible effects on the child’s insertion within the lineage. Nevertheless, the angry words of a third party publicly and explicitly naming the biological father is enough to interrupt it.” (Héritier, 1996: 14). Legal and customary conceptions of filiation do not ignore the biological facts; quite the contrary—they are part and parcel of a social narrative in which they are “diluted”. This narrative provides an acceptable and accepted version of a nonstandard arrangement: a married couple obtains a child via a third party; a young mother names a man as the father of her child to give that child a lineage and to avoid being disowned by her group. In these different cases, knowing what has happened has no truth value. The biological story is not hidden, it is simply secondary. In such cases, would it not be an anachronism or an extrapolation to refer to “family secrets” surrounding the father’s identity? These questions challenge the very category of the “secret” in its relationship to knowledge and truth.

## Relative secrets

In anthropological<sup>1</sup>, sociological, and psychoanalytical terms, the “secret” is tied to its etymology as a “secretion” or the trace of something that has existed: a secret is what remains of a past event kept hidden (by the group or by the subconscious) (Simmel, 1906, Zempléni, 1996; Rashkin, 1992; Winnicott, 1971). In all cases, its value lies in its power to explain a present that can only be partially understood without it. Uncertainty surrounding the father’s identity is a constitutive element of parentage law (Strathern, 1992; Carsten, 2000; Gavanas, 2004). In the absence of technology to verify a biological link, the father was identified at the mother’s discretion. Now, genetical identification of the father is a key component in exposing “family secrets” which can have important emotional and psychological consequences for those who have been kept in the dark. The key to many a family enigma can be found in a mother’s omission or “lie” about the father of her child, resulting in a husband realizing he has been betrayed, a former partner finding out he has a child after many years have passed, children and grandchildren discovering a filiation of which they were previously unaware... These stories are envisaged today as the node of traumatic situations that might prevent individuals from accessing their true “selves”. Mothers are therefore enjoined to tell the truth lest they wreak psychological harm upon their family, sometimes across several generations. This historical process can be seen in the claims for the “right to origins” that have emerged in converging medical, psychological, legal, and sometimes anthropological discourse about people’s need to know “where they come from” in order to become “fully-fledged” individuals—if not entirely fulfilled then at least spared the “trauma” of a buried secret. Research has focused on the anonymity of sperm donors as a key locus for

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<sup>1</sup> Recently in 2014, a paper in the *Annual Review of Anthropology* has been devoted to the question of secrecy (Graham, 2014).

understanding the relationship to secrecy and exploring its effects on a person's sense of self and future (Turkmendag, 2012; Pennings, 1997). In France, where sperm donors' anonymity has so far been maintained those campaigning to lift it emphasize the substantial impact that secrets have on formation of self (Delaisi de Parceval, 2006; Théry and Leroyer, 2014). Within this current paradigm, where subjects' truth is to be found in their historical and biological past (Roux, 2017b), few studies in the social sciences have examined the value of family secrets in the formation of subjectivities (Fonseca, 2018). Family secrets are often considered in their ontological dimension—i.e. the fact they exist—without their performative dimension being examined—i.e. looking at what they themselves bring into existence.

Although she does not go back on the term “secret”, which she uses to refer to her ethnographic examples, Françoise Héritier does show the relative value of secrets about parentage in producing filiations and individuals: “concerning secrets and donor anonymity, examining what happens in other societies shows that it is perfectly possible, when there is an established social consensus and when filiation is defined by law, to live in perfect harmony with oneself and others while entirely dissociating the function of the biological father from that of the *pater* [...]” (Héritier, 1996: 20).

The relationship to secrecy as an originary truth does not derive from one stable conception and its value depends entirely on the place ascribed to it by a given society. The enigma of paternity is not a fixed question. If this enigma is posed so forcefully today, it is perhaps because it is now technically possible to provide biological proof of a father's identity. This hypothesis follows on from the work of Carlo Ginzburg—one of the pioneers of micro-history—who views the rise of certain sciences and techniques (history of art and art valuation, psychoanalysis, forensic science) as the advent of a new paradigm based on the possibility of following the traces of objects and people. It entails collecting a body of evidence based on which one can trace the trajectories of objects and individuals such that

their provenance can be certified and it becomes possible to determine who they *are* and what they have done, or even to uncover what they might do (Ginzburg, 1979). One of the examples Ginzburg uses is fingerprinting (its contemporary extension would be DNA fingerprinting), which enables irreducible individual identification. By allowing the production of new knowledge about individuals, can biotechnologies be said to transform subjects' relationship to truth and to their past? The Samo case offers a potential answer. Recent studies have shown a certain break with the act of naming a father in the absence of a husband. Traditionally this practice allowed mother and child to remain in the group without this designation generating any suspicion. However, with the advent of blood tests and DNA tests introduced by social services with a view to "checking" paternity and halting the rise in youth pregnancies and pregnancies outside of wedlock, mothers are seeing their word being challenged. Before, naming the father was a way for them to protect themselves; now, it is a source of shame and leads to their social relegation (Bertho, 2016). They are framed as mercenary liars looking to exploit one of their unfortunate partners, who is not necessarily the biological father. The Burkina Faso social services present these DNA tests as benefiting very young mothers dealing with pregnancy alone, but the tests in fact risk backfiring on them. Similar situations have also been observed in another geographical context, namely the favelas in Porto Alegre studied by Brazilian anthropologist Claudia Fonseca (2002). Here "fatherless" children and mothers with scant financial resources begin paternity searches, sometimes several decades after the child's birth, asking for DNA tests through legal services specializing in women's rights. These organizations aim to help these vulnerable populations obtain the child support owed to them—a right to which they sometimes do not even know they are entitled. In practice, however, the anthropologist wonders whether this biotechnology—on the pretext of helping women—might not have an insidious side-effect, namely that of paving the way for a new form of sexual, moral, and economic control? On the

pretext of lifting family secrets to bring clarity to everyone, might DNA tests not make something public that previously remained private to women? And, in the name of “the right to know”, might carrying out a DNA test not in fact dispossess mothers of their power of discretion?

These different ethnographic examples, historically and socially situated in different places and times, testify to “family secrets” being taken on board in ways that are entirely relative. Relative insofar as their value and effects depend on the social relationships within which they are construed. Who is targeted by the result of a DNA paternity test? The child? The mother? The father? The paternal bloodline? The maternal bloodline? Relative, also, insofar as “family secrets” can be more or less important depending on social situations. They have become a key issue in contemporary family policies and practices<sup>7</sup>—particularly evident in discourse about origins and lifting anonymity (Théry, 2014)—but, in other situations, they can in fact be a secondary concern or even of no interest whatsoever to those involved, who dispense with the need to know the father’s identity or enroll it within a reproductive history that is focused on designated/declared paternity.

### **Looking for the father. Genealogy of DNA use in the United States**

With a view to examining changes in the relationship to family secrets, this article draws on a study conducted in a center specializing in DNA paternity tests in New York.<sup>8</sup>

The DNA Lab is part of a medical center in the heart of Brooklyn that offers free treatment and care. For a fairly modest price, the DNA Lab rents two rooms here (an office and a storage room).<sup>9</sup> Three chairs in a row in the corridor mark out the waiting room. Due to its location in a historically African-American, Caribbean, and Hispanic neighborhood, as yet unaffected by gentrification, the issues faced by the DNA Lab are different from those in

another centers in Manhattan, for example, where the target clientele is drawn from the neighborhood's middle- and upper-class inhabitants. In this context, where the local population has a high unemployment rate and often poor health insurance, DNA paternity tests have economic stakes ranging from child support payments to whether someone remains in a family home or whether a child is enrolled on a health insurance plan. In all cases, the results of a DNA test have a direct effect on the subsistence of those involved.

### **Field study in a DNA testing center in New York**

Far from offering the sterile environment commonly associated with genetic testing, the premises of the DNA Lab are particularly cramped and run down. Appointments, sometimes involving as many as four people, take place in a room less than ten square meters into which is fitted an imposing desk (belonging to Jacob, the director), a workstation (belonging to his assistant, Toinette), as well as a chair, squeezed into the door recess, allocated to me for my observations. The close quarters make my presence a potential obstacle to appointments unfolding in the usual way. For this reason, at Jacob's request, I wear the regulation white coat, less for reasons of hygiene than to blend in with my surroundings. This associates me with the medical team and makes it easy for me to interact with the clients, however this confusion about why I am there raises a certain number of ethical issues. The first concerns the confidential nature of highly sensitive genetic material. However, I do not have access to identifying information in the DNA—and would not be capable of understanding it even if I did—so my analysis focuses instead on the value placed upon this data. The second ethical question also relates to sensitive data, this time in terms of personal information. What is the right stance to adopt when information relating to “family secrets” is in play? There is no standard answer to this question. My approach was to explain why I was there at the beginning of each appointment in order to give the clients the option to refuse. The rare times

in my study when I was asked to leave the office, by both Jacob and the clients, were during negotiations about the cost of the DNA tests. The economic side to the process was in fact what was considered “embarrassing”, far more than the significance of genetics or of personal/family stories. The data collected during my observations and drawn from individual interviews have all been anonymized (names and places have been changed) so that the narratives reported here cannot be connected to the people I met.

The DNA Lab carries out three types of paternity tests. So-called “Peace of Mind” tests, Legal Court Screening tests, and Immigration tests. The first cost approximately 250 dollars per person sampled. They do not require consent from all parties and can therefore be done without all sampled persons knowing about it. Contrary to statutory saliva or blood samples, which require the consent of the person directly concerned by the result, DNA can also be collected from “alternative” samples taken from a hairbrush, toothbrush, razor blade, nail clipping, cigarette butt, used condom, tissue, or piece of chewing gum. The nature of these samples means that the person whose DNA is being analyzed has not given prior consent, whether they have refused or have simply been kept outside the process by those concerned by the test results. For this reason, while “peace of mind” tests are legal, they have no legal value; in other words, they cannot be used as evidence in court proceedings.

As for the legal tests, they are carried out for expressly judicial purposes and require the consent of all parties concerned. For this reason, they are more expensive (400 dollars).

In addition to these two tests, the DNA Lab offers a third, more recent, type of analysis. For almost 5 years now, the lab has specialized in “immigration tests” in response to the demands of an increasingly lucrative emerging market. Such commercial decisions are encouraged today by bills looking to systematize these sorts of practices in increasingly common situations. This is the case for the DNA tests required as part of the procedure for

family reunion. Although, for legal reasons, these tests cannot be made mandatory, they are nevertheless subject to an administrative form of imposition (Mazouz, 2015) insofar as they are presented to applicants as an administrative formality that is necessary to finalize their applications (Gourarier, 2017). Since 2008, in the State of Tennessee, a second measure has given rise to substantial controversy.<sup>10</sup> Senator Tate has sponsored a bill<sup>11</sup> that would make DNA paternity tests mandatory in order for a father to be declared on a birth certificate, irrespective of the relationship between the two parents. This measure would apply to all births, involving both married and unmarried couples.

The different paternity tests on offer at the DNA Lab illustrate the increasingly diverse fields in which genetics are applied, extending more and more to ordinary users (Nelson, 2016; Rose, 2007; Palsson, 2007). Both Frédéric Keck and Paul Rabinow (1996; 2004) have attested to this democratization of genetic knowledge, which began with a moment of euphoria in DNA use at the end of the 1980s and has risen consistently ever since. This craze took concrete form with the invention of DNA home tests in the mid 2000s. DNA sample “kits” or “boxes” are easy to use as they require no technical knowledge—a cotton swab is rubbed inside a person’s cheek and the sample sent away for analysis. The results are then mailed back, expressed in percentages that are comprehensible to non-experts. Whereas genetic expertise was previously only accessible to forensic police and legal/preventive medicine (Vailly, 2017; Heinemann and Lemke, 2014), from 2006 onwards it became marketable knowledge and various companies began selling DNA tests directly online, such as 23andMe or Pathway Genomics. Based on a saliva sample sent in by post and then analyzed in a lab, these companies offer their clients an assessment of their predisposition to certain illnesses or behavioral traits, as well as analysis of their ethnic origin and genealogy. The scientific relevance of these tests is regularly subject to controversy, particularly in terms of the ideological presuppositions that lead laboratories to reify genetic characteristics in

order better to classify ethnic groups, suddenly fixed outside historical considerations of history or population migration patterns (Rajagopalan and Fujimura, 2012). These tests are subject to specific regulations concerning ownership of genetic data and how they are used. Legislation regulating DNA testing varies considerably from one country to another according to bioethics laws and national political and economic contexts. In France, for example, it is illegal to sell or carry out a DNA analysis without a medical prescription or legal decision. Most users therefore use the services of companies located abroad, some of whom directly target the French market through their websites, such as the British website of the DNA Diagnostic Center [www.testdepaternite.fr](http://www.testdepaternite.fr),<sup>12</sup> with its very telling domain name. In the United States, however, tests are freely accessible and legal. Any person over 18 can go to a DNA center, order a DNA test online, or buy one in a drugstore without any restrictions, with the exception of the State of New York which requires a medical prescription. The leading firm on the US market estimates it had over a million clients in 2015, as opposed to “only” 100,000 in 2011.<sup>13</sup> In this context, the expanding use of genetics translates into both more users and more diversified fields of application.

In the field study in question here, the varied uses and users of DNA paternity tests call for close attention to be paid to two specific features. First, the fact that, while the aim of a paternity test is to confirm or contradict a genetic tie between two people (or several people when siblings are concerned) by comparing their DNA, this is not the only relationship in play. Often a test is conducted as a result of broader family discussion and its results affect a much wider kinship network than just the direct link between a parent and a child. Second, and consequently, there can be various aims to a DNA test depending on the family situation. By paying attention to why users decide to carry out a DNA test, it becomes clear that the value of exposing family secrets depends on the potential benefits of divulging the “truth” about a biological tie for those concerned.

## **In the name of the father**

This attention paid to the multiple actors involved in carrying out a DNA test is the result of a surprising ethnographic discovery: the men who came to carry out a DNA paternity test at the DNA Lab were almost always accompanied by a woman from their family (mother, sister, wife, or daughter). Far from offering silent support, these women from the family circle usually spoke out in order to “manage” the process. Three specific cases, which I will use here as examples, show how these women were engaged in managing filiation within what could be described as their family clan, in the sense of a group with shared interests.

The first case concerns a woman of around 50 who came in with her young 19-year-old son. He had returned home 4 months earlier from a year spent in Costa Rica, training with an American company. Since then, he had gone back to live with his mother, who was alone since her divorce. She expressed her concern about her “son’s future”. In Costa Rica, he had met a young woman slightly older than him and who had apparently “seduced him”. The young woman, aged 25, was now 7 months pregnant and had just announced her pregnancy to her former partner back in the States. She wanted the young man to return to Costa Rica to declare his paternity and accept his responsibilities. As far as his mother was concerned, by this she meant that he should give her money. His mother believed that the young woman, who was unemployed, was exploiting her son’s gullibility and trying to make him believe he was the father of the child she was carrying for the plain and simple reason that, as an American citizen, he had the means to support her and her future child:

- It’s obvious to me, it’s a big scam. It is not the first time I see it, it happens all the time there. Women throw themselves at the first American guy they

see. Then, they pretend that they are the father of their kid. Sometimes it's even worse than that, women get pregnant on purpose to trap them. They do it for the child support ! Those women are really nasty, yes, that's what I think... nasty girls.

- Nasty girls?

- Oh you know what I am talking about

- Not really

- What I mean is that these women are liars and my son is a victim of one of these liars. And I can tell you that they don't know who they are messing with, I am not going to let this go.

During Jacob's discussion with the two clients, only the mother spoke—for her son and in his place. When Jacob addressed the boy, she was the one who answered, referring to him in the third person as though he were not even there. He remained mute, eyes glued to the ground, clearly embarrassed by the situation. When the young woman had announced her pregnancy, his mother had turned to the DNA lab to find out about the possibility of taking and storing a DNA sample from a newborn child. She intended to go with her son to Costa Rica when the baby was born, take a hair sample without the mother's consent, and send it off to the lab. Her aim was to defer her son's declaration of paternity until after the results came back, convinced they would be negative. By taking in hand the process of paternity declaration, which she in fact hoped to avoid, the mother was defending her own family interests via her son's alleged paternity. Faced with the prospect of what she perceived as an unjust and unjustifiable attribution of paternity, she intended "not to let this go" and so, implicitly, to defend her "lineage" from unwarranted expense, a ruined reputation, and an unwanted child.

A second case testifies to a similar process. This time, it was a wife who suggested that the DNA test be carried out when it was alleged that her husband was the father of a child born from his relationship with another woman. At the wife's behest, the two women therefore found themselves each sitting on either side of their husband and lover, in the appointment room at the DNA Lab. The 6-month-old child remained in his mother's arms as they waited for a sample to be taken. Everyone tensed up, avoided each other's gaze, and remained tight-lipped. The silence that weighed on this appointment as it unfolded testified to the conflict dividing the various parties brought together reluctantly in this cramped office. Given that they remained mute, Jacob filled me in on the situation afterwards. A week earlier, the wife had met Jacob to find out what her rights were. A woman had contacted her, claiming to have been her husband's mistress until he left her upon discovering she was pregnant. This woman was now demanding rights, namely a father's name for her newborn child. On the telephone, the wife had expressed disbelief towards the alleged mistress. She said she believed her husband was faithful and wanted to do everything possible to protect her family. More specifically, she refused to pay any compensation. If this woman had had her husband's child, then she would have to prove it. This is how wife, mistress, husband, and child came to be in the same room at the DNA lab. Both women were motivated by the need to defend their own interests and those of their respective families. They intended to force the man to clarify his situation and responsibilities depending on the results of the paternity test.

A third case illustrates that DNA paternity tests are above all women's business. A young girl, aged around twenty, arrived with her mother. They had called the day before to ask for an appointment, insisting on the urgency of the matter. Jacob therefore saw them between two appointments. The case was sensitive because it involved a sample from a deceased man. They had to act quickly before the body was removed from the hospital and embalmed. The man in question had just died of a heart attack aged sixty. The young woman

claimed he was her father. He had had an affair with her mother while living with another woman, whose three children were officially declared as his. Although he presented himself as the young woman's father, providing regular financial support and visiting her every week, his legitimate partner had apparently forced him not to acknowledge his paternity officially. This was now problematic insofar as it precluded the young woman from any inheritance. When her father had died, his three children had contacted her, wanting to keep her away from both the funeral and the inheritance. This, in fact, was how she had found out about his death. Alerted by this attempt at dissuasion, the young woman's mother had consulted a lawyer to discuss what she could get from a DNA paternity test. As the person directly concerned could not consent to a legally mandated genetic test, in this case consent would fall to the legitimate partner who would clearly refuse. The two women did not want to bring about legal proceedings, which they felt would be too expensive. Nevertheless, they did not want to give up either. They decided they would make the most of a moment when the family was not by the deceased man's side to take a hair or nail clipping. They were counting on the performative effect of the test results and on future changes in the law to, one day, obtain "compensation".

These three cases show how, although paternity tests are carried out on men, the whole process is overwhelmingly handled by women related to these men. These mothers, wives, and daughters decide that the test will be done, take the initiative of contacting the DNA Lab, choose the date and time of the appointment, bring together all the protagonists, collect the results, decide whether or not to pass them on to those concerned, and, often, pay for the process itself. How can we explain this female monopoly over processes determining paternity? On the one hand, fairly unsurprisingly, it is the women of the family who deal with administrative matters and appointments more generally. This division of domestic labor is even clearer in the cases at hand insofar as they relate precisely to the issue of filiation and

more broadly of family. A mother is worried about whether a future child is really her son's; a wife wants to restore her husband's honor; when the man she considers her father dies, a young woman wants to stake her claim to similar rights as his officially declared children. In the name of the father, far broader family interests are actually in play: honor, money, care-work, living arrangements, etc. DNA tests are used to preserve the "family line" from undesirables who might have an adverse impact on its financial and emotional "economy" or, conversely, who might assert their right to also benefit from it. In most cases, there are underlying financial stakes—sometimes even openly and vehemently stated—motivating the request for a DNA test. Whether it is about claiming or denying rights, DNA tests are used to arbitrate situations in which filiation is problematic. In other words, the cases outlined here are not so much indicative of biological conceptions of paternity winning out over social conceptions (Porquerès and Wilgaux, 2009; Franklin, 2013) as they are indicative of how biotechnologies are used to resolve family conflicts and protect threatened interests. Similarly, revealing a biological father's identity can be explained less in terms of providing reassurance to incomplete or traumatized selves and more in terms of preserving, or conversely transforming, the family order.

In this context, the fact that many of these tests are carried out without the consent of all sampled parties raises questions. Why resort to a DNA test—and a costly test at that (more than 250\$ per person)—when its results will not translate into any legal rights (to child support or an inheritance)? In these cases, what are the actual stakes of knowing the truth? Beyond the possibility of gaining legal results, the women seem to be organizing these DNA tests as part of the continued female management of secrecy surrounding the identity of biological fathers. This analysis makes even more sense give that the new ability to establish a genetic link between two individuals has created an unprecedented break in mothers' monopoly over keeping the identity of biological fathers a secret. As the ethnographic

examples mentioned above illustrate, the loss of this monopoly is often detrimental to the mothers' interests.

### **Against mothers**

Whether the intention is to confirm or deny a biological link between a person and his or her putative father, wanting to carry out a DNA test means casting doubt on the mother's word. Mothers are suspecting of hiding the truth about their past or of choosing a "father" for mercenary reasons, despite what they know about what happened. While the key issue is often determining biological filiation, in reality the mother's morality is also at stake. During my study, three men aged around twenty came into the DNA Lab with children under a month old, without the mothers, to check their paternity. They were soldiers and marines on leave and wanted to check that the mothers had not been unfaithful to them due to their long periods away from the marital home. Via the issue of paternity, the women's probity and faithfulness to their husband or partner was also being verified. Claudia Fonseca, in particular, has identified this interpretation of the use of DNA paternity tests in the Brazilian context:

"My impression is that, in general, DNA tests suddenly brought a whole host of jealous husbands out of the woodwork. These men who used to keep their doubts to themselves now want to "know the truth". The director of the laboratory has revealed that 24.6% of the tests he conducts lead to paternity claims being annulled." (Fonseca, *ibid.*)

In the cases from the DNA Lab mentioned above, mothers' assertions were called into question by their husbands but also by the mothers and children of alleged biological fathers

and sometimes there was discussion about whether a relationship had even been consummated. In such cases, mothers are accused of making libelous claims and of being promiscuous and shameless: how can anyone believe a woman, sometimes a single mother, when it is hard to know how many partners she has had? When women trying to assert their rights at a particular point in their lives find that their word is challenged on these particular grounds, the other person usually occupies a higher social position. The case of the young American man on a work placement in Costa Rica is particularly telling in this regard. Upon his return, after a year's absence, he had to answer to the paternity of the child carried by a woman he had been seeing there. The young man lived alone with his accountant mother in Manhattan and was middle class. His social status was far higher than that of the young woman with whom he had a relationship. This difference in resources was the source of his mother's doubts about the woman's claims and the key issue at stake: it was her poverty that made her suspicious. She was seen as wanting this very young American to acknowledge paternity of her child for base material reasons: to extort money from his family and to use him to enter the country legally or even to obtain American nationality for her child. The young man's mother rejected this plan even more forcefully because the young woman would make an unwelcome and undesirable addition to the family due to her class and race: by bringing a young unemployed Costa Rican woman into the family (even just on a secondary level) through her child, her son would be engaging in a relationship beneath his station.

Although DNA tests can be used by mothers and children who are trying to find a biological father or have him acknowledge his paternity, they are also just as likely to be used in ways that place the already vulnerable in an even less secure position. This risk is exacerbated by the procedure itself: in order to consider a DNA test and then conduct one, certain resources are necessary. These are financial, first and foremost: testing two people costs over 500 dollars (and far more if the people concerned are not in the same place, due to

the transport and accommodation costs involved in collecting the samples). However, it is also necessary to know one's rights and to feel legitimate in asserting them (Ewick and Silbey, 1998). For these sociological reasons, in practice, single mothers tend to be most exposed to the insidious effects of the expansion of these biotechnologies (Heath, Rapp, and Taussig, 2004). Dispossessed of their former power of discretion, they find themselves forced to provide proof of their claims. This unprecedented act of genetic "revelation" places them under suspicion of telling lies and of mercenary intent, to which they are invited to respond by availing themselves of the very tool used to accuse them.

### **Conclusion: the desire to know**

The desire to find out the identity of a biological father can be explained in two ways. First, it results from the social relationships connecting the different people involved in determining and managing a "family secret". In other words, genes become problematic when various responsibilities (relating to money, inheritance, affect, and practicalities) are at stake for protagonists with conflicting interests. Whereas "authenticating" the biological father may not have been of particular interest to anyone before, it can suddenly take on new explanatory importance when an unexpected individual or situation is brought into the mix. Ultimately, divulging the secret reinforces the family unit by relegating certain individuals to its margins. Furthermore, the desire to unveil the truth surrounding a biological father's identity, as expressed by the people encountered at the DNA Lab, can be explained by their concern with restoring the authenticity of family histories and of the personal identities caught up in them. Exposing the "secret" of the biological father's identity means countering the mother's word by seeking a truth she has hidden, whether willfully or because she does not know "what actually happened". Whether the intention is to assert one's legitimacy as "the daughter of"

someone, to defend the honor of one's husband, or to "save a son's future", the truth finds material expression in DNA. The borders of the family and selfhood are therefore drawn thanks to the "secretion" of genes as traces of the truth.

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<sup>1</sup> Slogan on a DNA Lab advert.

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<sup>3</sup> Source: personal photograph taken during fieldwork in October 2015. For reasons of confidentiality, I have chosen not to publish the photograph as it contains information that could identify the DNA center where I conducted my research.

<sup>4</sup> A principle in Roman law: “The mother is always certain, the father is always uncertain”.

<sup>5</sup> Ordinance on the reform of parentage, July 4, 2005, enacted July 1, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Article 372 of the French Civil Code states that “The father and mother shall exercise parental authority in common.” Article 373-2 specifies that “Separation of the parents has no influence on the rules of devolution of the exercise of parental authority.” (see law n°2002-305 of March 4, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> The collaborative Ethopol study funded by the ANR focuses on changes in policies and practices relating to the government of the family: <https://ethopol.hypotheses.org/>

<sup>8</sup> The field study took place over 4 months and was based on observations of the appointments before and after the genetic test and on a series of interviews with 30 clients after these appointments. Informal interviews were conducted throughout the study with members of staff at the center.

<sup>9</sup> The director did not tell me the exact price, although he did explain that his reasons for setting up in south Brooklyn were both economic (lower rents than in Manhattan) and practical (he lived close by).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the discussion on this feminist blog devoted to debating bills: <https://womenshealthnews.wordpress.com/2008/02/18/tennessee-to-require-dna-for-birth-certificates/>

<sup>11</sup> Reference: SB3717

<sup>12</sup> URL: <http://www.testdepaternite.fr>

<sup>13</sup> URL: <https://mediacenter.23andme.com/blog/23andme>