

Liquid Genealogy: Choice, Race, and Neoliberal Subjectivity in DNA Ancestry Advertising

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How does commercial DNA ancestry testing navigate the apparently conflicting ideologies of individual freedom and genealogical determinism? By exploring the cultural politics of this vast and growing industry and analyzing video advertisements by 23andMe and Ancestry.com, two key figures emerge in these adverts: the unexpectedly “not-quite-white” individual and the maximally “mixed-race” individual. Represented as the “ideal” subjects of the genealogical quest, they are able to access and instrumentalize ancestral self-knowledge in a way that amplifies, rather than impinges on, their powers of personal and consumer agency. Through the cultural capital that stems from their range of “ethnic options” and their “post-authentic” claim to histories of injury, they appear as the masters of a fluid, all-purpose, commercially driven relationship to their own ancestral identity: a stance that the paper terms liquid genealogy, after Zygmunt Bauman’s theory of liquid modernity. However, this representation co-opts and romanticizes often-violent histories, leverages a depoliticized identity politics, and grossly misrepresents real-world race relations.

Far from being grounded in a mere “recovery” of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.

— Stuart Hall (“Cultural Identity and Diaspora” 225)

The ideology of the world market has always been the anti-foundational and anti-essentialist discourse par excellence. Circulation, mobility, diversity, and mixture are its very conditions of possibility.

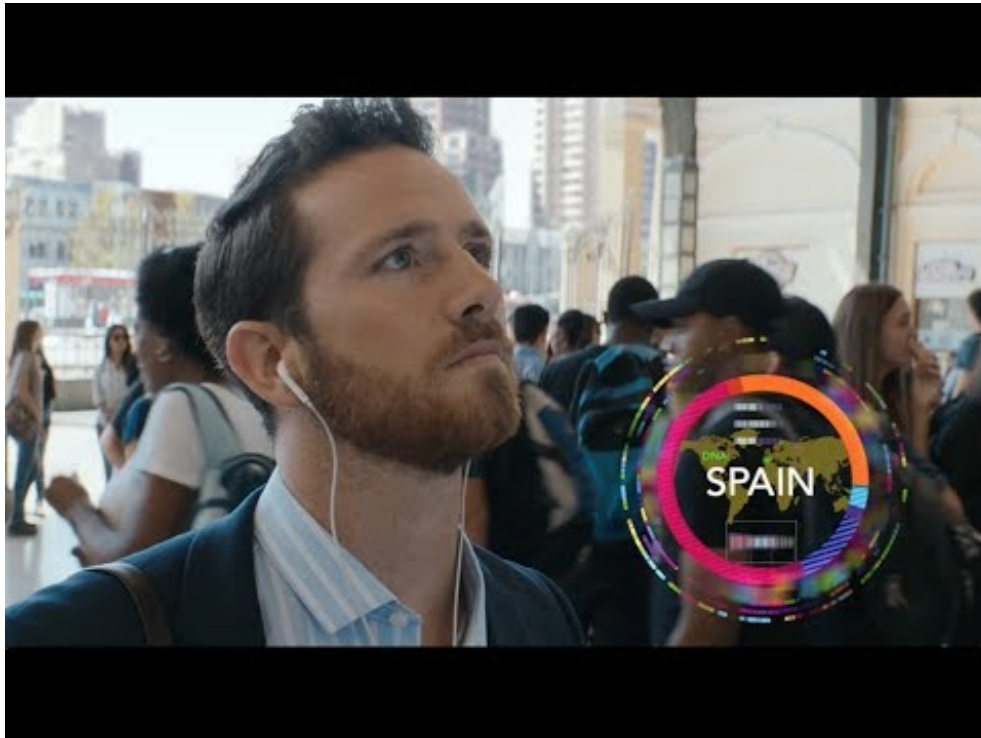
— Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (150)

Introduction: “Root for Your Roots”

Roots and Rooting

- 1 In the summer of 2018, following the US men’s soccer team’s failure to qualify for the World Cup, the genetic-testing company 23andMe released an opportunistic new ad campaign.^[1] Titled “Root for Your Roots,” the campaign

encouraged US viewers to “decide which country to cheer for” based on the results of DNA ancestry testing which claims to reveal the geographical regions from which individuals are descended. In the TV commercial, a handful of young, clean-cut soccer fans take the 23andMe test, discover their “percentages” of Spanish, French, Brazilian, Portuguese, or Argentinian ancestry, buy the corresponding soccer kits, and enthusiastically support their newfound ancestral nations in crowded sports bars (fig.1).



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/l2r5jQfdV3k>

Figure 1: *Root For Your Roots with 23andMe*. 2018 Ad on YouTube.

On FOX Sports, 23andMe-sponsored segments showed predominantly white TV presenters celebrating the results of their own tests by donning Swedish, German, or Polish soccer shirts—with one host excitedly reporting that she was 0.1% African. “You may not speak the language or have visited the country,” the advert announced, “but we’re all connected to a World Cup nation. [...] It’s in your DNA.”

- 2 This campaign provides a rich gateway into; an industry that is itself an ever-more-prominent gatekeeper into hegemonic ideas of racial/ethnic identity in the US and elsewhere. As of 2018, approximately one in twenty-five Americans had bought a test, a proportion that continues to grow (Regalado, “2017 Was the Year”; “More Than 26 Million”). The industry was valued at around \$117m worldwide in 2017, with a projected increase to \$611m by 2026 (Credence Research). The campaign invokes and capitalizes on several US mythologies that return throughout this study: the conception of the US as a ‘nation of immigrants’ in which all members are diasporic; the romanticization of both Old World European roots and ancestral mixture; the fetishizing of racial ‘Otherness’

within the white self, as indicated by the presenter's response to her 'African DNA'; as well as a liberal-utopian narrative of global 'connectedness' and multiculturalism that precludes the need for meaningful interaction across difference. But most significant for us here is the campaign's rhetorical tension between the discourse of biological essentialism and true-selfhood on the one hand; and the discourse of temporary, leisure-fueled, convenience-based identity cultivation driven by consumer choices on the other hand. This apparently contradictory pair of themes is present in much of the industry's marketing and points us toward the complex ideological knot of choice, racial identification, and the neoliberal marketplace in the US today.

- 3 The wordplay of the "Root for Your Roots" campaign itself provides useful language for this discursive tension. The term *roots*, borrowing the metaphor of a plant's foundations, is often used as a symbolically charged shorthand to naturalize individuals' relationships to their genetic ancestors, implying longevity, stability, emotional depth, and/or biological essentialism (Clifford; Malkki; Zerubavel). 'Roots,' then, is a term situated in and describing the deep ancestral past. The verb *rooting*, meanwhile, means both "digging/searching" and "supporting/cheering"—i.e., "to root for a team." In US usage, this latter meaning tends to imply a relatively casual association, a contingent and retractable choice to align with a person or group, often for a short period of time. In contrast to the language of eternal allegiance used in some sports fandoms, "rooting" is found in more-reserved settings (as in the strangely nonchalant Portland Timbers chant, "When I root, I root for the Timbers"), implying a context-specific asterisk on the level of support. This type of "rooting," therefore, is individualized, whimsical, and liable to change, tied to the appeal of a particular spectacle and attaching itself transiently to different objects of meaning.
- 4 When we combine these definitions and re-examine the phrase "Root for Your Roots," the starting point of my argument emerges. This study shows how mainstream DNA ancestry video-advertising, particularly from Ancestry.com and 23andMe over the past five to ten years, often invokes two apparently competing desires: the past-oriented desire for roots (fixity, essentialism, inherited identity); and the present/future-oriented desire for rooting (flexibility, transience, chosen identification). I argue that the adverts often frame the former through the lens of the latter, with roots presented as a fluid identity accessory to be claimed and expressed through consumer purchases, in service of increasing one's individual market-oriented freedom and cultural capital rather than fixing one's essence or necessitating kinship. This then opens up further questions: How does this logic of individualized choice inform and manifest in the adverts' racial representations? Which "ethnic options" (Waters) are presented as available or desirable within this framework, and which real or imagined subjects are free to choose them? And what are the wider political implications and echoes of the adverts' subjection of ancestral identity to the neoliberal logic of individualization, flexibility, and market diversity? These

questions form the driving preoccupations of this study.

Terms and Method

- 5 Given the paper's focus on the production of knowledge, identity, and representation, I take as my analytical starting point the core tenets of cultural studies: a critical approach to the language, imagery, and ideas that constitute hegemonic discourse, seeking to deconstruct and denaturalize commonsense assumptions and the power structures that underlie them. As such, I am less interested in formal definitions of the topics I approach—identity, race, ethnicity, ancestry, genealogy—than in how these concepts are used in popular discourse. What is at stake politically when these discourses are invoked? Who mobilizes them, in what ways, and who do they interpellate in doing so?
- 6 With these questions in mind, I take up Stuart Hall's view of identity as a set of narratives about our relationships to the past that are both ascribed by others and forged by ourselves (see Hall epigraph). I align with Karen and Barbara Fields's understanding of race as the ideological fiction that "nature produced humankind in distinct groups, each defined by inborn traits" (16). This doctrine has been applied to our world through what Fields and Fields call the process of racecraft: the making-rational of belief in race as an objective reality, not a social construct. The term ethnicity emerged as a more politically acceptable "corrective to race" in the mid-twentieth century, connoting cultural and/or national characteristics rather than explicitly physical ones, yet often still deployed similarly (Jacobson 33; Hall, "Multicultural Question" 110). Ancestry, meanwhile, refers literally to an individual's genetic descent from other specific individuals, the history of their reproductive line; and genealogy is the study or pursuit of ancestral knowledge. However, the industry often invokes the term "ancestry" in ways that overreach this specific meaning, using it as a euphemistic signifier for racial, ethnonational, and cultural difference (Nash; Reardon). This conflation runs throughout the advertising, a slippage that is informative in itself. Therefore, I do not attempt to rigorously pin these definitions down but treat them as revealingly entangled in the material I analyze.
- 7 The texts that I read in this way are a representative sample of TV/online video-advertisements, predominantly by the two largest DNA ancestry companies in the US: Ancestry.com and 23andMe. I focus on these for their relative size, hegemonic influence, and strong marketing presence (ISOGG; Regalado, "More Than 26 Million"). While there are some differences between their brands—most notably, Ancestry.com combines genetic testing with more traditional archival genealogical services, while 23andMe offers testing for both ancestry and health—their DNA ancestry advertising approaches are similar, often using parallel imagery, storylines, and styles. Therefore, I analyze their content together as representative of the industry's dominant face, rather than taking a comparative

approach. There are also smaller US companies that appeal to particular ancestral groups (most notably African Ancestry) whose marketing discourses differ; comparing/contrasting these in detail is a task for future research.

- 8 Importantly, I do not claim to make observations as to how consumers receive these adverts. It is beyond the scope of this paper to study the degree to which their narratives are embraced or resisted by viewers or test takers. The desire to learn more about one's ancestors is by no means inherently loaded with the racial ideologies I unpack here; in many cases, as in the African American roots movement, it can become an antiracist political tool (Nelson, "Reconciliation Projects"). What I study here is one particular, top-down, commercial manifestation of DNA ancestry discourse. However, discourse analysis offers an entry-point into the set of stories circulating in popular consumer culture. To quote Stuart Hall, identity is "always constituted within, not outside, representation" ("Cultural Identity and Diaspora" 222). Therefore, hegemonic discourse can tell us about the patterns made most visibly available—although of course not unavoidable or determinative—for the construction of our identities. I approach the adverts in this spirit, mindful of both the limitations and possibilities of studying texts produced within the heart of capitalist power structures.
- 9 The paper is divided into four main sections. Section 1, "Ancestry in America," sketches the historical landscape of US ancestry practices, situates the DNA ancestry industry within this, and surveys the existing literature. Section 2, "Choice/Essence," is a theoretical unpacking of the roots/rooting dialectic introduced above. Through theories of neo/liberalism, I examine the relationship between individual freedom and genealogical determinism in contemporary ancestry discourse and develop the term 'liquid genealogy' to describe this. In section 3, "Percentages of the Self," I conduct a close reading of selected advertisements, focusing on their racial representations and romanticizing of ancestral mixture as a maximization of consumer opportunities. This section identifies and unpacks two key raced and classed characters who recur in the adverts: the unexpectedly "not-quite-white" individual and the maximally "mixed-race" individual. Section 4, "Rooting for Injury," combines the discussions of choice/essence and racial mixture to examine wider societal implications of the subjection of ancestral identity to neoliberal marketplace logic. Engaging with theories of injured identity politics and neoliberal multiculturalism, I argue that the industry's discourse of liquid genealogy reflects/contributes to the depoliticization of race and the individualization of history. I end with a short conclusion, "Declaration Descendants," which points toward spaces of oppositional reading within the adverts' representations of history.

Ancestry in America: History and Scholarship

The Genealogy of the “Nation of Immigrants”

- 10 While origin myths are important to every society, ancestral knowledge has played a particularly idiosyncratic role in the US’s national narratives since the Declaration of Independence. With the nation’s transition from colonial possession to independent republic, there was a corresponding move to reject European modes of genealogy as an elite pursuit based on aristocratic credentials, and to “democratize” it as a national (white) pastime (Weil ch.2). It was not until the Civil War, however, that popular genealogy became explicitly, rather than tacitly, about making racial claims, with a newfound concern among freed slaves to trace their family lines, and among white Americans to prove their WASP “purity” and naturalize the nation-as-white—a development that roughly coincides with the rise of biological and eugenicist racial theories (Painter; Weil ch.4). The late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries were a time of great ruling-class anxiety around the evolving borders of US whiteness, as new immigrant waves arrived from what WASP America then considered the less-desirable parts of Europe: Ireland, Italy, Greece, Eastern Europe, and Jews and Catholics from across the continent (Gerstle; Ordovery). As each group sought to escape the socioeconomic stigma of “not-quite-whiteness” (Jacobson 22), one way of achieving assimilation into the “melting pot” of white Americanness was to dissociate from their former national identifications, adhere to the ideology of white superiority, and cultivate racist animosity against their working-class peers of color (Baldwin; Roediger).
- 11 In the 1960s and ’70s, US genealogical practices were transformed again by the Civil Rights Movement and its aftermath. As epitomized in Alex Haley’s influential book *Roots* (1976), the tracing and celebrating of African lineage became profoundly important to Black activism, with many African Americans newly embracing diasporic identity (Nelson, *Social Life of DNA*). Yet—as Matthew Jacobson details in his history of the era, *Roots Too*—the “roots phenomenon” soon travelled beyond racially oppressed communities and was retroactively adopted within white US culture, in ways that often appropriated and neutralized its political force. Suddenly, white-ethnic individuals whose ancestors had for decades attempted to assimilate into the WASP norm were proclaiming their not-quite-white ancestry, driven—Jacobson argues—by the combined desires to “disassociate themselves from white privilege” and to access the cultural capital of being from elsewhere, of having “roots too” (21).
- 12 It was in this era that the now-commonsensical designation of the US as a “nation of immigrants” grew in popularity. As Jacobson shows, this reflected a major ideological rebranding of US history: the nation-of-immigrants narrative—by subsuming settler-colonialism and slavery into the same discursive category as recent immigration waves (as well as erasing Indigenous existence altogether)—retroactively and speciously depicts the US as an inherently open, multicultural land of individuals who arrived in the spirit of the “good immigrant” (67–69). This popularization and hegemonic co-option of the roots

phenomenon laid the groundwork for the success of today's DNA ancestry industry.

DNA Ancestry and Its Critics

- 13 The growth of the DNA ancestry industry over the past twenty years has further commercialized this roots-seeking culture and endowed it with a new semblance of scientific legitimacy—one that many have argued perpetuates the history of scientific racism (for more emphatic versions of this argument, see e.g. Duster; Palmié; Spickard; for nuanced qualifications, see Abu El-Haj 34; Nash 7). The first direct-to-consumer DNA ancestry tests were sold by Family Tree DNA in 2000, and the number of companies and types of testing available quickly proliferated with 23andMe entering the market in 2006 and Ancestry.com launching its genetic-testing subsidiary AncestryDNA in 2012. Today, these companies primarily offer autosomal DNA testing, interpreted through admixture analysis (ISOGG). To summarize crudely, this works by comparing an individual's genetic markers against the company's database of samples and calculating the percentages with which they match certain clusters in the database, taken to represent different ancestral populations (Gabriel). This means that the percentage breakdowns that are ever-present in the advertising do not literally represent the proportion of an individual's ancestors who "originated" in a certain region. Instead, they represent the percentile match between an individual's DNA and others' in the database with similar markers (Nash 56; Rutherford). This is a highly variable and epistemologically subjective process: depending on the samples in a company's database and the way in which scientists have sorted these into ancestral groups, an individual's DNA will be interpreted very differently (Nash 52–56; Saey).
- 14 Today, DNA ancestry testing has become a major industry, embedded within pop-scientific common consciousness. In a triumph of commodity fetishism, these tests have amassed a cultural value greatly disproportionate to their accuracy and explanatory power—all the more reason why their advertising rhetoric demands close attention. While the earlier tests were presented primarily as a niche tool for committed hobbyists (see e.g. Family Tree DNA's 2001 marketing video, "Genealogy by Genetics"), they have since reached a far wider market. The number of tests sold across the industry more than doubled in 2017 and again in 2018, corresponding to booms in ad spending by the two major companies (Regalado "2017 Was the Year"; "More Than 26 Million"). As of September 2019, 23andMe had sold over 10 million tests worldwide, Ancestry.com over 15 million, with the US the largest market for each (ISOGG). Both companies' standard tests currently cost \$99, a fairly significant outlay for a leisure-based purchase, suggesting that their target customer is middle- to high-income. The customer base also skews white: recent research shows that around 78% of genomic-testing participants are of European descent, though both Ancestry.com and 23andMe have been making public attempts to diversify

their databases (Morales et al.; Zhang). As we will see in section 3, the advertising reflects the companies' dual motives of appealing to their existing white-dominated base while attempting to attract more individuals of color.

- 15 The industry has come under criticism from at least three angles: The first is wide-ranging discrediting of its scientific accuracy (e.g. Bolnick; Gabriel; Zimmer). The second concerns issues of privacy: unethical co-option of Indigenous DNA, sale of consumers' genetic information, and collaboration with state surveillance (e.g. Hosman; Reardon and TallBear; Winston). The third, and most important here, is a metacritique of its naturalization and validation of racial categories that are more accurately understood as social constructs and its disguising of this process through apparently antiracist language. As powerfully argued by Jenny Reardon and others, the industry elaborates a discourse of "liberal antiracist genomics," invoking diversity, connection, and oneness; yet it actually premises its biocolonial data-collection techniques and analytical tools on discredited ideas of racial difference (Reardon 29; see also Abu El-Haj; Nash; TallBear). This, combined with the industry's wide commercial reach, has made DNA ancestry testing one of the foremost ways in which racecraft takes place in our society. While the technology has certainly also been used in more-explicitly racist ways (e.g. Panofsky and Donovan), it is the forms of race-thinking that have become hegemonic and socially acceptable that concern us most here.
- 16 As this overview suggests, the critical study of DNA ancestry is a varied and dynamic field. However, the literature contains few up-to-date concentrated readings of the neoliberal discourses at work in the mainstream advertising. Many scholars make passing reference to advertisements, but largely base their analysis instead on companies' scientific methods; writings by influential genealogists; TV shows like *Who Do You Think You Are?*; or customer forums. There are also many adjacent studies looking at the commodification of ethnic/racial identity in advertisements for tourism, clothing, food, etc., whose insights inform this study, but few of these pay sustained attention to the DNA ancestry industry (e.g. Comaroff and Comaroff; Halter; hooks). This paper attempts to fill this gap. My findings build on and support many of the arguments made in the existing literature as well as contributes to a new theorization of the industry's specific commercial narratives and their relationship to the neoliberal marketplace.

Choice/Essence: The Making of Liquid Subjects

- 17 The concepts of roots/rooting explored in the introduction are one way of thinking about a question that is fundamental to both biological science and political philosophy: To what degree are humans bound by their ancestral inheritance (whether that be of genetic coding or sociomaterial status); and to what degree do they possess the freedom to overcome this inheritance and choose their own path? The two versions of this question—biological and political—though seemingly describing very different things, have been

entangled throughout the history of ideas, with biological determinism frequently used as a justification for sociomaterial determinism. Indeed, this has been a founding and pervasive strategy in the tradition of liberal modernity (Degler; Fields and Fields). In this section, I situate this dialectical tension within theories of neo/liberalism, and begin to trace the ways in which contemporary commercial ancestry rhetoric navigates the line between identity-as-essence and identity-as-choice.

Ethnic Options

- 18 Elizabeth Povinelli has coined the terms ‘the autological subject’ and ‘the genealogical subject’ to describe both the conceptual binary of freedom/determinism that often appears in liberal discourse and the ways that it has been mobilized to assert and consolidate power (4–6; see also Abu El-Haj 173). The autological subject is the mythologically “ideal” Enlightenment individual—implicitly or explicitly imagined as a white, heterosexual, able-bodied, property-owning male—who is entirely “self-making, self-sovereign,” the embodiment of “individual freedom” (Povinelli 4). The autological individual is able to triumph over nature and history through reason and self-discipline. This figure is produced in contrast to the genealogical subject, who is seen as programmed and limited by “various kinds of inheritances,” be these kinship structures, physical attributes of race/gender/ability, or religious/cultural traditions (4). In the history of liberal thought, this ascription of genealogical constraint has often been projected onto women and people of color, among others (see, for instance, Kotef; Pagden; Stepan). As a self-fulfilling claim, it has been used to justify the exclusion of these groups from the conditions needed for the exercise of autological freedom in the first place—a tautological move that is one of the basic mechanisms of racecraft.
- 19 The binary and hierarchized pair autological/genealogical is of course a fictitious distinction from the start, overflowing with internal contradictions and intentional blind spots. Despite the fantastical nature of this division, however, it has yielded liberal modernity’s present-day glorification of free choice as the ultimate value, and the free individual—that is, free from social constraint—as the ideal social unit. The American Dream of bootstraps social mobility (and its accompanying economic system, free-market capitalism) has its ideological seed in the Enlightenment notion that “the course of a man’s life should be determined by *his* life, the life *he* made, rather than from his placement before his birth in a genealogical, or any other socially defined, grid” (Povinelli 185; see also Brown, *Undoing the Demos*; Harvey, *Brief History of Neoliberalism*).
- 20 Given this ideological history, advertising executives for the US genealogy industry are faced with a potentially problematic discursive tension. They must appeal to a free-market society whose imagined subject is the autological individual, yet their product is premised on the sale of genealogical identity. Several critics have excavated this tension, using different terms to describe it.^[2]

Many of these scholars note that in the contemporary US, as in Povinelli's historical reading, middle-class whites tend to be granted more rhetorical freedom to choose the degree and manner of their genealogical identification, as opposed to people from classed/racialized communities whose ancestries are more likely to be externally ascribed or fostered in political self-defense. However, this rhetorical freedom is not total: it often involves a corresponding waning in credibility when these subjects articulate strong identification with their ancestral pasts—hence the romanticized association of working-class white ethnics and people of color as more “authentic” in their attachments to tradition (Comaroff and Comaroff; Jacobson; MacCannell).

- 21 This dynamic is explored in studies by Herbert Gans and later Mary Waters as well as Richard Alba, who use the term symbolic ethnicity to denote the situationally specific and individualized ethnic identification that they observed among their middle-class white American participants. Symbolic ethnicity is expressed largely through self-declaration rather than everyday behavior, kinship ties, or external ascription. As such, the genealogical identifications that symbolic ethnics choose to maintain—their ethnic options—serve primarily to increase their sense of liberal selfhood, rather than to forge kinship: to make them feel “unique and special,” without dampening their autological freedom (Waters 151). For these individuals, then, genealogy is an individualized choice, not an essential imperative, because it is “uprooted” from kinship obligation. We can see in these studies the early contours of the dynamics of the “Root for Your Roots” advert, as roots transition into rooting.
- 22 In the first decade of the DNA ancestry industry, critics often highlighted the essentialism side of the choice/essence equation as the most dangerous emergent discourse (Nelkin and Lindee; Roof). In 2008, Jonathan Marks stated: “It need hardly be pointed out that it is in the interests of this transformed science to overvalue the significance of genetics in life. The more of life you think genetics controls, the larger the potential market for its products” (27).
- 23 It is indeed true that essentialism discourse has remained integral to the industry's marketing, with advertisements frequently promising to “prove” your “true” origins (see e.g. “Story of You”; “Prove Your Irish Ethnicity”). Yet I argue that in the major advertising over the past five to ten years, the discourse of choice—of autological subjectivity—emerges as equally if not more dominant, qualifying the powers of DNA to dictate our real selves. The characters of “Root for Your Roots” and the other adverts studied here, are presented as maintaining autological power over the activation of their ancestry. Their genealogical “essence” is mobilized casually, temporarily, for the duration of a single World Cup and for the purpose of leisure. The speed, ease, and transactional nature of DNA testing means that their ancestral identification does not need any corroboration in life experience, not even being cultivated through familial word of mouth or occasional holiday celebrations as Gans, Waters, and Alba describe. Instead, it can be swiftly achieved with only an online payment and a swab of

saliva. Given this easy access, it demands no great emotional investment or behavioral change on the consumer's part. This choice-oriented genealogy borrows from long-standing liberal tropes of autological freedom, while also introducing a newer, "post-authentic," and hyper-fluid form of choice rhetoric. Why has this discourse emerged now, and what explains its appeal? To unpack this shift and place it within our particular political-economic context, I turn now to the theoretical writings of Zygmunt Bauman.

Liquid Modernity, Liquid Genealogy

- 24 Bauman describes a gradual and overlapping epochal shift in the late-twentieth century: what he calls the transition from solid to liquid modernity and what others have called the rise of neoliberalism. Many other theories of neoliberalism could serve a similar purpose here (e.g. Appadurai; Hardt and Negri; Harvey, *Condition of Postmodernity*; Sloterdijk), but I find Bauman's best-placed to help us draw insights from the DNA ancestry advertising, given his focus on consumer society, the privatized task of identity production, and changing understandings of time/speed. Solid modernity, beginning with the rise of industrial capitalism and colonialism, was characterized by forms of power that sought heavy, lasting attachments—to territory, material property, institutional longevity, epistemological "truth." It was a period of great change, but such change took place with the rulers' stated end goal of consolidating power through creating order and stability. Liquid modernity, however, entails an erosion of this stability in favor of the pursuit of fluidity as a means of power in itself. For reasons including technological change, the growth of finance capitalism, the encroachment of climate change, the breakup of territorial empires, and the waning of nation-state sovereignty, heavy attachments have lost some of their appeal. The powerful increasingly seek lightness and immateriality, avoiding bonds that would tie them to one place, ideology, community, or opportunity. Liquid modernity is characterized by socioeconomic "deregulation, liberalization, 'flexibilization'" (Bauman 5). "Heavy capitalism was obsessed with bulk and size," Bauman writes. "Nowadays capital travels light—with cabin luggage only. [...] It can stop-over almost anywhere, and nowhere needs to stay longer than the satisfaction lasts" (58).
- 25 While economically beneficial for global elites, this shift has had disempowering effects in many sectors of society, including the increasing precariousness of labor and the development of new forms of neocolonialism. For our purposes here, however, we must examine its ambivalent impact on the social sector that constitutes the consumer base of the DNA ancestry industry—that is, the relatively affluent Western individual who is interpellated as an active member of the liquid-modern socioeconomy, i.e., the neoliberal consumer. Bauman writes that increasing economic fluidity and deregulation has entailed a "radical melting" of ties between individuals and their political communities, restructuring life around the marketplace and producing a society of consumers

rather than citizens (5). Individuals undergoing this process of “individualization” face both new possibilities and new responsibilities, not least “the responsibility for performing [the] task” of identity-making, of perpetually “needing to *become* what one *is*” (31–32). Identity is now presented as each individual’s unique, ever-changing combination of consumer choices from the “buffet table” of options (63): “[T]he loose, ‘associative’ status of identity, the opportunity to ‘shop around’, to pick and shed one’s ‘true self’, to ‘be on the move’, has come in present-day consumer society to signify freedom. Consumer choice is now a value in its own right” (87).

26 Yet the putative “freedom” of this consumer society, even for those who can afford to participate in it, also brings a flipside of sociopolitical atomization, the vertigo of free-floating individualism. Bauman describes how at the same time as we see the hegemonic championing of consumer choice, self-sufficiency, and adaptability, we also see a corresponding longing for community and tradition. Though often in romanticized forms, Bauman’s liquid subjects are increasingly drawn to their imagined heritage in search of “authenticity” and “rootedness” (see also Lowenthal). Thus, solid modernity’s collapse produces its own nostalgia, as individuals seek out the idea of community—often ethnic community—as an antidote to “the new fragility of human bonds” (Bauman 170). In practice however, for Bauman, this quest has been reabsorbed into the liquid-modern marketplace, which sells “cloakroom communities” in which such individuals can “hang collectively, if only for a brief time, their individual fears,” hopes, and self-images (199, 38).

27 The form of identity marketed by the DNA ancestry industry is, I argue, just such a “cloakroom community”—market-centric, contingent, and highly individualized (see e.g. “[Connection](#)”; “[Michael](#)”; “[Travel the World](#)”). Indeed, Bauman’s theorization sheds contextual light on many of the cultural threads that converge in DNA ancestry discourse. The industry’s marketing appeals simultaneously to the two hegemonic desires that Bauman outlines: the need for fluid self-making (rooting) encouraged by a liquid economy that lionizes individual opportunism and flexibility; and the retroactive desire for fixed communal belonging (*roots*) in an era of sociopolitical uncertainty. The particular discourse that emerges is what I call ‘liquid genealogy’, in which the nostalgic desire for “authenticity” is instrumentalized in the sale of a cynical “post-authenticity” and in which tradition and heritage themselves are displayed on the “buffet table” of frenetic consumption.

28 In some adverts, this buffet-table metaphor is surprisingly blatant. See, for example, the Ancestry.com commercial “Holidays: Ethnic Mix,” in which ancestral discovery is represented by the unwrapping of giftboxes within giftboxes, each covered with a different “ethnic” wrapping paper: shamrocks for Irishness, giraffes for Africanness, Viking helmets for Scandinavianness (fig.2). “This holiday,” the voiceover declares, “the real gift isn’t what’s inside the box. It’s what’s inside the person who opens it. [...] You’ll save 10%, and they’ll have a

new story to tell!” In this phrase, ancestral knowledge gains value from its anecdotal storytelling potential, its post-authentic performativity, as well as its location deep “inside” oneself. The language of essence and convenience, earnestness and cynicism, fuse (or grate) together in the competing timescales of holiday shopping rush and deep-ancestral unwrapping. Thus, we see—throughout the marketing’s emphasis on the speed, convenience, and affordability of genetic testing—the packaging of genealogical rootedness as a “just-for-Christmas” novelty relationship with the self. (For further examples of the language of discounts, speed, and convenience, see e.g. “Father’s Day”; “Imagine What’s Possible”; “Only \$59”; “Reinventing Ancestry”.)

Figure 2: *Holidays: Ethnic Mix*. 2015 Social Media Ad.

- 29 In these commercials, and in Bauman’s theory, the always-dubious split between Povinelli’s autological and genealogical subjects breaks down, its binary no longer possible or hegemonically appealing. Liquid genealogy instead promises its consumers only the most attractive elements of both subjectivities. Who, then, is invoked as the “ideal” liquid subject of these commercials? Does it remain the “normative” white middle-class male of early liberal ideology (see Povinelli; Stepan)? Or has liquid-modern ancestry discourse fashioned itself a new “ideal” subject? In the next section, I conduct a closer reading of the adverts with these questions in mind, unpacking the specific manifestations of liquid genealogy in the industry’s racial representations.

Percentages of the Self: The Racial Politics of Mixture

- 30 Given the persistency with which the specter of white supremacy looms over US racial discourse, we might expect narratives of individuals discovering their WASP “purity” to feature prominently in DNA ancestry advertising. As outlined in section 1, there is certainly a long tradition of genealogy being used for this purpose (Weil), and recent research shows that self-describing white nationalists continue to turn to DNA ancestry testing with the intention of validating their racial “purity” (Panofsky and Donovan). Despite this, the figure of the “100% European” individual is surprisingly rare in the marketing, and the “100% WASP” even more so. Although, as mentioned, the major companies’ customer base skews overwhelming to people of European ancestry, these companies seem to have determined that stories of so-called pure whiteness are not the best marketing strategy. Neither do narratives of any other “pure” or singular race predominate.^[3]
- 31 As well as simply heralding the desire to maximize their commercial reach, we can speculate that this is in part due to the criticism that explicitly monoracial ads would face. In addition, it reflects the overall move within the genealogy industry toward the rhetoric of “liberal antiracist genomics” described above (Reardon 29). Yet there also seem to be further nuances to the profit motive here. The companies’ marketing decisions are presumably based to some extent

on a belief that the discovery of only *one* ethno-ancestral source does not appeal to their consumer base. Rather than just euphemistically obscuring the language of purity, the adverts almost universally display celebratory representations of delighted individuals discovering their ancestral “mixture,” urging viewers to “find the surprises in you” (see “[Irish Roots](#)”). Ironically, of course, the notion of mixture is necessarily premised on the myth of purity—the belief that pure races exist originally, from which mixtures are made. This myth remains central to contemporary genomics (Nash 58; Zerubavel 74). Iconography of mixture is ever-present in the adverts: the inclusion of the pie-chart symbol, each colorful slice supposedly representing a different ancestral portion of a given individual’s DNA, is practically mandatory. As mentioned in section 1, the percentages given in these pie charts actually represent matches across a DNA database, rather than an individual’s straightforward genetic breakdown. Yet the presentation of this information within the pie-chart form appeals to neo/liberal conceptions of the self as both divisible, quantifiable, scientifically knowable through personalized data and simultaneously indivisible, cohesive, adding up to a unique, complete 100% you (Foucault; Lupton; Zuboff).

- 32 The marketers’ assumption, then, seems to be that customers are more attracted by the promise of their own internal diversity, their “admixture,” than by some fantasy of purity. Whether or not this assumption is correct, it makes theoretical sense in a liquid-modern socioeconomy that thrives on the proliferation, differentiation, and customizability of market options (see Hardt and Negri epigraph). Mixture offers more consumer choice than purity—more World Cup soccer teams, more roots-tourism destinations, more “ethnic food” choices. Whatever the marketers’ reasons, in place of the “pure” WASP ideal of earlier US ancestry discourse, two figures emerge as the most frequent protagonists of the commercials: the unexpectedly “not-quite-white” individual and the maximally “mixed-race” individual. This section traces these figures through the advertising to unpack the racial politics of mixture they are enlisted to serve. In doing so, we can draw out the particular identities that liquid genealogy produces and validates.

The Not-Quite-White Individual

- 33 A light-skinned, white-appearing man is sitting at his computer, browsing the Ancestry.com website. He clicks a button captioned “Your Results Are Ready: Explore Now,” and the camera pans upward to follow a falling leaf. As the leaf lands, the scene transitions to an ancient Scandinavian settlement, a Viking-style boat visible in the background and a fur-clad, long-blond-haired man sharpening a weapon in the foreground. A pool of orange light spreads out across the land and the camera pans to another falling leaf. This time we arrive in what looks like an Indigenous American plains settlement, where a woman grinds food on a rock surrounded by tipi-esque structures. Blue light engulfs the scene and the tag “Native American” appears. Zooming out, Google Earth-style, we

transition back to the Ancestry.com customer's computer screen, where a color-coded map and pie chart show his "Ethnic Mix": 33% Native American, 47% Scandinavian, 11% Irish, 9% Spanish (fig.3). This advert, titled "1000 Years in the Past", is characteristic of an entire subgenre of DNA ancestry adverts, which can be summarized as: white-appearing individual discovers their internal racial mixture. (For other examples, see "[Elizabeth](#)"; "[Momondo](#)"; "[Story of You](#)".)

Figure 3: *1000 Years in the Past*. 2015 Social Media Ad.

- 34 We can see this subgenre as appealing to a fantasy of "not-quite-whiteness" (Jacobson 22), in which an individual who otherwise appears, identifies, and is encountered in the world as white, lays claim to a tenuous racial Otherness—perhaps as a way of selectively disavowing the privileges of whiteness, or leveraging the cultural capital of "difference" in a society that nominally and superficially values diversity.^[4] In "1000 Years," this manifests through the claiming of so-called Native DNA, an act of dispossession with echoes as old as the earliest encounters between European colonizers and Indigenous American peoples.
- 35 As Kim TallBear has shown, the idea that Indigenous identity can be reduced to a percentage of one's genes is antithetical to many Indigenous Americans' understandings of kinship, despite its use in colonial "blood-quantum" laws and similar legal categorizations today (TallBear; Sturm). TallBear situates this act of dispossession within the history of the violent expropriation of Indigenous land, resources, and knowledge as white property. She thus shows how representations of Indigenous societies as ancient artefacts frozen in time serve to naturalize white claims to Indigenous history and biology as part of a universal (read: white) US heritage. As the blue-light graphic sweeps across the landscape, sectioning, labelling, and reducing an entire continent's cultures into a segment of the white character's DNA, the neocolonial resonance is hard to miss. The appeal of Viking DNA is itself wrapped up in masculinist white mythologies, as an imagined pinnacle of the Aryan warrior race (Hirschman and Panther-Yates). In this representational pairing of archetypal colonial victors and archetypal colonial victims, the advert draws cultural capital from both sides of an unexamined power differential. While TallBear and co-author Reardon describe "the 'heavy legacy' of whiteness as a form of property" (244), in this case it might instead be described as a 'light' or 'liquid' legacy, in Bauman's sense of the words. That is, the material resources that were the main focus of colonial dispossession under solid modernity have transitioned to a more immaterial form of dispossession in this advert. This is certainly not to suggest that material oppression does not persist today (it definitely does), nor that immaterial oppression did not exist before (it definitely did), but that genealogical dispossession is one example of a changing face of power that reflects contemporary socioeconomic developments. Ancestry.com's white protagonist

captures not physical territory, but liquid genealogy—with the ease of a computer click and the lightness of a falling leaf, he absorbs Indigenous identity into the pie chart of his genetic data-self.

- 36 This fetishization of “Otherness” as a way of claiming it, “taming” it, and ingesting it to make the white self more interesting—what bell hooks terms “consumer cannibalism” (31)—shows up in many variations throughout the adverts. Among the most prevalent is a de-whitening of whiteness through the romanticization of non-WASP European ancestries: Irishness, Italianness, Jewishness, etc. (see e.g. “[9 Degrees](#)”; “[Labor Day](#)”; “[Without You: Journey](#)”). These commercials emphasize the histories of ethnic and class discrimination against groups who have since been assimilated into whiteness, encouraging the affluent, white-identifying individuals of the companies’ consumer base to identify with the oppression of their ancestors. This appeals to the nation-of-immigrants US convention described above, in which “Everyone wants a ghetto to look back to” (Klein 373; quoted in Jacobson 18). Studies suggest that the promise of claiming just such a “ghettoized” personal history is a common motivation for white individuals’ ancestral searches, with genetic-genealogy chatrooms dominated by expressions of “the desire to be Jewish, the desire to be Native American, the desire to find some ‘minority’ ancestry” (Abu El-Haj 158; see also Lowenthal 15–17; Waters 161).^[5] I will discuss the identity politics of this rooting for injury in section 4, but for now it is important to note the prevalence of qualifiers to whiteness that allow the commercials’ characters to present as not-quite-white. This enables a fluid and adaptable identity, one that maintains all the property-based privileges of whiteness, while leaving room for convenient attachments to the apparently appealing “difference” and un-incriminating “victim status” of romanticized ethnic/racial Others.

The Mixed-Race Individual

- 37 The second idealized figure who recurs throughout the adverts is the “visibly” and “maximally” mixed-race individual, both descriptors being important here. In a move that echoes *Time* magazine’s cover “[New Face of America](#)”, the advertisers seem to have intentionally cast actors whose features will be read as racially ambiguously as possible. In 1993, *Time*’s front cover featured a computer-generated woman purportedly composed of a mixture of “Anglo-Saxon, Middle-Eastern, African, Asian, Southern-European, and Hispanic” phenotypes, to celebrate “the World’s First Multicultural Society.” Two representative examples of this subgenre, both from 2018, are Ancestry.com’s commercial “Anthem,” and 23andMe’s “Travel the World Based on Your DNA.”
- 38 The first, “Anthem”, is a montage of historical-fictional re-enactments, shown in the following order: a white man surveying a factory floor; a Black woman leading an encounter between unspecified African communities; an Indigenous

American family being forcibly relocated; a white male outlaw fleeing through the woods; and a ship crossing the ocean. As these images play, the voiceover narrates:

If you knew that your great grandfather built an empire... Or that your great grandmother fought one... If you knew they stayed strong in a time of pain... Or wild in the face of the law... If you knew how they fled the Old World to build a new one... And never let anyone tell them no... If you knew what they did... What would you do?

- 39 At the final words, the setting transitions to the present day and to a young mixed-race woman gazing across a landscape (fig.4). A slogan appears: “Unlock your past. Inspire your future.”

Figure 4: *Anthem*. 2018 Social Media Ad.

- 40 The second advert, “Travel the World”, also stars a young mixed-race woman. The commercial follows her character, Nicole, as she travels to the locations that supposedly make up her ancestral geography. In East Asia, she rides a motorbike through mountains and takes selfies with locals; in West Africa, she beats a group of men at chess and dances with them down the street; in Scandinavia, she swims in a fjord. Superimposed across each location is her DNA pie chart: 29% East Asian, 46% West African, 3% Scandinavian, and—to end—100% Nicole (fig.5). The scene pans out to a color-coded world map, labelled “Now with 150+ regions,” and a voiceover urges us to “know how your DNA connects you to the world” by purchasing a test for 30% off.

Figure 5: *Travel the World Based on Your DNA*. 2018 Social Media Ad.

- 41 There is much to say about these adverts’ fetishization and instrumentalization of mixed-race identity, but for our purposes here I will briefly identify two key tropes. Firstly, the ads play into a neoliberal-multiculturalist discourse that equates racial mixture with racial transcendence (Ahmed; Elam; Haritaworn). Within this trope, the mixed-race individual (often female, and usually classed as affluent, educated, sociopolitically ascendant) is tokenized as a redemptive figure for the nation-at-large, as “fleshly confirmation that racial equality has arrived” (Elam 9). Their existence is—highly simplistically and disturbingly, given the prevalence of rape by white men in interracial colonial history (Davis; Smith; White)—taken to be de facto evidence of love between people of different races, and thus their image becomes a magic mirror for the nation, reflecting back racial unity and progress. One striking example of this is the Latin American discourse of ‘mestizaje,’ which presents the often-violent miscegenation of European colonizers with African or Indigenous women as productive of a superior, hybrid race destined for political perfection (Lund; Wade). In the case of the US, this mirror retroactively “justifies” the crimes of colonialism and slavery since it tacitly presents them as necessary to the teleology of globalization and diversity. In this way, the token mixed-race subject

is enlisted as a posterchild for a political-economic system that gained and maintains its power through racist means (Chow; Puar).

- 42 The first advert, “Anthem,” is exemplary of this trope: its montage of US ancestry draws a false equivalency between events that in fact took place within profound power differentials. These uneven histories—the founding of capitalist empires and subaltern resistance to colonial ones; the endurance of Indigenous Americans in face of genocidal violence and the lawlessness of Wild West frontiersmen; the migration of European Americans and the Middle Passage of slavery—all are invoked side-by-side and set to a single uplifting soundtrack. In the final scene, a mixed-race woman is called forth as the genetic culmination and prophetic bearer of this sentimental version of US history. (Other examples of this trope in the adverts include “Declaration Descendants”; “USA Network: Melting Pot”; and the controversial “Without You: Inseparable”, which epitomizes the romanticization of interracial ancestry as proof of interracial love [see McClinton].)
- 43 Alongside these undertones is a second, related, but more individualized trope: the mixed-race individual as an embodiment of choice and freedom. This trope fetishizes certain mixed-race individuals as the ultimate liberal “trailblazer[s]” (Elam 10), whose inability to be defined by a single census box is emblematic of their uniqueness, agency, and subversive glamor. Again, this invokes mainly middle/upper-class individuals with access to the disposable income necessary for market freedom. Nicole of “Travel the World” is glamorized along these lines, her mixed ancestry serving as her passport to global cosmopolitanism: she can go anywhere, fit in with anyone, and retain her “100% Nicole” individualism while doing so. Her samplings of different identities and belongings—fluid attachments that look like kinship but do not impinge upon her individual freedom—are presented as exactly the “cloakroom communities” that Bauman describes. This example draws our attention again to the close links between liberal freedom and consumer freedom. Nicole’s ancestry unlocks a variety of consumer possibilities in the form of travel experiences: her DNA pie chart becomes a “buffet table” of tourist destinations, and the more segmented her genetic makeup, the more appetizing and customizable the menu—the more of the “150+ regions” she can legitimately claim.
- 44 In the adverts, these two tropes of racial mixture—as embodiment of collective progress and as signifier of individual agency—are mutually reinforcing. Taken together, they imply that racial mixture leads toward a destiny of individual freedom, producing unbounded “postracial” consumers: a new autological/genealogical ideal. Like the not-quite-white subject, this imagined mixed-race subject has an array of identity options available to them and access to the cultural capital of “authenticity” associated with romanticized ethnicities (Jacobson; MacCannell). Indeed, the mixed-race subject’s authenticity is validated not only by scientific data (as with the not-quite-white individual) but also by the visual politics of appearance (Alcoff). Within the classed and

marketized mixed-race mythology of the adverts, this gives them ultimate choice, ultimate freedom: they can embody the benefits of (conventionally white) autological consumer power, while also legitimately leveraging the cultural capital of difference.

- 45 Of course, as soon as we extract this representation from the mythology of the adverts and contextualize it within real-world sociopolitics, its distortions become clear. For one, there are major differences in power geometries between the adverts' representations of the not-quite-white individual and the mixed-race individual: The first is about a politically dominant subject using scientific discourse to make a personal claim on the histories of less powerful groups. The second is about the reductive glamorization and commercialization of histories that, outside the fictional world of the adverts, often assert very real and ongoing legacies of discrimination on their inheritors. That is, a mixed-race person in the US is less likely to experience their ancestral identity as a passport to individual freedom, than to have it used against them to *restrict* their collective freedom (Haider; Haritaworn). The adverts, however, do not acknowledge this contrast; in fact, key to their discursive strategy is the “colorblind” denial of all power differentials, the apolitical ascription of all ancestral histories as fair game for the cultivation of the consumer-self. So long as the individual can “prove” a genetic link to a particular population, it becomes available as their liquid-genealogical playground. Thus, in the “choose-your-own-ancestry-adventure” style of these adverts, history—often violent racialized history—exists entirely in service of the contemporary individual, its meaning stemming from its potency as a self-fashionable identity narrative for the contemporary consumer.

Rooting for Injury: Identity Politics in the Multicultural Marketplace

- 46 As the previous sections have shown, in the hands of mainstream DNA ancestry advertising, collective racialized histories (which we know to be deeply political, contextual, and constitutive of today's world order) are reinscribed as individual genetic ancestries (personal, market-oriented, autologically empowering, apolitical). Why, at this particular cultural moment, would framing history in this way be commercially successful and/or ideologically expedient? What are the wider implications and resonances of the adverts' channeling of racial identification through the logics of the marketplace? Toward answering these questions, this section brings the DNA ancestry industry's marketing strategies into direct conversation with the larger societal rise of injured identity politics and neoliberal multiculturalism, arguing that DNA ancestry advertising is one manifestation of a depoliticizing discourse that disguises violent histories and reproduces ongoing inequalities.
- 47 By identity politics, I refer not to the term's original meaning—coined by the Combahee River Collective to emphasize the importance of recognizing intersectional differences within political solidarity—but to its deradicalized

meaning within contemporary neoliberal hegemony. Asad Haider powerfully summarizes this second meaning in his book *Mistaken Identity*: “I define identity politics as the neutralization of movements against racial oppression. It is the ideology that emerged to appropriate this emancipatory legacy in service of the advancement of political and economic elites” (12).

48 In this neoliberal appropriation of identity politics, political demands “can only be made on the basis of a singular and injured identity,” and are reduced to individual claims for recognition and redress of personal wrongs (Butler, *Psychic Life of Power* 100; see also Brown, *States of Injury*; Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Gilroy). Thus, we ironically become participating members of society through our individualization—through forging and articulating our identities around our unique injuries and entitlements—rather than through a collective politics of solidarity. What’s more, if political rights are premised on individual identity, then “politics is reduced to the anxious performance of authenticity” since “we are left with no practice of politics outside of the fashioning of our own personal identities and surveillance of the identities of others” (Haider 67). Politics, then, morphs into the profoundly self-conscious cultivation of identity. This ideology has been extremely effective in dismissing and fragmenting social justice struggles and has also travelled beyond the explicitly political realm into commercial culture. Indeed, the commercialization of identity has played an integral role in its depoliticization.

49 In the DNA ancestry industry, we see a cynical marketization of this kind of identity politics. The industry’s adverts appeal to the “anxious performance of authenticity” and restless “fashioning of our own personal identities” that Haider describes, by selling supposedly scientific—but conveniently malleable—“proof” of individual ancestries, often situating this within romanticized histories of injury. The adverts’ liquid-genealogical discourse promises an instant and mutable post-authenticity, uprooted from any necessary lived experience or political activity and based instead on DNA data. As such, each percentile segment of one’s ancestral pie chart becomes an opportunity for injured identity performance, raw material for the production of one’s cultural capital. The “11% Irish” or “33% Native” descent of the not-quite-white individual becomes their biopolitical passport to “minority” status—to both an anecdotally interesting “difference” and a politically convenient history of “victimhood.” Similarly, the “29% East Asian” and “46% West African” ancestry of the mixed-race individual marks them as culturally and commercially mobile, with access to a “buffet table” of authenticities and selves. These various instrumentalizations of history proffer a profound depoliticization of race: rather than a political terrain, race becomes a fashionable pastime; rather than public history, the past becomes individual identity-based property.

50 This discourse, while context-specific to the commercials I study here, resonates with trends across US society. Racially euphemistic evocations of ancestry have cropped up over and over again in recent US politics and beyond, especially wielded

by “not-quite-white” individuals in response to racially charged accusations. Recent high-profile statements of not-quite-whiteness include Elizabeth Warren’s publicization of her “Native DNA” in response to baiting by Donald Trump (Nelson, “Elizabeth Warren”); Kellyanne Conway’s and Mike Kelly’s wielding of their Irish heritage as a disavowal of their racism (Scott; Siddiqui); and, in the UK, Boris Johnson’s evocation of his “Muslim great-grandfather” as a defense against accusations of Islamophobia (Perraudin). These examples presume the logic that white individuals who can mobilize a not-quite-white ancestry are immune from being racist since identity is conflated with and thus usurps politics.^[6]

- 51 This kind of “neoliberal-multiculturalist” approach—in which race is extracted from the political sphere and reduced to personal ancestral stories of hardship, uplift, and uniqueness—is a major strategic component in the maintenance of existing socioeconomic systems (Ahmed; Hale; Hall, “Multicultural Question”). In this hegemonic discourse, race can be discussed, and racial difference can be celebrated, so long as it emboldens individualist atomization while making no demands for structural change. Dominant DNA ancestry advertising, with its maximization, marketization, and individualization of racial mixture, shifts the ideal autological subject of liberalism from the “pure” white individual to the not-quite-white or mixed-race “multicultural” individual. This is, however, a highly selective admission, welcoming only specifically classed and “mixed” consumer-subjects whose identity is expressed through the marketplace. As such, this remains a form of multiculturalism “defined and deployed by whiteness,” in which “[t]he ethnic aids the production of whiteness through his or her participation in global economic privileges that then fraction him or her away from racial alliances that would call for cross-class affinities” (Puar 31; see also Chow; Melamed). Thus, liquid-genealogical representations of diverse ancestries only support—both financially and ideologically—a socioeconomic system built on the perpetuation of race and class inequality.
- 52 This is not, of course, to suggest that advertising executives at Ancestry.com and 23andMe are conspiratorially plotting the propagation of racial-capitalist ideology in any direct way. Hegemony and intentionality have a complex relationship, and the DNA ancestry industry is merely one player in a global political-economic assemblage comprised of innumerable actors with distinct motivations and roles. These companies’ foremost goal, like all for-profit entities, is simply to sell their product. However, the fact that they should choose to sell their product in this way—to package it through an identity-political and neoliberal-multiculturalist discourse that centers the liquid-genealogical individual—and the fact that US customers should continue to buy it in such numbers, tells us something about the hegemony in which these adverts circulate. Like all hegemony, one of its key ideological technologies—and one for which DNA ancestry is ideally placed—is the controlling and framing of its histories.

Conclusion: “Declaration Descendants”

- 53 From the “Root for Your Roots” campaign onward, this paper has traced discourses of choice, race, and neoliberal subjectivity in the video-advertising of DNA ancestry’s largest US companies. What emerges is a body of texts that refract racial identification through the logics of the marketplace: romanticizing genetic mixture, individualizing political pasts, and capitalizing on the resultant depoliticized not-quite-white and mixed-race identities as conduits for further consumption. In sum, this liquid-genealogical marketing presents racialized histories as a means for the cultivation of individual cultural capital—a discourse that reflects and contributes to broader societal dynamics of individualization, neoliberal multiculturalism, and injured identity politics. By identifying the specifics of these adverts and situating them within political/cultural theory, this study has added one small piece to a growing body of work that together demonstrates the industry’s immense sociopolitical significance.
- 54 I would like to end with a brief reflection on one last advert—one that both supports and complicates my argument by containing an unintentional glimmer of self-critique, leaving the door ajar for more subversive political interpretation. In Ancestry.com’s July Fourth advert from 2017, “Declaration Descendants”, around thirty racially diverse individuals gather in a room to recreate John Trumbull’s famous painting of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. As they assemble, in the solemn atmosphere of a congregation, they take turns to read aloud iconic lines from the Declaration. At the end, they all turn to look at the camera as words appear on the screen: “Everyone we’ve assembled here is descended from a signer of the Declaration of Independence.” This pronouncement is then followed by the now-familiar slogan, “Unlock your past. Inspire your future” (fig.6).

Figure 6: *Declaration Descendants: July 4th*. 2017 Social Media Ad.

- 55 One reading of this advert echoes many of the troubled tropes analyzed above: the idealized union of the multicultural nation through the figure of the mixed-race individual; the redemptive teleology of history arcing toward racial transcendence; the co-option of politics and identity as marketing fodder. Indeed, the commercial’s [official backstory on Ancestry.com’s website](#) confirms this reading, describing the advertisers’ intention “to reveal the truth of [the descendants’] lineage in a beautiful and uplifting way—and inspire a sense of pride in who we are as nation,” as well as, presumably, to inspire purchases.
- 56 Yet, the descendants’ silent stares at each other and toward the camera, their awkwardly staged postures, and the darkly trembling music in the background all unsettle this simplistically sentimentalized version of US history. Is this gathering a redemption, or is it a reckoning? The ghosts of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings—the enslaved woman whose children he fathered, a line of descent that was the subject of one of the earliest (and very controversial)

applications of DNA ancestry testing (Palmié)—haunt this scene, emblems of the fraught colonial relations behind an unaddressed US past and present. The hypocrisy of the Declaration both then and now; the simultaneous presence and distance of these Americans stiffly posing together for an advert; the defiant confrontation that creeps into their looks and silences—through these fissions we can refuse a depoliticization of this moment. Rather than accepting the advert’s invitation to enact our patriotic consumer-citizenship by purchasing a DNA test, we might ask different questions: What other meanings can we read into the instructions to “Unlock our past” and “Inspire our future”? How else might we learn about, narrate, and mobilize knowledge of our ancestries? As with any hegemonic text, DNA ancestry advertising contains within itself fractures and alienations through which we can make space for resistant readings.

Notes

[1] I am grateful to the SOAS Master’s Scholarship Fund for supporting this research. Special thanks to Naomi Leite, Hovsep Markarian, Jana Cattien, and Clay Wilwol.

[2] E.g. choice/essence (Abu El-Haj; Comaroff and Comaroff); discovery/constraint (Nash); shopping/inheritance (Halter). I am also indebted to Naomi Leite’s exposition of the choice/compulsion dialectic.

[3] Importantly, this is not true of the whole industry—companies that explicitly appeal to particular ancestral groups, like African Ancestry, often emphasize the specificity with which they will pinpoint a single ethno-geographical region (see e.g. “[African Ancestry TESTimonials](#)”; “[Do You Know](#)”). However, 23andMe and Ancestry.com generally avoid such narratives.

[4] The power dynamics of this are more or less the inverse of the politics of “passing,” in which an individual is constructed as attempting to conceal their Othered ancestry to escape its socioeconomic stigma. It is beyond the scope of this paper to unpack this in detail, but for further discussion see Hobbs; Dawkins.

[5] *South Park*’s spoof DNA [ancestry commercial](#) is a spot-on parody of this, inviting white consumers to discover their percentage of “victimhood.”

[6] Although, as the case of Elizabeth Warren shows, the success of this discourse in its public reception is highly contextual and is not guaranteed.

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