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By
Nicole-Marie Cotton

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

African American Studies

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Chiyuma Elliott, Chair
Professor Tianna Paschel
Professor Michael Omi

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Abstract

From Test Tube to YouTube: Public Displays of DNA Ancestry Tests Results and the
Performance of Race in America

by

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Doctor of Philosphy in African American Studies

University of California, Berkeley

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The consumer DNA ancestry testing industry was estimated to have served two million customers in 2015 (Nelson, 2016). DNA ancestry testing is permeating media outlets and proliferating in forms of social media and popular culture. Viewers see performances of genetic ancestry test results on news programs, talk shows, educational programming, and social media sites. Given how ubiquitous DNA ancestry testing is in American households, and how often test results are being shared on social media sites such as YouTube, I argue that we can use DNA test reveals to ascertain the way race is viewed, performed, and negotiated. My research asks, what do the social media performances of DNA Ancestry tests tell us about how test takers see race and ethnicity? Do test-takers change their identity affiliations or the ways they view themselves after reading the results? If so, do test-takers rely more on the genetic component of identity or are there other criteria that have more weight? The performative, dramatic nature of genetic results being read in front of an audience means we can use these reveals to understand what people consider the appropriate criteria to belong to an ethnic or racial group, and to see what conditions cause people to change identity or reject the test results.

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Introduction

In a promotion for the 2018 film *Black Panther*, actor Chadwick Boseman appeared on The Breakfast Club, a morning radio show (also broadcast via YouTube and Facebook) to talk about the film, including African Americans' feelings of connection and belonging on the African continent. He told the host, Charlemagne, that he had taken an ancestry test to address his desires, and "Me too… I am 97% West African" Charlemagne interrupted. Boseman responded, "No, you took the wrong test. You took Ancestry, I took African Ancestry. It can tell you the ethnic group you are from" (Breakfast Club, Feb.14, 2018). Boseman went on to explain that where other tests give general countries, those are European borders, but if you know you are Yoruba, you can point to certain customs and rituals. Dr. Gina Paige, the co-founder of African Ancestry, heard of the plug Boseman made for the product and offered to test Charlemagne; she appeared on a subsequent episode of the show. When he asked about the three ethnic groups he was given in his results, Paige replied, "You can pick and choose, identity is you know, fluid. You get to form your identity however you see fit" (*Breakfast club Interview* June 2018). Both Paige's and Boseman's appearances were promotional for the company, and clear messages were communicated about identity, what specific information is desired in order to construct identity and its practices; Paige's appearance legitimized the idea that customers are players who can pick and choose what you want to be from a list of genetic avatars. These exchanges raise important questions: Now that such genetic ancestry information is widely available to the public, to what extent do individuals use this information to support or change their identities? And what role does social media play in these identity explorations?

Many Americans may be familiar with DNA ancestry testing in traditional broadcast media, such as morning radio or public television shows such as *Finding Our Roots*. However, I highlight how these DNA testing dramas play out on social media sites: a context where there is a clear tradition of identity tourism through online games in which players can choose which racially loaded avatar they would like to be for a new experience. Social media is an important site of study. Seventy percent of U.S. Adults log onto either YouTube or Facebook every day[1] Previous researchers in Black Studies such as bell hooks (in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* in 1992) and Janelle Hobson (2013) have written about the ways broadcast media has influenced the ways people learn ideas about racialized blackness and the behaviors associated with it. Recognizing the growing importance of social media, my research looks at what YouTube performances teach the public about race.

Since direct-to-consumer genetic ancestry testing is available to content creators who post on social media, I explore to what extent genetic information has in the contemporary making and remaking of racial and ethnic categories for the public to claim, play with, and perform. Besides entertainment and race-play, this study explores what people gain from these performances. I identify click-monetization, the profit

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[1] https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/06/01/facts-about-americans-and-facebook/??

content creators gain from viewers engaging in posted content, as the engine that keeps both the content creators and the genetic testing companies supporting genetic essentialism and identity play among their customers and reflect on the implications of that commercialization. In the world of contemporary DNA testing, genomic science provides us with an authoritative, country-coded list of ethnic identities we can choose from. Click-monetization algorithms let social media users know what a good racialized performance looks like. And DNA testing companies influence (and sometimes even coach) content creators in those performances to generate more traffic and purchases of their products. My contention is that we can learn about how people view race and identity by observing which identities they pick and choose and why.

Identity as Performance: Identity Tourism and the Gamification of Race

The relatively young academic field of New Media Studies now has a generation of scholars such as Daniels (2013) Hobson (2013), and Burgess & Green (2018) who have highlighted how, despite the internet and Silicon Valley celebrating technology as post-racial spaces that preceded a post-racial era, race and racism are embedded in the infrastructure of online platforms. Nakamura (1995), Leonard (2003) and Grey (2018), are part of a genealogy of studies of online gaming that present the phenomenon as one of the earliest sociological sites of human interaction where racial performance and racism were exposed under the supposed anonymity of a computer screen. They found individuals, particularly white males, were entertained by donning the identities of racialized minorities, and since the gamers knew little about actual experiences associated with the identities, they engaged in stereotypical performances. In 1995, Nakamura coined this phenomenon as "identity tourism." Leonard (2003) specifically points out how Black bodies are read biologically and understood as a social position through sports video games where Black athletes have larger muscles and super-human abilities that white characters do not have. In games like *Grand Theft Auto*, Leonard found that suburban white players wanted to see what it was like to be a person in South Central Los Angeles but only had stereotypical black and Latino characters committing criminal activities such as theft, murder, and patronizing prostitutes.

Leonard notes that much attention has been put into studies of how children learn about violence and may change their behavior due to violent video games, but few studies look at how video games teach us about race. I wondered instead if we learn about race through video games, what do social media conversations about genetic ancestry tests teach us about the way race is viewed (and how we want others to see us) when product advertising and coaching encourages race-play and the gamification of identity changes in genetic ancestry test reactions? Alondra Nelson (2016) and Anita Foeman (2015) have looked at the weight genetic ancestry tests are given in establishing new identities for African American test-takers. For example, AfricanAncestry.com test-taker Isaiah Washington went on stage in front of cameras to receive a certificate naming the African tribe he belonged to and he subsequently gained citizenship from Sierra Leone. These pseudo-scientific tests are designed by algorithms that artificially assign individuals into genetic groups, and they have real-life consequences, as do the identity performances linked to DNA testing results that are

proliferating now on social media, particularly the increasing number of live test reveal videos on platforms such as YouTube. Given the performative, dramatic nature of results being read in front of an audience, I propose that we can understand what people think constitutes racial identity from the public display of DNA tests.

These YouTube performances of DNA test reveals are profitable because they are entertaining. I compare profitable online racialized performances to gaming, where players are given stereotypical identities to "choose their player" as an avatar to navigate the world. Similarly, DNA ancestry companies give color-coded identities and encourage users to pick new ones to play with by making lifestyle changes such as traveling and eating ethnic foods. Dr. Gina Paige of African Ancestry testing company reinforced my assertion that this online gaming identity tourism and DNA Ancestry testing are similar performances when she responded, "You can pick and choose" (*Breakfast Club Interview* June, 2018). Here, the spokesperson for a genetic ancestry company is acknowledging that users like to pick and choose who they want to be from the list given to them, similar to the ways avatars in video games are presented. And, as I will show, many independent YouTube content creators employ a similar avatar-like approach to race and ethnicity in their DNA test reveal videos.

Previous studies of DNA ancestry reactions have failed to look at the backstage of the click economy that motivates individuals to engage in these performances, the role the test-taking companies have in directing performances, and what this communicates to the public about race, play, and representation. Click-monetization is the money generated from clicks on content, the corresponding advertisements, and products linked to that content; click-monetization is the driving force behind some of the racial essentialist performances we see in the DNA ancestry test reactions on YouTube. In this study, I tie identity performances to what Sofia Noble[2] calls "information capital." I look at various theoretical frameworks from dramaturgical studies, Black studies, New Media Studies, and genomic studies that explain identity as a performance. These seemingly disparate studies highlight the performativity of identity, how ethnic divisions are created and marketed through genetic sciences, and how click-monetization of these performances (disguised as definitive scientific information) become profitable and circulate via social media engagement.

Situating the Research in Broader Context of African American Studies

DNA Ancestry testing is a relatively new technology that became available after the mapping of the human genome in 2000. At that time, scientists, and heads of state, such as President Bill Clinton, announced with fanfare that there was no biological basis to race (Bliss 2013; Nelson 2016). Bliss reports that an ironic shift has happened where the media has replaced the expertise of sociologists with genetic experts on questions about race. Anita Foeman (2013) called for Africana Studies scholars to become directly involved with the genetic ancestry industry in an article in the *Journal for Negro Education* due to test-takers from all backgrounds discovering they had African roots that had previously been denied or purposely erased in cases of racial passing or disrupted by chattel slavery in their family history. Foeman foresaw that a mass of test-takers would run to scholars, even taking classes to find out more about the

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[2] Noble, Safiya Umoja. *Algorithms of Oppression*. New York University Press, 2018.

cultures and geographies that appear in their results. The hyper-focus on black ancestry from test-takers is a clear takeaway from observing their recorded reactions vloggers upload to YouTube.

       Individuals are looking for information regarding who they are by gathering information about the past in hopes of giving them insight into future actions. Ruha Benjamin in the *People's Science* also introduces the metaphor of the Sankofa in her discussion of how African Americans politically position themselves in stem cell debates, highlighting that people can be simultaneously pulled backward and forward while scientific advancements appear with historical inequalities baked-in (2013 p. 23). Sankofa is a symbol commonly used in the African diaspora to refer to the Akan concept of going forward but learning from the past. Lawton, B.L.; Foeman, A.; Surdel, N. (2018) related the resurgence of personal family genealogies and the use of genetic science to the Sankofa in their work. Such characterizations give the new technology of DNA testing the status of something ancestral, African, and timeless and invest it with racialized meaning.

Image 1 Sankofa is used as a metaphor for the connection to past and future. This image is part of the public domain.

       There are larger social and political stakes in DNA test reveal performances. Previous studies surrounding DNA tests and ethnicity have revolved around either the scientific, legal or bioethical questions regarding user data (Wagner, 2010), or DNA ancestry testing tests as tools for discussion of race and ethnicity in the classroom (Daley el al., 2013 & Eubanks, 2013). Few scholars have interrogated how the personal becomes public performance and the social impacts of ancestry DNA testing. An exception is Alondra Nelson; in the S*ocial Life of DNA: Race Reparations and Reconciliation after the Genome*, Nelson explores how the lives of individuals are transformed from the public and private reactions to ancestry tests results to subsequent involvement in community development economics. Nelson (2016) found ancestry DNA testing has been used as a healing and reconciliation tool for traumas ranging from the transatlantic slave trade to the Abuela's de Plaza de Mayo in Argentina receiving DNA analysis on missing grandchildren during Argentina's militarized government from 1976-1983. In both cases— descendants of the slave trade and

grandmothers looking for missing children—DNA tests were a tool used in hopes of reconstructing the of family and receiving closure from an unresolved emotional trauma.

Much of the literature regarding DNA ancestry testing is written as personal essays and typically centers around African American experiences participating and digesting ancestry results (Eubanks, 2013; Foeman, 2012). This could be due to the way some tests have been marketed towards African Americans as means to fill in gaps in historical records due to slavery, as well the use of ancestry DNA tests in documentaries or television programming involving genealogical studies of African Americans. Some have gone further and advocated for DNA Ancestry tests to be provided to African Americans free of charge as a form of reparations (Nelson, 2016). African Americans have the trauma of not knowing ancestry or having incomplete genealogical records due familial disruption during slavery which makes them a demographic targeted for this service; some feel paying for this service is another injustice.

In addition to the ready-made African American market for genetic ancestry tests due to the lack of historical records, scholarly literature points out how other racial groups are impacted by incomplete histories or the purposeful re-writing of familial histories through the act of racial passing. White individuals may be surprised to find African ancestry due to passing. Foeman (2012) asked what does it mean when blackness is absent in the family narrative, yet present in DNA? Similarly, what does it mean when Native American ancestry is hyper-present in a family narrative, yet absent in DNA? Nelson's (2016) work shows that societies see DNA testing a great power. It is positioned frequently as the ultimate bearer of truth where a historical account may be questioned, or as a tool to verify an already held belief. These dissertation probes motivations for testing and how this power is used by consumers as a way to verify their identity, or, in the case of conflict, change racial affinity and the performance that may come along with either outcome.

Previous studies of DNA ancestry tests reactions on social media have focused on all-white populations. A 2019 study looked at the way white nationalists shared their DNA ancestry test results and their reactions on Stormfront, an online forum, and how they reconciled non-European ancestry with their white nationalist beliefs[3]. Another study, "Attitudes on DNA Ancestry Tests" (Wagner & Weiss, 2011) was done through observing interactions on scientific and genealogical RSS blog posts and fifteen Facebook groups. The study recruited participants via a link to the research survey posted on the public Facebook affinity groups; the researchers could not provide a reason why the Facebook groups they recruited from were composed of predominantly males from European ancestry. Direct quotes were taken from the Facebook walls of the groups and attributed with the first and last name of the poster, offering the justification that the group settings were public and thus open to use. Wagner and Weiss called for future research to explore the psychological factors for participating in DNA Ancestry testing and the seriousness of changes in ethnic affiliation. My project attempts to answer that call with a more ethnically diverse sample set.

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[3] Panofsky, Aaron, and Joan Donovan. "Genetic Ancestry Testing among White Nationalists: From Identity Repair to Citizen Science." Social Studies of Science, vol. 49, no. 5, Oct. 2019, pp. 653–681

Theoretical Frameworks

Since most of the extant scholarly literature is related to personal essays, theoretical applications are sparse. However, my research is also situated within the broader literature on the construction of race such as Kimberly DaCosta's (2007) work on creating and marketing multiracials—given how DNA companies use multiracial individuals in ads—and Osagie Obosogie's (2014) challenge on the treatment of the social construction of race. Obosogie highlights asking how we believe the racial difference we see is transmitted socially rather than the material reality we believe we see. When DNA ancestry tests results, at times, are not reflected in the individual's phenotype, both the YouTuber and the viewers responding in the comment sections try to make sense of the inconsistencies in the individual's phenotype and the results of the genetic test, and claim to "see" racial difference when it is not there. Following Obasogie, I cover the sensory experience of race beyond sight including touch (and feeling) and taste in this dissertation.

In order to interrogate the online interactions between the testing companies, test-taker identity performances on social media platforms, and the viewers of these performances, I draw on the dramaturgy of Goffman (2001), the feminist scholarship of West and Fensternmaker (1997), the identity tourism in online game interactions that Nakamura (1995) highlighted, and the critical race scholarship of Noble (2018) on racialized computer algorithms and their relationship with click-monetization in the embedded racial structures of the internet studied by Benjamin (2019) to explain the engines that run these performances. The interactions we see in online communities mirrors the racial hierarchies and kinds of racial interactions that are observed in physical spaces in society.

Recognizing that identity is a performance, not a biological essence, is critical in understanding the way genetic ancestry test-takers engage in racial fluidity despite believing in a biological reality of race and ethnicity. Goffman (2001) in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* introduced the sociological understanding that individuals consciously perform for an audience of other people, similar to a theater performance. They do this in order to craft an image of themselves that influences the audience. There is a "front stage" where the individual carefully grooms oneself through donning of clothing and other physical markers that signal what they may do for a living and what class they may belong to. Goffman's theory asserts that every social interaction is a performance. The "backstage" refers to parts of oneself that are outside of the public gaze. Goffman's theory helps us understand the ways YouTubers may groom themselves to present an ethnic identity (or identities) they want to be seen and understood by viewers. Where this theory falls short is the specific relationships with monetized content that also influence the performativity of identity on YouTube, where click-monetization, sponsored content, and affiliate links motivate individuals to perform to maximize views that generate income.

It is important to communicate the difference between performance and performativity. Although I refer to specific videos in my research as racial performances, I acknowledge the performativity of identity. Judith Butler (1990) explains that gender "performance" suggests that there is a well-defined biological essence of gender: a

reality that individuals work towards replicating. On the other hand, Butler asserts that performativity is a more accurate description of what actually goes on. Performativity means that there is no biological essence of identity, rather we are constantly working and reworking what it means to belong to a certain identity through our performances.

Besides building on Goffman's theory on performance of identity, Butler contributes to this dissertation by explaining that identities are performative, meaning they are constantly worked and reworked. In this dissertation, I discuss how the lines defining racial difference have been drawn and redrawn through U.S. Supreme Court cases to illustrate racial fluidity, including bendable scientific definitions of racial groups that were used in important legal cases. This study sees Butler's definition of performativity as helpful in explaining the working and re-working of ethnic categories DNA ancestry companies create, and the working and re-working of test-taker identities when people receive their genetic ancestry results and experience genealogical dislocation. Previous studies have observed users selectively and partially consider or reject their genetic ancestry results when confronted with surprise results in a process Nelson (2008) calls "affiliative self-fashioning."[4] Previous studies have concluded that the race of the test-taker is a factor in how test-takers interpret their DNA ancestry test results, including those that lead to "official" identity changes such as checking more boxes on the U.S. Census[5] (Sasha Shen Johfre, Aliya Saperstein, and Jill A. Hollenbach, 2021). I have also observed racial differences in how individuals interpret their ancestry results and selectively pick and choose which identities to accept. Blackness is a focus in this dissertation because genetic ancestry reactions are particularly nonsensical and rich to interrogate when it comes to a "Black" result.

Explanations of the slippage of categories and identities is something that the performativity of identity adds to this study. This matters because the algorithm the genetic ancestry companies use for predicting the probability a user descends from a people group from a particular location has changed over time. When some individuals (myself included) were initially given "Nigerian" as a result, an update years later from Ancestry.com gave those same users results from Ghana, Benin, Togo and other countries. Some YouTubers made videos to express their rage over the changes in results, saying they already traveled to Nigeria and made connections and now had to identify as something else. Others expressed confusion, disappointment, and distrust when their ethnic results changed because they became attached to the results of the first test. Some YouTube reaction videos in my study capture user experiences of earlier iterations of DNA ancestry genetic test results. I observed users complain about the lack of specificity in the broad "The Americas" and "Sub-Saharan African" categories that came in the results, a complaint observed in the direct-to-consumer genetic ancestry industry and in at least one previous study of DNA test reactions. By contrast, from the outset, individuals of European descent (more racially homogenous than populations on other continents) received names of specific countries their ancestors hailed from in the early versions of DNA ancestry test kits[6]. From the YouTube videos I collected in this

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[4] Nelson, Alondra. Bio science: Genetic genealogy testing and the pursuit of African ancestry. *Social Studies of Science, 38, (*2008)759–783

[5] Measuring race and ancestry in the Age of Genetic testing Sasha Shen Johfre, Aliya Saperstien, and Jill A. Hollenbach 2021

[6] Justin Petrone. Controversial Ancestry Ad Reicnigites Discussion about Minorities and Consumer Genomics. *Genome Web.* May 2, 2019

study, I observed that test companies eventually furnished users with more specific results when users said they not only wanted a country but to know what "tribe" they descended from. Most often, the YouTubers stated they were looking for results like "Aztec," a historic civilization and group of people who no longer exist and were not around to collect DNA samples as a reference. These identity performances are not fixed, and the categories to choose from are not fixed. DNA test users largely understand that identity is associated with certain performances, such as traveling to a particular country and buying clothing or engaging in ceremonies as previously mentioned in the Chadwick Boseman example. Identity tourism, combined with Butler's performativity theory, helps explain identity performances in the videogame-like context of DNA testing, where participants are prompted to "choose a player" or identity to play with, and the set of possible avatars changes based on algorithms and the shifting genetic datasets they use.

One of the earliest studies about how race is performed in online space is Lisa Nakamura's "Race In/For Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet," written in 1995, not long after personal computers were made accessible for people to use in their homes. Nakamura wrote about the phenomenon of individuals who cannot see one another in digital space, yet perform stereotypical racialized and gendered identities in alternative reality spaces as a sort of fantasy play. White males were particularly drawn to perform Asian female stereotypical identities like geisha and oversexualized women. Since then, authors have looked at a similar phenomenon in gaming, where players can choose an avatar to represent them as they move through the game. David Leonard (2003) highlighted the way video games taught children how to read racial differences and ascribe meaning to those differences. Leonard also demonstrated how white male gamers would seek out games like the highly-stereotypical *Grand Theft Auto* to understand what it was like to be an "other" living in the inner city. This videogame-like race play that identity tourism describes is seen in users who describe the options of ethnic identities to pick-and-choose from, and it is encouraged by ancestry companies like African Ancestry. Based on my study of YouTube videos, it appears test-takers are pleased with multiracial results because they receive more options to identities to select and thus have "immunity" from sanction for performing behaviors considered racist for outgroups. The work of Goffman and Butler helps us understand the connection between identity and various performances; Nakamura's identity tourism is the most precise previous work to describe the desire of individuals, particularly white individuals, to move between different ethnicities in order to gain access to performances they normally would not due to accusations of racism. Nakamura also explains how racial essentialism becomes part of the performances of race-play in the virtual world. Essentialist beliefs that certain aptitudes and characteristics are innate within races also is a key part of the performances we see in YouTube DNA ancestry test reaction videos.

Gap in the subject area/ How my work differs from previous studies

Previous studies on racial essentialism and identity changes after people engage in DNA ancestry testing have ignored the performative aspects of identity and the fact that identity is formed within social interactions and contexts. Therefore, we do not know the emotive, performative, and social aspects of how people may change identities after

DNA ancestry test taking. Wendy Roth and her colleagues, in the 2020 study "Do genetic ancestry tests increase racial essentialism? Findings from a randomized controlled trial," surveyed over 800 white-Canadian individuals to examine the correlation of genetic ancestry testing and racially essentialist views. They found that essentialist views depend on how well the test-taker previously understood genetics, with the incidence of racial essentialism decreasing among genetically literate individuals and increasing among those who knew little about how genetics worked. Although Roth's study looked at how genetic ancestry tests impact the way consumers view race, its quantitative experiment featured a homogenous dataset and did not focus on how the test impacted identity shifts or what criteria people used to claim new identities. Most importantly, the Roth study failed to consider the emotive performative aspects of test-taking and presenting of how we understand and perform the interpretations of the test to others.

Sociologists who see identity as something performed rather than a biological essence, or *dramaturgy* as Goffman (2001) famously described, understand that interrogating the performative aspects of how we see ourselves and present how we would like to be seen to others is a critical aspect of identity formation. As social creatures, the way we form what is appropriate to present to others, and therefore the constraints of the identities we are allowed to take up, are contoured by societal expectations, norms, and taboos. We must consider emotion, performance, and the perimeters drawn to create categories of identities to be taken up as critical components of how and why people choose to affiliate with a certain identity. Therefore, my study looks specifically at what we can understand about racial expectations, norms and taboos through the identities given to individuals who take genetic ancestry tests and perform their revelations on YouTube. I argue that looking at these test reveal videos tells us more about racial identity than other methods, such as surveys, because identity is situational, closely tied to visual performance, the judgment of others, and dependent on the acceptable identities given to us.

Methodology

My project uses an ethnographic approach to answer its three-fold research question: What do the social media performances of DNA Ancestry tests tell us about how test takers see race and ethnicity? Do test-takers change their identity affiliations or the way they view themselves after reading the results? If so, do test takers rely more on the genetic component of identity, or are there some other criteria they give more weight?
 Nelson & Hwang[7] (2012) looked at thirteen YouTube videos in their co-authored chapter "Roots and Revelation: Genetic Testing and The YouTube Generation" in *Race After the Internet* . The team searched YouTube with the search terms "African" ancestry," "roots", "black, "genetics", DNA" and "Genealogy" and found 500 videos, yet only thirteen matched their criteria. Their search terms limit the results to African

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[7] Nelson, Alondra, and Jeong Won Hwang. "Roots and Revelation: Genetic Ancestry Testing and the YouTube Generation." In *Race after the Internet*, ed. Lisa Nakamura and Peter Chow-White (Routledge, 2013) 271-290.

American users and capture individuals interested in genealogy, but not engaging in genetic ancestry tests. Since I look at the interconnections between the genetic results test companies provide (and occasionally a representative from their company) and the public-facing work of YouTube content creators, I examined seventeen YouTube videos, as well as social media posts from Twitter and Facebook that feature Vlogs (video logs) and interviews about DNA testing on talk shows. I also examined the blogs individual DNA testing company employees publish online to promote their products and highlight their customers' experiences. To explore the way that genetic ancestry testing companies may coach prospective users into ethnic and stereotypical performances, I also look at company advertisements that use real users of the DNA tests; I ask how these advertisements might shape consumer expectations.

Using YouTube's algorithm to select the videos in my study produces a "snowball sampling" effect where the site directs me to other DNA ancestry videos with a lot of engagement from viewers based on the commercial value of clicks and the algorithm's predictive analytics on what I am more likely to buy if shown the appropriate content (in this case, a genetic ancestry product). YouTube algorithms are powerful due to the sheer number of users that engage on the platform, many of whom unknowingly give data through their engagement with the content. One of the benefits of letting the algorithm guide my sample selection was capturing the patterns of popular content the website gives viewers who click on a DNA test reveal video.I downloaded the sample videos to MAXQDA software, which created a close captioned transcript and allowed me to code each video by the actions, words, and emotional reactions they contained, and then create charts with those patterns. The software also let me capture and code the comments from viewers. I discuss my data collection methods and content tagging categories in greater detail in my data analysis chapter (Chapter 4), along with the assumptions and limitations of my approach.

In order to answer the superficially simple question, "how many DNA ancestry videos are there on YouTube?" I turned to a Google Chrome extension called Tubebuddy that helps YouTubers grow their channels; the extension shares data on the most successful videos in particular content areas and genres in order to help YouTubers create similar titles, tags, and keywords. Tubebuddy is a free Google Chrome Extension with the option to pay for additional features. Even the free version gives users more information than a Google search. Unlike the Google search engine, which shows the number of times a search term can be found on the web, YouTube does not provide a way to count its content with particular keywords, such as "DNA Ancestry Test." With Tubebuddy, I received information on how many videos existed with that search term or "tag," how many "likes" each of those videos received, and how many times the video had been shared on other social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. MaxQDA helped me integrate this data for analysis.

Ethical Questions and Human Subjects Considerations

Vlogs are created as public video diaries that are uploaded to the internet. Given the personal nature of self-identity, the use of YouTube videos allows the research subject to self-identify without the researcher mis-racing them. This methodology allows

research subjects to "speak for themselves." There is also something to be said about the fact that individuals upload their DNA test results and discuss them in a space where anyone in the world can view. This sort of public display is an announcement to others of who they are and how they would like to be seen.

The data that researchers have access to on YouTube is seemingly endless, new videos are uploaded on YouTube with high frequency or shared on social media as test takers receive their results. Following up with research subjects can be difficult in traditional research interview settings as participants move away, change phone numbers, or drop out of the study. However, when YouTube videos or other social media posts are used as data, the research subject is easily accessible via their YouTube or Facebook wall or direct message through the site. Researchers can also view discussions vloggers or Facebook users have with others about test results and their views on race. Information about how society, in general, takes in ancestry DNA test results and how identities and opinions are transformed can be understood from through these discussions.

In the case of public social media posts and YouTube videos, confidentiality is not an issue. Pseudonyms do not have to be created to maintain the privacy of research subjects since these individuals are sharing their personal information with their face and if applicable, their real or screen name. In the case of Facebook posts that do not appear under "public" settings, I blur out screen names because, although the posts were published for a group of strangers or among a smaller subset of "friends," the author of the post did not intend the post to be viewed for anyone with web access to see and therefore assumes some privacy in the results.

Do the research subjects have a right to give consent to how their public information will be used for research? The question of informed consent in studies that use social media data has been briefly addressed in the emerging digital ethnography[8] field (Koene at el, 2015 ; Lin Suh 2015). Some of the questions asked by scholars who engage in this work are 1) Do the research participants read the data and privacy statements associated with social media sites? 2) Would interactions on these sites be impacted if users knew their posts would be used in research? 3) Does using this data violate trust of individuals when or if they find out the researcher has used their posts for research and publication purposes? (Koene at el 2015).

A recent example of how using private social media posts has sparked controversy is the use of political posts that appeared in a private Facebook group called "Pantsuit Nation." The aforementioned was a group of predominantly female-identifying individuals who voiced their support of Hillary Clinton during the 2016 elections Twitter hashtags donning the name of the group started to trend on Twitter. When Clinton lost the election, members of the group used the space to express grief over the loss. The creator of the group, Libby Chamberlain, was exposed in an article in the New York Times for striking a book deal featuring material that was posted in the private group. Members of the group felt they were being exploited as Chamberlain did not seek the permission of members of the group to use their private posts, nor were they aware that their posts would be featured in a public, printed form (Lewis, 2016). Although Facebook groups and Facebook pages in general are considered public

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[8] Luh Sin, Harng. ""You're Not Doing Work, You're on Facebook!": Ethics of Encountering the Field Through Social Media." *The Professional Geographer* 67, no. 4 (2015): 676-685.

information per the terms and conditions of the site, users still assume privacy because of how they use the space. Members of Pantsuit Nation would have interacted in the space differently- perhaps censoring some of their posts if they knew of the potential of their posts to appear in print form.

One of the ways my research project avoids some of the ethical questions about using social media posts is by relying on public-facing material; the videos I study are already visible on search engines like Google, and so there are low-stakes risks research subjects have in having their information discussed in an academic analysis. Not only are these YouTube videos made public to anyone surfing the web via a Google search (since Google owns YouTube), we can also assume that posters are proud of their ancestry DNA results and do not see associations of their self-produced content with their likeness as potentially harmful information. Otherwise, they would not self-publish their videos online. For individuals I analyze who appear on television programming or advertisements, I rely on the fact that they have signed consent forms for their likeness to be broadcasted and one can presume to welcome the publicity. Publishing ancestry DNA reactions and discussions from posters pose lower impacts on them than publishing political or religious viewpoints or other taboo topics that may impact job prospects or perceived social acceptability.

It is important that clear lines are drawn concerning what is considered public information, and when do users expect a certain level of privacy. As UC Berkeley's Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS) IRB guidelines on Internet Research state:

> Research utilizing data that are both existing and public is not considered human subjects research and does not require CPHS review. Data only accessible through special permission are generally not considered public. However, if steps are required to access data (e.g., registration/login, payment, etc.), but access is not restricted beyond these steps (e.g., anyone who creates a username and password can access the data), the data may qualify as publicly available.

Preliminary Research and Expected Results

I based my initial data coding on five years of preliminary research into race and DNA testing in academic studies and in popular media, including 50 additional YouTube videos about DNA test results. Nelson (2016) found that after Isaiah Washington had his results read publicly in the Magic Johnson theater where he found he had some of his MtDNA[9] traced to Sierra Leone, he identified with the people of Sierra Leone and set up a philanthropic organization there. None of the 50 Youtubers I observed in preliminary research expressed any inclination to dedicate themselves to social justice organizations of the new ancestry they found out about. Wagner & Weiss (2011) found that only a minority of their participants experienced any feelings of distress or changes in ethnic identity. They speculate that this may have been due to the demographics of participants being largely white males.

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[9] Mitochondrial DNA passed down from mother to child

My preliminary research found that individuals downplayed white results and focused on African ancestry. What Wagner and Weiss (2011) failed to take into account was the nature of social media, how it is used differently by different demographics, and how networks often reflect the background of the person doing research. Due to the field of genetic testing and science, in general, being dominated by white males, it should be no surprise that the search terms used to find these groups such as "haplotype" would be jargon used in those fields and thus function as an "in-group" for white males. Also, Wagner and Weiss' analysis did not take into account the possible hesitancy for African-Americans and Native Americans[10]) to participate in genetic studies due to past abuse at the hands of scientists and medical experts.

Vlogger reactions in my preliminary research tied in with DeCosta's work in *Marketing Multiracials* because of the performativity of the reactions and the marketing of themselves. Vloggers engaged in careful editing and thumbnail creation to attract viewers to their page where popular Vloggers may receive a commission from clicks from ads on their page. Ancestry.com was (and still is) the most visible company that markets DNA tests for private consumer use. The company has commercials that run on network and cable television. They also run advertisements on Youtube pages. Ancestry.com ads feature individuals who have multiple ethnic results. Lezlie Mitchell appeared in a 2015 ad. She said her motivation for taking the DNA test was that she was asked "what are you?" three to four times a week. "I feel like Ancestry gave me a sense of Identity. What are you? Now I know" (Lezlie, ispot.tv, 2015). Some express a sense of surprise. One commercial advertising a business casually-clothed man named Kyle speaks of conducting genealogical research yet finding no German ancestors in his family tree. In one shot of the 30-second commercial, he dons a German lederhosen outfit and performs a dance as he speaks of performing traditional dance with his family since his childhood.

He says he found out he has no German ancestry. He is Scottish. The commercial cuts to him wearing a Scottish kilt and with a smile and a slight laugh he says " So, I traded in my lederhosen for a kilt". This commercial reflects a comedic effect that is seen in many of the candid DNA test results on YouTube or talk shows, a change in ethnic identification that is related to a stereotype that can be performed. This commercial communicates several things to the audience: a) there is such a thing as a false identity- you are what your DNA says you are b) identity is something to be performed and c) being mistaken and performing the wrong identity is comical. The humor and entertainment value of these commercials are obviously a function of generating income via sales of the DNA product. Most importantly, it gathers together the different theories from disparate disciplines that I argue are interconnected in the online commercial space of social media, namely YouTube.

If we look at these two commercials together, we see the performance theory of Goffman, the post-racial, multi-cultural Silicon Valley values Burgess and Green highlight, the identity tourism Nakamura (1995) coins, and the commercialization of racialized identities[11] Noble(2018) argues is foundational to the circulation of capital

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[10] Pacheco, Christina M., Sean M. Daley, Travis Brown, Melissa Filippi, K. Allen Greiner, and Christine M. Daley. "Moving forward: breaking the cycle of mistrust between American Indians and researchers." *American journal of public health* 103, no. 12 (2013): 2152-2159.
[11] Noble, Safiya Umoja. *Algorithms of Oppression*. New York University Press, 2018.

online. Mitchell's commercial advertised multi-racial results as something of interest and a result that users may expect. The fact that Mitchell relied on the DNA test to give her the official word on her uncertain identity is a point that Bliss (2012) makes that increasingly genomic scientists are being called on as the race and identity experts instead of sociologists. Kyle's commercial is the perfect example of how identity tourism works in relationship with the tests. Prior to taking the test, he was Scottish and wore the costume of the lederhosen and performed traditional dance. Now, with the permission of the test, he is given the option of a new identity to don complete with a new set of stereotypical markers such as a kilt that is associated with a distinct set of identity performances.

In addition, this change in identity also signals what Foeman and Benjamin spoke about earlier in this introduction: the Sankfofa metaphor, where genomics are allowing us to reach back into the past to inform our present and future. Ancestry is about the past, and the identity performances of their new selves reflect imaginings of identities other than themselves as people stuck in the past. Neither modern-day Germans or Scottish persons wear lederhosen and kilts in their everyday lives, yet test takers immediately associate the modern-day nation states and ethnicities in the results with imaginings of the past.

Another important factor to highlight in my research is how individuals feel about their results. Some individuals experience a crisis in identity or disappointment in their results. Others may cry. It is important to understand the emotions around the reactions and what that can tell us about the way people see race, identity and how that may change the way others see them and or value them. Due to his skin complexion and his identity as a Dominican, Gadiel was expecting a greater amount of African heritage in the test results. This affirms Obasogie's (2014) claim that the visual nature of race is not existent. It is a socially transmitted idea that teaches us to see differences. Gadiel was also expecting a result that would read 100% Dominican. The idea of nationality coming up in results was an expectation for Latinos in other videos who seemed disappointed their national origin did not appear in results.

This expectation of a nationality to be given in results could be related to the fact that many who have European and African ancestry do get national breakdowns in their results. Additionally, Curly, disparaged Gadiel's white result by calling him a "white girl". This, coupled with Gadiel's own reaction, suggests that whiteness is something to be distanced from or ashamed of. Other YouTubers I have observed had similar reactions yet expressed their parents or grandparents would be happy to hear of their European ancestry.

My preliminary research made it evident that the temporal aspect of DNA test YouTube reaction videos is important to consider since these videos have become an archive of the evolution of genetic science and consumer reactions. Five years ago, genetic tests like 23nMe did not give country-level results, but rather broad continental results such as "The Americas" or "Sub-Saharan African". When these tests first appeared on the market, and subsequently spoken about on YouTube DNA ancestry reaction videos. The geographical scope of the study is another factor to consider in how racial identity plays out online. Many falsely assume that DNA ancestry testing is a U.S. phenomenon. YouTube comments chide, "Americans are obsessed with race," they have an identity crisis- wanting to claim anything but accept being Americans. Stil,l

others suggest Americans, unlike other countries, are such a mix of different cultures and nationalities, that they have lost touch with their origins and long for an identity.

The reality is that YouTube has participants filming and uploading their reactions from all parts of the world. One of the main takeaways from this research is that YouTubers are taking the DNA ancestry tests more for identity performances suited with the possibilities of different ethnicities with their costumes, meals, and stereotypical special abilities. For example, Pazza John, a white Brit, was disappointed he did not have any, in his words, "interesting" (non-White) DNA results so he began to make fun of how white he was. He did this by Googling the people in his haplogroup and making fun of their pale skin "They are really white!" He also researched "the ginger gene" (although not himself a redhead) and told audiences he was very blonde as a child. So much so, that he joked the Nazi's would have kidnapped him as a child to breed him. In my preliminary research, the trend I witnessed in DNA ancestry test takers desiring a what they consider multiracial result tracked with Kimberly DaCosta's argument that multiraciality is being marketed as something that is hip, and the future of mankind while it actually reinforces racial stereotypes and racial divisions.

Like DaCosta's argument that multiraciality reinforces racial difference rather than unites human beings as one, DNA ancestry test takers in my preliminary research often said that multiethnic DNA results prove that 'we are all the same' (because we all are mixed); on the other hand, respondents joked about stereotypes and performed or spoke about changes in behavior based on essentialist ideas about the ethnic groups that appear in their results. DaCosta pressed that multiracial category was becoming its own racial category rather than the unification of all people as they are celebrated. Some DNA ancestry test-takers who have multiple ethnicities gravitated towards one identity over others in the results. There were also individuals who reject whiteness that appears in their results. Racial lines and racial differences appeared to be drawn deeper after taking the tests, and I was interested to see if this would be true for my snowball-style sample of DNA test reveal videos as well.

I compared my preliminary findings to those in other academic studies. Wagner and Weiss (2011) failed to see white respondents in crisis over their ancestry results while Foeman (2012) saw white students surprised and experiencing internal confusion over finding out black ancestry; I saw white reactions with either excitement over a small amount of black ancestry or disappointment over having 100% European ancestry. One Vlogger on YouTube named Candy Lamb said she was shocked to find she had two percent African Ancestry because she comes from a white racist family. The revelation set her on a path to find out through genealogical research who the black ancestor was. Viewers in the comment section insisted they could now "see" the trace amounts of Sub-Saharan African lineage in her facial features now that she mentioned it. Previous studies such as Obsogie's (2004) study on blind people's interpretation of race and Leonard's (2003) work on the donning of avatars for gamers to experience different races in gaming were helpful for me to think about the way we read bodies, the aptitudes we assume accompany those bodies and the gamification of race. Upon embarking on preliminary research, I was not expecting to see individuals of multiple ethnic ancestries gravitate and highlight African ancestry over others, given historical anti-blackness.

Analyzing more videos, I suspect I saw more of this counter-intuitive pattern. Although individuals often said something to the effect of 'we are all the same because we are all mixed,' they more often than not gravitated towards identifying with one ethnic group rather than a multi-ethnic identity. While on one hand, blackness was something YouTubers were glad to have in their results, there was a reinforcement of old racial ideas of what a "good" white result looked like. YouTubers echoed Eugenicists and political leaders from the past like Teddy Roosevelt, who spoke about the beauty and apex genetics of Scandinavians. These sort of contradictory lines, where individuals claim multiculturalism yet engage in racist discourses, is the basis of my research. The unique contribution I am making to the conversation about DNA ancestry test reactions is tying these performances to historical patterns of racial masquerade, the fluidity of identity tourism, racial performances in gaming, and the dynamics of the click-monetization economic system on the web, all of which contains the same racial hierarchies that inform our in-person interactions.

Chapter Overviews
Chapter One: The Paradoxes of Playing Race: Genetic Ancestry Identity Performances

The first chapter contextualizes test takers interpret the test results as an anachronistic view of themselves as their ancestors. Whether it be the mother of humankind or an uncomfortable relation to someone who owned enslaved persons, test taker reactions reveal they believe in genetic determinism since the test results tell them and others about their intrinsic morals and aptitudes, good and bad. You will see that paradoxically, this adherence to genetic determinism does not lock test-takers into a single identity, rather, they often interpret the multi-ethnic results options of as *races* that have their own aptitudes they have permission to perform when socially, such stereotypical performances would have been off limits to them. The chapter will also illustrate that because users believe that behaviors, personalities, and moral aptitudes are passed down through genetic ancestry, both test takers and test companies such as African Ancestry will "pick and choose" which ethnicities to align with and disregard unsavory results.

Avoiding historical taboos is the main motivation for editing out undesired genetic ancestry results. Race itself has been a taboo for Americans up until fairly recently. However, the first chapter will specifically focus on the taboo of interracial sex and assumptions that accompany a mixed-raced result of African and European ancestry. I discussed African Ancestry's decision to exclude Y chromosome testing because white ancestry in African Americans in most cases comes from a white male ancestor. I then use the example of the *Finding Your Roots* segment featuring Ava DuVernay's anxiety over encountering white ancestry which may cancel out her Blackness. I follow by exploring the contradictory ways race, specifically Blackness, is defined depending on the identity of the test taker with non-Black identifying persons using 1% African ancestry as the criteria to claim a Black racial identity [historically rooted in the 1-drop rule]; while Black-identifying individuals consider 51% African ancestry as the criteria to be able to rightfully claim one is Black. In the final chapter of this dissertation, I will return to the idea of Blackness and blood quantum in explaining the financial and social

stakes in white-identifying individuals clinging onto often small percentages of African ancestry or a "Black test result" while anxiety around receiving white European ancestry results in "Who's Blacker" competitions will use examples from HodgeTwins and Candylamb YouTuber ancestry DNA tests videos to illustrate this paradox.

Chapter 2: Creating Race and Nation

This chapter focuses on the Americas and tells the story of what we know about race and how we know it. While it is impossible to cover the full spectrum of racial claims routinely made in YouTube DNA test reveal videos, I aim to look at [four] major identity categories; the stories about blacks, Caucasians, Vikings, and Mexicans relate to and shed light on the larger racial logics and history underpinning YouTube vloggers' performances. I begin with a discussion of dramatic DNA test reveal video titles that use race and nationality as marketing tools, and then turn to two historical court rulings on racial classification that demonstrate what is at stake in the fluidity of racial categories: Rhinelander v. Rhinelander and United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind. Next, I outline influential ideas about genetic lineage espoused by prominent political leaders and scholars such as Francis Galton, David Starr Jordan, Thomas Jefferson, and Teddy Roosevelt, some of whom were eugenicists with clear racial essentialist ideas that shaped American popular opinion and law. I explain that racial essentialist ideas were not products of the creation of 19th and 20th-century national identities, but rather have roots in the Enlightenment period. After that,I conclude with a discussion about how the ideas of racial superiority became influential in immigration policy as a tool to exercise eugenics to curate the genetic features of a nation. As a result, we associate nations with certain phenotypes as if they are natural when they are created by immigration control. This chapter answers the question of why would YouTubers attract clicks by advertising shock around African ancestry and likewise create a video title that highlights their nationality.

Chapter 3: Results: Science and the "Truth-telling" of Race

In chapter three, I discuss my findings of the 17 YouTube DNA Ancestry test reaction videos I viewed, coded, and analyzed. This chapter talks about how test-takers consider genetic ancestry testing results as a critical tool in revealing their true selves. Participants consider these pseudo-scientific results as verification of who they are. Along with the official-looking presentation of the results genetic ancestry companies give to test takers, some are encouraged by the company marketing and other associated services to change everyday identity performances such as traveling to the countries given in their results, donning ethnic garb, eating ethnic food and engaging in cultural and religious practices such as having a bar mitzvah. I trace some of these genetic essentialist beliefs back to the science of the Enlightenment as I cover in chapter 1. I tie in this behavior with the phenomenon of "Identity Tourism" Lisa Nakamura coined in the sociological studies of online video gaming.

My Conclusion reflects on what is at stake with DNA Ancestry testing. I circle back with a discussion about how a DNA ancestry test was used as a pass to

allow a popular YouTuber, WhoaVicky, to engage in and profit from "blackfishing", which catapulted her to a household name in pop culture. Next, I use the example of a white police officer, Cleon Brown, who took a genetic ancestry test and discovered he had African ancestry as a real-world example of how individuals take on new identities after receiving their results. He subsequently sued his police department for racial harassment and. received financial compensation. Next, I review the major takeaways of this dissertation. I close by explaining how DNA ancestry testing has the power to extend white privilege in society and reify outdated ideas of genetic essentialism. This adaptation of genetic essentialism has the possibility to spark a renaissance of eugenics which places non-White groups lower on the racial hierarchy at risk.

Chapter 1: The Paradoxes of Playing Race: Genetic Ancestry Identity Performance

Introduction

   Blond-haired, blue-eyed social media influencer *WhoaVicky*, *a*lso known as Victoria Waldrop, shot to fame in July of 2017 after she posted about her DNA ancestry test results. WhoaVicky's social media presence consisted of Instagram and YouTube videos that featured her speaking in a southern-accented African American Vernacular English; showing off guns; and wearing faux locs, box braids, or a hair bonnet when filming her videos. People in her small audience were outraged and accused her of Blackfishing[12] and acting out harmful Black stereotypes. In response, WhoaVicky posted a video to her Instagram and YouTube channel justifying her right to don the urban, African American aesthetic and her "Blac-cent" by presenting DNA tests results from Ancestry.com that purportedly proved she was Black:

> I got an announcement to make. So, like a lot of ya'll, I guess be feeling some time of way because ya'll don't really think I'm Black, but Ancestry.com did tell me I was Black so I have the right to say that I am Black because…All I know is I took the test and they said I was Black. Well, they ain't say that, but they said I had Black in me so you know what I mean.[13]

   The video post went viral and turned a relatively unknown YouTuber into the subject of pop culture pieces. *WhoaVicky* continued to "don a Black avatar," as I call it, released a rap music single, and received enough attention and pop culture infamy to get into social media tussles with celebrities like Snoop Dog. Two years later, WhoaVicky came clean: she admitted that the DNA ancestry test she presented was a fake, and she rebranded her channel with her legal name, "Victoria." What does it mean when a social media influencer calls on a genetic ancestry test to prove their right to claim an identity and the stereotypical performances around that identity? Moreover, what does it mean to fake a DNA ancestry test result then shed those results when it seems convenient? DNA ancestry tests play a key role in contemporary beliefs about race and identity and this chapter focuses on the ways those beliefs are explored in the public sphere.

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[12] See Glossary for definition

[13] Instagram Tea."Woahhvicky Explains That She is Black" YouTube. October 6, 2017. 0:11-0:37 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L6fsuQRQH0s&t=36s

This dissertation is about racial performance and belonging. Specifically, how this new tool of genetic ancestry testing is used by North Americans on social media as a key part of novel racial identity performances and conversations about identity. This chapter explores how genetic essentialism can co-exist with the fluidity of picking and choosing of identities for individuals who take DNA ancestry tests.

Consumer DNA Ancestry testing came about as a result of the intersection of the Human Genome Project[14] and anthropological research attempting to identify the origins of human remains of enslaved Africans found in Manhattan in 1991 at what came to be called the African Burial Ground site. Dr. Rick Kettles, Co-CEO of African Ancestry, was a critical part of a team that conducted anthropological research on the origins of over 400 enslaved African remains discovered in Lower Manhattan. In order to correctly identify the origins, the researchers had to extract DNA from the 200-year-old skeletal remains and compare them with DNA from reference populations in Africa. They had one major problem: the largest repository of Genetic coding, GenBank, had an inadequate database of DNA sequencing from African countries involved in the slave trade in, and researchers' personal collections were similarly limited.[15] So, Kettles had to source his own reference populations to conduct the genetic matching. Kettles pioneered the methodology for establishing genetic matches from baseline samples according to haplogroups. Much to the chagrin of his colleagues, Kettles left the African Burial Ground project in 2003 to establish his own commercial enterprise which became one of the first five direct-to-consumer genetic ancestry tests, African Ancestry. [16]

As a screenshot of the AfricanAncestry.com webpage shows, the co-founders' biographies list their countries of origin as on the African continent despite being born and raised in the U.S. Both also list tribes as Fulani and Mandika, and Hausa respectively. Their test-designated nationality and ethnicity info appears to be of high importance because this information is listed directly under their names and titles as company co-founders:

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[14] The Human Genome Project was an international research effort from 1990-2003 to map the first sequence of human genome.
[15] *The Social Life of DNA*
[16] The social life of DNA

DR. GINA PAIGE

CO-FOUNDER & PRESIDENT, AFRICAN ANCESTRY, INC.
INDUSTRY PIONEER, SPEAKER, ENTREPRENEUR
COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: NIGERIA
TRIBES: HAUSA AND FULANI

DR. RICK KITTLES, PH.D.

CO-FOUNDER & SCIENTIFIC DIRECTOR, AFRICAN ANCESTRY, INC.
INDUSTRY PIONEER, LEADING GENETICIST, ENTREPRENEUR, SPEAKE
COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: SENEGAL, NIGERIA
TRIBES: MANDINKA AND HAUSA

Figure 1.1 Screenshot of Dr. Gina Paige & Dr. Rick Kittles who founded African Ancestry Inc. from their webpage bio found on AfricanAncestry.com

Direct-to-consumer genetic ancestry testing offers contemporary North Americans permission to take up new identities. However, the rules for that exploration are complicated and seemingly contradictory depending on the racial identity of the test taker. Building on the work of Nakamura, Nelson, and Roth, I argue that DNA tests authorize the racial performances of curious test-takers due to a collective belief in genetic essentialism and the popular perception that DNA ancestry tests are the ultimate truth-teller about personal identity; the tests are thought to be neutral, accurate, and scientific rather than shaped by subjective cultural and historical understandings of race and ethnicity.

As Americans, we disagree about so much in social life but racial categories are something we all seem to agree on. Test takers interpret the ethnicity results in their DNA ancestry test results as receiving a genetic result of what racial categories they belong to, as suggested by celebrity Demi Lovato's Twitter posts about her DNA test results:

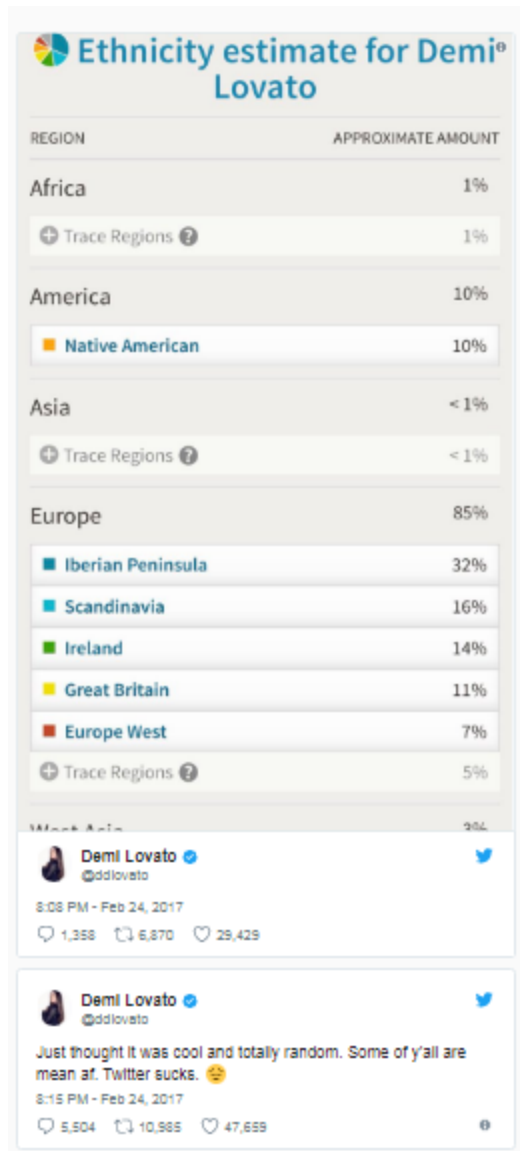Figure 1.2 Screenshot. Demi Lovato. "I did a DNA test and found out" *Twitter.* December 24, 2017. https://twitter.com/ddlovato/status/835338675491778560?lang=en

Figure 1.3. Screenshot of Demi Lovato Ancestry.com result tweets and her response to the backlash she received announcing she was 1% African.[17]

Despite this widespread popular consensus about the racial meaning of genetic testing results, there is nuance in the degree of blood quantum that qualifies one to be a member of a race, specifically, what percentage of African ancestry qualifies to be considered "Black." Black and non-Black identifying test takers alike focus on African ancestry to the extent that "who's Blacker competitions" trend in DNA ancestry test videos on YouTube. What DNA ancestry testing offers the public is a widely accepted form of permission to identify as a particular race or ethnicity. But that permission

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[17] Golgowski, Nina. "Demi Lovato Says She's 1 Percent African -- And Twitter Absolutely Loses It". *Huffington Post*. Feb 25, 2017.
https://www.huffpost.com/entry/demi-lovato-ancestry_n_58b1e4f8e4b0a8a9b782d251

depends on how the test-taker self-identifies beforehand. White test-takers interpret as little as 1% African Ancestry as enough to authorize calling themself Black. By contrast, African American and Afro-Canadian test takers routinely worry that any result of less than 50% throws them out of the club of Blackness (Hollywood Director Ava Duverney's anxiety about discovering her own European ancestry is an example of anxiety African Americans face I draw on in my results chapter[18]).

This chapter presents what educational media teaches the public about genetics, race, and identity, and how individuals interpret that information as supporting the idea of racial essentialism which is the belief that characteristics and aptitudes of racial groups are genetic rather than learned. I explain how the paradigm of the avatar (a symbol or character used to represent the player in video gaming) explains how test takers move between the identities given to them in their DNA ancestry results because the tests themselves (paradoxically) allow race to be both fixed and mobile and implicitly authorize such racial play. These seemingly contradictory ideas about race play out in YouTube videos and educational programs such as National Geographic & *Finding Your Roots* that use DNA ancestry testing to explain who we are. I begin with stories about educational media because YouTubers (non-coincidentally) use the same language, vocabulary, and share the same seemingly contradictory assumptions about racial fixity and racial mobility.

I begin the chapter with a discussion of Scientific Eve on *National Geographic* and a related exchange between Lupita Nyango and Professor Skip Gates on *Finding Our Roots* that helps explain how educational television programming about DNA ancestry puts humanity on a linear timeline (presenting human evolution branching out from an African woman from whom all living humans descended). Scientific Eve is important because she is the literal beginning of the discourse. I talk about the invention of direct-to-consumer DNA ancestry tests, which arose out of innovative methods to identify and repatriate the remains of enslaved Africans buried in the U.S. In order for the present-day racial implications of *Finding Our Roots* conversations about genetics and identity to make sense, I then gloss a longer history of American understandings of race and the scientific justifications or explanations that undergirded them, from Enlightenment Period influences to the creation of racial categories in the U.S. Census.

This history informs what the general public understands as *biological* classifications and provides the contours of what identities are possible to take up in YouTube performances. I end this chapter with a discussion of how the "editing" of ancestry (or picking and choosing which ancestors to identify with or highlight) relates to racial avatarism and reflects popular fears that the ill deeds of the ancestors somehow determine the intrinsic morals of the descendant. I talk about the implications of two DNA ancestry examples: the scandal around Ben Affleck's slave-owning ancestor that led to the temporary cancellation of *Finding Your Roots*, and the controversy around Ancestry.com's banned commercial "Inseparable" that was pulled from the airwaves due to criticisms that it misrepresented the nature and power dynamics of relationships between enslaved women and white men.

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[18] PBS. *Finding Your Roots.* Season 4, Episode 4. Aired 24, October, 2017.

I am where it all started: Black Women as Scientific Eve

When DNA Ancestry testing is mentioned, Professor Skip Gates' PBS Series *Finding Our Roots* is often part of the conversation. The television series, running from (March 25, 2012- the time of this study in 2022), features celebrities and political figures seeking the help of Gates, who combines his historical expertise (bolstered by a team of professional genealogists) with DNA ancestry test results provided by Ancestry.com to present the "true identity" of the guest participants. This dissertation focuses on the visual performances of genetic ancestry test results on YouTube, so it is important to consider how test takers who share their test results on social media may have been influenced by media representations and interpretations of DNA ancestry from academic and popular historians and scientific experts alike. Besides being a familiar frame of reference, DNA Ancestry trends seen on *Finding Our Roots* are also prevalent on social media platforms such as YouTube, Tik Tok, Instagram, and Twitter; the prominent role of experts, segment editing, the coaching of reactions, the interpretation of science, and the picking and choosing of race and ethnicity converge to create a history suitable for entertainment. *Finding Our Roots* pioneered this entertainment-focused presentation of ancestry. Moreover, the episodes highlight how test-takers pick and choose which identities to accept. One such identity is "pre-racial," and linked to Scientific Eve.

Scientific Eve, also called "Mitochondrial Eve," is considered the common female ancestor of every living human being because we all have inherited the same segment of mitochondrial DNA (named L0) from one woman who lived in Southern Africa some 100,000 years ago.[19] While the assumption that Scientific Eve was a Black African woman is likely true, Black American and African women are singled out in television series such as National Geographic's *"The Human Family Tree"* and *Finding Our Roots* as the descendant of Scientific Eve, despite the fact that the same thing can be claimed for every human being.

On Gates's popular and long-running show, the Mexican-Kenyan Oscar-winning actress Lupita Nyong'o's connection to Genetic Eve was presented as unique despite the fact that every human shares a common female ancestor according to mitochondrial DNA.[20] In this televised exchange, viewers see both expert Gates and the Hollywood actress associate genetic groups with sociological races. Nyongo opens the leather portfolio containing her genetic ancestry results on camera while Gates tells her she has the oldest mitochondrial haplogroup in the world and is a direct descendant of the mother of all. Gates explains, "When Mitochondrial Eve lived, there were no humans outside of Africa. Everyone was Black in the whole world." Nyongo throws her hands up

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[19] Brandon Specktor. "Scientists Think They've Found 'Mitochondrial Eve's' First Homeland". *LiveScience.com*. 28, Oct. 2019
https://www.livescience.com/mitochondrial-eve-first-human-homeland.html
[20] Lupita Nyongo segment of *Finding Our Roots* https://youtu.be/Vb3FBy7SAcU

in the air and exclaims, "I pre-date race!" Gates nods his head and responds "yes, you pre-date race." Gates then used Nyong'o's results to explain that everyone was Black in the whole world; he did not simply say that everyone *originated* in Africa, he went further to say only the only humans on earth lived in Africa and they were all Black. In other words, the show described a pre-racial common human ancestor and then promptly racialized her. Nyongo explicitly used the word "race." Moreover, she did not say that Mitochondrial Eve pre-dated race, she stated *"I* predate race," placing herself in the past and taking on the attributes of her earliest predecessor, a behavior quite common with genetic ancestry test reactions on YouTube. What is the impact of this? Crucially, modern Black women are represented as the mothers of all and objects of the past instead of as 21st-century humans.

Nyong'o's racial-temporal anachronism is not an isolated incident; such understandings also appear on American educational television pr*ograms,* sometimes in bizarre ways. National Geographic's *The Human Family Tree* (2009) is an educational program aimed at teaching viewers the timeline of human anthropological evolution. In it, actors portrayed each new subspecies of humans hunting and migrating out of Africa to other continents, finally ending with genetically modern humans. In the program's representation of the ancient past, contemporary Black humans (played by actors in minimal makeup and costumes) clash with violent, phenotypically white European Neanderthals and hominids, reinforcing the idea that modern African Americans are antique. The early African migrants encountered pre-modern humans that have since gone extinct. Moreover, because the characters portraying *anatomically* modern humans migrating out of Africa are depicted as encountering previous human subspecies across the globe and taking over their lands, there is a visual sense of anachronism. The documentary uses flashbacks juxtaposing stories of contemporary New Yorkers with vignettes of *anatomically* modern humans 60,000 years ago to illustrate how much humans have phenotypically changed and given rise to racial difference the further they traveled out of Africa.

In the first episode of *The Human Family Tree*, Scientific Eve is visually represented by a Black woman sitting dusty earth holding a baby on her lap. The scenes of people doing everyday things in contemporary New York City cut to the image of Scientific Eve cradling her baby. One of the first New Yorkers the series follows is Kerry Nicholson Gonzalez, who is of Slovenian descent and also the mother of a child. Kevin Bacon narrates, commenting how Genetic Eve has given birth many generations before, as the camera cuts to a woman who looks so different (Gonzalez) holding her baby. This image of Scientific Eve is used repeatedly in the series:

Figure 1.4 Screenshot of vignette of Scientific Eve from "The Human Family Tree", *National Geographic.* (Video). *2009.*

LUCILIO DE ALBUQUERQUE: *Mãe preta*, 1912. Óleo sobre tela, 180 x 130 cm. Salvador, Museu de Belas-Artes da Bahia.

Figure 1.5 :Screenshot of modern New Yorker with child from "Human Family Tree", *National Geographic*. (Video). 2009. Alongside the painting of a Black wet nurse breastfeeding a white child.

The image National Geographic created of Scientific Eve is reminiscent of the racially stereotypical Black "Mammy" figure long depicted in American popular media, and conveys some of the same contradictory connotations of virtue and inferiority. The series focuses on this image and the idea of Scientific Eve while barely mentioning Scientific Adam from which all men have inherited a common "Y" chromosome.

At the end of the series, a group of contemporary New Yorkers representing countries around the world are given a genetic ancestry test and the camera crew records their reactions. A dramatic shot depicts the participants standing atop a large world map drawn on the ground, and placed according to the region of their ancestry.

The New Yorkers all start on Africa; most move about while the sole Black-identifying participant remains alone standing on Africa. When she is interviewed about her feelings on the test results, she says, "I am happy I am where it all started." The test taker's reaction to the genetic test and the visual exercise of the participants moving about a map correlates with the narrative arc of the program.

Mapped geographic results that depict human migrations out of Africa can be easily interpreted by laypersons as evidence that humanity branched out into different genetic races depending on where they ended up, rather than evidence that a single human race dispersed geographically.[21] This lay understanding unfortunately seems to be prevalent and unchallenged on educational programing such as *The Human Family Tree* and *Finding Our Roots*. Test takers on both shows are given genetic ancestry results in the form of a list of geographical regions and contemporary names of countries, and they interpret their results as racial categories (the percentage of each race they are composed of). I argue these "racial" categories provide the defined set of identities that individuals pick and choose from in their identity play. Much like the picking and choosing of racialized avatars described in scholarship on video game identity tourism, many DNA test takers on educational TV and in YouTube Videos seem to attribute innate traits, attributes, behaviors, and special abilities to those racialized identities.[22]   In order to understand the seemingly universal lay translation of geographic region to race in my study, we must look into the historical creation of racial categories and at how genetic ancestry tests reinforce biological and state-constructed racial classifications.

Essentialism and the Creation of Modern Racial Categories

Genetic essentialism, a form of racial essentialism, is the belief that the essence of each racial group is defined by their genetic makeup.[23] Previous studies have looked at the impact DNA ancestry testing has on essentialist beliefs, and have found that and have found that individuals who were not familiar with the social construction of race before taking the test were more likely to have essentialist beliefs.[24] Understanding genetic essentialism is important because it is baked into commercial DNA testing categories and how the genetic ancestry testing companies coach their customers to interpret and perform the identities given to them in their results. Test takers believe that

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[21] Roth, Wendy D, Yaylacı Şule, Jaffe, Kaitlyn, Richardson, Lindsey . Do Genetic Ancestry Tests Increase Racial Essentialism? Findings From a Randomized Controlled Trial. *PLoS ONE* 15 no.1 (2020) 1-17

[22] Leonard, David. "Live in Your World, Play in Ours: Race, Video Games, and Consuming the Other." *Studies in media & information literacy education* 3, no. 4 (2003): 1-9;. and Austin, Michael, '"Playas" and Players: Racial and Spatial Trespassing in Hip Hop Culture Through Video Games', in Justin D. Burton, and Jason Lee Oakes (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Hip Hop Music* (online edn, Oxford Academic, 8 Aug. 2018), https://doi-org.libproxy.berkeley.edu/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190281090.013.55

[23] Yaylacı, Şule., Roth, Wendy D. & Jaffe, Kaitlyn. Measuring Racial Essentialism in the Genomic Era: The Genetic Essentialism Scale For Race (GESR). *Curr Psychol* 40, (2021) 3794–3808 https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-019-00311-z

[24] Roth, Wendy D, Yaylacı Şule, Jaffe, Kaitlyn, Richardson, Lindsey . Do Genetic Ancestry Tests Increase Racial Essentialism? Findings From a Randomized Controlled Trial. *PLoS ONE* 15 no.1 (2020) 1-17

their genes determine their aptitudes, food preferences, personality traits, and the permissibility of a range of future behaviors such as eating new types of food, performing new rituals, and traveling to the origin country (or countries) listed in their test results.

YouTubers often embrace and sometimes contest DNA test categories on racial grounds (and also assign behaviors, immutable essences, and aptitudes such as dancing and sexual performance to the geographic regions in their results). Their attitudes about race are part of a long tradition of modern racial thinking that developed during the Enlightenment. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel was one of the most influential thinkers of that era, in part because he consolidated and amplified the racialist thinking of his contemporaries.[25] In the *Geographical Basis of World History,* Hegel claimed that the world existed of two bases: geographical elements and climate *(Eze, 1997)*. In other words, geographical features and climate can predictably determine the behaviors and aptitudes of the people who occupy a territory. Hegel argued that observing the continental and climate differences of the races provided a world stage for the linear progression of human consciousness from primitive to advanced. This stage metaphor is used by Goffman (1959) centuries later to describe the everyday performance of identity. The aforementioned *The Human Family Tree* documentary, like Hegel, showcases each continent as a racial group and uses them as a proxy for the progression of human evolution.

Hegel's ideas about race are still pervasive in North America although they are rarely attributed to him. Hegel theorized that environmental, not sociological, factors lead to human modernity; mankind has a sensual nature that is fueled by heat, and *climate* is the key to civilization. He observed that the temperate climates of the North are the reason "advanced" civilizations are found in these areas, in contrast to the "fiery heat of Africa" (Eze. 1997, 112) where the hot climate was too powerful to lend itself to anything but animism and hypersexuality (Hegel, 1831 as in Eze, 1997).[26] These ideas did not consolidate into racism (a biological assertion of human difference) until after the beginning of slavery[27]. Outdated ideas of environment and race are echoed by YouTubers who equate warmer climates, more specifically African, to sexual aptitudes.[28]

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[25] Basevich, Elvira. "What Is an Anti-Racist Philosophy of Race and History? A New Look at Kant, Hegel, and Du Bois." *Critical Philosophy of Race* 10, no. 1 (2022): 71–89.

[26] Hegel, Georg W."Geographical Basis of World History", 1831 as in Eze, Emanuel. *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader* . Blackwell Publishers. 1997. 110-149

[27] Winthrop Jordan published *White Over Black*, in 1968 which argues that such geographical/environmental thinking exists in Revolutionary era America as a form of Eurocentric prejudice. Campbell, James, and James Oakes. "The invention of race: Rereading White over Black." (1993): 172-183 place Jordan answering the debate over which came first: slavery or racism at a time the U.S. was addressing anti-Black racism through policy.

[28] To deal with the contradiction of continents with similar climates (such as South America and Africa) having different cultural features, Hegel explains that geological features, animals, and people in the Americas are smaller than those found on the African continent because Africa is older. Therefore, Black bodies, although exposed to similar climates in the Southern Hemisphere, are stronger and built for labor. (This idea of African age relates to how Black women don the avatar of genetic eve as the origin of humanity).

Although Hegel's (unattributed) geographical determinist theories take on a veneer of biological or scientific authority when repeated in the world of DNA test vlogging, his claims did not arise from research or observations of his own but as a result of reading the second-hand account of an acquaintance of a friend. Hegel's influential work of philosophy, like many Enlightenment pieces before it, relied on the writings of others, or rather, on gross generalizations about peoples and cultures across the globe to form their theories. Racial differences and their essences were an Enlightenment invention, but an invention that continues to echo into the present day.

DNA Ancestry Tests and State-Constructed Racial Classifications

Previous researchers have explained how U.S census categories rely on socially constructed racial categories; those census categories became entangled with the modern medical tradition when used in epidemiological studies and scientific research in the 20th and 21st centuries[29]. The overall effect was a "rebiologizing" of race, despite the fact that the pseudo-science or scientific racism on which the biological categories were largely based had long been discredited. Twentieth-century Eugenicist scientists divided all of humanity into a handful of categories, including Caucasoid, Negroid, and Mongoloid. Those scientifically discredited categories have had remarkable staying power in everything from medical research to census classifications to education.[30]

Racial affinity and state-created racial categories are part of the "rules of the game" that govern racial identity and performance. Both Ancestry.com and 23andMe companies report their results in accordance with continental categories: The Americas, Europe, Africa, and Asia. Test-takers in turn interpret those results following implicitly racialized U.S. Census categories. (A few openly contest the results, as I will explain below). Not unlike social contexts in traditional media, white is considered the "norm," neuter, or default U.S. identity category in North American DNA testing (despite the non-white categorization of the original peoples inhabiting the continent). Whiteness is treated as something biological and fixed although political action, court cases, advocacy groups, and the ability to assimilate by shedding cultural and ethnic distinctions has changed historically, and continues to change, who counts as white. As John Terhanian who wrote about performing whiteness in America wrote:

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[29] Prewitt, Kenneth. "What Is" Your" Race?." In *What Is" Your" Race?*. Princeton University Press, 2013.; Duster, Troy. "A Post- Genomic Surprise. The Molecular Reinscription of Race In Science, Law and Medicine." *The British Journal of Sociology* 66, no. 1 (2015): 1-27.
[30]The U.S. Census is a socio-political tool that has far-reaching implications beyond its original purpose. It was originally written in the U.S. Constitution as a way to determine the allocation of the number of seats in the House of Representatives. Medical testing labs and companies use census racial categories in their statistics due to federal reporting required by the Office of Management and Budget. Although this reporting is for the allocation of federal funds, race becomes intertwined with medical research and as a result, reifies the idea of genetic races

To almost all Americans, the word "white" continues to connote race. The color has transcended its chromatic meaning and woven itself into a web of social, political, and economic entanglements that define our nation and its people, for better or worse.[31]
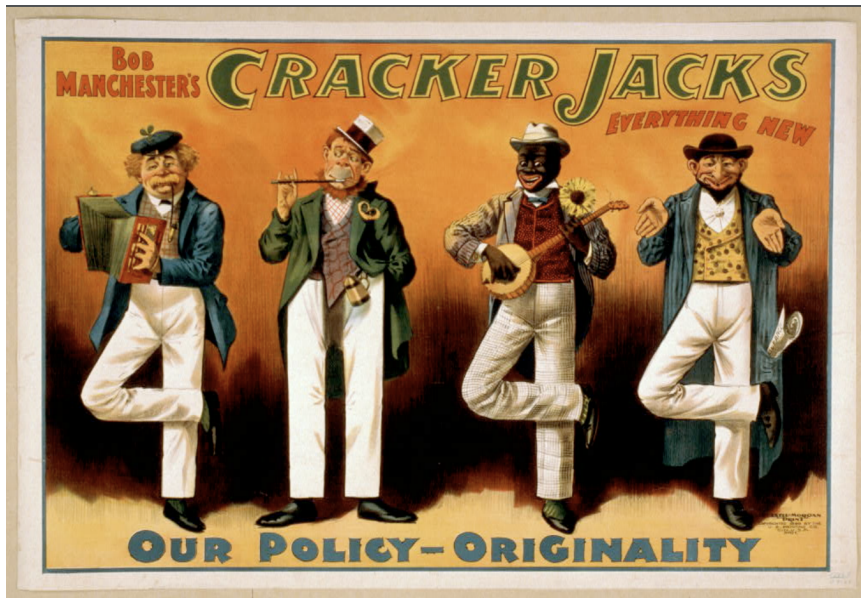

Figure: 1.6 Vaudeville show poster where blackface minstrels were performed. This image depicts ethnic groups not considered white at the time: (left to right) Scottish, Irish, Black, and Jewish stereotypes were performed in comedy sketches that used jokes to subjugate minorities. *Bob Manchester's Cracker Jacks Everything New,* 1899, color lithograph poster, The U.S. Printing Co., Cin., U.S.A.Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA
http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print

YouTube vloggers routinely assume that "Caucasian" means "European" and "white" – having roots in the populations of Europe — although the "white" category also includes populations with roots in North Africa. They respond in confusion to the classification "Caucasian" on their DNA results, claiming that some of the countries listed under the classification should be labeled "Middle Eastern" instead. Their confusion parallels complaints related to the U.S. census, which defines whiteness in a nearly identical way. In preparation for the U.S. 2020 Census, several groups that were lumped into the single "Caucasian" category sought to be separated, for example into a new Middle Eastern and North African category.[32] The YouTubers' statements suggest that they too feel there is something culturally similar in Iranian, Turkish, and Armenian etc., experiences to that they too should be labeled Middle Eastern (and not conflated with

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[31]John Tehranian. "Performing Whiteness: Naturalization Litigation and the Construction of Racial Identity in America". The Yale Law Journal. 109, No. 4. (Jan. 2000) 818.

[32] Wang, Hansi."The U.S. Census Sees Middle Eastern and North African People as White. Many Don't", *NPR.org*, Feb. 17, 2022
https://www.npr.org/2022/02/17/1079181478/us-census-middle-eastern-white-north-african-mena

Caucasians). This shows that YouTubers understand "white" as neutral and cultureless. And it ignores the fact that, historically, not all Europeans were considered "white"; for example, Irish, Italian and Spanish immigrants, despite being from the same continent as the Anglo-Saxon descendant majority, *became* white after assimilation into the United States.[33] Identity categories are fluid and socially constructed, yet each generation since the Enlightenment understands them as fixed and biological; like census category protestors, vloggers react strongly when their racial assumptions are challenged by DNA test categories.

Marketing Racial Difference

Such challenges are inevitable because DNA Ancestry testing companies take social constructions such as nation-states and market them as biological facts to entice consumers. There is significant slippage in how biological difference gets made and re-made; in 2018 Ancestry.com upset test takers by announcing that their DNA had not changed, but their *results* had in light of larger population sample sizes. One test taker who previously learned about his heritage in Nigeria (and who had traveled there to reconnect with long-lost kin) was now informed that his ancestral genetic homeland was actually in Ghana. This classification change, of course, resulted in many users expressing outrage, and betrayal.

YouTubers are sometimes confused by the available types of DNA testing, and sometimes select their tests deliberately based on the different results each type of test can offer. While mitochondrial DNA tells us about a single line of ancestry (mother's mother, mother, and so on), other techniques such as autosomal DNA testing give a more complete picture that includes all lines of ancestry descending from matrilineal and patrilineal heritage. Dr. Gina Page from African Ancestry told the Breakfast Club YouTubers that her company uses mitochondrial DNA to intentionally exclude Y-chromosome DNA (Father's father, father) because, for African Americans, the father's line has a much higher chance of showing European ancestry due to the gender and power imbalance during U.S. chattel slavery. Some African American YouTubers explain that they prefer Page's African Ancestry test because they do not want to be forced to think about the sexual exploitation and rape of their enslaved ancestors[34]

Regardless of the criteria a company uses to *craft* a genetic ancestry result for their users, DNA testing companies present those results as indisputable facts and their testing processes as infallible. Yet, these tests are handled by human beings who can make human errors, and algorithms that can ignore genetic markers which indicate an ethnicity. For instance, in 2017 an African-American woman named Jennifer Smith submitted her DNA to Ancestry.com and 23mMe and received widely different results. Ancestry.com gave her a shocking 97% European, 43% of which was European Jewish, and a 2% Asian ancestry result. Smith contacted Ancestry.com to complain and was

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[33] Ignatiev, Noel. (2008). How the Irish Became White (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi-org.libproxy.berkeley.edu/10.4324/9780203473009

[34] Du Bois writes about about his son born with "golden" hair that reflects the sorrowful history of white slave masters who fathered children with enslaved women in chapter 11, "Of The Passing Of The First-Born." In *The Souls of Black Folk*, University of Massachusetts Press, 2018. (201).

told "there was no way there could have been an error."[35] Confident that Ancestry.com had made a mistake, Smith submitted a sample to their competitor 23nMe and received a 70% Sub-saharan result. Smith highlighted her complaint to her local news station, Chicago Fox 23,[36] arguing, "I am a Black girl, not a Jewish white lady." Although testing companies assert that their results reveal the truth, both companies clearly cannot be correct in their vastly different results. Ancestry.com eventually told Fox 23 reporters that Smith's tube was likely mixed up with another tube before being sent to a lab. But the default initial response of testing companies is to blame incorrect family legends. For example, when 23andMe staffer Jhulianna Calderon appeared in TryGuys Get a DNA Ancestry Test YouTube video in which the vlogger Zach disputed his 88.7% Ashkenazi Jewish result (saying he expected a 100% result), she responded, "Well someone lied to you."

The attitude that families lie but "DNA doesn't lie" about race is not held by most scientists. William Gilliland, an associate biology professor at Depaul University, responded to Jennifer Smith's complaint about her surprising ancestry results and explained that DNA ancestry tests can match you to relatives, however, "DNA tests for ethnicity are entertainment value only," noting that while DNA tests can connect you to family members, there is no solid DNA marker or "diagnostic nucleotide" for race. In other words, DNA may not lie in terms of parentage, but there is no definitive truth for race and ethnicity.

Ancestors, Genetic Avatars and Racial Essentialism

The seemingly contradictory variability and authority of consumer DNA test results set the stage for "picking and choosing" and racial and ethnic identity tourism. Test takers feel authorized to select among the set of genetic characters or avatars each DNA test offers. Yet, because of genetic essentialism, vloggers and others who share their test results in the popular media are keenly attuned to the profound ramifications of those avatar sets. Genetic essentialism helps explain the strange phenomenon of individuals believing that the deeds of their ancestors, whether good or bad, indicate what kind of person they are. In other words, the genes of their ancestors (or being biologically related) will determine their personality and moral compass. Public scrutiny raises the stakes of those genetic discoveries. One dramatic example of this was the way *Finding Our Roots* celebrity guest Ben Affleck reacted to being told he had a slave-owning ancestor.

In 2015, hackers broke into Sony emails and revealed their contents on Wikileaks; one thing the leak revealed was *Finding Our Roots* host Henry Louis Gates Jr. writing to Michael Lynton, Sony's CEO, for advice: Ben Affleck had asked Gates to omit the revelation of Afflecks' wealthy, slave-owning ancestor from the episode, and Gates was unsure how to respond. The information was notable as Afflecks' three times great

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[35]Woman Takes 2 Ancestry Tests, Gets 2 Wildly Different Results" *The Grio*. Nov 3, 2017 https://thegrio.com/2017/11/03/woman-dna-tests-ancestry/
[36] Fox Chicago 23. "2 Different DNA Tests Lead to Starkly Different Results". Facebook,October 30, 2017 · https://www.facebook.com/watch/?ref=external&v=10156359211818797

grandfather owned 25 enslaved persons and was thus considered among the Georgia elite (since 90% of slave owners had less than 20 slaves.)[37] In the email chain surfaced by Wikileaks we see Gates chatting with Sony Executive, Michael Lynton, about Affleck's request where Gates curiously gives a value judgment between the characters of the slave-owning ancestors of Affleck and Anderson Cooper:

Re:
yes, bad idea.
On Jul 22, 2014, at 10:30 AM, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. wrote:

> And he wasn't even a bad guy. We don't demonize him at all. Now Anderson Cooper's ancestor was a real s.o.b.; one of his slaves actually murdered him. Of course, the slave was promptly hanged. And Anderson didn't miss a beat about that. Once we open the door to censorship, we lose control of the brand.

> Sent from my iPad
>
>> On Jul 22, 2014, at 12:28 PM, "Lynton, Michael"
<Michael_Lynton@spe.sony.com> wrote:
>>
>> yeah,, the past is the past…..
>>> On Jul 22, 2014, at 9:30 AM, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. wrote:
>>>
>>> Will call. It would embarrass him and compromise our integrity. I think he is getting very bad advice. I've offered to fly to Detroit, where he is filming, to talk it through.
>>>
>>> Sent from my iPad
>>>
>>>> On Jul 22, 2014, at 11:28 AM, "Lynton, Michael"
<Michael_Lynton@spe.sony.com> wrote:
>>>>
>>>> then it is tricky because it may get out that you made the change and it comes down to editorial integrity. We can talk when you land.

>>>>> On Jul 22, 2014, at 9:11 AM, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. wrote:
>>>>>
>>>>> Good; relieved. As for the doc: all my producers would know; his PR agency the same as mine, and everyone there has been involved trying to resolve this; my agent at CAA knows. And PBS would

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[37] Soraya Nadia McDonald. "Ben Affleck's deleted 'Finding Your Roots' segment shows his Savannah ancestor owned 25 slaves". The Washington Post April 23, 2015

know. To do this would be a violation of PBS rules, actually, even for Batman.

In the now-deleted episode, Affleck's on-air response to the revelation was, "God. It gives me kind of a sagging feeling to see, uh, a biological relationship to that. But, you know, there it is, part of our history."[38] Affleck's word choice about a *"biological relationship"* to a slave-owning ancestor indicates distancing from and discomfort with the test results, and perhaps also a biological determinism or genetic essentialist belief that personality traits and moral standards are genetically inherited.

Discomfort at the ill deeds of a distant ancestor somehow reflecting back on the test taker put *Finding Our Roots* in jeopardy and called into question both the integrity of the PBS network where the show airs and Dr. Gates' work as a scholar. The New York public television station that co-produces the show also had to defend its journalistic integrity when the emails were leaked. The show was postponed while PBS launched an investigation led by Beth Hoppe, Chief Programming Executive, to look into the possible breaches of ethics and programming standards. As a result of the internal review, PBS instituted changes to the production process including hiring additional fact-checkers.[39] The scandalous episode was pulled from syndication and from YouTube (although it may be visible to viewers in the United Kingdom).

Creating Happy Racial Histories

The Ben Affleck scandal parallels how individuals on YouTube choose to omit or ignore unfavorable ancestry results that conflict with either their family oral history or an individual's view of self. It is an example of how test-takers believe the personality characteristics of their distant ancestors inform the true nature of their own ethics, likes, and dislikes, and abilities. It is also an example of the contemporary "rewriting" of revelations of interracial relationships in the time of slavery when the enslaved and owner had a clear imbalance of power. (In my findings section, I explore multiple examples of YouTubers who "rewrite" such histories as romantic relationships in order to distance themselves from any act of non-consensual sex and abuse). In the aforementioned *Try Guys Take a DNA Ancestry Test* episode,[40] a 2017 YouTube video that has received over 21 million views, Keith finds out he has 0.2% African Ancestry from the 23andMe representative, Jhulianna Calderon. Calderon interrupts Keith's exclamation of joy when she gives the time period prediction of when the African Ancestry entered into his genetic lineage. "So that comes into play sometime between 1810 and 1720". The ambiance takes a turn when the co-hosts comment on the genetic ancestry result. Zach states, "I thought this was real cool until I remembered what the British were doing in the 1700s... and now I think it's less cool". Fellow YouTuber Eugine

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[38] (Ibid) Soraya Nadia McDonald.
[39] Marisa Guthrie. "PBS' Finding Your Roots' Returns After Ben Affleck Scandal: "Hard Conversations," More Rigorous Process". *Hollywood Reporter*. October 19, 2015 https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/pbs-finding-your-roots-returns-832976/.
[40] Buzzfeed. "Try Guys take a DNA Ancestry Test". YouTube, May 20, 2017, 9:58 *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N06g2kc1Dxo*

chimes in, "I don't think that was good." Keith interjects, "Love happens in a lot of places". Eugene insists, "I don't know if that was –" before Keith interrupts, "You don't know if it wasn't love." Keith further suggests that the union could have been between traders or friends. The interaction between the Try Guys during the DNA ancestry test results reading highlights how test takers will go to lengths in creating a positive story, however unlikely it may be, to escape confronting descent from a union of sexual violence.

It is not just individual YouTube vloggers and DNA testing company PR staffers who wrestle with whether and how to confront difficult racial history. In 2019, Ancestry.com removed an Ad called "Inseparable" from television and circulation on YouTube due to public outcry and accusations of whitewashing history. The ad takes place in the 19th century and shows a silent, enslaved, Black woman being lured by a white man who states he knows somewhere they can flee to be together. The ad originally debuted on YouTube which suggests how influential the company thought the social media platform was for reaching out to its demographic. Clearly, Ancestry intended to use this commercial as a romantic backdrop for their product, and perhaps appeal to multi-racial individuals (the largest group of consumers of genetic ancestry tests).[41] Arthur Caplan, a Professor of Bioethics at New York University, responded, "I think it's a historically horrific ad. It either reflects an utter ignorance or a willful ignorance of American history. They are trying to lure in customers with the idea that there were these hidden romances, making that claim in a sea of slavery and Jim Crow.[42]" This controversial ad highlights how part of identity formation is picking and choosing which stories to tell, and how uneasy information can be re-written to appease audiences and potential customers of the painful past they suspect could be discovered by digging into their ancestry.

Ancestry.com's choice to use this particular story to promote their product completely missed the mark if they were hoping to attract non-white Black and Latinx audiences since these groups often avoid confronting white ancestry, or rarely consider changing how they identify after taking a genetic ancestry test.[43] What the advertisement may be addressing is white guilt about the historical circumstances of African Ancestry in their genetic ancestry results. African-American genetic genealogist Andre Kerns called the *Inseparable* ad a missed opportunity to engage with African Americans. Kerns wrote in a *Medium* article, "I subscribe to Ancestry to uncover powerful ancestral stories of Black resilience, triumph and agency over slavery which my family and many other consumers have."[44] Resilience is indeed a positive reaction that consumers of genetic ancestry tests come up with as it appeared twice in my YouTube video transcript findings. The Atlanta NAACP chapter also spoke against the ad for rewriting the nature of interracial relationships during slavery.[45]

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[41] Sasha Shen Johfre, Aliya Saperstien, and Jill A. Hollenbach 2021

[42] Petrone, Justine, Controversial Ancestry Ad Reignites Discussion About Minorities and Consumer Genomics. *Genomeweb*. May 02,2019

[43] Roth, Wendy D., and Biorn Ivemark. "Genetic Options: The Impact of Genetic Ancestry Testing on Consumers' Racial and Ethnic Identities." *American Journal of Sociology* 124, no. 1 (2018): 150-184.

[44] Kerns, Andre. "Ancestry's Controversial TV Ad & My Family", *Medium* (blog). April 22, 2019. https://andrekearns.medium.com/ancestrys-controversial-tv-ad-my-family-1034a2a331ef

[45] 11Alive "Ancestry.com Pulls Controversial Ad".YouTube. April 19, 2019. 1:05 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0M_hRiD9vQw&t=2s

The outcry against the "Inseparable" ad spoke to its perceived harm. Ancestry.com touts itself as a vast library of historical records as well as genetic evidence, and its products have the trust of consumers because they are widely understood to be backed by facts that can be checked (rather than conjecture). The company's attempt to appease potential customers by placating uneasy feelings about racial miscegenation (such as those expressed in the Try Guys DNA test reveal episode) gave credence to a fantasy rather than acknowledging the painful, true stories that accompany historical information. Public outcry against the ad noted the power of a reputable source; Ancestry.com's historical fantasy likely would be considered fact among viewers familiar with the product, including those viewers of *Finding Our Roots* who see Ancestry.com ads, its show sponsorship, and the way the company's DNA tests are used as ultimate finders of truth on the popular PBS show.

Entertainment is key for genetic ancestry testing companies as their disclaimers read "for entertainment use only."[46] The companies relax legal responsibilities and the accuracy of data. One, because geopolitical boundaries are not indicated in a person's DNA, and two because the test kit is encouraged to be something that helps the user connect with others through genetic matches, join specific affiliate groups based on haplogroups, and to play with and perform identity (all of which are promoted in Ancestry.com commercials).[47] But DNA testing companies and consumers have different understandings of the role of fantasy, as the "Inseparable" ad and Ben Affleck ancestry suppression controversies show. In each case, companies valued entertainment over accuracy in genetic ancestry testing. In the latter case, TV producers crafted a pleasant story so as not to upset a "megastar" guest who would attract numerous viewers (viewership was deemed more important than adhering to PBS' editorial guidelines). In the former case, the company asked viewers to ignore a painful collective historical truth. Both were criticized loudly for breaking popularly-held views about what kinds of fantasy and racial identity play are permissible.

The Hyperfocus on Blackness

DNA test takers on social media have a disfavorable view of white, European ancestry because they think it is not as interesting as a multicultural result. Similarly, *Finding Your Roots* also hyper-focuses on creating stories around Black ancestry, especially if the test taker identifies as white and receives a minuscule percentage of Sub-Saharan African genetic ancestry (the series crafted Steven Tyler's ancestry segment around the story of a single Black ancestor). The hyperfocus on Blackness seen in *Finding our Roots* reminds me of the Casta paintings of colonial Latin America. Racial categories were illustrated by artists depicting how interracial relations create new racial categories with their own names and accompanying characteristics. As you

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[46] Both Ancestry.com and 23andMe have disclaimers on their product that read "for entertainment use only"

[47] Alex Haley's *Roots* is credited with sparking the American pastime of family genealogical research. The novel was a work of critical fabulation where Haley could pick and choose how to represent his ancestry

can see from the 18th-century casta painting by Andres de Islas below, the Black woman is shown as violent and a threat to her white, Spanish partner (a potential visual warning against mixing between racial groups):

Figure 1.7. de Islas, Andres. No.4 *De Espanol y Negra Nace Mulata.* (1774) Reproduced by permission of the Museo de América, Madrid, Spain. Research Gate.

According to the painting's taxonomic logic, it was impossible to genetically engineer African ancestry out of someone's genetic line through miscegenation. However, within two generations, offspring with indigenous ancestry can become Spanish (white). In the next chapters, I will explore the paradox between Blackness as an avatar of an identity that individuals can take up play with and discard when they want to and the social acceptance of Black/African ancestry, in its most minute amounts, as a permanent indicator of an inescapable Black identity.

Conclusion of Chapter 1

The key takeaways from this chapter include: First, that picking and choosing what ancestry they want to use as an avatar happens at three levels: DNA ancestry test methodology, editing from producers, and the test takers themselves. Second, although people think of genetic ancestry as deterministic, they paradoxically read the results as choices of identities to slip in and out of in a given situation. Thus, why the metaphor of an avatar that individuals choose in video games is helpful in understanding the user's desire and belief that they can change racial and ethnic identities to experience. Third, Blackness receives particular treatment when it comes to genetic ancestry. Blackness is portrayed as unchanging, Black people in the present day are treated as artifacts of the past as has been the representation since the Enlightenment. We see this in how Black women are depicted as Genetic Eve and how they anachronistically speak as if they are her.

Fourth, the threshold of what blood quantum is considered Black depends on who is taking the test and how they identify before the test with African Americans considering over 50% African Ancestry as the threshold for claiming they are "Black" while non-Black test takers consider as little as 1% African Ancestry enough to consider themselves Black. Fifth, that genetic ancestry tests acknowledge the uneasiness that

test takers have when it comes to confronting ancestors who have committed sexual violence and may manipulate their test methodology as African Ancestry eliminates Y chromosome testing to reduce a customer's likelihood of receiving a white ancestor who is presumed to have raped an enslaved woman or rewrite history and cast relationships between an enslaved woman and her owner as a romantic relationship rather than an exploitation of an imbalance of power or sexual violence as Ancestry.com did in their *Inseparable* ad.

Chapter 2: Creating Race and Nation

One notable similarity in many YouTube DNA Ancestry test reactions is the intimate setting of the home. Kitchens and bedrooms are amongst the most commonly identifiable spaces seen within the video frames. The settings of the ancestry test reaction videos are easy to ignore given the dramatic nature of the performances, but the YouTubers consciously chose to set up a camera and let the world see that particular space. For example, in the video "*Mexicans React to Ancestry DNA Kit! We're African__ History Kitchen*" viewers see a family of a mother and two sons at a round kitchen table with a tablecloth resembling the Aztec calendar. This interesting choice of setting gives the viewers the feeling of being in the family's home and sitting down across the table with them in a conversation. Like a guest over for coffee or a meal. The Aztec Calendar print of the tablecloth accentuates the "Mexicanness" highlighted in the title they chose for the video:

Figure 2.1 Screenshot I took of "Mexicans React to Ancestry DNA Kit! We're African__ History Kitchen" YouTube video

Another video, *"Dominican Girl Finds out she's AFRICAN ancenstry.com (sic) DNA test Results"*, gives a similar appearance of intimacy and spontaneity. In it, a young woman sits at the kitchen table with cluttered countertops visible to the audience. A Lysol can, various spices on the stove, a small table with a prayer candle, and indistinguishable

knickknacks compose nearly half of the frame, and coats hanging up in the entryway in the other half:

Figure 2.2. Screenshot of "Dominican Girl Finds out she's AFRICAN ancenstry.com (sic) DNA test Results" *YouTube* video.

Among such informal and intimate settings, it is easy to forget that these DNA test takers are performing race and ethnicity for an audience of strangers, and often conflating those two categories.

Ethnicity refers to the cultural distinctiveness of a group of people including but not limited to language, religion, and a shared set of values, rituals, and musical traditions. Ethnicity can be shared across racial groups. Race, on the other hand, is associated with physical characteristics such as skin color and hair texture. This confusion about race and ethnicity is not limited to YouTubers; the U.S. Census has had to adjust their questions due to participants' uncertainty about where they fall in those categories. One example that illustrates the vexed distinction between race and ethnicity is question 8 of the 2010 U.S. Census, which instructs census takers to further indicate their race:

➔ **NOTE: Please answer BOTH Question 8 about Hispanic origin and Question 9 about race. For this census, Hispanic origins are not races.**

8. Is Person 1 of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?

☐ **No,** not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin
☐ Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano
☐ Yes, Puerto Rican
☐ Yes, Cuban
☐ Yes, another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin — *Print origin, for example, Argentinean, Colombian, Dominican, Nicaraguan, Salvadoran, Spaniard, and so on.* ↙

9. What is Person 1's race? *Mark* ☒ *one or more boxes.*

☐ White
☐ Black, African Am., or Negro
☐ American Indian or Alaska Native — *Print name of enrolled or principal tribe.* ↙

☐ Asian Indian   ☐ Japanese   ☐ Native Hawaiian
☐ Chinese   ☐ Korean   ☐ Guamanian or Chamorro
☐ Filipino   ☐ Vietnamese   ☐ Samoan
☐ Other Asian — *Print race, for example, Hmong, Laotian, Thai, Pakistani, Cambodian, and so on.* ↙   ☐ Other Pacific Islander — *Print race, for example, Fijian, Tongan, and so on.* ↙

☐ Some other race — *Print race.* ↙

Latinx peoples in the Americas often express confusion about question 8 because, in their countries of origin, categorization happens on a nationality level and many do not identify themselves with the limited racial categories the U.S. government has made standard on the census (and on school enrollment paperwork and medical questionnaires as well). For example, when *Buzzfeed*'s Latino branch called *Pero Like* conducted DNA tests on their media commentators and posted a video on Youtube called "Latinos get their DNA tested," the comedian and journalist Gadiel Del Orbe expected his results would read "100% Dominican."[48]

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[48] Del Orbe was not alone in his confusion and disappointment; while many European countries are individually specified on DNA test results, the U.S., Canada, and all of Latin America are frequently represented with the single label "the Americas."

When the musician Snoop Dog learned his DNA test results live on Lopez Tonight, he quipped "Wait a minute. I don't got no Asian in me?! I like Chinese food."[49] Many YouTube test-takers also make comments that link genetic results to tactile experiences such as preference for a particular ethnic cuisine. These comments are so common that it is hard to tell if they are serious or joking. However, according to a body of literature, racist and ethnic jokes carry important sociological information that illuminates social boundaries between different groups in a society. Sociologists have neglected jokes as a sociological site to study racism (Perez, 2017). Despite laughter being interpreted as a lack of serious tone and intentions, social humor is a tool of social power reproducing unequal power relations in society (Weaver, 2011 as in Perez, 2017). Perez contends that race-based humor serves as "social grooming" fostering cohesion amongst dominant groups while simultaneously reinforcing social distance and boundaries from the outgroup.

Ethnic jokes draw the moral, social, and geographical boundaries of a nation (Davies, 1982). Research on Ethnic jokes in Western industrial nations finds that jokes about ethnic minorities often happen on opposite sides of the spectrum (stupid vs. crafty or docile vs. militaristic) to communicate the group's peripheral social status among the majority population who are considered the 'norm' (Davies,1982). It may seem odd that a minority group that is more economically successful than the norm would be socially considered the butt of jokes. However, these jokes communicate the zero-sum viewpoint of the society where the group's stinginess or craftiness cheats the majority population due to their hyperfocus on maintaining a financial advantage. The fact that western industrial nations view social values as a continuum where the majority group that comprises a western nation is seen as a balanced group while any outsiders are extreme and unprincipled.

Neither racial nor ethnic categorizations are indicated in the human genetic code and both are socially constructed groupings outlining differences based on arbitrarily chosen characteristics. Skin color and hair texture may seem like normalized criteria for racial groupings, but humans could have easily chosen eye color or lip shape as the basis for categorization. So why are YouTubers so confident, and so consistent, about identifying racial characteristics? Why do so many YouTubers associate, albeit by tongue-and-cheek jokes, Scandinavian ancestry with beautiful people, African ancestry with dancing and sexual ability, and Asian ancestry with mathematical ability and Chinese food above all else? What beliefs do their test reveal performances convey about the nature and legibility of race and ethnicity? How and why is geography used as a racial proxy in so many DNA test reveal videos? And what historical factors and precedents contributed to these present-day racial understandings?

The answer to these questions lies in part in how perfuse and normalized socially constructed racial categories and their associated meanings are in our daily lives. Despite the fixity suggested by DNA ancestry tests, and the endurance of certain racial stereotypes, race has always been slippery. Criteria to define supposed natural racial categories get created and discarded over time, moving the boundaries of classifications. Racial categories are also often geographical categories that delimit who

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[49] LatinasEn4 "Lopez Tonight - Snoop Dogg's DNA Test - [Snoop Dogg is WHITE]". *YouTube*. Jan 15, 2010.

belongs where. Geographies are not neutral; many have been genetically engineered through eugenic programs or selective immigration policy so that individuals of certain ancestry or "bloodlines" will inhabit a nation and bring with them their essentialist qualities. This chapter examines racial categorization and the genetic engineering of nationalities through immigration policy has manipulated what we understand about who belongs within what geo-political boundaries. This is important because the assignment of ethnic groups within geopolitical boundaries is the primary way DNA Ancestry tests like 23nme and Ancestry.com present a test taker's genetic results. I will turn to how we are conditioned to "see" or experience race through sensory information and attribute those features to nationalities. We assume these physical features of a nation are natural, however, I will demonstrate how immigration policies based on eugenic beliefs controlled who and who does not belong in a nation.

Race and the Senses

Sekimoto and Brown (2020) argue that "[r]ace is a visual economy" in which phenotypic difference is overlaid on a social hierarchy. However, other sensory information and emotional stimulation goes into the experience of "feeling" race. DNA test-takers compare visual cues such as phenotypic features such as skin color in their test reveal videos; they also express feelings of ethno-racial solidarity that accord with Sekimoto and Brown's claim that the act of knowing is a full-body experience. Sekimoto and Brown argue that race, "one of the most hegemonic social constructs," is an experience of lived sensations and symbolic interpretations rather than a system, structure, or construct; they focus on "the multi-sensory and intersectional conditions in which the invented idea of race becomes sensible and feelable."[50] And that they maintain that they "do not believe our senses are simply controlled or fooled by race as a structure of domination."[51] But the idea of being fooled, or at least surprised, by race is a central theme in many YouTube DNA test reveal videos, many of which draw attention to this feature via dramatic thumbnails, titles, and keywords. Thumbnails are consciously crafted to increase the likelihood of clicks on content once a video lands on the page of a search result. A screenshot of the test taker's shocked expression and colorful graphics are common strategies to catch a viewer's attention and drive them to consume the video content. Dramatic titles work similarly, and many of them appeared in my preliminary research and in my "snowball" sample of YouTube content:

> **Video title list:**
> 23ANDME_ ANCESTRY RESULTS (LOUISIANA CREOLE) BIG SHOCK
> African gets her ancestry DNA results
> Afro Latinos Get DNA Tested- pero like
> Am I STILL Black! EMOTIONAL Ancestry DNA Results!!! SHOCKING!!!
> Ancestry DNA update! It was my mom's side, and my parents are cousins!
> Ancestry.com DNA Results - Puerto Rican & Jamaican

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[50]Sekimoto, Sachi, and Christopher Brown. *Race and the Senses: The Felt Politics of Racial Embodiment*. Routledge, 2020. 1-149.
[51] Ibid.

CRAZY ADOPTEE DNA RESULTS (We found her Parents!)
DNA RESULTS! Finding out I'm Mixed- p1 of the Crazy Adoptee video
Dominican Girl Finds out she's AFRICAN ancenstry.com DNA test Results
HILARIOUS PUERTO RICAN DAD TAKES ANCESTRY DNA TEST FINDS OUT
HES 20% AFRICAN HALF EURO
Hodgetwins You Are Not Black DNA Results @Hodgetwins
I'M WHAT _ _ Mexican DNA Results
Latinos Get Their DNA Tested- Pero Like
Lopez Tonight - Snoop Dogg's DNA Test - [Snoop Dogg is WHITE]
Mexicans React to Ancestry DNA Kit! We're African__ _ History Kitchen
My Ancestry DNA Results!
My Heritage DNA shocking results! Genuine reaction to results!
Our Hispanic ANCESTRY DNA Results!!! 23andMe
Reacting to my Ancestry DNA Results
The Try Guys Take An Ancestry DNA Test
White Guy's DNA Test Results _ 23andMe

Content creators use their titles to situate themselves in ethnic categories they think
their target audience may be searching for since the words in titles can serve as
keywords that will index the video in a group of similar videos. The more specific the
ethnic group, the more niche the video will appear in the results. Videos such as
"Latinos get their DNA Tested" and "My Hispanic 23nMe results are in" are examples of
this landing in the results of searches of either ethnicity or individuals searching
ancestry DNA tests. On the other hand, it is not unusual for a country name to appear in
the title of a DNA reaction video, such as "Cuban Ancestry DNA Results are in" and
"Irish People Take A DNA Test."

Figure: 2.5 Word cloud of DNA ancestry video titles I created using MAXQDA

The way YouTube influencers title their videos is an important subject of study for two main reasons: One, this is the first way YouTubers present who they are and they strategically use titles to garner attention translating to views, likes, and potentially income if they promote a discount code in their video. Just as a title of a book, newspaper article, or dissertation needs to be both catchy to promote consumers to pick up the work and expletive to give a tease of the contents, YouTubers give attention to how they name their videos. SEO (search engine optimization) is a strategy of digital marketing that increases the chances that your page will come up in search results around specific keywords. Figure 2.5 "*SEO Periodic Table*" shows a table of factors that positively influence the way an item may come up in search results:
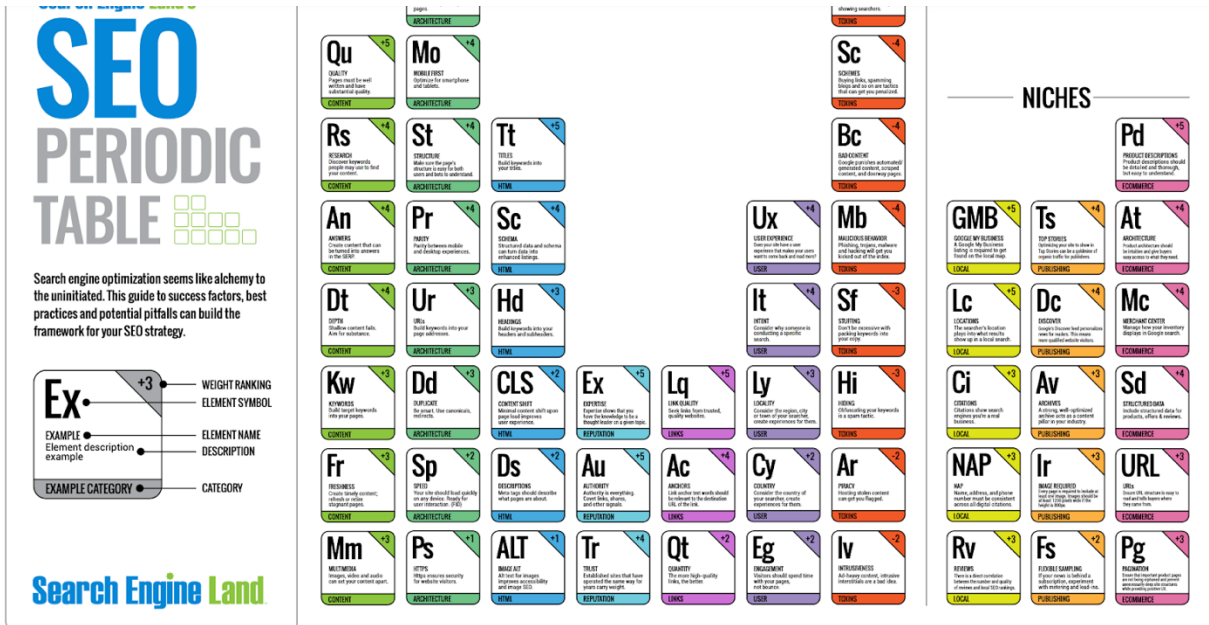
Figure 2.6 : *Search Engine Land's SEO Periodic Table*. Carolyn Lynden, Barry Schwartz, George Nguyen. 2021 Third Door Media, Inc.

SEO involves a complex set of criteria about media displayed online optimizing the way artificial intelligence reads the material and index it among similar media. Think of this sorting similar to the old school Dewey decimal system where library books were intentionally sorted so a user could find them.

There is a Mexicanism that for someone who is of one obvious race, but identifies with another, "El Nopal Enfrente" which literally translates to cactus on the forehead. The cactus is a native plant to Mexico, plays a role in one of the indigenous origin stories, and is a staple in Mexican cuisine. *El nopal en la frente* specifically describes a person with strong indigenous or mestizo features but chooses to identify more with Spanish lineage. The expression communicates how ridiculous a person looks to others when everyone can see that they are clearly Mexican (specifically strong Indigenous features) by simply looking at them yet they highlight European ancestry as a way to reject being classified as Indigenous. To pretend you do not have indigenous features is considered as ridiculous and obvious as walking around with a cactus on your forehead. The phrase comes up in "*Latinos Take a DNA Test*". While the group prepares for their DNA test reveals, Norberto describes an uncle of his who had "el nopal en la frente" but had blue eyes and pride in his European ancestry. This example shows that across time and borders, race is understood visually and considered obvious upon a gaze of a body. Moreover, the phrase tells us that one becomes a subject of ridicule when choosing an identity disparate from how others read your body.

The Rhinelander Case

Nearly a hundred years ago, the ability of an individual to accurately identify the race of a person by visual cues came into question in dramatic fashion. The 1925 *Rhineland vs Rhindland* case was one of the biggest race spectacles of the twentieth

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century. A white husband belonging to a wealthy family sued for an annulment of marriage based on deception; his lawyers argued that his wife, Alice Rhinelander, deceived their client by passing as white when she was, in fact, a quadroon (one-quarter Black heritage), which made her black under most American racial classification statutes. The trial took place at a time when there was a burgeoning eugenics movement and a mass migration of African Americans from the southern states to the predominantly white Northern cities; many Americans feared the size and anonymity of American cities meant that people could "pass" racially with more ease than in the past. Class differences, the taboo of interracial sex, and fears that Black blood could infiltrate its way into respectable white families through deception were aspects that helped the case capture national attention.

Hypersexualized stereotypes of Black women to seduce and deceive and the disrobing of a woman's body for visual inspection were strategies used by legal representatives in the case. The trial did not call into question the racial classification system. Black hypodescent was not problematized, but rather the visual nature of race: whether her husband should have known she was Black (even one-quarter Black) by looking at her was the main focus. Was race a matter that was self-evidently known? Should it be obvious to the common person by a simple gaze? Alice Rhindlander's exposed body, namely her skin complexion, was scrutinized during the most scandalous part of the trial. Mrs. Rhindlander's attorney's instruction to the all-white male jury was clear, "You are here to determine… whether or not he [Mr. Rhinelander] could see with his own eyes that he was marrying into a colored family." To drive the point home that Mrs. Rhinelander's race was obvious that it was impossible for her husband to not have known, her attorney submitted her body for examination by the jurors in the jury room. Rhinelander was instructed to keep on her underwear but expose her chest until her breasts were visible and show her legs until the knees. This defied rules of female modesty at the time, however, Rhinelander's council wanted the jurors to identify visual differences in Alice's body from a white woman.

Figure: 2.7 "Alice Disrobes in Court to Keep Her Husband", New York Evening Graphic. November 25, 1925. Retrieved from *Medium* https://medium.com/@hloni26h/the-rhinelander-affair-713810639c7

The embarrassing spectacle for Alice Rhinelander was a success for the defense as the jurors ruled in her favor after gazing at the complexion of her exposed skin. There were no grounds for an annulment of marriage by fraud, they decided. She could not have hidden her Blackness from her husband because her racial heritage was obvious by looking at her.

One hundred years after the Rhinelander verdict, some YouTube DNA test reveal vloggers discuss similar controversies over whether individuals look obviously black, and express discomfort (and sometimes disdain) for the visual scrutiny to which viewers subject them. For example, in CandyLamb's video, she revealed to viewers that her DNA ancestry test results declared she is 1% African. In her follow-up video, she stated that viewer comments to her original video claimed they could see that she was black because of her nose. To which she replied with a smirk "no."[52] In the video "Hodgetwins You Are Not Black DNA Results," which was published on YouTube in 2015, the way race is measured visually came to the forefront. In the video, the twins stated that viewers often assert in the comment section they are not Black:

Twin 1: "Hey man, we get a lot of comments on this all the time. And we get a lot of emails. Yeah, people, they would like for us to stop claiming that we're black. yes is…and you know it's not coming from white people. It's coming from a bunch of n***s, man

Twin 2: yeah, my own people tryna outcast my ass. But my___ (indiscernible), everyone wants us to claim we're biracial, but see the thing is both my parents are black.[53]

Many test takers elect to highlight "Black" or blackness in their title despite not previously identifying as ethnically Black, with titles such as:

"Mexicans Take DNA Test!! We're African?? ANCESTRY DNA RESULTS"
"Am I STILL Black?! EMOTIONAL Ancestry DNA Results!!! SHOCKING!!! "
"DNA RESULTS! Finding out I_m Mixed"
Hodgetwins You Are Not Black DNA Results @Hodgetwins
Dominican Girl Finds out shes AFRICAN ancenstry.com DNA test Results

The presence of Black ancestry appears to be universally attention-grabbing. What we can glean from this common strategy to hook viewers is that non-Black YouTubers know that the presence of African Ancestry is shocking and intriguing to viewers who would expect black ancestry to be visible on the body, just like the spectacle of the Rhinelander trial. Thus the use of phrases in the title like "We're African??" and "Dominican Girl finds out she's African" for individuals who do not self-identify as Black to invite viewers to scan the YouTuber's body for any signs of visual Blackness. Conversely, African ancestry is met with anxiety for Black-identifying YouTubers who

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[52] CandyLamb. "Ancestry DNA Update! It Was My Mom's Side And My Parents Are Cousins"! *YouTube,* October 12, 2016. https://youtu.be/39kEuAgCPwA
[53] Hodgetwins. "Hodgetwins You Are Not Black DNA Results" *YouTube,* November 10, 2015 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b0EDNX47S20

hold themselves (and are held by Black viewers) to a higher threshold to prove their Blackness to spectators than non-black YouTubers. So, we get titles that contain phrases such as "Am I still Black?!" and "You are not Black DNA Results" which plays on the anxiety of individuals being "kicked out" of the race to grab the attention of those (predominantly Black-identifying) YouTube viewers who leave unsolicited comments denying the Blackness of the content creator. Mixed ancestry is problematic in this situation, however; if you have 51% percent African ancestry as a Black-identifying individual, you reluctantly get a "pass" into the group. You are able to don a Black identity with this test result as evidence.

The Boundaries of Whiteness

YouTube viewers and content creators routinely adjudicate racial categories, and they pay considerable attention to who is and is not white. Accordingly, I want to bring up the contradictions of legal cases in the U.S. that ruled whether a group of people were white. United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind (and also Ozawa v. U.S.) was not a frivolous question of categorizations; what was at stake was the ability of groups of people to gain citizenship. Although Thind, who had ancestry from India and identified as Aryan (a group with common ancestral roots in the Caucasus Mountains, the very biological definition of "white"), the Supreme Court ruled against him by saying that the common man could look at him and not consider him white. The important thing to remember is that despite the weight given to the notion of biological race arising from populations that were geographically set in the past, that biological assertion can and is thrown out subjectively in favor of a visual explanation of who belongs in pivotal contexts and moments.

Specific racial terminology matters on YouTube, but apparently words were more malleable when preserving white privilege in American courts in 1925. The Supreme Court engaged in the "splitting of hairs" between the colloquial use of the words "caucasian" and "white" in the 1925 Thind ruling, which decided whether ancestry could be used to determine racial classifications (and thus eligibility for U.S. citizenship). Although "Caucasian" and "White" were (and continue to be) used interchangeably, the justices decided that separating the words from their scientific application and applying visual and temporal limits to qualify for (white) racial classifications, would preserve the intent of the law reinforcing racial hierarchy:

> the term 'race' is one which, for the practical purposes of the statute, must be applied to a group of living persons *now* possessing in common the requisite characteristics, not to groups of persons who are supposed to be or really are descended from some remote, common ancestor, but who, whether they both resemble him to a greater or less extent, have, at any rate, ceased altogether to resemble one another. It may be true that the blond Scandinavian and the brown Hindu have a common ancestor in the dim reaches of antiquity, but the average man knows perfectly well that there are unmistakable and profound differences between them to-day; and it is not impossible, if that common ancestor could be materialized in the flesh, we should discover that he was himself sufficiently

differentiated from both of his descendants to preclude his racial classification with either.[54]

The Supreme Court ruled against Thind, stating, in short, that although "Caucasian" and White are used interchangeably, in essence, Caucasian is used to label a person as racially white. The court must disregard the regional, scientific definition of "Caucasian" in favor of the socially defined visual cues of how individuals are read as white. One of the most interesting aspects of the Court's statement was that although a brown-skinned person from India and a blond Scandinavian may share a common ancestor, the Court must disregard how that ancestor may have been racially classified in favor of how their descendant would be classified in the present-day. This contradicts how many DNA ancestry test takers interpret their tests; they place themselves in the same identity category as their ancestors. And they continue to insist that race is biological while offering sensory performances that conform to a set of socially agreed on expectations about group belonging.

Vikings, Scandinavians, and the History of Racial Classification in America

That kind of ancestral identification is apparent in the way YouTube vloggers talk about Scandinavians and Vikings. One Facebook commercial by Genomelink dramatizes the ways testing companies coach users to perform a Viking identity if they receive a Scandinavian test result. The commercial starts off with the actor in plain-clothes, announcing his test results:

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[54]United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind, 261 U.S. 204 (1923). *Justia.com*
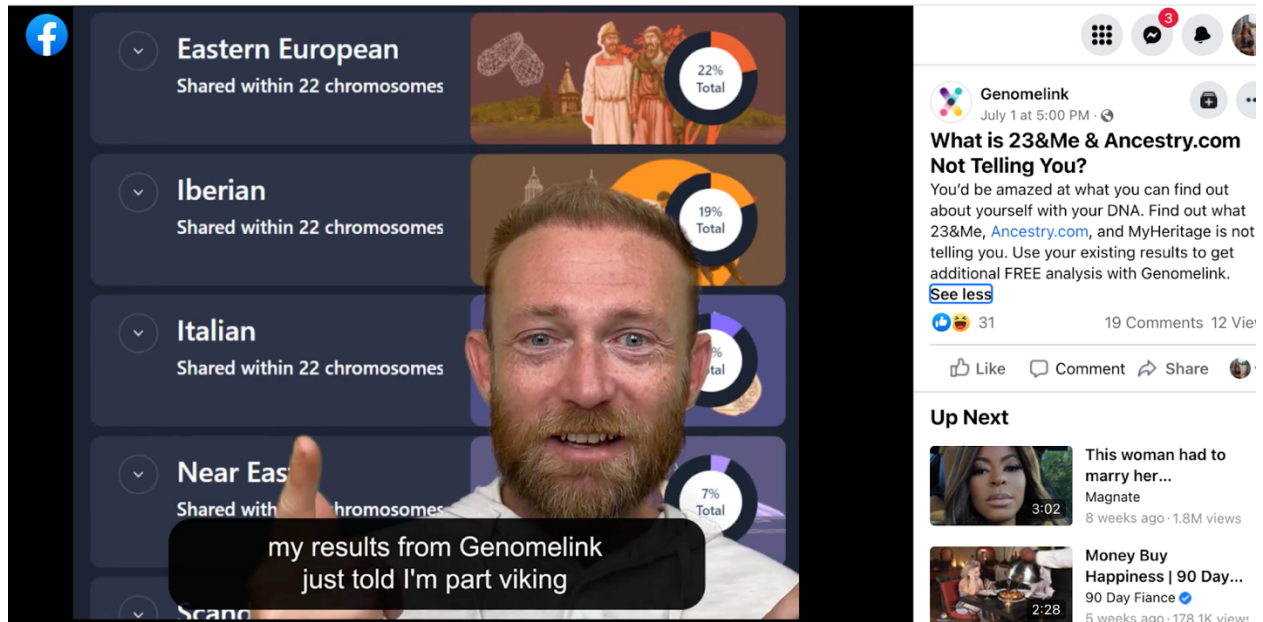https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/261/204/

Figure 2.8 Screenshot I took of Genomelink ad that runs on Facebook.

In the next shot, the same actor is wearing the stereotypical horned Viking helmet and long wig. He says "I am going to lean into my heritage to pillage my kitchen" (a play on the history of Vikings pillaging villages).[55] It is a joke, but a joke with serious history.

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[55] Genomelink's ad strategy mirrors that of African Ancestry, which also maintains that their test tells people more information about the particularities of their heritage than the more well-known 23andMe and Ancestry.com tests.
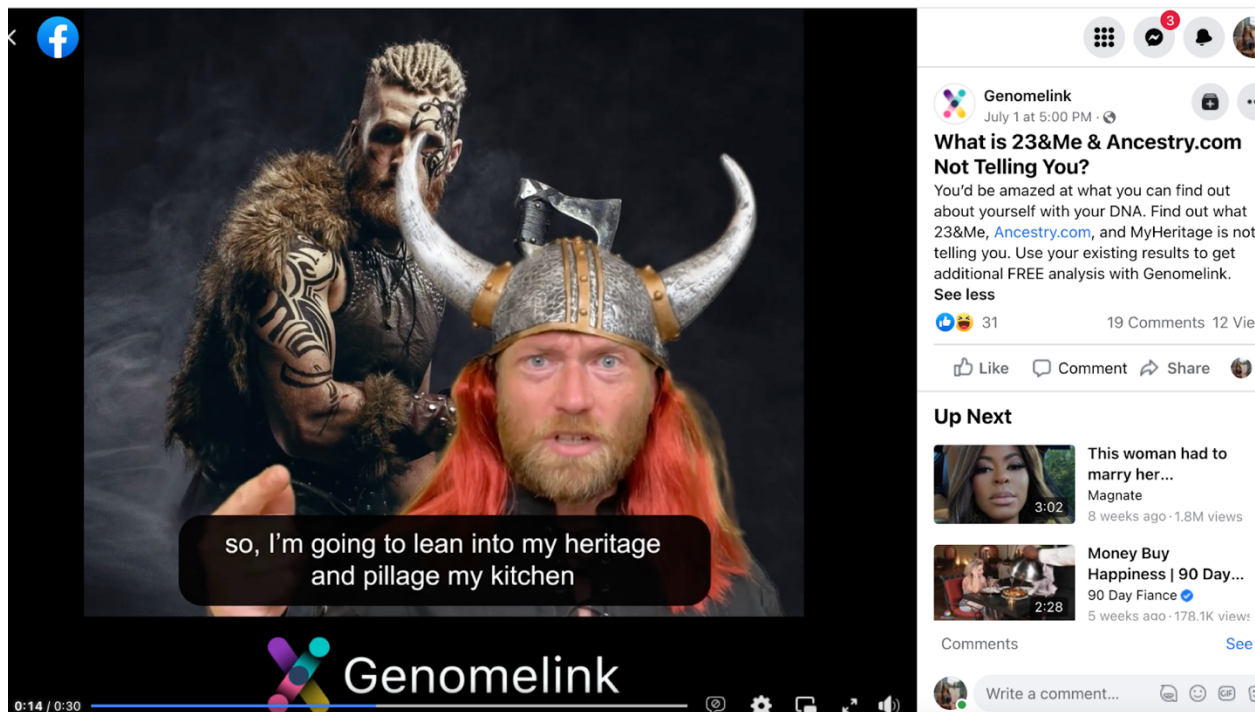
Figure 2.9: Screenshot I took of Genomelink ad that runs on Facebook.

The U.S. has a long history of its political leadership and other influential people declaring the desire for a racially superior nation of English and German stock; that history informs the Scandinavian romanticism and delight often found in YouTube DNA Ancestry test reveals. To understand when and how American collective consciousness turned to consider Scandinavian ancestry as the apex of desirable racial lineage, we must turn back to Francis Galton, who coined the word "Eugenics" and also was responsible for articulating the "nature vs. nurture" argument about genetic traits.

The term "Eugenics," meaning *good birth*, was coined by Frances Galton (a British Scientist and cousin of Charles Darwin) in 1883. Eugenics is predicated on the idea that there is biological difference between people and that undesirable traits can taint an otherwise healthy population. However, what are considered good traits is arbitrary. Galton, a mathematician and geographer, published an 1869 article, "Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry Into Its Laws and Consequences" that graded ethnicities, or rather geographic groups of people, on a scale classifying the "Nordic race" the highest on the scale. This racial taxonomy had consequences as nations adapted this new science in their immigration policies.[56]

Galton, a statistician by trade, developed his eugenic theory when physical anthropologists debated whether there was a mathematical model that explained the heredity of physical features and whether there was, in fact, a way to measure racial difference in the human body. By the early 1900s, there was a camp of scholars, including Ariel Von Török, who asserted that, despite decades of data racial typologists had collected on craniums and other bodily proportion measurements across the world,

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[56] Stepan, 22-23.

scientists failed to show any pattern along racial lines. In fact, they asserted that "racial traits were distributed between and within populations in a gradual and irregular manner that made it impossible to delineate distinct racial types."[57] Török, in particular, criticized racial anthropology stating that the theory based on two unsubstantiated assumptions: 1) the arithmetic mean of measurements of a population defined the baseline for race and 2) that the variation you within a human population is because the races have been too mixed in modern times, but that racial purity occurred in primordial times and the further anthropological studies went back in time, the more racial purity would be found.[58] However, these ancient pure races were never found in anthropological excavations. It was not until the rediscovery of the obscure work of a German priest named Mendel, who developed theories about heritable variation by his study on flowering plants, that academe moved from mathematical models expecting the mixed raced individuals to be the mean measurement between two races, to relying on the concept of hidden and expressed genes that differentiate genotype and phenotype.[59]

Race, Eugenics, and National Identity

Jake Kosek points out how the U.S. preservationists call on national eugenic metaphors of pure white bodies, unsoiled bloodlines to stand for natural landscapes.[60] But previous American racial ideologies paved the way for the language and ideas of eugenics to take hold. For nascent nations who underwent the process of separating from the empires who ruled them, the opportunity to create a distinct national identity from their colonizers was a popular project. Michelle Wright (2008)[61] points out that Thomas Jefferson had a clear idea about whose genes were worthy of the land that Black people were a genetic threat to the new nation. Zimring (2018)[62] further notes that Jefferson considered products of black and white interracial relations a "pollutant," creating an environmental value or illustration to the connection between white purity, land and nation. Jefferson also entered the debate of his contemporaries on the origin of black skin by asserting whether the difference lay in blood or in the reticular membrane; in Jefferson's view, the difference was a natural one where black bodies were suited for warm climates and hard labor, and did not belong in the New World. He advocated slavery as a temporary situation where slaves would be repatriated to Africa.

Since Jefferson believed in a racial hierarchy where Anglo-Saxons were the top group, all other bodies were considered "unfit" and unsuited for the nation as a whole. Science became social policy. Jefferson did not have the technology in the 18th century to control sexual reproduction other than legal prescriptions to physically segregate

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[57] While Anglophone countries primarily used the term "eugenics," both Germany and Scandinavia considered the theory "racial hygiene." Kyllingstad, Jon Røyne. 2014. Racial Hygiene and the Nordic Race" In *Measuring the Master Race: Physical Anthropology in Norway 1890-1945*, Chap. 5. 88-95. Open Book Publisher.

[58] Ibid. 88-95

[59] ibid. 88-95

[60] Kosek, Jake. "Purity and Pollution: Racial Degradation and Environmental Anxieties." In *Liberation Ecologies*, Routledge, 2004,145.

[61] Wright, Michelle M. *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora*. Duke University Press, 2004.

[62] Zimring, Carl A. "Clean and White." In *Clean and White*. New York University Press, 2016.

white, indigenous, and black bodies and support immigration and citizenship from peoples considered "fit" (i.e. English and German blood). But others would take up his ideas about race and genetics.

Although technological advances enabled the practice of forced sterilization by the 20th century, immigration policies aimed to control which genes were suited for the sprawling American frontier. A reemergence of the theories of French scientist Jean Baptiste Lamarck (who in 1802 published zoological theories that an organism can inherit traits from their physical environment) had an impact on the U.S. landscape in politics, especially in California. Like the Enlightenment naturalists who categorized plants and later people, David Starr Jordan, the first President of Stanford University, was a leading Eugenics who also explored the local flora and fauna and classified them (Stern, 2005). One century after Thomas Jefferson, Jordan also placed Anglo-Saxon blood at the top of the racial hierarchy and wrote that the beauty and strength of California's topography made Californians superior in height and strength than people on the East Coast (Stern, 2005).

Like Hegel and Jefferson, Jordan believed the inferior races came from tropical countries of the Southern Hemisphere and poor European countries who knew not of freedom so, therefore, he advocated for immigration control of Mexicans, Asians, and Southern Europeans to protect the pure Anglo-Saxon bloodline suited for the state. Like his contemporary, U.S. president Theodore Roosevelt (a major conservationist and leader of the U.S. environmental conservation movement) Jordan believed the rugged terrain of the Sierra Nevada mountains toughened people. Non-white individuals were not suited for the land and eugenicists who were among the first conservationists in California wanted to conserve the land from lesser races that were parasites who would milk its natural resources (Stern, 2005). The Enlightenment concepts of European superiority, and the related idea that the American terrain was the rightful inheritance of English and German bloodlines, played a political role in Manifest destiny and the conquest of the U.S. West.

Jordan, the first president of Stanford University, was a Eugenicist who influenced other prominent figures such as Jack London (whose name is inscribed across Oakland's landscape). In the late nineteenth century, Jordan advocated for the restriction of immigration of Southern Europeans and Asian immigrants from California stating, "the dangers of foreign immigration lie in the overflow to our shores of hereditary unfitness. The causes that lead to degeneration have long been at work among the poor of Europe".[63] It is important to note that Southern Europeans were considered racially distinct from Anglo-Saxons and would not be placed in the same category as they would today. To further bolster this claim, Jordan stated "only the Saxon and the Goth know the meaning of freedom."[64]

There are two things to highlight here that resonate with the way individuals tend to interpret their DNA tests; 1) That individuals consciously look for evidence that there are physiological differences between groups of people that would support the preconceived idea of race (and racial difference) 2) That scientists interpret miniscule

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[63] Kosek, 133.

[64] Koesk, 133. Hegel spoke similarly about freedom being the signifier of the higher species of animal, going above subsistence living.

differences observed in a small or singular sample and extrapolate it to an entire group of people without considering the difference may be found between individuals of the same race. Barbara Fields in the 1990 seminal paper *Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the United States* has a similar critique of scholars who have "dabbled in Anthropology in college" using scientific arguments to support the idea of biological differences between socially constructed races. Fields starts her theory about U.S. racial ideology with the sportscaster Jimmy the Greek's on-air explanation that Black athletes excelled due to biological differences due to the intentional breeding of enslaved men and women by the people who owned them. Fields demonstrates that Jimmy the Greek's claims were not one-offs; prominent people with more credibility from journalists to the highest court supported the claim of biological racial difference prior to and in response to Jimmy the Greek's career-ending statement. For example, Washington Post Journalist Richard Cohen defended Jimmy the Greek's statement by saying he participated in identifying race and sex from skulls in his college anthropology studies.

The year prior, in 1987, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Arab and Jewish people are biologically distinct from Caucasians and therefore eligible for protection by anti-discrimination laws. Rather than citing any genetic reality, the Supreme Court made their ruling based on nineteenth-century racial classifications they *decided* were valid to apply to the contemporary context of anti-discrimination policy. Fields points out that, in both of these examples, circular logic supported the idea of biological race when there was in fact no biological correlations to what we consider race. Her argument is that one must have the idea that there is a biological reality of race in order to classify groups of people accordingly and so look for information in order to justify that belief. The reason I am pointing out this example from Field's introduction is to show just how pervasive the idea of biological race is, how it is normalized and discussed on public forums, and how old racial classification schemes are reinforced in legal decisions determining legal rights based on race. Today, they are also reinforced through YouTube DNA test performances that celebrate "Viking" heritage and claim unique high status for groups of people believed to descend from the "apex" races celebrated by Enlightenment and Eugenicist scientific thinkers and politicians. One YouTuber edited a clip from the *Vikings* miniseries after he read his Scandinavian ancestry, and another, responded, "I'm Finnish? Finnish and Scandinavian people are like, hot. Right? "[65] along with an edited image of a Viking man with a bare chest.

La Raza Cosmica, National Identity and Mixed-Race Superiority

Genetic purity is not the only model that plays out in YouTube racial performances. On the flip side of genetically engineered citizenship and populations of nations that valued racial purity, Mexico notably coalesced their national identity around the positive attributes of heterogeneity. This is not to say that racial essentialism is absent from this celebration of mixed-raced identity. On the contrary, this celebration of a heterogeneous population, or *La Raza Cosmica,* is based on the "best of both worlds' premise that takes the racial or genetic essentialist ideas of the respective races, such as European intelligence and African strength, and pushes the idea that the

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[65] Try Guys, 2:17

mixed-raced nation has these attributes passed down through their genetic ancestry.[66] Looking at how coalescing the ancestral identity of the nation as a genetically mixed-race mestizaje served political ideas of who belonged in the nation and why in the past helps us understand the ways contemporary DNA test takers perform mixed-race identity YouTube.

The Mexican eugenic movement arose on the heels of the Mexican Revolution where the nation was looking toward socialist and secular solutions to address mass sickness and poverty (Stepan,1991).[67] One of the examples of how eugenics shaped social policy is the divorce law. One may interpret this as a move toward more individual freedom, however the law was set within Darwinian terms as marriage should be "for the benefit of the species" (Manrique, 2016).[68] The aim of this law was to genetically the population to reduce hereditary diseases and venereal diseases that could weaken the fitness of the population or become a contagious threat to public health. As one may deduce, in order for the country to control the genetic fitness of the population, policy was aimed at targeting women's reproductive choices.

There are two major contradictions within the theory of superiority of hybridity in *La Raza Cosmica.* Although Vasconselos clearly rejected the popular eugenic theory of pure races being superior to degenerate mixed-raced individuals, not all races were welcomed genetic contributors to the future of the nation. Moreover, whiteness was seen as a civilizing and beautifying agent that would assimilate or "dilute" the uncivilized, and undesirable indigenous and African attributes of the population[69]. Therefore, any more genetic contributions be it by immigration or high-birth rates of these groups were discouraged.[70]

This celebration of white genes as a civilizing agent in *La Raza Cosmica*, and although Manrique said the work as a whole was taken up by Chicano movement, many Latinx YouTubers express uncomfortable feelings about white ancestry due to what it means in the context of conquest and historical sexual trauma. This means that the perception of desirable genetic lineage has taken a complete 180-degree turn in the nearly 100 years since the publication. This is also supported by many of those same Latinx-American YouTubers who comment that their grandparents always claimed Spanish ancestry and would be proud to see the Spanish genetic ancestry result. While Latinx YouTubers may downplay pride in descending from violent colonizers, the same

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[66] The popular Mexican Revolutionary-era writer José Vasconcelos actively proselytized the notion that the mestizo was the superior race.

[67] Stepan, Nancy. *The Hour of Eugenics.* Cornell University Press. 1990

[68] Manrique (2016) Dreaming of a cosmic race: José Vasconcelos and the politics of race in Mexico, 1920s–1930s

[69] Stepan,1991, 150-159

[70] Some eighty years after Vasconcelos, geographer Jared Diamond published the popular and controversial book *Guns Germs and Steel*. Diamond gave his theory on the cultural and environmental resource factors that lead to ethnic groups within a continent conquering rival groups and dominating the genetic legacy of the population left behind. With chapter titles like "How Africa Became Black, and Asia Became Yellow," it was easy for many to criticize the work as racially essentialist. However, I want to point out how Diamond and Vasconcelos disagree on the genetic success of Europeans. Diamond says the success of Europeans has been spreading their genes across the globe through immigration and colonization. Whereas Vasconcelos said the failure of Anglo Europeans was their unwillingness to intermix with other races.

cannot be said for YouTubers who think positively about the possibility of descending from Vikings who they imagine are warlike conquerors who pillage lands. It appears that Scandinavian heritage is celebrated by young YouTubers of various nationalities while Spanish heritage is a reminder of historical trauma.

Conclusion

This chapter answers the question of why YouTubers would attract clicks by advertising shock around African ancestry and likewise create a video title that highlights their nationality. In order to do so, I had to lay out how we came to associate physical attributes and their value with nationalities. We receive information about racial norms—unspoken rules about what we do and what is considered socially expected and accepted —through many means, including movies, television programs, news, indoctrination by caretakers, and personal experiences with a category of people[71]. Though these stereotypes exist today, we can trace the genealogy of these correspondences and identify the purpose of their use. Race in the Americas was constructed to be synonymous with national identity. The work of politicians to create a national identity out of genetic bloodlines and assign those bloodlines meanings that celebrate attributes they wished to correlate with the country is most likely a reason YouTubers and (DNA Ancestry tests in a certain respect) attach race to a country in their reactions. One factor that is overlooked is given the amount of human migration that has occurred since the dawn of humanity, why do we associate a *singular* identity and accompanying characteristics such as attitudes, physical and mental aptitudes, facial features, and cuisines, with geographical boundaries then those populations and boundaries have changed?

We take for granted that our expectation of what it *looks* like to belong in a national boundary is based on genetic engineering by political moves like manifest destiny, citizenship, genocide/ ethnic cleansing. Human beings move around following resources. Artificial boundaries maintain a population in place while also maintaining perceived racial differences that would not exist without deliberate interference. I use the word perceived because there is no biological racial difference, yet we interpret skin color as an indication of biological difference. These categories are socially constructed and move with court rulings, land policies, and politicians genetically shaping their population with the vision that the ideal attributes of citizens such as genetic fitness, intelligence, and low probability to engage in crime, comes forth, not by comprehensive social policy, but with the right genetic lineage.

In the following chapter, I share my findings of the 17 videos I analyzed for this study. You will see how the aforementioned essentialist beliefs that genetics determines aptitudes instead of social environmental factors have impacted the YouTubers'

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[71] Terence Keel (2018) argues had Abrahamic religions had and continue to influence scientific inquiry and scientific knowledge production. The formation of the race concept in the minds of Western European and American scientists grew out of Christian intellectual history. Specifically, in relation to the belief that black skin was the Biblical Curse of Noah.

understanding of what their genetic ancestry tells them. DNA ancestry tests tell users about their genetic lineage in terms of which modern countries their ancestors originated. All but two videos were recorded "live" as the participants read their results for the first time, so we see their immediate impression of what it means in terms of looks, innate abilities, and intelligence to be connected to the countries and regions given to them.

Chapter 3: Results: Science and the "Truth-telling" of Race

Introduction: Feeling and Performing Ethnicity on YouTube

Most of the YouTubers in my study recorded their initial reactions to the DNA test and made the conscious decision to let the audience find out the results along with them.[72] But the test reveal performances of those few who preview their results privately convey important things about the key role of racial play. For instance, YouTuber Amber Rue, who dedicates her channel to beauty and make-up tutorials and guides viewers with her makeup brushes and liners, made a visual and content departure in her DNA test reveal video.

Image 3.1 Screenshot of Amber Rue's thumbnail of her reveal video on YouTube

Instead of wearing her hair down, Rue wore her hair in Afropuffs, and sported a gold chain, Black tank, and hoop earrings. She explained the sartorial change to her audience, "see I've thrown on my hoops and gold chain. I am feeling a little ethnic today since we're going to find out my ethnicity" ("My Ancestry DNA Results!" *YouTube*

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[72] Only two (of 17) videos in my study featured individuals who read their results to the YouTube audience after they initially opened and read their results.

Uploaded by AmberRue 18 Sept 2017). Rue made it clear to her audience that her wardrobe was a conscious choice to reflect what she considers reflective of her ethnicity. Rue was able to participate in this costumed performance because she had read her results before filming the video and selected clothing and accessories that would most reflect her ethnicity since she was "feeling" ethnic. Her comment harkens back to my previous section on race and senses, which documented the ways people believe racial differences can be haptic or figuratively felt (as when Steven Tyler told Skip Gates that he always felt akin to Black people after learning he had African ancestry). Feeling in this sense is also a feeling of interpersonal empathy[73]. YouTubers like AmberRue use costumes to perform racial or ethnic empathy or belonging; YouTubers who find out their test reveals live use other means to perform race or ethnicity. In *Playing Indian,* Philip Deloria argues that white Americans have a long history of racial play that enables them to experience a sense of belonging tied to the North American continent. YouTubers play a variant of the settler colonial game Deloria describes as "find a culture, claim a culture, and find rituals and practices to engage in," (Deloria, 2022). It is a game that induces anxiety for its players as they don and remove racialized identities.

In this chapter, I analyze the range of feelings (including confusion and anxiety) that YouTubers convey in their DNA reveal videos, and detail YouTubers' reflections on authenticity in their racial and ethnic performances. Citing Émile Durkheim, Carolyn Chen describes the secular workplace analogs of "religious rites, rituals, and rules" that set things "apart in time and space from the profane, or the ordinary" (*Work, Pray, Code*, 188). Even in a new media format, there are specific practices (rules and rituals) that demarcate YouTube DNA reveals from other types of racial and ethnic performances and give the latter a heightened sense of authenticity, reality, and meaningfulness. Of course, I am not arguing that these DNA test reveals are treated as a religion, but rather that people give enough credence to them to drive individuals to strong emotions (to the point of tears), to express shame or pride about themselves, and to signal connection and belonging, as some religious practices do. I describe the features of DNA reveal videos that distinguish them from other types of racial and ethnic performances. I reflect on the implications of my findings.

First, I will describe my methodology and data collection practices. I review the sample size, collection method, coding, and data analysis tools I used in this study Next, I explain the ritual of the YouTube DNA ancestry reveal. Driving the point that the performance is uniform amongst YouTubers. Then I present my findings and interpret them. I draw out themes and provide supporting evidence from scholarly sources to support my contextualization of the data. I conclude this chapter by outlining the key takeaways from my findings and offer recommendations to testing companies that may help test takers better understand their results. I also explain what is at stake if tests fail to properly inform customers about the difference between social and biological units.

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[73] Sekimoto & Brown, 2020.129

Survey Methodology

        I used a snowball sampling technique to collect the 17 YouTube videos I analyzed in this study, and I collected the video transcripts between February and March 2022, along with details about the number of views and subscribers. I used the YouTube algorithm to produce a "snowball sampling" effect. Algorithms are predictive formulas that uplift content tailored to each user. After watching one DNA ancestry video, the site continues to offer viewers DNA ancestry videos to view in order to keep them engaged on the site. One advantage of snowball sampling is that it produces a snapshot of phenomena in a particular time (in this case, winter and spring of 2022). The drawback of this methodology is replicability; a different researcher using the same technique would likely receive a completely different set of videos to view, though analysis of those videos might yield similar conclusions about key themes and content. In my case, because I had been viewing and downloading DNA ancestry videos since beginning my research in 2017, YouTube's parent company, Google, may have collected extensive data about my internet searches and video viewing habits and incorporated that information into YouTube's personalized video recommendations.

        I downloaded the snowball sample videos for study because videos are often removed from the platform by either the YouTuber or the platform itself. Several of the recommended videos were duplicates of ones I had downloaded and saved as early as 2017. During the writing of this dissertation, at least two YouTube channels removed the videos and shut down their channel (or changed their settings to private). For the sole video that did not remain posted until I could collect its transcript in 2022, I used the Veed.io subscription website to upload the video for automatic transcribing. I found the Veed.io transcription service to be about as accurate as the YouTube transcriptions. Unfortunately, since the video was taken down so quickly, I could not collect data on it such as the number of views and the number of channel subscribers.

        The DNA test reveal videos ranged in length from just over three minutes to fourteen minutes long. Lengthier videos, and videos with more than one participant, of course, had more content to code. I copied each video's transcript into MAXQDA software which allowed me to code the videos and identify patterns in the data. MAXQDA proved helpful in correcting the auto-generated YouTube transcripts as it facilitated my hand-correcting misunderstood words and Spanglish phrases the YouTube artificial intelligence transcription service did not accurately record. The code tags that I created were based on trends and themes I observed in five years of preliminary research into DNA ancestry test reveals. My coding process was iterative; I added to that initial code list through the process of reviewing videos and discovering new themes and then, with each code category addition, re-reviewed the previously coded videos to see if any of the new codes were applicable to the content.

        Following are the codes I used to group themes and performances:

        The tags I placed on the videos based on my preliminary research are:
1. User Experience
   a. Mentions historical info in results
   b. Says test does not give a specific Native American tribe
   c. Expresses Skeptisism regarding how their DNA is used

  d. Unsure of what the result means/ has not heard of the country result
  e. Describes what the test is about/procedure
  f. Says test is hard to navigate
  g. Says test is "worth it"
2. Deeper Meaning of the test
  a. Says tests eliminates borders/ differences
  b. Feeling of home
  c. "We're all connected"
  d. "We're all the same"
  e. "We are all mixed"
  f. Says test can ameliorate racism
3. Haplo group reference
4. Neanderthal rereference
5. DNA ancestry results changed
  a. A result disappeared
  b. Received a completely new result
  c. Results became more specific (a country, genetic community, or ethnic group was mentioned with the test update when only a geographical area was given in the previous test results)
  d. Significant percentage change of any test result
  e. Attached to previous ancestry test result and disappointed at the change
6. Refers to ancestral trauma to explain results
  a. Mentions colonization
  b. Mentions slave trade/ slavery
  c. Mentions ancestral rape or sexual assult
7. Truth-telling
  a. Results confirm family story
  b. Results contradict family story
  c. Test company insists their test is the real truth (contrary to protest)
8. Often mistake for a different race
9. Research done prior to taking the test
  a. Watched other YouTube videos
10. Race or Nationality of tester mentioned before results are read
  a. Colombian
  b. Dominican
  c. El Salvador
  d. Mexican
    i. Mexican American Specifically mentioned
  e. White
  f. Black
11. Comparing users phenotype to results
  a. Generally says the word "features"
  b. Eyes
  c. Hair

     d. Nose

     e. Skin color

12. Aptitude

     a. Sexual aptitude

     b. Strength/ resilience

     c. Beauty

     d. Good at math

     e. Musical ability

13. Haptic/ other sensory data

     a. Taste

14. User interpreted a race from their ethnicity results (i.e. Refer to European ancestry as "white" or African as "Black")

     a. Black

     b. White

15. Continent

     a. Motherland

     b. Region of Continent

     c. Genetic communities

         i. timeline

16. Tribal/ Ethnic Group

     a. Jewish (general)

         i. Ashkenazi

     b. Native American

17. Country

     a. State

18. Video production

     a. Filmed after vlogger read their results

     b. Live results reveal

19. Emotions

     a. Crazy

     b. Surprising

     c. Mentions previous generations claimed a different primary identity

     d. Excited

     e. Nervous

     f. Disturbed

     g. Envy/Jealousy

     h. Emotional/ overwhelm/ need to digest

     i. Funny

     j. Disappointed in test itself

     k. Disappointed in results

     l. Confusion

         i. Ask parents or grandparents for clarification

         ii. Wondering where to find a specific country in results

     m. Cool to say they're multiracial

     n. Shame

     o. Sadness

      p. Denial
      q. Happy/ cool
      r. Shock
      s. Confirmation
      t. Pride/joy

20. Phenotypic references to ancestors or living relatives
      a. Mentions general phenotype of their people group
      b. cheekbones
      c. eyes
      d. hair
      e. nose
      f. skin color

21. Performance
      a. Generally negative comment about DNA ancestry result
      b. Mentions ethnic diversity of a geographic result given (implies test is vauge because there are many ethnicities in that region or country).
      c. Mentions / jokes about the number of cousin matches
      d. Tells a racially essentialist joke
      e. Mentioning a stereotype of the climate of a country result
      f. Imitating Maury Show DNA paternity test results
            i. General paternity test joke
      g. Interest in finding information about a particular ancestor
      h. Interest in doing more research about a group or groups in results
      i. Interested in reaching out to genetic matches
      j. Says test doesn't change their identity
      k. Mentions changing identity based on results
      l. Mentions new plans on traveling to that country
      m. Gives a prediction of anticipated results
      n. Mentions eating or trying food from a country result
      o. Editing a movie, show, or cartoon clip to represent an ethnicity result
      p. Faking an accent
      q. Dressing up in a costume
      r. Competition on a percentage of ethnicity result
      s. Educating audience about a country result
            i. Giving a conjecture of how something happened historically
      t. Editing images of items to represent thoughts
            i. Image of food
            ii. Images of other items
      u. mentions the word "exotic" or some variation
      v. Mentions they will ask parents and or other relatives to take the test

22. Reasons for taking the test
      a. Test kit was on sale/ they received a discount
      b. Adoptee or child of adoptee
      c. Trying to find a sense of belonging

       d. Got the test as a gift
       e. They watched another YouTuber's DNA ancestry test reaction video
       f. Confirming identity/ proving right to claim their primary identity
       g. Filling in gap in family history
       h. Suspicious of family history
       i. Just Curious

23. Sponsored video
       a. Affilate link or discount code mentioned or in the description (shows YouTuber gets a portion of the viewers' test purchases)
       b. No
       c. Yes

24. Which test they took
       a. 23nme
       b. African Ancestry
       c. Ancestry.com/ AncestryDNA
       d. My Heritage
       e. Other test or name of test not mentioned in video

Using this coding schema in MAXQDA helped me find trends in the data, such as the most common reactions, most frequently used words, how many times users received specific country results (versus vague continent results) and identify the common performance elements that I discuss in this chapter. Additionally, I used the MAXQDA software to create data visualizations that illustrate and summarize my findings.

Test Results: Screenshots as Ritual

The Collins dictionary defines "ritual" as "a way of behaving or a series of actions that people regularly carry out in a particular situation because it is their custom to do so.." ("Collins Dictionary"). One of the rituals surrounding the DNA ancestry test performances is the YouTubers sharing the screenshot of their DNA results. The practice of YouTubers screen sharing their DNA ancestry results is nearly universal. Further, screen sharing of results is done the same way. YouTubers will look at the camera, read the result out loud and a screenshot of the results will appear on one half of the screen. Of course, the screen share is done after the recording and during editing, yet the effect is that both the viewer and YouTuber are sharing the same time and space where we find out their genetic ancestry results along with them.

Genetic test results are some of the most intimate data, yet individuals share this publicly. This should raise eyebrows because rarely do we see other personal biological information shared for public consumption via a screenshot. But the test results screen shots are a key ritual that demarcates these videos from other more casual racial and ethnic performances, such as the viral TikTok trend "How I would look in other nationalities" or nationality challenge. The viral trend gave users a chance to create a deepfake video via an app that realistically superimposed their face on to bodies

wearing traditional costumes representing various countries and marked the countries' name on each slide. The app changed skin tone and facial features to match the costumed body that users claimed gave them a glimpse of what they would look like as a different ethnicity. True to the nature of social media, this nationality challenge leaped from TikTok to other social media platforms including Instagram and YouTube (as linked above).

The number and speed of costume changes in the nationality challenge distinguish it from DNA reveal videos, even the ones that use costumes; in the viral nationality challenge videos, the performer's real or "authentic" identities typically are the ones *not* performed via costume changes. Moreover, the rules of the challenge authorize anyone to perform the same generic range of identities, whereas the DNA test results authorize each person to perform a specific, personalized, and more limited range of identities. The nationality challenge endorses and enables ephemeral ethnic performances in a limited context, whereas public display of the DNA test results is a ritual that authorizes extended (even permanent) kinds of public racial and ethnic empathy and display.

Shock, Anxiety, and Confusion: The Emotions of DNA Reveal Videos

The screenshots of test results simultaneously mark these DNA test reveal performances from everyday life. Additionally, the range and intensity of feelings make the DNA identity performances distinctive:

Figure: 3.2 Screenshots I took of Michelle Khare and The Try Guys thumbnails that promote their DNA Ancestry test reaction videos.

Table 1: DNA Ancestry reaction video emotions count

Emotions that appeared in DNA Ancestry Reaction Videos	
Emotions	Frequency
Crazy	1

Surprising	7
Excited	2
Nervous	6
Disturbed	1
Envy/ Jealousy	1
Emotional/Overwhelm/ need to time process	3
Disappointed in test results	2
Confusion	14
Shame	0
Sadness	1
Denial	2
Happy/ Cool	12
Shock	19
Neutral/ unsurprised	12
Pride	7

I encountered eight instances of YouTubers expressing nervousness or anxiety about opening up their DNA test results. The results are like the fictional game of Jumanji where unexpected things come at them and challenge their sense of self. YouTuber RyMingTahn expressed her uneasiness around taking the test:

> The hardest part was actually getting the courage to do it. I don't really know why its courage. It shouldn't even be that serious, but it was for me. I feel like I have a lot of secrets in my family. And it's like people aren't honest. You know, this person has blond hair and blue eyes and this person is like jet Black with ice blue eyes and you know it's a bunch of different genetics rolling around in my family.[74]

On one hand, unexpected results can offer a passport that enables them to enact performances previously "off-limits" to them ranging from telling offensive racial jokes to wearing traditional cultural garb. On the other hand, an unexpected result can throw the
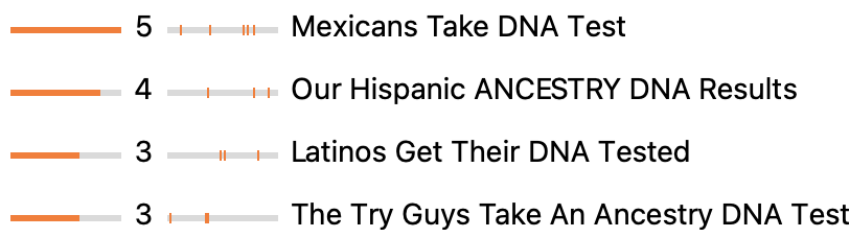
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[74] RyMingThan."My Ancestry.com Ethnicity DNA Results," YouTube. 2014. 2:10-2:41, https://youtu.be/MdpuGIZfR90

test-taker into a sense of confusion, disappointment, and overwhelm as they express the need to digest results they feel conflict with the way they identify.

I was able to code these emotions through the visual display of emotions on the faces of YouTubers and their verbal expression of the emotions they felt. Most of the time, this was a relatively straightforward process because humans are highly skilled at using facial expressions to deduce emotional states[75]. In a handful of cases, verbal expressions were pivotal. For example, the "crazy" code is used when the YouTuber verbalizes the phrase "that's crazy" since there is no way to read that state through reading one's face. For "confusion", I used that code when the YouTuber either stated that they were confused or used a phrase such as "what is that?!" or exclaims "what?!"

Some emotions are not as clear-cut even when the subject vocalizes their reaction. For instance, what emotion do people express when they respond "cool!" or "that's cool"? I interpreted that to mean they were expressing that they were pleased with their result. Therefore, I placed "cool" and "happy" together as a code because being pleased with something can be interchangeable with having happy emotions. I also coded the use of the word "awesome" as "happy" since it is a positive emotional expression.[76] "Cool" appeared in over 60% of the videos I surveyed. Through video transcript analysis with MaxQDA, I found the word "cool" most frequently appeared in videos featuring Latinx vloggers:

Most frequent in these documents

———— 5 ——ııı— Mexicans Take DNA Test

———— 4 ——ıiı— Our Hispanic ANCESTRY DNA Results

———— 3 ——ıı— Latinos Get Their DNA Tested

———— 3 —ı— The Try Guys Take An Ancestry DNA Test

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[75] Ekman, Paul. 1992. Facial Expressions of Emotion: New Findings, New Questions. *Psychological Scienc*e, 3 no.1: 34–38. https://doi-org.libproxy.berkeley.edu/10.1111/j.1467-9280.1992.tb00253.x

[76] There has been some research on the history and use of the word "cool" where scholars argue there is a gendered and racial element to who uses and what races are associated with the word (Dinerstein, 2013). The enthusiastic use of the word "cool" in the ancestry test videos is paradoxical in and of itself because the word has been used to express demonstration of lack of emotion. Dinerstein writes the modern use of the word cool dates, "...back only to the African-American jazz culture of the early 1940s when cool carried four core meanings among jazz musicians: a calm state of mind; an individual's signature sound and style; a relaxed mode of performance; and, most importantly, a blank, impassive, aloof facial expression" (Dinerstein in *The Cultural Career of Coolness*). When one looks at the aforementioned core meanings of cool, one can see the similarities in the context of performances. One a musician on stage performing in front of a crowd, and a YouTuber performs a reaction to being assigned an ethnic identity to a global audience. Further, both performances are modes of entertainment and self-expression. However, DNA ancestry test reactions do not come across as 'blank, impassive, or aloof facial expressions'. On the contrary, thumbnails often use a frame of the YouTuber with a dramatic, shocked facial expression or a large grin sprawled across their face.

Figure 3.3 Chart I created in MaxQDA illustrating the frequency of the word "cool" in the transcripts.

This diverges from the original context of the word, connected to the African American jazz musicians Joel Dinerstein studied in *The Cultural Career of Coolness*. However, the prevalence of the term could be an interesting path for scholars interested in Latinx popular culture, linguistics, and media studies to further investigate.

The third complicated coding choice related to the state I termed "denial." I coded "denial" as individuals denying the validity of a specific ethnic result as well as expressing that others will reject their ethnic ancestry result. For instance, Jennifer in Ghostlight Videos' "Our Hispanic Ancestry DNA Results. 23andMe" YouTube video reaction states,

> Oh my God, I am Jewish!
> *shakes head as if she's snapping out of the excited emotion*
> I don't think that counts. I feel like people are going to say you're not f*cking Jewish!" [77]

Here, Jennifer was excited that she received a Jewish result and claimed that as part of her identity when she states "...I am Jewish", yet she immediately thinks about how others would respond to her 2% Jewish results and surmises they would reject that claim.

Shock was the most common emotion I observed in my video survey. It should be no surprise that the attention-grabbing shocked facial expressions on the DNA test reveal video thumbnails would be observed. YouTubers most often expressed shock over European ancestry or the percentage of European ancestry in their results. Black and Latinx test takers predicted some amount of European ancestry but often found their European ancestry was much larger than they had imagined. Another interesting thing about this is that either YouTubers are teased by their peers accompanying them (if the video features a group of people taking the test) or they joke about being "White". "I'm white" or "You're so white" is uttered. I point this out because it demonstrates that YouTubers automatically equate European as white when, as mentioned in previous chapters, nationalities such as Italians and Irish were not considered white in the United States for much of the country's history[78]

What I had originally labeled as "confirmation" became "neutral/ unsurprised". Clearly, a neural or unsurprised emotion is the opposite of shock which illustrates that the emotional videos show a spectrum of reactions. This did not mean that there were no changes in facial expressions. Confirmation could make a user happy and feel vindicated but I would need to fall on unsubstantiated assumptions to do that. Statements like "Oh I knew there was a bit of Jew in me somewhere!" ("Irish People Take a DNA Test") or "that wasn't really a shock because I already know, you know,

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[77]Ghostlightfilms. "Our Hispanic Ancestry DNA Results" *YouTube*, August 27, 2017. 8:16-8:27 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SO0Vw0XSkyw

[78] Noel Ignatiev in the canonical, "How the Irish Became White" argues that white is not an ethnicity as it has no culture, rather white refers to a social position and the ability to enjoy the privileges that come with that social position. The early Irish immigrants arrived in the U.S. at a status equal to Black Americans however, they were eventually able to become white and enjoy white privileges by subjecting Black Americans.

African descent", ("My Ancestry DNA Results!") were some of the statements the YouTubers used that lead me to assign the "neutral/unsurprised" code.

One of the most common emotional reactions was confusion. Although confusion can be red on the face, I identified this emotion by the YouTubers stating their confusion at the results. YouTubers reacted with confusion for various reasons: a test result contradicted their family history, the test was difficult to navigate so the user did not know what to make of the information, or the country or people group that appeared in their results was completely alien to the test-taker. First, let us take a look at the confusion caused by a result that conflicted with the YouTuber's knowledge of their lineage. RyMingTahn's confusion at a Great Britain result surprised me. She is an African American woman and she appeared unaware of miscegenation that occurred during slavery when the possibility of finding European ancestry is enough to cause some African Americans to avoid genetic ancestry testing. RyMingTahn told viewers that she had to FaceTime her parents to understand why she received a 26% Great Britain result:

> I was really confused by that not being a big history buff. That was confusing for me. So, I call up my mom and dad and on my FaceTime them and showed them my results and my dad's like, Oh, that makes sense. I was like, how does that make sense? And then he reminded me because I'm pretty sure I learned this somewhere in grade school that during the time of slavery, Great Britain was like the central hub or that's where the majority of the slave trading and things like that took place.I don't know the logistics maybe they came from Africa to Great Britain and then from Great Britain to other countries. Um but I do know that Great Britain was like the central hub for slave trade and things like that naturally because of that interaction the Great Britains and the slaves were um intermingling.[79]

RyMingThan seemed to know very little about the transatlantic slave trade and had to be reminded of it. Her father reacted to the results with "that makes sense". Opposite of his daughter acknowledging the logic behind a genetic ancestry linked to Great Britain. Perhaps there is a generational gap in the teaching of the transatlantic slave trade. RyMingThan appears to be a woman in her early to mid-twenties and her father must be older, of course. This ancestry DNA test helped fill the educational gap by child going to parent for an explanation and in turn educating the masses about the transatlantic slave trade via her YouTube platform. In addition to historical confusion, limited geographical education also appeared to be at play when YouTubers expressed they had never heard of a country or did not know where countries were located or confused one country with another on a different continent. A common confusion was over what the Iberian Peninsula was. Many YouTubers had never heard of it. In one case, the test-taker commented that the Iberian Peninsula had frigid temperatures and a viewer posted in the comments that they had the Iberian Peninsula confused with Siberia ("The HodgeTwins").

Doubting Family Stories

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[79] RyMingThan."My Ancestry.com" 11:48-12:11.

RyMingThan turned to her family to help her understand her DNA test results. But the majority of DNA reveal videos were made by people who expressed doubt about their families' accounts of their heritage. I found that interest in family history is a major motivating factor for taking a DNA ancestry test for YouTubers:

Table 2: Reasons for taking the test.

It was on sale/ received a discount	1
Adoptee or child of Adoptee	2
Trying to find a sense of belonging	2
Got the test as a gift	3
Saw another YouTuber doing a DNA ancestry reveal	2
Confirming identity/ proving claimed identity	1
Filling in gap in family history	3
Just curious	2
Suspicious of family story	4
Often mistaken for another race	2

YouTubers often expressed multiple reasons for taking the test as their video progressed. The most common reason was suspicion of their family stories. I observed four instances of YouTube vloggers stating they decided to take a genetic ancestry test because were unsure if their family stories were true. Jonathan Hunn in "Am I STILL Black?! EMOTIONAL Ancestry DNA Results!!! SHOCKING!!!" gave several reasons in a single video for taking the test, within the first minute of the video, Hunn said he received the test as a birthday gift. Hunn then states he considered doing a DNA ancestry test because after searching DNA ancestry test results on YouTube, he felt that he could fill in the gap of information and representation of African American males sharing their test results,

> "I found a lot of Black women, but I didn't find a lot of Black men actually doing this and obviously I was curious on my own…But I thought, hey, this is a chance for me to put some information and some data out there that might help some other people kind of figure out what the could be" ("Am I Still Black?!").

Within this single statement Hunn gives viewers two additional reasons for taking the test: One, he was curious about the subject after searching other DNA ancestry test reactions, and two, he observed a paucity of Black men making DNA reaction videos so he thought taking the test and sharing his results would fill in the gap of information on

African American male DNA ancestry test results on YouTube. Hunn's statement also tells us that individuals turn to YouTube as a resource to learn about genetic ancestry and seek out YouTubers with similar demographics to give them clues on what their genetic ancestry may be.

The second most common reason YouTubers gave for why they took the test was that they were given the test as a gift. Direct-to-consumer Genetic ancestry testing companies capitalize on holidays from Christmas to St.Patrick's day as a marketing opportunity to promote their product.

Figure 3.4. Screenshot of 23andMe Mother's Day Advertisement for their product

Figure 3.5. Screenshot of Ancestry.com advertisement for their St. Patrick's Day sale

Table 6: Confirmation of expected results

Confirmation of expected results	
Results confirm family story	2
Results contradict family story	6
Results contradict self ID	3
Test company insists their test is the truth	2

It was more common than not that YouTubers stated their test results contradicted their family stories. The absence of Native American ancestry and lower percentages of genetic ancestry than expected were examples of contradictions to their family history. One such example is the aforementioned reaction of Zach from the ("The Try Guys") when he received an 88% Ashkenazi Jewish result, "Yeah. I thought I was full blood". Jhulianna from 23nMe responds "Well, someone lied to you." ("The Try Guys"). Here, Zach's statement indicates that the DNA ancestry result contradicts what he has been told in his family history. Jhulianna's statement insists that 23nMe testing is the real truth that he is not "Full Blood." But what does full blood mean? Imagine you were a new learner of English. You may think that full blood may mean someone has all of the blood in their body. Is it possible to have one-quarter, one-half? This and similarly

strange combinations of words were prevalent in YouTubers's videos about their DNA test results.

The Oxford English Dictionary records the earliest use of "full blood" outside of livestock in the 17th century referring to siblings with the same royal mother and father ("Full Blood"). The term evolved to refer to "a person descended from a single racial or ethnic group" as recently as the early to mid-19th century. We see the first usage between 1819 and 1847 where "full-blood" referred to Native American individuals ("Full Blood"). Notice that the evolution of the usage that refers to a single racial or ethnic line of descent instead of siblingship coincides with the introduction of human classification into races. After the introduction of and acceptance of race and ethnicity as a biological unit, race could be measured by blood in a similar way to parentage. Zach could not imagine that he had ancestors who were not Ashkenazi Jewish. Blood quantum is not a criterion for Judaism and perhaps Zach was not "lied to" if his alleged non-Jewish ancestors had converted, culturally assimilated, and were accepted in the Ashkenazi Jewish community. Their peers would consider them a member of their group. Additionally, membership is matrilineal so, if the said ancestor was a male, their heritage would not have been taken into account by the community. To have a 23andMe representative discredit a family history by "someone lied to you" is deeply problematic when many communities do not use genetics as a factor in membership.

Characteristics of Performances: Phenotype References

The two performances that were equally the most frequent (thirty-three instances) in the videos I surveyed were the YouTubers mentioning phenotypic references to known ancestors or living relatives and the use of editing images to represent thoughts regarding their DNA ancestry test results. The most common phenotypic reference YouTubers made of skin color alluding to possible Native American ancestry which I observed in six instances:

Table 7. Instances of Performances

Performances	Count
Expresses desire for multi-ethnic results	5
Edited in an image of food	1
Fans self	1
Dances to represent country of DNA match	2
Editing images to represent thoughts	33
Crying	1
Using music to reflect emotion/ Attitude	3

Test taker mentions Vikings despite word not in result	1
Generally negative comment about result	2
Educating audience about a country result	4
Makes a racial joke	15
Makes phenotypic references to known ancestors or living relatives	33
Mentioning stereotype of the climate of a country result	1
Imitates Maury Paternity test or makes a paternity test jokes	6
Interest in doing more research about group(s) in results	4
Says test does not change their identity	3
Mentions changing identity based on results	4
Mentions desire to travel to result country	1
Gives prediction of anticipated results	17
Mentions wanting to try food from result country	4
Faking an accent of country result	2
Dressing up in a costume	1
Editing Music from country of origin	6
Mentions "exotic" or some variation of the word	2
Competition	3
Giving a conjecture of how their ancestry happened	3
Mentions asking parents or relatives to take the test	2
Editing images to represent thoughts	13
Editing in image of map or results graphic	12
Editing in a clip from a movie, show, or cartoon to represent ethnicity	11

YouTuber RyMingTahn made a reference to her ancestors explaining the expectation of seeing Native American Ancestry, "One thing I will say is when I look at my ancestors' pictures, I promise you, I wish I had some pictures to show you all but, they look they have features of a Native American. The cheekbones, the hair, the skin color" ("My Ancestry.com Ethnicity DNA Result"). Chris, as half of Ghostlightfilms video, describes his father as tall, muscular, and dark to describe his "very indigenous" looking Mexican father. During this same time period, the former Los Angeles City Councilperson, Nury Martinez, described the indigenous Oaxacans in her constituency as very short, little dark people in a notorious leaked audio recording (Riddle, 2022). Tall

and muscular is quite the opposite of Martinez's description of her indigenous constituents, suggesting that there is not universal consensus about what physical characteristics predominate in or typify ethnic groups.

Another phenotypic reference I observed often at five times was describing a distant relative as having blue eyes. As you might guess, this was followed by the YouTubers' predictions of their results having some European ancestry. After reading her fifty-five percent European result out loud, Cecily Gomez stated on her reaction video that she had a "feeling" that she was going to have European ancestry:

> I had a feeling that I was gonna be you know more European than Native American just because from my grandpa's side I have like great great great grandmas that have blond hair blue eyes it's freaking crazy colonization is real[80] .

While I understand the line of thought that relatives with blond hair and blue eyes may indicate European ancestry, a person's three-times great-grandmother with that heritage would not account for a 55% European result. Were there other, closer relatives that carried that phenotype? Did she have any other clues from family stories she drew on? According to Ancestry.com's Support website, Gomez's three-times great grandparent would only account for 3% of her DNA profile.[81] A far cry from the 55% the test results gave her. That would mean relatives without the blue-eyed, blond hair phenotype were bigger contributors to Gomez's genetic ancestry. Therefore, phenotype does not equal genotype. In anycase, Gomez points out her European ancestry result is evidence that colonization occurred (in Mexico).

An equally common performance was the use of editing in outside images from a show, movie, or meme to reflect the YouTuber's thoughts and emotions, and/or represent the genetic ancestry result they received. Jonathan Hunn used an image of a squinting Simpson character with the words "I am not sure if [he's] Black or really bad tan" to communicate how his Black identity is often called into question due to his looks and surname and again when he shares a lower than expected African ancestry result of 58%.

[80] Cecily Gomez, "Reacting to my Ancestry DNA Results". *YouTube*, Sep 1, 2017 4:16-26
[81] "Unexpected Ethnicity Results" *Ancestry.com*. Retrieved 20 October, 2022.
https://support.ancestry.com/s/article/Unexpected-Ethnicity-Results?language=en_US

Figure 3.5. Hunn used a cartoon character from the Simpson to illustrate how people saw him as racially ambiguous. Jonathan Hunn. "Am I STILL Black?!" (video) *YouTube*. Unlisted video.

Hunn also edited in a battle scene clip from the show "Vikings" when he announced his 18% Scandinavian result. These images are used to represent Hunn's thoughts as he shares his feelings about his identity and what he and others view it. Editing in pictures adds a comical element to the test reveal and accentuates the views he shares.

Figure 3.6. Hunn edits a clip from the Viking miniseries after revealing Scandinavian ancestry. Jonathan Hunn. "Am I STILL Black?!" (video) *YouTube*. Unlisted video.

Telling a racial joke after reading a DNA ancestry result was quite common with at least a dozen instances. Many of these jokes were told immediately after they read an ethnicity result and drew on racial and ethnic stereotypes of the people group they had just mentioned. Jokes like "We're smart because of that 2% [Asian result]" ("I am What? Mexican DNA") or "I figured I'll drink more now that I know I'm Irish" ("Irish People Take") were often part of the DNA ancestry test reveal performance. These jokes are told to engage the audience and make the reveal more entertaining to

viewers, but there is something deeper here. The fact that the YouTubers come up with these jokes instantly after reading each result for the first time says that these jokes are part of their snap judgment about that ethnic group. Reflect back to the earlier section about racial jokes and remember that previous scholarship found that racial jokes have been used to create and maintain social boundaries between groups within a country (Perez, 2017) therefore they carry sociological information. Associating an Asian result immediately with intelligence can tell us that is the first thing that came to mind or the YouTuber unconsciously believes the stereotype.

I found the joke about drinking more [alcohol] after the Irish result strange because the YouTube participants were all from Ireland, but I believe the point of the group getting an ancestry DNA test was to show how immigration has changed the landscape of the country. This joke tells us that even in Ireland there is a joke about alcohol consumption. Moreover, the fact that alcohol consumption was mentioned as a change in behavior going forward also communicates the belief that consuming alcohol is part of performing the Irish identity.

An unspoken element of comedy that incorporated ethnic stereotypes was the use of music. Music is used in television and movies to signal a change in mood or inspire the audience to feel a certain way[82]. There were ten times music was edited into a reaction video to reflect a change in mood of the YouTuber from upbeat to sentimental or dramatic when they expressed vulnerable feelings, but the majority (eight times) of musical turns were to represent the music of the country of origin. This is another layer of the reveal performances that express test taker associations with countries. This was the most challenging element of the performances to pick up on because of how subtle the music playing in the background when there are graphics and body language to read. I had to watch videos multiple times to notice musical changes.

Native American-style flute music was used after a Native American result was read (TryGuys 2017, 6:04), a few chords of the Spanish guitar played when two test-takers received an Iberian peninsula or Spanish result (TryGuys 2017, 2:23), and upbeat Irish music played during an Irish (TryGuys 2017, 3:55) result reveal. The use of stereotypical musical instruments and style of music arouses laughter for the viewer since it plays after the results and reflects American stereotypes of what these ethnicities *sound* like. The change in music reflects a change in identity from the norm, whiteness. Curiously, "ethnic" music was played for all of the white TryGuys, but not for Eugene, the Asian TryGuy. I suspected that whoever edited the video was either not familiar with traditional music from the three major East Asian countries, or thought using stereotypic Asian stringed instruments would be offensive to viewers.

Table 8: Refers to ancestral trauma to explain test results

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[82] Bruner, Gordon C. 1990. "Music, Mood, and Marketing." *Journal of Marketing* 54, no. 4: 94.https://doi-org.libproxy.berkeley.edu/10.1177/002224299005400408

References to ancestral trauma to explain test results	
Mentions colonization	4
Mentions slave trade/ slavery	4
Mentions ancestral rape	1

YouTubers attempt to explain their ethnicity results by mentioning ancestral trauma although the test results do not include how an ethnic result occurred. Test takers give viewers a conjecture on how European ancestry specifically entered their lineage. Those guesses and assumptions coincide with colonization, the slave trade, and ancestral rape. While these guesses are likely accurate explanations of how a non-white identifying person received a European ancestry result, it is important to point out that this behavior reveals the internal process of digesting and rationalizing their DNA ancestry test results. Further, the test takers rely on their previous historical knowledge of events to process their results.

Aptitudes, Authenticity, and Corporate Sponsorship
One of the most interesting aspects of DNA Ancestry test reactions are innate abilities YouTubers believe come with their genetic ancestry result. As I discussed in the previous chapter about Race in the senses, YouTubers' comments about aptitudes they associate with race and ethnicities expose how the legacy of genetic determinism persists among Millennials. The word or aptitude "Flavor" came up the most in the reaction videos surveyed. The word "flavor", is of course, associated with the taste of something, but it is used colloquially in a similar way "cool" is used, to describe a person's style or uniqueness.The four instances of the use of the word flavor to refer to a participant's DNA ancestry result were between two videos and I will give one example from each.
Vanilla is considered plain or the anti-flavor of a food. Its white color in ice cream is used to describe white people as plain, average, lack-of variety. Zach was somewhat relieved he did not have a boring DNA ancestry result, "I am not vanilla, I am more like hummus, I guess" referring to his Askenazi Jewish and Iberian result ("The Try Guys"). Hummus is typically a light color, an off-white you can say garnished with olive oil and a few spices. In essence, Zach is saying he is white, but not *that* white. He has some flavor, uniqueness. Another use of flavor similar to the use of "cool" was how Chris in "Our Hispanic Ancestry DNA Results" expressed his desire for an African ancestry result, I'm hoping like I'm really hoping that I have like a close African American descent. But yeah, like I want something. I want some real flavor" ("Our Hispanic Ancestry DNA").

When Chris subsequently opened his results and received his 53% Native American and East Asian result, he responded, "That is some authentic-ass shit!" Yet, also said that he was disappointed he only got 1.7 percent African as a result, but that he would still rep [represent] with that small amount because he grew up around a lot of

Black people and has a lot of "flavor" because of it and noted his superior dancing ability as an example of it.

Table 9: Aptitudes

Aptitudes mentioned after getting results		
Sexual Prowess	1	
Strength/ resilience	1	
Beauty	1	
Good at Math	1	
Dance ability	2	
Musical Ability	1	
Flavor	5	

Chris goes on to say that he is surprised by the small African result and suggests many viewers might also have expected him to have a higher African percentage because of how dark his skin is especially compared to his friend next to him who has white skin and a higher percentage of African ancestry. So, initially percentage is considered authentic, but then "flavor", or social learning growing up around an ethnicity is used as a response to claim authenticity in lieu of percentage, and finally skin color is presented as a criterion that most would agree on to authenticate belonging to a racial/ethnic group.

Authenticity can be a contradictory concept in YouTube test reveal videos; the word is used frequently, but often with no overt criteria offered for how to determine who or what is authentic.The Oxford English Dictionary defines "authenticity" as "The fact or quality of being true or in accordance with fact; veracity; correctness… accurate reflection of real life" ("Authenticity"). What stands out here is that authenticity can be used as a synonym for "truth in accordance to fact" and the "accurate reflection of real life". The key point I make is that test-takers use the test as a pass in order to perform different identities. They are only able to do so because the test is considered the ultimate truth-teller, irrefutable evidence of who they are.

"growing up, so many people in school would always like try to make fun of me. Like oh, you're not really that Black and honestly I can't wait to see… 74 percent! Slap in the face to all you haters. I am Black ("My Ancestry DNA Results").

This quote is from Amber Rue and if you recall, she is also the YouTuber who wore her hair in afro puffs and donned a gold chain, and wore hoop earrings for her reveal explaining that she was dressing "ethnic" for the ethnicity reveal. This is an example of how YouTube test takers perform what they believe is the "accurate

reflection of real life" as the Oxford Dictionary defines. Moreover, they consider certain cultural performances such as eating ethnic foods, dancing, and wearing certain clothing as evidence of authenticity.

Let us go back to Chris' statement "That is some authentic-ass shit!" referring to his 53% Native American and East Asian result. Many genetic ancestry test reveals had these two disparate groups lumped together as a single ethnic result. That should give any test-taker, or viewer, for that matter, a reason to pause and question the accuracy of the test. The ethnicity result does not only collapse various ethnicities in East Asia and the Americas, but five of the YouTubers in this study had DNA ancestry tests that combined the two continents. All five were of Latinx descent.

Only a few videos explicitly mentioned if they were sponsored videos or not. One video (Irish people get DNA test) made it clear it was sponsored by providing an affiliate link and coupon code. Three videos had YouTubers who explicitly communicated that their videos were not sponsored. This data can tell us about the motivations behind posting the video. A sponsored video means the content creator collaborated with the DNA testing company to advertise their product in a way that the video creator profits from sales from viewer purchases. On the other hand, for three YouTubers to unequivocally state that their videos are not sponsored, they communicate a sense of authenticity to the audience. Research has shown that disclosure of sponsorship can increase the vlogger's credibility in the eyes of their regular viewers (Chapple and Cownie, 2017). However, the opposite effect occurs when the viewer has no prior relationship with the viewer. Such disclosure is seen as opportunistic to new viewers (Chapple and Cownie, 2017). I did encounter one YouTuber who listed the link to purchase a DNA ancestry test kit in their video description, but they did not state if the link was an affiliate link where the YouTuber would gain a portion of the sales generated from said link.[83]

Reflecting on the Test Process

Contrary to what other scholars have warned about the propensity of marginalized groups to be skeptical or reluctant to submit genetic samples due to historic abuses of medical studies, I found only one YouTuber who experienced skepticism about what the testing company may do to their biological sample. Nelson highlighted in *The Social Life of DNA* that African Americans, in particular, have been distrustful to participate in medical studies due to exploitive experimentation such as the Tuskegee Syphilis study (Nelson 82). The following graphic of user experience exhibits what test takers say about how they feel about the process of DNA ancestry testing. The takeaway here is that the most common comment about the process is that users find the test results difficult to navigate.

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[83] Some YouTubers may not be aware of the legal implications of failure to disclose a social media post is sponsored. In 2022, Kim Kardashian agreed to a $1.26M settlement to the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission for neglecting to state she was paid $250,000 to promote a crypto currency on her Instagram account. https://www.sec.gov/news/press-release/2022-183

Table 10: User Experience

User experience- What test-takers say about the experience of the process of DNA Ancestry testing	
Mentions results contain historical info	**2**
Says test does not give "tribe" or specific people groups	**1**
Expresses skepticism regarding what the testing does with the user's genetic sample	**1**
Unsure of what results means	**12**
Mentions test results are hard to navigate	**2**
Says that test is worth it/ recommends test to others	**4**

Only two YouTubers mentioned the test contained historical information about their matches. This could mean that either there was no historical information in most results, the historical information was not easy to find, or that the YouTuber did not find this historical information to be noteworthy. In order to help individuals understand what the tests mean and avoid the tendency to rely on their limited knowledge (often stereotypical) of what cultural traditions are like in the regions that appear in their results, genetic ancestry companies should make historical information visible and accessible to their users so they do not reproduce notions of genetic essentialism. Statements like, "Scandinavian people are like, hot. Right?" ("The Try Guys")
or responding to West African ancestry as the root of a test-taker's [sexually] freakiness ("Our Hispanic Ancestry") should not be the take-away a comes away with from their ancestry result.

Ending with Greater Meaning

Despite the widespread confusion about how to read and interpret DNA test results, many of the YouTubers reflect at the end of their videos and express confidently what they believe is the test's greater meaning. The most common reflection YouTubers expressed after reading their results is that we all [Humans] are mixed. Jenny Lorenzo in her "Cuban Ancestry DNA Results Are In!" video provided two greater implications of DNA ancestry testing: that is demonstrates everyone is mixed and because of that, the test can help combat racism,

> "I think it's important for people to trace back their ancestry especially cuz we're living at a time where everyone just kind of hates on each other based on their skin color and their ethnicity and this we all see the news every day….and it's so stupid

we're all a little bit of each other. There is absolutely no way that any of us are a pure-bred of any kind." ("Cuban Ancestry DNA").

Mind you, this video was recorded in 2017, after the Travon Martin and Michael Brown killings sparked nationwide attention in 2012 and 2014 respectively. Lorenzo was most likely referring to the civil unrest that followed the cases and divided the nation among racial lines. Lorenzo postulates that DNA Ancestry testing is a tool to help people realize that racism is stupid because they will see they are a mixture of different races and ethnicities. Given how much has changed in the discussion of race in the U.S. since the death of George Floyd in 2022 at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer, it would be interesting to see how Lorenzo's reflection of DNA ancestry tests falls on today's viewers.

I encountered two instances where YouTubers felt the test was communicating how humans were all the same, "We're not different. All of us; we're all the same!, commented Gadiel ("Latinos get their DNA tested"). In the same video Norberto noted, "At the end of the day, deep down inside, we all bleed red" (Latinos Get Their DNA Tested). These reflections are different than the "we are all mixed" sentiment because we are all mixed acknowledges the idea of biological race "while we are all the same" suggests there are no inherent distinctions between human beings.

Jonathan Hunn reflects on the significance of DNA ancestry test-taking for African Americans as empowering since it can give African Americans a place, an origin and history around that everyone has except them,

"Everybody has a place and that they can resort back to right so someone tells them saying they ain't shit, they can lean back and to consider their broader history and be able to you know, debunk that point…because they understand where they come from they really understand the achievement that their people have accomplished and they know that they're from that lineage and it gives them a sense of empowerment that Black Americans don't have" ("Am I Still Black").

Table 11. The Greater Meaning of the Test

What YouTubers say about the greater meaning of the test	
Gives test-taker a sense of identity	1
Eliminates borders/differences	1
Finding home/ sense of belonging	1
We are all the same	2
We are all mixed	5
Test can ameliorate racism	1

Conclusion: What does it all mean anyway?

You go back far enough, just a flash in the timeline of human existence, and your genetic ancestry is meaningless. Supermodel Cindy Crawford appeared on TLC Network's "Who do you think you are?"[84], a genetic genealogy program nearly identical to Skip Gates' "Finding Our Roots" on PBS. Both programs use Ancestry.com services. Crawford's segment revolved around her search for the furthest ancestor she could find in the archives. The episode peaked when Crawford discovered she was related to Charlemagne; she expressed awe at her father being born in rural Midwestern U.S., and yet descended from European royalty.

Many DNA test users would be excited to receive the news they are descended from royalty. However, the issue is that every European alive today is a descendant of Charlemagne, making the biological significance of this fact zero (Marks, 2017). This is due to the concept of pedigree collapse, meaning that family trees contain pairs of parents who are interrelated rather than unique. A simple calculation of every living person having two parents who descended from two parents, and so on, leads to an exponential number of ancestors, creating a septillion number of ancestors going back as recently as the first century A.D (Marks, 2017). That is more than the number of humans that have ever existed. How can this be? Pedigree collapse explains that there were many intermarriages between related individuals where partners would share a common ancestor, therefore reducing the number of ancestors a person can descend from. What is the value of the DNA ancestry test then? This is answered by a main point in this dissertation: these tests are part of a money-making effort among DNA companies marketing biological differences that do not exist, peddling them as scientific information. Race and science author Johnathan Marks, in the book *Is Science Racist?*, argues there is a paradox where scientists reject religious explanations of phenomena, yet believe and reify false explanations of social differences as being rooted in biological racial differences. DNA ancestry testing is an example of science treating social distinctions as biological units.

In my formal survey of DNA ancestry test reaction videos and the many anecdotes I collected from popular culture sources (including Chadwick Boseman's interview about DNA test results), I found that individuals were looking for a sense of belonging. A test that can tell you what tribe you have descended from can offer users that sense of belonging. The part that is not explained to test takers is that social units such as tribes are exactly that: social units that are determined by a variety of factors, practices, performances, initiation, and the gender of the parent who belonged to the group. In other words, criteria besides genetics. As illustrated in the Cindy Crawford example, genetic ancestry testing is a business focused on marketing and sales delivering the "social, political, and ideological capital that having a prominent ancestor represents" (Marks 2017, 78). The public largely believes that aptitudes and behaviors are genetically determined by genes so there is a desire to be genetically linked to an important person because that means they too have those talents and behaviors.

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[84] TLC. "Cindy Crawford Descended from Royalty. Who do You Think You Are". *YouTube.* Uploaded July 10, 2010. *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iA_UYcGDhYw*

Likewise, there is an avoidance of confronting the truth about slavery as I mentioned in my discussion about Ancestry.com's "Inseparable" ad. Being related to a slave owner who did horrible things somehow reflects poorly on their descendants and means they too have inherited immoral behavior as I illustrated in the Ben Affleck case.

Implications and Recommendations

My findings make it clear that many test takers believe social units such as tribe, religious-ethnic group, and nationality are biologically determined and the genetic ancestry tests support this belief. The harmful impact of this is that test takers and viewers make outdated essentialist assumptions rooted in genetic determinism. They believe and in the instance of 23andMe representative, Jhuliana, are coached by these testing companies to perform superficial practices stereotypically associated with their results. Going through the process of having a Bar Mitzvah is deeper than having a trace amount of Ashkenazi ancestry. Moreover, the YouTuber's essentialist ideas that aptitudes are passed down genetically such as Asian ancestry is responsible for intelligence and West African ancestry makes them more sexually adventurous can very well lead to the support of eugenic practices. In chapter two, I mentioned how eugenics had historically been exercised by controlling immigration through policies blocking unwanted groups while encouraging North Eastern Europeans. Today's technology has more tools to practice eugenics in a direct and harmful way.

Ancestry testing companies can do more to educate consumers about the ethnic groups they give users in their results. They can provide educational materials about cultures and practices of the people groups they list beyond what foods they eat. More importantly, explaining what groups believe it takes to be a member of their community would help clear up the confusion between social and biological units and combat genetic determinist ideas.

The emotional component of DNA ancestry test reveals gives us insight on the harmful impacts of this seemingly benign form of entertainment. These tests induce anxiety and fear due to the falsehood that science trumps family accounts of their history as well as socially defined distinctions of tribal membership and ethnic groups. Despite legal disclaimers on the genetic ancestry test, that participation is for entertainment only, test takers take their results as irrefutable truth. The fear the test will contradict their known identity causes anxiety and dissuades some from taking a genetic ancestry test. Emotions of anxiety and confusion inform us of the state of the YouTubers' education about transnational relationships such as the trans-atlantic slave trade and human migrations.

Genetic ancestry companies cannot reasonably address the gap in education about these major historical events and traumas (even moreso now when the teaching of slavery is at risk of being banned in some states), however, the test companies can do better at explaining the push and pull factors of migrations and drive home the point that nations are politically determined, not biologically fixed. This recommendation is risky since the premise of the test is that populations within national borders have

remained fixed over hundreds of years to determine the control population. Individuals educated about large-scale historical events such as colonization, transatlantic slave trade, and migrations all know that to be untrue. Especially in the past 500 years.

My study has also revealed that YouTubers confuse race and ethnicity. Neither of which are biological units. Race refers to classifications based on continental origins and physical characteristics. The classifications of who belongs in a racial group has changed over time. As I mentioned, Irish and Italians were not considered white when they first immigrated to the U.S. Ethnicity refers to shared language, rituals, religion, and cultural traditions. All of which are learned rather than genetically inherited. Genetic ancestry tests promote this entanglement by giving test takers ethnicity results based on their biological samples. However, I cannot argue that the test leads the test taker to translate nationality and ethnic results into race. I believe since the YouTubers automatically associated European results to "white", that they have made this association from their previous understanding of race as continental categories.

Many forms of popular racialized entertainment (such as minstrel shows and playing Indian) had pernicious social effects. Whoa Vicky and other Blackfishing social media influencers continue a tradition of minstrel shows that borrowed from Black cultural materials to profit from Black pain through comedy (Lott 2013 4). This comical treatment of an oppressed group which does not take minoritized status seriously and fails to foster audiences to empathy or move folks to ameliorate injustices. WhoaVicky was able to don an urban persona, fake a DNA ancestry test, and use rap, a musical genre that gave voice to systemic injustices communities faced due to racist institutions as a vehicle to gain clicks and monetary rewards before discarding the Black identity. A similar history of the seemingly benign "Indian Play" that Americans engage in during childhood with organizations such as the boy scouts and girl campfire girls that becomes an embodiment of a performance of settler colonialism (Deloria 2022, xii) This racialized hobby play reproduces the structural racial formations where land is seized from indigenous folks, rituals are adopted along with an indigenous identity while actual indigenous folks are rendered invisible (Deloria 2022, xiii). These performances are based on negative stereotypes that reinforce social boundaries between majority and minority groups rather than informed cultural performances. You should see the clear parallels between playing Indian and minstrel shows to the YouTubers immediate association between ethnic groups in their results and the stereotypes such as alcohol consumption, eating certain foods, and promiscuity associated with them. Moreover, YouTubers often express they will perform those stereotypical behaviors as they accept their new identity available for them to play with.

Chapter 4- Conclusion Chapter

My argument throughout this dissertation is that DNA ancestry reveal videos on YouTube tell us important things about contemporary beliefs about race in general, and racialized Blackness in particular. My findings suggest that two people can get the same results and yet interpret them in opposite ways depending on how they identify prior to taking the test. White-identifying and Non-Black identifying individuals seem to accept the "one-drop rule' of Black identity. A one-percentage-point of African ancestry will often result in the individual celebrating given access to that racial identity, despite the fact that such small percentages fall below the test's stated confidence level. In contrast, Black-identifying individuals express anxiety over getting a DNA test result that categorizes them as less than 51% Black. A threshold of less than 50% African ancestry would be devastating to them, as they believe this takes away their right to be considered Black (as in the cases of the HodgeTwins and Ava DuVernay). I call this "Insider vs. Outsider rules," where an insider group has a different set of criteria than the out-group to determine what it takes to be considered a group member.[85]

DNA testing plays an important role in contemporary social media debates about blackfishing and the boundaries of Black identity, and raise an interesting question: Do DNA ancestry results with small percentages of Africa Ancestry below the test's confidence level allow social media influencers to be excepted from blackfishing accusations? Wesley Stevens (2021) defines blackfishing as a range of practices such as altering physical appearances through physical and digital means, adopting certain terms and linguistic patterns associated with Black vernacular speech, and endorsing or selling products that replicate urban aesthetics.[86] Stevens argues that blackfishing is a digital and economic tactic to advance self-promotion in the capitalist landscape of social media, where monetary gain is acquired through engagement on various digital platforms. White women are most often the culprits of this digital blackface and attempt to increase engagement by darkening their skin with makeup, wearing wigs, and donning urban-style clothing made popular by African Americans.

As I noted in chapter one, in July 2017, seventeen-year-old Victoria Waldrip, AKA "*WhoaVicky.*" gained social media fame in her viral video where she claims she is Black, apparently responding to criticism that she is "acting Black" from her channel viewers. WhoaVicky's videos featured her posing with guns, speaking with an AAVE accent, wearing faux locs, box braids (or a hair bonnet when filming a video at home). Although originally shared on Instagram, the video was uploaded to YouTube by the *Instagram*

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[85] For example, the various ways indigeneity is measured for tribal membership and formal recognition. Despite many claiming membership in groups such as Cherokee based on family stories, tribal groups hold the membership threshold much higher than outsiders, relying on criteria such as matrilineal descent, participation in social events, votes of accepted members, etc. Another example is when a DNA testing company representative uses a popular YouTube channel to coach test-takers with a two percent Ashkenazi result to have a bar-mitzvah.

[86] Stevens, Wesley. Blackfishing on Instagram: Influencing and the Commodification of Black Urban Aesthetics. *Social Media + Society*. July 2021:1. doi:10.1177/20563051211038236

Tea account and became the subject of many response vlogs in which people expressed outrage at how WhoaVicky was acting out harmful Black stereotypes.
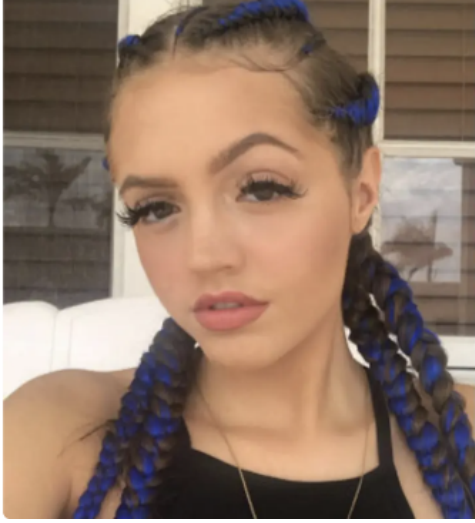

Figure 4.1: Image of Victoria Waldrip as she presented herself on social media in 2017. *Pinterest*. https://pin.it/crMMypk

Before this controversy, Waldrip was relatively unnoticed on social media. In the controversial 2017 video, as transcribed below, Waldrip asserts that an Ancestry.com test told her she was Black so she has the right to say she is Black[87]:

> I got an announcement to make. Like so like a lot of y'all I guess, y'all be feeling some type of way because y'all don't really think I'm Black but Ancestry.com did tell me I was Black. So, I have the right to to say that I'm Black because I'm like. It's just. All I know is I took the test and they said I was Black. Well, they ain't say that but it said I had Black in me. So, you know what I mean.

Despite this assertion, most people commenting on the video talked about how ridiculous it was that a white girl was claiming she was Black. Capitalizing on her notoriety, in 2018, Waldrip released a music video to a self-titled rap single that has been viewed over 1.5 million times. It became clear that Waldrop's influence had reached even the most seasoned in the industry when Snoop Dogg made a video reacting to Waldrop's diss video of him.

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[87] Instagram Tea. "Woahhvicky Explains That She is Black" Uploaded October 6 2017. Retrieved November 22, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L6fsuQRQH0s&t=36s

Figure 4.2: Screenshot of Waldrop donning silver grills in her mouth and long acrylic nails in her music video to the single "Whoa Vicky".[88]

WhoaVicky later created a video admitting she was not Black and had lied about her Ancestry.com test results. She renamed her channel "Victoria," and removed her old videos and Instagram page where she engaged in digital Blackface and repeatedly claimed she had 25% African ancestry. But the positive results of her notoriety endured; Waldrip's channel now has over 63 million views and 1 million subscribers who watch her continue to perform an African American urban aesthetic and show off the wealth she has acquired as a social media influencer (such as the luxury car she was able to buy for her mother). I describe all this to convey how much attention Waltrip was given by donning a Black avatar and then validating her right to do so by (falsely) claiming Ancestry.com gave her the right to perform Blackness. Her case highlights some of what is at stake when non-Black individuals engage in racialized identity tourism on social media.

A Black person who engages all of the same racist stereotypes does not become famous and gain a platform that can lead to a rap career that gets the attention, albeit negative attention, from established celebrity rappers. The takeaway from Whoa Vicky's performances and rise to fame is that she gained notoriety by stereotypical performances similar to minstrel shows, where a white performer imitates harmful stereotypes that dehumanizes Black Americans. Would a Black individual have the

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[88] Whoa Vicky Music Video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZaaNDcXO1fI March 12, 2018. Retrieved November 22, 2021.

same meteoric rise to fame and access to sponsorships and music industry if they were to claim a white identity? The answer is no. Just like how the fluidity of race operates in the real world that allows non-Black individuals to don and shed identities, digital spaces where identity tourism happens does not allow Black individuals that same ability.

There are five of key takeaways about race and racialization from this dissertation. First, picking and choosing what ancestry DNA test takers want to use as avatars is a complicated endeavor that involves interpreting DNA ancestry test methodology and the careful editing of results shared by YouTubers. Second, although people think of genetic ancestry as deterministic, they paradoxically read the results as choices of identities to slip in and out of in a given situation. Blackfishing bolstered by genetic ancestry results is an example of this. The avatar model from video games clarifies the DNA test users' desire and belief that they can change racial and ethnic identities to experience. Play is the primary motivation test takers have in this new form of identity tourism, as YouTubers think it would be fun to have the option to be something much different than what they are. Changes in behaviors that accompany a shift in avatar include the desire to try new foods, travel, wear certain clothing, and behave and speak in racially and ethnically stereotypical ways.

Third, my research shows that Blackness receives unique treatment when it comes to genetic ancestry testing. Blackness is portrayed as unchanging, and Black people in the present day are treated as artifacts of the past (tapping into Enlightenment-era racial representations and hierarchies). We see this in how Black women are depicted as Genetic Eve and how some test takers anachronistically speak as if they are her. (For example, Lupita Nyong'o was connected to Genetic Eve on PBS' *Finding Our Roots* and exclaimed, "I pre-date race!") Fourth, as I mentioned at the beginning of this Conclusion, the threshold of what is blood quantum is considered Black depends on who is taking the test and how they identify beforehand; African Americans consider over 50% African Ancestry as the threshold for claiming they are "Black" while non-Black test takers consider as little as 1% African Ancestry enough to consider themselves Black. Such divergent understandings of group membership sets the stage for fraught arguments on social media about race and belonging.

Fifth, genetic ancestry testing companies acknowledge the uneasiness that test takers have when it comes to confronting ancestors who have committed sexual violence, and some manipulate their test methodology around this (as African Ancestry eliminates Y chromosome testing to reduce a customer's likelihood of receiving a white ancestor who is presumed to have raped an enslaved woman). Testing companies also rewrite history and cast relationships between enslaved women and their owners as romantic rather than an exploitation of an imbalance of power or sexual violence (as Ancestry.com did in their *Inseparable* ad). Many people come away from DNA testing with a skewed sense of their genetics and in the process, are exposed to sanitized stories about historical racial trauma.

I want to close by discussing what is at stake with DNA ancestry testing more broadly. White-identifying individuals have much more to benefit from engaging in genetic ancestry tests than non-white individuals. It clearly is a form of entertainment that allows them to take on identities otherwise not available to them. Conversely, for African American and Latinx test takers, the test can conjure up feelings of fear, anxiety or avoidance because it is not just a game for them. The identity they move around in the world is called into question if they have over a 50% European ancestry result. Their ability to say they are "Black" is taken away, and they are teased by their peers for being "white" and are ridiculed in the comment section for being a fraud. White test takers can use their results to perform formerly off-limits behaviors like making offensive jokes that mock the ethnic and racial group they are now a part of. As I discussed earlier, racial jokes are not benign; they have been used to "other" minority groups and teach a nation ethnic and cultural differences to maintain group separation and subjugate the target group of the joke. White test-takers also aim to profit more than minority groups when they take on non-white avatars. As Officer Brown's case demonstrates, a white presenting, white-identifying person with a relatively small amount of African Ancestry can make essentialist jokes about their newly discovered ancestry, then turn around and sue for financial compensation for racial harassment from the same individuals they had joked with. Relatedly, WhoaVIcky was able to continue to blackfish on social media, monetize her platform, shoot to social media stardom, make rap videos, and beef with hip-hop celebrities like Snoop Dog because of an African result on her genetic ancestry test.

There are tangible benefits and harms for communities as well as individuals. Non-white communities are at risk of losing governmental funding and program benefits when white test-takers take on a non-white identity and select it on the census. Roth and Lyon (2018) warned that demographers and policymakers need to be aware that their study found that as many as one in five white DNA ancestry test takers selected three or more identities after receiving their results. This means that white households will be counted as minority households, which will skew the federal population Census and other surveys. Policymakers with good intentions to ameliorate inequalities ethnic minorities face would exacerbate them by investing more into white neighborhoods. The most frightening component of the DNA ancestry test reveal is the reifying of outdated ideas of genetic determinism: ideas that placed humans into separate racial categories with on a hierarchy of inherent attributes such as intelligence, sexual prowess, ability to create a civilization and beauty. The belief that aptitudes are inherited has been used to withhold social benefits and belonging to groups lower on the racial hierarchy. YouTubers are regurgitating racist ideas, believing that abilities are indeed genetically determined because a scientific test confirms there is genetic material that correlates with national boundaries and racial groups. Eugenics was born out such beliefs and a eugenics movement is at risk of reemerging, this time with more technological tools and greater knowledge of the human genome. Communities on the lower end of the racial hierarchy would likely be targeted, as might people who have a genetic link to an infamous person or criminal since so many YouTubers also accept the old belief that we inherit our ancestors' moral compasses. As a society, we need more thoughtful engagement of popular understandings of DNA test results and their meanings to accurately assess their propensity to harm.

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Appendix 1: Glossary

Avatar - According to the Oxford Dictionary, an avatar is defined as an icon or figure representing a particular person in video games, internet forums, etc

Black-fishing - A white person will paint or tan their skin, wear wigs, and clothing styles associated with African American culture to pose as a Black person on social media.

Click-economy - describes the monetary gain generated by viewer clicks, engagement, and sales from affiliates and advertisers.

DNA ancestry test /genetic ancestry test - used interchangeably to refer to the direct-to-consumer testing kits that allow users to submit a DNA sample for analysis to determine where their ancestors originated.

Dramaturgy - is a sociological theory brought into the field by Ervin Goffman to explain how identities are fluid and arise from interactions with other people who present themselves a certain way based on cultural norms and values.

Thumbnail - refers to the image that appears next to the video's title and description in search results or video recommendations. Content creators can choose what image or screenshot from the video appears as the Thumbnail to attract viewers to click on their video.

Vlogger - is a person who creates videos and uploads them on YouTube. YouTube is a social platform where people can share aspects of their daily lives. The word originates from the combination of the words "video and blogger."