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Editor's Notebook

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For the past three years I have been an admirer of a one-hour weekly television show on PBS called “Finding Your Roots.” The host is distinguished Harvard history professor and public intellectual Henry Louis Gates Jr, who, with the help of a crack team of researchers and the science of a DNA-chromosomal-testing service called “23andMe,” traces the ancestry of invited celebrities. In a dramatic sequence of steps, the host reveals to each episode’s subjects, through prepared “Books of Life,” the often unexpected and always emotional facts of their family histories. Actor Dustin Hoffman learns that his grandfather was murdered in the USSR by the Bolshevik secret police; comedian Bill Hader is told that he descends from English royalty; legendary Civil Rights activist John Lewis learns of his great-great grandfather’s record as an early Black-voting registrant in Reconstruction-era Alabama. It’s emotional. Gates told one NPR interviewer in 2012, “People cry.”

The program has been a great success because its appeal is something much deeper than celebrity voyeurism and the cliff-hanging uncertainties of well-staged drama. Interest in family history, long the province of the superannuated and supported by well-heeled and religiously motivated institutions such as the Church of Latter-day Saints, has exploded in the past half-decade. Genealogy is in vogue, and it’s no longer just your grandmother’s hobby.

It is, in fact, big business. For a subscription fee, online genealogy-research services like Ancestry.com and MyHeritage sell access to searchable digitized databases such as census, birth and death records, and make finding answers to elementary genealogy queries fast and easy. What’s more, DNA-research services like AncestryDNA

allow interested inquirers—for \$99 and the safe return of a cotton-swab test kit—to reach back beyond traceable and nameable ancestors and learn what chromosomal analysis can tell them about their ethnic origins. (Note: the “science” of this sort of DNA testing is fuzzy. This chromosomal test isn’t searching for a specific tell-tale ethnic

gene; it merely compares snippets of one’s DNA makeup to snippets of the DNA makeups of others known to be of certain ethnicities and seeks similarities). In this way, curious consumers are told that they are “54% British” or “23% Oceanic” or whatever. According to data from Kalorama Information, family-tree-related at-home DNA-testing services will generate \$350 million by 2020.

The upshot of this is what Maud Newton called in a June 2014 *Harper’s* magazine piece “America’s Ancestry Craze.” The term “craze” suggests a passing fad or fetish – a social phenomenon that has emerged quickly. So why now? Some of our interest in this endeavor comes from its novelty. We want to know our ethnic makeup because now we – almost all of us – can. The “science” is now widely available. But there are longer-term, pent-up causes, too, that stem from some of the darker chapters in American history. Slavery and the conquest of First Nations peoples obliterated the knowledge of Black and Native ancestors, *some* of which (it is hoped) can be reconstructed using what we might call the “New Genealogy.” And others, like war-era British “Home Children,” adoptees, and families of Holocaust victims, now have new tools to help describe what had previously been unknowable. “A new world has opened up,” Newton writes, “for . . . anyone else cut off from her origins” (31). It’s exciting.

Most of us have expectations about our ethnicity, have already imagined our own “race.” And so revising or contradicting those preconceived truths can be unsettling.



Still, there are potentially unanticipated consequences for at least some of this new enthusiasm for genealogical inquiry. In the old days, family-history research was most often a solitary and incremental pursuit, a plodding, time-consuming pastime that involved a great deal of correspondence, travel to libraries and archives and family-history centers, and hours upon hours of winding through microfilm perched awkwardly, head inside a boxy metal reader. Old-school genealogists constructed their family trees painstakingly; unexpected discoveries were digested slowly and smoothly. As always, technology changes things; the New Genealogy's ease and speed has

sensationalized family-history research and activated new political meanings for it.

Who am I? Who can I *claim* to be? These questions are at the core of family research and they have never been wholly innocuous or benign. Most of us have expectations about our ethnicity, have already imagined our own "race." And so revising or contradicting those preconceived truths can be unsettling. "We're talking about blood," writes Newton, and "we're supposed to pledge allegiance to blood" (32). What does it mean, really, to be 35% Irish, or 25% Native American? Intriguing and inviting, for some; a new window on "self." For others, it

means little if we haven't experienced the lived condition, or paid the social price of those who, for all of their lives, have been identified as members of disadvantaged groups of people. In the end, as University of Alberta Native Studies professor Kim Tallbear told a PRI interviewer last fall, it matters less who we claim to be than "who claims us."

Still, for Gates, the discomfort of these blood revelations is at the center of the political mission of the New Genealogy. By demonstrating scientifically that there is no such thing as racial purity, that we are all mixed beings, digital and genetics research will, as he said, "revolutionize our concept of race in America" and break down barriers (Newton, 33). There's something comforting in that assertion. If Gates is right, ethnic heterogeneity is the common trait that connects Americans. This idea, now backed by science, has potential for redefining what it means to belong in America – for both claiming heritage and being claimed by it. Today, when a new brand of xenophobia has emerged in this country, fueled by fear-mongering over immigration and border control, reactions to social-justice movements such as Black Lives Matter, the export of American jobs, and the continued specter of radicalization and terror, "othering" is on the rise and anomie threatens to trump community. In a modest way, the New Genealogy (and the political message it can bring) counters that awful wind.



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